

TIME TO PUT YOUR HEAD ON THE BLOG?

Sceptical about business blogs? Don't brush them off so fast, says Jonathan Holt. They could just double your sales.

You may have misgivings about how much a blog can do for your brand, but what if you found out it could double your sales?

You'd be forgiven for thinking this was nonsense were it not for a blogging success story from a sheet metal company in Lancashire. Yes, a sheet metal company. In Lancashire. (Just to be clear, it wasn't a perky new media company in Shoreditch.)

Paul Woodhouse started his Tinbasher blog in 2004 on the website of Butler Sheetmetal. Since then he's written about everything from house hunting to, well, business blogging. But mainly he writes about metal with articulacy and grit. To date, company turnover has doubled, with 90 per cent of new business coming in via the web. Woodhouse says the "blog is the engine room".

Clearly, blogs can work in the business world. So why not take a fresh look at some of the myths that make businesspeople balk at blogging.

It's an untried technique

Only three per cent of small and medium-sized firms in the UK are even considering starting a blog, according to recent research from web hosting firm Fasthosts. Meanwhile some businesses, like Butler Sheetmetal, have already started blogging. For inspiration, have a look at the websites of the companies below:

- Innocent Drinks, the smoothie phenomenon, www.innocentdrinks.typepad.com
- Howies, the off-beat clothing retailer, www.howies.co.uk
- Hitflip, a DVD and CD swap-shop, blog.hitflip.co.uk
- Salvo's, a family restaurant in Leeds, www.salvos.co.uk
- WigglyWigglers, a mail-order garden centre, www.wigglywigglers.blogspot.com

You may never have heard of some of them, but as long as Salvo's and Howies' customers read their blogs these businesses can

put a tick in the customer loyalty column. In Innocent's case it's a very big tick, with 6,000 readers every day.

I have nothing to say

"Write what you know" is the maxim of a thousand creative writing courses. In business today it should be "blog what you know". You're an expert in your field and on your company. If you've ever talked a mate's ear off about your business over a pint, you can blog.

Maybe you think blogging is not business-like. It depends on the business, naturally, but also on the behaviour. Appropriately for its brand, the Innocent blog is full of office silliness and "daily thoughts". (Prime example: "Bananas are good. Bruised mushy bananas are less good.") "People like to keep tabs on whether we're actually working or not," says Dan Germain, head of creative at Innocent.

Who has the time?

"Some days we'll go without having anything and some days we'll have seven things on the blog," says Innocent's Germain. By "we" he means several people in the Innocent marketing department who post regularly. You might consider spreading the time commitment in a similar way.

No one will read it

Unless you do something to promote your blog, no one will read it. Tinbasher Paul Woodhouse left comments on other blogs, with links back to his own. Hitflip simply linked to a new UK blog from its other European websites. Innocent publicised its blog in an email newsletter to 50,000 subscribers.

Why not give blogging a go yourself? "If a chilly jobshop in a nasty, disused foundry in the north-west of England can make elements of blogging work, anybody can," says Woodhouse.

Jonathan Holt is a writer, editor and web consultant. Read his own blog at ubiquity.typepad.com

