

FEATURE STORY

A day in the life of a ghost blogger:

Blogger X reveals how he ghostwrites blogs for a large national association

By Kirsten Lambert

Blogs should be casual and irreverent, said The Wonkette during a session at the Corporate Communicators Conference in Las Vegas last June. Most compelling blogs also are written in a personal tone—even if an organization publishes the blog. Two examples of this approach are Manufacturer's Blog (from the National Association of Manufacturers) and the IABC Café (from the International Association of Business Communicators).

However, not all organizations are lucky enough to have senior leaders with the time or talent to write a regular blog. So what do you do, if you think your nonprofit could use a blog to communicate—but don't have an executive who can write it? Here's where a ghost blogger comes in.

Nonprofit Communicators Update talked with a communicator we'll call Blogger X. Instead of writing a bylined blog for the association where he works, he ghostwrites posts on behalf of the association's executives. He spoke on the condition of anonymity, so *NCU* promised not to blow his cover.

7:30 a.m.: Ghostwriting for an association takes some physical stamina, judging from Blogger X's schedule. Each weekday morning he stops at a gym for a workout before heading to his office in Washington, D.C.

9 a.m.: Blogger X slides into his chair at the Washington, D.C.-based association where he works. He then spends the morning peering at various blogs and message boards, reading news summaries at news.google.com, and absorbing digests and summaries of the talk-TV shows from the previous night.

After catching up on the day's news, Blogger X might turn his attention to his organization's Web sites. In his role as digital editorial manager, he spends several hours each day writing or editing the association's four blogs as well as contributing to other forums such as podcasts. He also has written speeches, articles, columns and op-eds for the association's member publications as well as other publications.

He got his start blogging in 2001, when the organization needed a way to share information such as speeches and other documents with employees. Blogger X built the information architecture and, in his words, "developed a reputation for being a digital guru." In 2005 the nonprofit asked him to edit what he refers to as the "main blog."

"I still review other content and other nondigital editorial stuff," he explains. "I'm a writer-editor, and the blog is just part of this."

The nonprofit has four blogs, in all. The main blog is geared toward members and the general public; it covers issues, stories in the news, legislation and topics such as social policy. Two blogs are written for employees, and another blog is geared toward volunteers.

"Our blogs are not narrative," Blogger X explains. "One reason we use blogs is because anybody can look at it and use it. But we're not really excited so much by the technology; it's the most readily available way to get the word out."

The first blog for employees launched in 2001, before the term blog (from weblog) came into general usage. The main blog debuted about a year ago.

"The idea was to talk about ideas, not to say 'Here's what our CEO had to say today,'" Blogger X says. "I imagine that most corporate blogs have people writing for them; they just never admit it. It's the CEO's opinion, but he or she may not have written it. Here it's not written by the CEO, but we don't attribute everything to him."

Blogger X is one of about five people who write for the blog. The idea of ghostwriting is not new, of course. The executives at his nonprofit have always had ghostwriters. And Blogger X cites countless presidents whose speechwriters have crafted orations that the presidents have uttered as if the words were their own.

"Ghost blogging is not unusual," he says. "People are so busy, and the pace today is so fast, that you really have to have communications people working for you who can do it for you. You can have people with bylined blogs, so it works either way, but it's probably more common for people to pay others to do their blogs for them than anyone wants to admit."

In fact, the Association Forum of Chicagoland publishes a blog called View From a Corner Office but does not disclose the writer's name. BoardBuzz, the daily weblog of the National School Boards Association, employs an informal tone but also keeps the author's identity under wraps.

Noonish: Even ghost bloggers have to eat. Although it's easy to imagine Blogger X furtively sneaking bites at his desk (lest someone discover his identity), he sometimes eats in the employee cafeteria or at a restaurant.

Around 1 p.m.: Uncovering topics for one of the association's blogs can take 60 to 90 minutes. Although most people don't know that Blogger X writes the association's blog, some of his fellow employees suggest content.

"I have come up with topics; I may pick a topic based on my knowledge or something based on politics," he says. "People from within the organization come up with topics or stop me in the hall.

"Some people inside the organization know [about my role], but I must be invisible because it's all about the ideas, not the person. It's not about who says what. For example, our speeches can be given by any of our board members; the information is interchangeable. It's the same as at GM or Coca-Cola."

2 or 2:30 p.m.: Writing a post based on the news and how it fits with the organization's efforts can take another 60-90 minutes.

"Opinion leaders, MSNBC, Fox and the other mainstream media all have blogs," Blogger X says. "We're usually in the news because somebody is criticizing us; it's always about which political party we're owned and operated by."

Blogger X is no stranger to the news media. He worked in the radio industry as well as cable TV before coming to the nonprofit where he now hangs his hat.

3 or 4 p.m.: Blogger X may be immersed in one of several tasks by midafternoon. However, at some point, any posts he has drafted for the blog need approval from his legal department.

Legal review can take as little as an hour or as long as 2 1/2 hours. Rather than fact-checking the draft of a post, the legal department scrutinizes the draft to make sure the organization cannot be sued over the blog's content. Because of the length of the review process, Blogger X does not update the blog each day.

"It's updated several times a week," he says. "Daily was impossible."

Once he gets legal approval, Blogger X publishes the post. "The blog post goes live instantly after legal approval is e-mailed to me," he says. "Some days I write two blog posts, depending on what's happening in the news and how the news does or does not fit with the organization's efforts."

Although Blogger X did not provide statistics on the number of visits to the blog, he says, "We know people are reading [it] because we do get responses. We have not enabled the Comments feature; however, we do post an e-mail address so people can write. If the topic is a really hot political topic, it will generate more activity."

Between 5:30 and 7 p.m.: Blogger X arrives home. He watches the national news. To unwind, he watches shows such as "American Idol" or "CSI." He also relaxes by listening to jazz on the digital cable-music channels.

"I never watch any talk-television news since I read summaries of the relevant talk television shows the next morning," he says.

10 p.m.: Blogger X usually looks at various blogs and message boards.

"Some blogs are a guy who doesn't know anything about a subject, and I can tell right away if somebody is a writer or not," he says.

He also has a personal blog, which allows him to communicate with friends who are geographically dispersed and in different time zones.

Midnight: Although sometimes he is still trolling the Web at this hour, usually Blogger X is trying to get some shuteye before the next day's covert operations.

No doubt he is dreaming about his next post. Ghostwriters like Blogger X need to keep up the flow of information, especially because his association hosts several blogs. Blogs need to be updated frequently, as Ragan blogger David Murray discovers in "A work in progress," describing a blog he quit shortly after writing the article. Also, as the Wonkette said, organizations need to be as transparent as possible.

"If we stopped, it would cause trouble," Blogger X says. "It's now an ongoing strategy. It's not going away. If somebody wants to start a blog, you can't just stop or your readers will think something is wrong—you have something to hide or are lying."

Kirsten Lambert is principal of Watermark Communications, a Chicago-based communications and marketing consulting firm. She has worked with numerous corporations and not-for-profit organizations for almost 20 years.

Copyright © 2006 Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.