

Dave Taylor

The Intuitive Life Business Blog

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"Blogging is guerilla marketing at its finest."

—Dave Taylor

Dave Taylor has a long history as an online pioneer. He first logged on to the Internet in 1980, when he was an undergraduate at University of California, San Diego (UCSD). While working at Hewlett-Packard (HP) in the mid-1980s, he served as a Usenet administrator and helped develop its domain hierarchy. He also found time to write the popular Unix Elm e-mail system.



www.intuitive.com/blog

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Taylor left HP a few years later to organize Intuitive Systems, a consulting firm that helps businesses develop Web marketing strategies. At the same time he turned to freelance writing and editing to put his technical expertise and industry knowledge to work.

In February 1994, research for a magazine article led Taylor to establish the Internet Mall™. Assigned to write a story about companies doing business on the Internet, he was surprised to find that there was no register of such operations available. So he put together his own and began publishing it as “a monthly list of commercial services available via the Internet.” The text-only document started with a modest 34 entries, but it grew rapidly in size and popularity.

The Internet Mall was organized as a virtual multi-story department store, with each “floor” offering a different category of merchandise—books, music, and video on the first floor, personal items on the second, and so on. Individual retailer listings consisted of breezy descriptions, with instructions about how to connect to online stores using such arcane methods as Gopher and Telnet. Corporate underwriting helped support the list.

The endeavor was simple and effective—and *first*. (Consumer online services such as CompuServe and The Source offered online shopping, but they were not accessible via the Internet.) At a time when commercial activity on the Internet was of dubious legitimacy and frowned on by purists, the Internet Mall was radical. It has since been supplanted by search engines and mainstream advertising, but it has served as the template for Internet shopping ever since.

Taylor sold his online mall concept and trademark to TechWave, and a couple of years later he created another startup, iTrack.com—the first third-party auction search system, which has since been sold.

Just Ask Dave!

Today Taylor continues his consulting and writing activities, often combining the two in the several blogs he maintains.

Taylor is perhaps best-known for AskDaveTalyor (www.askdavetaylor.com) and The Intuitive Life Business Blog (www.intuitive.com/blog). AskDaveTalyor (his first blog, started in 2003) showcases and shares Taylor’s tremendous technical expertise—and sometimes just plain common sense—as he answers questions on everything from cascading style sheets to search engine optimization, not to mention the plague of porn and spam on the Internet. The

Intuitive Life Business Blog is a center for information exchange and discussions on business blogging and real-world events that affect blogging and business strategy. Along with his wife, Linda, Taylor also maintains the Attachment Parenting Blog (www.apparenting.com).

Does blogging help Taylor's business? In addition to generating a healthy income through advertising, Taylor's blogs promote his books (he's written 20, and he currently offers a downloadable title) and boost his visibility in the technical and business communities. And high visibility, he maintains, translates into increased sales, whether you're selling a product or expertise.

Tell us why you started blogging. Was it out of curiosity or business-related?

It looked like an interesting tool to help me manage communications with readers of my books. With 20 books published, I had the same problem that many technical book authors have, which is that someone buys one of your books, and they think you're their free consultant for the rest of time. That means a lot of e-mail.

But the fundamental dilemma wasn't answering e-mails from people, which I like to do; it was that I'd get the same questions again and again. So the problem for me became how to be more efficient about this, and not have to answer the same question 10 times in a month.

The first stab I took at it was actually a web-based discussion forum, organized into subject categories and topic threads. But it didn't work real well, so the second time I tried it, I thought, "Let's just make it a blog, because this blogging thing looks like it is a very powerful tool." And that really hit some traction. The next thing I knew, I was getting more questions than ever—many from people who hadn't read my books.

It's obvious that blogging extended your interaction far beyond your original audience. Just how far has blogging taken you?

I have three different blogs that I pour attention into. There's the Attachment Parenting blog [www.apparenting.com], in which my wife and I address parenting topics. This is the most personal of my blogs. Then there's AskDaveTalyor [www.askdavetaylor.com], which now sees a million visitors a month. That one is basically technical and business Q&A. It was originally the support conduit for my books, but it has very much taken on a life of its own. I get a rather amazing daily waterfall of questions coming

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in. They range all over the map, from programming questions to the most rudimentary questions like, “How do I sign up for a screen name on AOL?”—and all things between.

Literally every single day, I get a question from someone saying, “I got an iPod; how do I put music into it?” I even get questions from kids asking about relationships, but I don’t answer those. That’s a little out of my bailiwick.

My Intuitive Life blog [www.intuitive.com/blog/] focuses on business and strategy. A lot of what I do is help businesses figure out how to tap into this (blogging) world. So I’m interested in things like how you take a good idea and make a real business out of it. How do you treat your customers so that they are delighted by how much you’ve exceeded their expectations?

I spend a significant chunk of my time consulting with companies on strategy, and hopefully, I reflect this in the blog. I’m not interested in breaking news. I’m not interested in talking about what everyone else is talking about. I’m really interested in just business questions—for example, whether it’s a smart business strategy to let someone else run your server.

Some people have said that I march to the beat of a different drummer with all of that [focus on business blogging]. And that’s fine with me, because I think there are important business questions that aren’t asked in the blogging world, partly because as a general community, I think bloggers are somewhat reticent about earning money online.

They’re not just unable to figure out how to make money. There’s a large sub-community of people who think that you can’t—that you *shouldn’t*—earn money from your blog. In the online world, there’s this sense of, “You offer the service for free and you get a lot of people who want to use it, and then you sell the company to Google, and that’s how you make your money.” Of course, that’s not a sustainable business.

My AskDaveTalyor blog is more realistic, and a very profitable venture. It’s a legitimate business, it gets a lot of traffic, and it adds value to the community. Tech support in companies like Microsoft and HP and Apple point their clients to my site to get answers. People tell me, “I was on the phone with Microsoft, and they said I should check you out.”

But a whole lot of bloggers say, “Oh, that’s not a blog. It’s a business. It can’t be a blog and a business.” Or, it can’t be a blog because I don’t inject my own opinions. Or it can’t be a blog because I’m not writing about the news

that's happening at this very minute. So there's all this sort of arbitrary expectation in the sub-community, and yet at the end of the day, a blog is just a concept-management tool.

Blogging gives you certain capabilities, and there are certainly recommended practices and best practices, but there is no reason you can't use a blogging tool to create something that looks nothing like a blog.

BLOGGING GIVES YOU A VOICE ... AND MORE

A blog can help you establish a voice and identity online, can help you position yourself as the authority in your marketplace, and can give you a great avenue into learning more about what makes your customers tick.

Keeping up with three blogs—each with a different emphasis—would seem to require a lot of time. How much time do you spend blogging? Do you feel obligated to post every day?

On blogging itself I probably spend roughly 60 to 90 minutes a day. Sometimes I'll have two or three postings, maybe four or five, in a week, and other times I'll go for two or three weeks with nothing bubbling up.

“Instead of reacting defensively—or offensively—what you want to do is what any business needs to do when they encounter criticism. Take a deep breath, and then come at it from the perspective of ‘How can I make this a plus?’”

There are periods when I publish every day on AskDaveTaylor, but I don't write every day. A lot of bloggers think that [posting every day] is a huge mistake. You set expectations that you're going to write every day and then you're trapped; you have to write every single day.

For some people that works, but for other people, it's a bit of a treadmill. You end up diluting the quality of your work simply because you're writing for the sake of writing, not because you have something to say.

But one of the wonderful features of a blog is that you can schedule articles

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to show up in the future. So I can spend a day or two and pound out 6 or 10 or 15 articles. And often what I'll do is write two or three that are in somewhat of a series, and then I'll schedule them nonsequentially. The first will run the next Monday, the second on Thursday, and the third on the following Tuesday. And then I'll do another series, and I'll interweave them, so from the reader's perspective, I publish something on a different topic every day.

However you approach it, you have to create a lot of content. What inspires you?

It depends on the blog. On AskDaveTaylor, I have such a flow of questions that I won't run out for years. But I don't limit coverage of a topic to answering one question. I try to provide complete coverage of an area. If I have a bunch of questions on certain aspects of MySpace, for example, I'll go ahead and document other areas of MySpace so I can offer a complete set of instructional information.

With regards to the Intuitive Business blog, I read other blogs. I go to conferences. I talk to people. I have meetings with people. And I just wait for inspiration to hit.

Once you have the content in place, it's time to bring in the audience. Aside from the obvious—getting into search-engine results and e-mailing your friends—how do you attract readers to your blogs?

One big, big tip is [to] participate on other blogs. The metaphor I use is this: If I've just started college and I want to have the most successful party on campus, a really bad strategy is to just throw a party. That's because no one knows who I am. I'll end up sitting there with my house open and lots of alcohol and munchies, but no one will come. Or maybe two or three people will show up, and then leave.

The same thing happens if you set up a blog and just wait for people to come by. A few people might show up because they're your friends or you turned up in search-engine results, but mostly you'll just be waiting. So what can you do? You might try what some blog scammers do: Go to blogs, and leave comments that basically say, "Visit my site," and then hop away. Returning to the party metaphor, that's like going to other people's parties

wearing a sign that says, “*I Have Really Interesting Things to Say—Come Home with Me,*” and then going home.

The correct strategy—the one that actually works—is to go to parties and engage in discussions. Whatever they’re saying, you get involved in that discussion. Maybe you eventually lead into what you want to talk about, or maybe you don’t, but you’re interesting. You bring a bottle of wine as a thank you. You dance well. You help clean up afterwards. You’re a good guest. You become popular. And because you’ve become popular, you can throw a party and people will show up.

Make yourself known in the blogosphere, and people will come to your party. It’s a smart strategy, though not many people seem aware of it. If you look at the statistics, less than 1 percent of people who read blogs ever leave a comment. So you’ll really stand out if you get engaged in other blogs.

After the party starts, so to speak, are there things to watch out for—common mistakes you see bloggers making?

Absolutely. I’ll also say that what I see as a mistake, other bloggers you talk to will not see that way.

One of the mistakes that business bloggers make is that they write about what they want to sell, rather than writing about their expertise. If I sell outdoor furniture, and every single entry in my blog is about something I sell, no one’s ever going to come back. But if I write about things like how you take care of lawn furniture, how you keep it nice, and how to get a bee’s nest out of your umbrella, then people will come back to see what else you have to say. And they’ll associate what you’re selling with your interesting posts.

Another mistake business bloggers make is having a negative reaction to criticism of their product. Let’s say you run a ski resort. Someone comes onto your site and posts that they had a really bad experience at your resort, you were rude, and your slope sucks.

And you just respond, right there, “Well what do *you* know? You must be some sort of amateur idiot!”

Instead of reacting defensively—or offensively—what you want to do is what any business needs to do when they encounter criticism. Take a deep breath, and then come at it from the perspective of “How can I make this a plus?”

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So what do you do? You have the guy who runs the resort call this person and say, “I’m just so appalled to read about this experience you had! We would like to send you vouchers for a free weekend, including hotel. And when you’re here, I’d like to go out and grab a beer with you because I want to find out exactly what happened, so we can make sure that no one ever has that experience again.”

At a cost of maybe \$200, you can convert a critic into your best evangelist. If they come back, and they get the wine-and-dine, red carpet treatment and feel like someone really listened, now they’re going to tell 20 of their friends, “You know what? I had this bad experience, but these guys are so cool, they actually brought me up and paid for this fancy dinner, and I even got appetizers.” The point is that not thinking of long-term ramifications and not being willing to accept criticism is a mistake. No business is perfect. No individual is perfect.

Yet another mistake is not allowing comments. There are some blogs out there where the blogger’s attitude is, “Well, there’s really no discussion around our product, so there’s really no reason to allow comments.”

To me, letting any random person who comes onto your site add their two cents is the magic fairy dust of this whole thing. That’s what makes it so darned interesting. I don’t want to read just your opinion. I want to read other people’s responses to your opinion and, ideally, your retorts to them. And now it’s a whole discussion that just happened to start with the person who wrote the original opinion. But it goes on, and maybe it actually goes somewhere. Or at least there are multiple opinions and multiple perspectives that are all exposed and debated, for better or worse.

Whether you’re blogging for business or personally, I think it’s very poor form if you don’t have good grammar and good spelling. And I don’t really like obscenities, although they may sometimes have their place. The problem is that they’re used so often today that they have no value.

I also believe—and I might be in the minority here—that having some inherent level of respect for other people’s opinions is in order.

The reason I say I might be in the minority is because there is, to me, a very alarming current in our culture toward sarcasm, hostility, and rudeness. Obviously, people get to run their blogs the way they want. But from my perspective, if I write about a particular way of doing something, and someone disagrees, I’d rather respond to “Oh, I don’t agree,” than to “You’re an idiot!”

Just be professional. Even in your personal blog, be professional. Be mature. If someone disagrees with you, you can make them look far stupider by being calm and pleasant than by ranting or hurling insults.

You mentioned grammar and spelling as important elements for good blogging. Spelling can be fixed, but what can you say to people who aren't comfortable with their writing ability?

A blog is really cool in that regard because it gives you a publishing platform, and you can be as good or as bad as your skills let you. Also, you can vary your voice and tone over time. You can decide to try a more personal voice for a while. Or you might get the feeling that readers don't like it when you inject your opinion, and try not doing that for a while.

If you are indeed writing a couple of times a week, one hopes that over time you're getting better. As you write more, over time you find your voice and comfort level.

I'm a big fan of Peter Elbow. He wrote a great book (*Writing without Teachers*) that I read when I was an undergrad. [The message of the book] boiled down to, "If you want to learn how to write, just start writing."

DAVE'S BLOGGING TIP

If you are willing to share your experience, expertise, and insight into your own industry, you will gain readers and fans, and they will spread the word. Sharing my own insights and thoughts on business news and company offerings has significantly raised my visibility in the international business community and commensurately grown my consulting practice.

What do you find to be the most gratifying aspect of blogging?

The people who say, "You solved a problem I've had for a long time. Thank you so much." And I get that on a daily basis.

Another thing I really like is when someone says, "Thank you for having a thoughtful voice on this business instead of being just a knee-jerk person who agrees with everybody else."

And I'm careful not to have a knee-jerk reaction to things. In fact, I'll often take a contrary opinion to the majority, because I think that many people

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are sheep—even people who are in disguise as strong opinion leaders just echo what someone else says without really thinking through the implications. People tend to not remember the sheep of the world.

What are your plans for the future? Will you continue to expand your own personal blogosphere?

At AskDaveTaylor, I'm moving into Microsoft Windows Vista. I haven't yet covered Vista in a meaningful way, but I see that as a future trend. That's something I'm working on now.

And in terms of additional blogs, I have two that I'm sort of playing with. One will be movie reviews, and I'll invite anyone who has ability as a writer to be a co-contributor. Any money we make we'll just donate to the film preservation society. I think it would be fun to have an aggregation of good writers. I'm hoping we can get the Internet Movie Database [IMDb] to link to us automatically.

The other involves a book of mine that went out of print. I am hiring someone to turn it into a blog. It's a technical book, and 90 percent of it is probably relevant content. [That's] 600 pages just sitting there, so I might as well pour it out on the Web and let people comment on the chapters. And if they can update things, hopefully it will take on a life of its own.

What is your opinion of the blogosphere in general?

The beauty of blogging is in the eye of the beholder. There's a lot of noise and a lot of dribble out there. There are people who are just writing to see their words on the screen. And reading blogs can be like driving down the highway and looking at billboards—none really stand out, and the next day it's difficult to remember what you saw.

But you know what? That's fine! The forum for debate that blogging provides is unequalled, and blogging is the only outlet that many people have.

In the future, I think the concept of blogging as a distinct entity will blur. When you go to MySpace and send bulletins to your friends, it is not unlike blogging. And when you upload pictures from your recent vacation to Flickr, and your friends add captions, it's an awful lot like blogging. Blogging *per se* may eventually go away, but all that blogging is will be around for a while.

Points to Review

As a veteran of the pre-Web Internet and founder of the original Internet Mall and other important online businesses, Dave Taylor is someone to listen to. Here are some of the main points that Taylor makes in this interview that should be of special interest to bloggers:

- A blog doesn't have to look like a blog, and isn't limited to opinion. Taylor's first blog began as means of communicating with his books' readers. Today it hosts wide-ranging discussions on just about every topic imaginable.
- Can't write every day? Write when you're inspired, and write more than you need. Set up the extra material to post at later dates. From the reader's perspective, it will look as if you're posting regularly.
- Give your readers something extra. Don't stop with solutions—provide background or instructional information along with answers to questions.
- To bring readers to your blog, go to other blogs and engage in discussions. Don't just leave quickie comments so you can post your blog's URL.
- Don't write about what you're trying to sell—write about what you know. People will return to see what else you have to say, and they will take note of what you're selling.
- Accept criticism with a positive attitude.
- Don't block comments. You'll draw more readers if you show multiple viewpoints on topics.
- Cultivate good writing, and avoid obscenities.
- Think before you post. Respect others' opinions, and consider the future implications of your words.
- Blogging and business are not mutually exclusive. A business website can look like an informal blog or anything else a marketer wants it to be.

