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Blogging for Money

It is hard to miss the word “blog” today. We hear blogs mentioned in the media, see them all over the World Wide Web, and we even hear them discussed now in business and social situations. In many cases the term “blogger” is used not just to describe a person who writes a blog, but also someone who earns money doing it.

In this chapter we examine what blogging actually is and what it involves; we then examine the different types of bloggers, and the truth about making money blogging.

Before we get into earning money from a blog, we had better define what exactly a blog is.

What Is a Blog?

So what exactly is a blog? Because we are at the beginning of a blogging book, this is definitely an issue we need to be clear on!

There are a number of ways we can answer this question, ranging from the broad to the highly technical. To put it as clearly as possible, *a blog is a particular type of website*. You can see an example in Figure 1-1.

Studies have shown that although awareness of blogs is increasing, many people frequent blogs without realizing it. This is fine; the key thing is that readers get value out of it. Anyone who has been reading blogs for a while, though, will know there is more to blogging than just publishing any old website.

Though blogs started out as informal lists of links and personal journals, they have evolved into a far more varied medium. In addition to diary blogs and link blogs, there are now CEO blogs, educational blogs, marketing blogs — you name it!

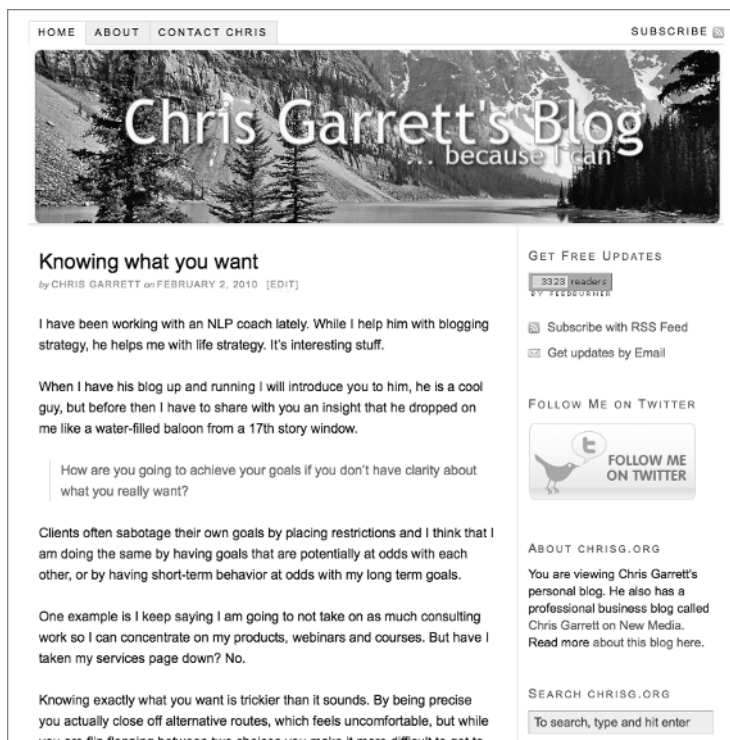


Figure 1-1: A typical blog.

Even blogs on a seemingly similar topic can be approached very differently. Just compare chrisg.com and ProBlogger.net, the blogs belonging to the authors of this book. You can see that although blogs have a lot of features in common, they can also be implemented with your own individual style.

What Makes Blogs Different?

If blogs are just websites, what makes them so different?

In my opinion there are three main areas that differentiate a blog from any other type of site:

- **Content** — Blogs are usually updated more often than traditional websites are; many are updated multiple times a day, and this keeps visitors coming back more often. The content is also normally arranged in reverse-chronological order with the most recent “post” (article) at the top of the main page and the older entries toward the bottom.

- **Syndication** — Not only can blog followers read a blog in their web browser just like they can any other website, a blog almost certainly provides the content in the form of a “feed.” In other words, the articles posted to the site are provided in a machine-readable format, allowing people with the appropriate software to read the blog posts as they are published without actually visiting the site.
- **Conversation** — The style of a blog is quite different from other types of websites; there is more of a conversational and community feel. Unlike a purely informational site, or a traditional news site, blogs are written with the bloggers communicating directly to their audience, and replies are expected in the form of comments. In addition to the conversation happening on each blog, conversation also happens between blogs, with one blog post attracting replies and responses on others.

EXERCISE

The best way to really get a feel for what makes blogs so special is to go out and read a few.

Find as many interesting blogs as you can and note the following:

1. What appeals to you?
2. What does not appeal to you?
3. What sort of content do the blogs you looked at provide?
4. How often do they update?
5. What sort of reader reaction do they get?

When you find a couple of blogs that you enjoy reading regularly, you will begin to appreciate the subtle differences in style and approach to other forms of web publishing. You might also appreciate the pleasure blogs provide over and above their potential to generate financial gain!

The Added Benefits of Blogging

Yes, blogging has many benefits. Although many bloggers get pleasure just from the process of writing, and of course we cannot overlook the bloggers who make money, blogging may help you achieve other goals:

- **Fame** — A successful blog has the potential to get you noticed and help you build a more visible profile in your business market, pastime, or community.

- **Contacts** — Blogs are excellent ways to get to know people and network. Because blogs naturally lead to conversation, a well-read blog will put you in contact with a wide variety of people.
- **Traffic** — Attracting highly targeted visitors alone could be a big draw, especially if you have products or services to sell. Website owners are always looking for new sources of traffic, and blogs are a proven way to generate more visits and increased loyalty.
- **Sales** — In addition to gaining more attention, over time through your articles you can generate trust and build credibility, critical to making sales.

I love blogging. It is great to be able to work from home, on my own schedule, while helping and meeting so many people. I can't imagine a better way to earn a living!

Making Money with Blogs

We've already mentioned a couple of times that blogs can make you money, but so far we have offered no explanation of how that is the case. This section takes a look at how bloggers make money. While you read this, you may want to think about tactics that appeal to you.

Introduction to Professional Blogging

Over the past few years blogging has changed a great deal and evolved in many ways. What was once an activity limited to a very small number of people has now exploded into a mini-industry. As the number of bloggers has exploded, so has the number of tools and services available for bloggers.

Online activities that once involved a good deal of perseverance and a lot of technical proficiency can now be quickly and easily performed by anyone with a few clicks and some typing. Web publishing has arrived for the masses.

With these developments and a growing awareness, some individuals have succeeded in profiting from their blogs. In the beginning it was almost unheard of for someone to earn money from their blog; in fact, for many, profit was seen as counter to blogging culture. This soon changed. As the first pioneers shared their income achievements the focus upon making money from blogging has increased. Now, although financial gain might not be expected, it is certainly much more accepted.

Over recent years the term “professional blogger” arrived to describe anyone who approaches blogging not as simply a hobby, but as a professional money-earning activity.

How Much Could You Earn?

It should be stressed before we go any further that bloggers need to enter into an examination of this topic with realistic expectations. While millions of bloggers are experimenting with professional blogging, most bloggers are not getting rich and are only supplementing their income by blogging.

Although some bloggers like Darren and I do make a full-time living from blogging, and there are bloggers who make way more than either of us do, many more bloggers use their blogging income to subsidize gadget purchases or to offset some Internet costs.

Just like in most walks of life, those who succeed are the few who put in the effort to make a go of it over the long haul, whereas most others fall by the wayside before they really get going.

Pro Blogging Is Not a Get-Rich-Quick Tactic

It sometimes disappoints people when we tell them to look elsewhere if they want instant riches. Unfortunately for the impatient, it takes time to build a profitable blog. You do not just become a professional blogger overnight any more than you instantly become a professional golfer. If only this was the case! Although blogging involves you making a decision that you are going to earn money from blogging, it is also something you have to work toward over time.

Yes, you *could* make a lot of money from blogging. Read the stories that are going around on blogs of people making decent full-time incomes from blogging and you will get an idea of the sort of earning potential that exists. Take care also to read about and investigate the hard work and time investment required by bloggers who have created a financially viable blog. Remember that for every well-publicized success story you do read about, there are plenty of others around who have tried and failed that you do not read about. There are a lot more people who struggle to make any more than a few dollars from their blogs than who earn those headline-making five-figures-a-month totals.

Don't get us wrong; we aren't not saying this to dampen the excitement and dreams of pro bloggers! The whole point of this book is to help you achieve exactly those dreams, but we think it is the responsibility of those of us who

are “talking up” blogging to also keep giving reality checks. There are no magic wands, no hidden tricks, and no secret handshakes that can bring you immediate success, but with time, energy, and determination you can get there.

Direct and Indirect Earning Methods

We go into more detail about exactly how you can earn money from a blog later in this book, but making money from blogging is achieved with two broad categories of tactics: *direct* and *indirect* monetization.

Most blogs and bloggers tend to use one or the other of these methods, but there is nothing to stop bloggers from experimenting with elements of both.

Direct Monetization

Direct methods include strategies that enable bloggers to earn an income directly *from* their blogs. Examples include the following:

- Advertising
- Sponsorships
- Affiliate commissions
- Paid reviews (If you are caught by Google selling links you can lose your rankings.)

As you can see in Figure 1-2, Darren creates revenue directly through displaying advertising.



Figure 1-2: Sponsor advertisements on ProBlogger.net.

Indirect Monetization

Indirect methods include those in which bloggers earn an income *because* of their blog. This could be taking your blog-derived authority, credibility, and expertise and using it for any of the following:

- Freelance contracts
- Books and ebooks
- Speaking engagements
- Consultancy opportunities
- Service contracts
- Running courses, classes, and workshops
- Membership sites and paid communities

When you visit my blog, shown in Figure 1-3, you will not see any ads, but you will see references to my indirect monetization methods.



Figure 1-3: Using a blog to sell services.

EXERCISE

Look over the list of blogs you found in the previous exercise. What methods, if any, do bloggers use to earn money? Look for the obvious signs such as advertising, and the not-so-obvious elements such as references to their own services.

Passive and Active Income

A big appeal for making money out of blogs, or in fact web publishing in general, is that many people see it as a passive income or income that is earned even when they are not actively working.

Although there are aspects to blogging that can be seen as allowing a passive income — for example, advertising can earn you money while you are asleep, you can take days off, and so on — in actual fact you do need to keep working at it to make a steady or increasing income.

Blogs that stay still, do not get cared for, or are obviously built with automated or ripped-off content ultimately decline and disappear. When a blog attracts no visitors, the blogger will not earn income.

Is Pro Blogging Right for You?

Darren and I speak to bloggers every day who have heard the stories of blogs that make big money and who want to try to make an income from blogging. One of the pieces of advice that we offer, knowing full well that it doesn't always get through, is that it is worth taking time out to ask yourself whether making money with a blog is right for you.

Although this might seem to be a silly or even insulting question to some, it is meant to help you examine your intentions. Not every blogger is suited to blogging for money.

Many new bloggers find that at first the enthusiasm and ideas come easily, but after the first flush of energy has passed it becomes harder and harder to write every day, let alone keep up with all the other activities required to maintain a blog. When your income depends on keeping it up, you might find some of the feelings of excitement and enjoyment have turned to resentment and blogging has become a chore.

Which Monetization Method Is Right for You?

It is not always obvious which style of monetization you might want to follow. Each monetization tactic is appropriate to a different style of blog and blogger.

Consider the following approaches to blogging and see if they fit you. We have noted which category they *primarily* fall under.

Indirect

Here are some common reasons for blogging that fall in the indirect monetization category:

- You blog to help promote your business.
- You blog because you want to sell your products.
- You blog because you want to promote your writing.
- You blog because you want to make yourself known.

Direct

Here are some common reasons for blogging that fall in the direct monetization category:

- You blog for recreational purposes, about your interests and hobbies.
- You blog to make money in your spare time.
- You blog about products and write reviews.

Now, there is nothing wrong with blogging for more than one reason and a mix of strategies is certainly possible, but bloggers considering adding income streams to their blogs need to be aware of the possibility that the implications of going in that direction might impact their other goals.

Let me share some scenarios of real cases that Darren and I have come across where putting ads on a blog wasn't a good idea. Although they might seem specific, I am sure they represent the story of many bloggers and that you can imagine many more scenarios.

BUSINESS BLOGS ADVERTISING FOR COMPETITORS

Many entrepreneurs hate the thought of leaving money on the table, so when they hear about blog advertising they think they have found a way to make money from wasted traffic. In fact, what tends to happen is that the ads that are served up by their blogs are for other competing businesses in their field. Although they could block some of the ads, most often more ads come in to replace them. If you are promoting your own products or services, be extremely careful about displaying banners or any offers other than your own. In many cases the space you give over to advertising could be more profitably used to sell your own offering.

READER UPROAR

One blogger who Darren spoke to told him about the day she added graphical banner ads to her blog that sparked a mutiny among her readers. Previously loyal readers expressed outrage that she'd gone that route. Whereas on some blogs, the readers' sense of ownership is not very high, on other blogs — for one reason or another — readers take great offense when bloggers change the rules midstream, especially when it comes to intrusive or animated banner ads. Depending upon the community levels and the way you introduce the ads, you can end up losing readership when you advertise, and you need to consider whether the benefits of the income ads generate outweigh the disadvantages of losing readers.

MONEY OBSESSION

Perhaps one of the saddest examples is of a blogger who had been running a really interesting and reasonably successful blog. Although you wouldn't call him an A-lister, he had a growing and loyal following. Seeing this growth, he got bitten by the "money from blogging" bug so badly that it ended up killing his blog. He deleted from his archive any content that had no income-earning potential and introduced so many ads onto his blog that it was hard to find the actual content. Eventually he ended up writing only on topics that he thought would be earners. By doing so, he lost the vast majority of his readership and ended up with a pretty uninteresting and garish blog.

DISTRACTIONS AND CLUTTER

A number of bloggers try some advertising and then later pull the ads, largely because the payoff isn't worth giving the space to the ads. Ads contribute an element of clutter to your blog and if the conversion isn't sufficient, using ads can seem quite pointless. Opinions on the usefulness of ads versus the disadvantages of the clutter they create vary from blogger to blogger and sometimes depend on the type of ad chosen and the topic that the blogger is writing about, but it's one of the main reasons we see for bloggers to *remove* advertising.

LOSS OF REPUTATION

Reputations are increasingly important and very hard to build. It does not take much to lose any trust you have built up. Some bloggers manage to build their reputation, gather an audience, and then wash what they built down the drain. After advertising, many bloggers look to affiliate commissions and paid reviews for their next source of income. The problems start when they

consider only the commission value and start promoting affiliate products that they have no knowledge of. Inevitably some of those products will be subpar or even actually rip people off. In promoting defective products or writing inaccurate reviews those bloggers betray their audience, something it is very hard to recover from.

How to Make Blog Advertising Work for You

Here are the key tips for considering blog advertising:

- Put your reader and content first.
- Don't let ads dominate.
- Ensure only relevant and appropriate ads are displayed.
- Write reviews only for products that you have used.
- Promote affiliate offers only when you are sure they are good value. (Disclose your affiliate relationship so as not to fall foul of the FTC regulations.)

Stick to these tips and you should be fine in most cases.

Blog Strategies

When they think of earning money from blogging, many people think of only one model:

1. Set up a blog.
2. Make it popular.
3. Earn from advertising.

In fact there are other models to consider.

Multiple Blogs

First of all there is no reason why you should have only one blog. Darren and I each have several blogs. Although your earnings on an individual blog might not set the world alight, if you have multiple blogs and earn a couple of hundred dollars *per blog*, it could make for quite a nice salary.

Freelance Blogging

In addition to owning my own blogs, I make a percentage of my income writing for other people. It is enjoyable, can be lucrative, and is actually great marketing for my own blog and me.

Obviously I think it is a good deal for the blogger, but what about the person hiring the blogger? People hire a freelance blogger to blog for them for several reasons:

Ability

There is the writing itself and then all the other things a blogger needs to do, such as traffic building and promotion, design tweaks, technical stuff like installing plugins and programming, and so on.

Time

If you are busy running your business but you know you would benefit from a blog, then you might hire someone else to do the actual writing. I know many bloggers who have built up mini-networks of blogs this way without doing much of the actual blogging.

Network

As you will see later in this book, success can be as dependent on other people as on your own efforts. Sometimes people hire other bloggers who they know are well-connected to gain access to people and communities otherwise out of reach for them.

Knowledge

At times you might need a subject-matter expert to write on certain topics. Rather than learning it all yourself, you can outsource those articles.

Credibility

Hiring an already-popular blogger is also an advantage because you can leverage his or her credibility and traffic to boost your own. There's nothing like having a well-known, big-name blogger to drive people to your site.

Build and Flip

A concept familiar in the real-world real-estate market, building and flipping has transferred over to the virtual world of property development. Essentially

it is possible to grow a blog's value and then sell it. You could build from scratch or find an under-developed property, buy it, give it a makeover, and then sell it for a profit.

EXERCISE

After reading the preceding sections you will have a good idea of the sort of revenue options that are out there. Take some time to think about which appeal to you and why. Most monetization techniques take a good amount of testing, but knowing in advance where your motivations lie will give you an idea of which strategies you are going to have the energy to persist with.

Measuring a Blog's Success

If you are building a blog to earn money directly, or if you are hoping to make sales from your blog, then money is your obvious metric to determine how well you are doing. What if direct income or sales leads are not part of your plan? How can you measure the success of your blog then?

Every blogger you speak to seems to have a unique perspective on what determines a successful blog. For some it could be about traffic, others prioritize the number of subscribers, and some bloggers count comments as the best measure. Each metric means different things to different people.

The following sections cover a few measures of success that different bloggers use to evaluate how their blogs are going. Some will be more or less relevant for different blogs and will depend upon the goals and objectives of the blogger.

Traffic

The most common ways that bloggers use to evaluate a blog are the different measures of traffic. Different bloggers seem to have their own preferences regarding different aspects of traffic, plus each tool you use to measure traffic gives a different result due to the differing methodologies used. It is very rare to find two different tools that agree on any one result, so when measuring traffic it is best to stick to your favorite service and use it to show progress rather than obsessing over the actual numbers. Figure 1-4 shows an example traffic graph for ProBlogger.net.

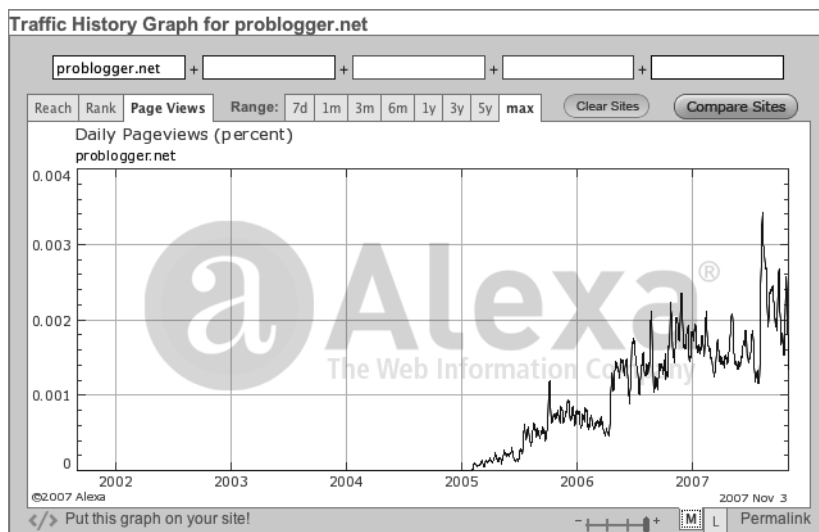


Figure 1-4: Alexa graph for ProBlogger.net.

Unique Visitors

The idea behind tracking unique visitors is to count the number of people who visit your blog. The problem in determining this accurately is there is no way to know who is visiting with any confidence unless you get each person to log in every time they read.

To get a rough idea of how many unique people visit a blog, you can use techniques such as counting each unique IP address (a number given to each device connected to the Internet) or recording “cookies” (small text entries saved by your web browser for later retrieval). All methods have proponents and problems. For example, your IP address today might be different tomorrow, or many different computers could be simultaneously surfing under one number due to differences in how networks are organized. Cookies have a lot of fans, but they are less reliable than they once were because so many people delete them manually or automatically via security and privacy software.

A further complication is that if you have readers who choose to take your content in feed form rather than view your blog in their web browser, your audience is actually larger than this statistic represents.

Advertisers, especially, like to know how many unique visitors your blog attracts in a given month, and if you are going to sell your blog, this metric is extremely important also.

Visits

An individual visitor could make several visits to a blog. You can measure visits more reliably than you can unique visitors, but to compare results you have to agree on what constitutes a visit.

Visits are also sometimes termed “visitor sessions.” Depending on who you listen to and which software you use to measure, a session could be calculated in several ways. One popular way to define a session is as an unbroken stream of page views after a certain period of inactivity. If someone visits two pages ten minutes apart, is that two page views in one session or two visits?

Many website owners take note of average session length as a way to determine how long people spend on their site. As websites become less about downloading pages and focus more on interactivity within a page, session length is gaining attraction. The longer visitors spend looking at your content the better, because it means they were more engaged and according to media-types, gaining more affinity with your brand.

Page Views

Page views are the total number of pages read in a web browser. Most bloggers like to know how many page views they attract on a daily and a monthly basis.

In addition to the total page views, you should monitor the ratio of pages viewed per visitor. It is best to have a high number of pages viewed and for the average visitor to read more than one page.

Each article you write will receive its own page views, and by comparing individual page counts you can work out which articles are gaining the most attention, giving you an idea what content your audience finds most interesting.

Hits

Hit counts measure the number of requests sent for a file to the server.

This is a dated and largely unhelpful metric because every request for any file is counted. Although it sounds useful, in actual fact it gives you little actionable information. If you have a page containing four images, one request for that page is counted as five hits. To increase your hits, you can add images to the page!

Due to the misleading nature of the metric, few people use it seriously, and the term *hits* is often incorrectly used in conversation and the media when what they actually mean is to describe traffic in general, or specifically visits or page views.

Subscribers

Bloggers can vary from being indifferent about subscriber counts to being obsessed with them. Why are subscribers so important?

Counting a blog's subscribers gives a good indication of how popular it really is because subscribers are the people who want to read your content long-term and have signed up to receive updates so they never miss one. These are your loyal readers, the people you can hopefully count on to come back again and again.

Whereas the metrics mentioned before are important, and they are traditional measures for any website, subscribers are critical to blogs. A visit could be a person arriving, not finding what they need, and going away never to return. A subscriber has made a small commitment to you and demonstrates you are providing something useful and compelling.

Subscribers are usually split into RSS subscribers and email subscribers; although, the lines are blurring.

RSS Subscribers

RSS subscribers are the people who use your feed to read articles. They use a feed reader (service or software application) to pull down updates to your feed and might never actually visit your blog at all.

The most popular feed-measurement service is FeedBurner.com, and because of this, most bloggers rely on that service to compare progress against each other. Both Bloglines and Google provide a count of readers using their feed-reader services, but only FeedBurner provides a count across all of them.

Even though nearly all bloggers rely on FeedBurner, even the company would admit that counting feed readers is not an exact science. Numbers fluctuate every day, and glitches can make it seem like you have lost or gained readers almost randomly. The best idea is to use the count as a progress guide and not an exact count of individuals.

Email Subscribers

In addition to RSS readers, many bloggers publish their content over email. There are services available to allow you to take your RSS feed and deliver email updates automatically, and then there are specialist email-newsletter-publishing services such as Aweber.com that allow you to create messages or import your content.

An advantage that using email lists has over using RSS is that when a visitor subscribes you get his email address. A list of email addresses is a reliable indicator of how many individuals you have subscribed.

Comments, Feedback, and Interaction

Much as we all want readers, when a blog is truly engaging you will attract comments. Comments show that your visitors want to interact with you. They allow you to build a sense of community, further encouraging readers to return time and again. You can see an example comment form in Figure 1-5.

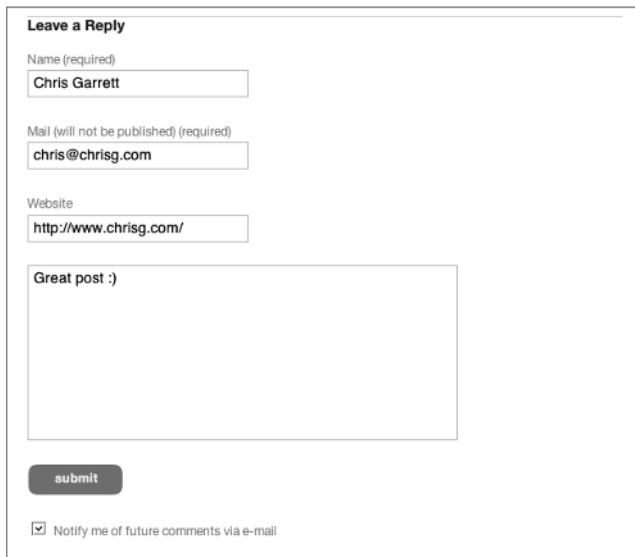


Figure 1-5: Writing a comment.

Comments

You can begin by counting the number of comments you receive after removing junk and spam comments. If on average each article attracts ten comments, you know you have made an improvement over when your blog gained only one or two.

There are two types of posts you might particularly want to receive: good feedback and considered posts. If the only comment you ever receive is, “You suck,” you might not be quite as happy about those ten comments as back when you received two “nice post” comments per article!

Many bloggers also judge quality equally as important as quantity because it is so easy to just post any old rubbish into the comment area, and people do just to get a mention of their own website, but when someone takes time and care to craft a thoughtful comment it can be much more satisfying.

Feedback

Obviously, in addition to comments, people will use your contact form and email to get in touch with you. Many of my best articles have been inspired by reader questions, and it is important to all of us to receive feedback, good and bad, so we know where we are going wrong and what we are doing right.

Interaction

Beyond comments and emails, there are many ways that readers can participate on a blog. Taking part in your blog might include responses to polls, competition entries, and other calls to action. In general, if people do in large numbers what you ask, then you have an engaged audience!

Links

Links are the currency of the World Wide Web. The number of incoming links to your blog can be an indicator of how well you are engaging other bloggers. Incoming links are good for a blog in most cases because of the incoming traffic that follows them, but also because they are a major factor in climbing the rankings in search engines.

They can be monitored in a number of ways.

Trackbacks

If another blogger links to your article you can be notified using a special comment called a Trackback, which appears linking back to the original blogger with a small quote of the text used. Though some bloggers hate them due to spammers taking advantage of the free link back, blogs utilize them to further conversations and as notification of what others are writing about you.

Search Engines

To find out who is linking to you, type **link:domainname** into Google. You can get a good quick picture of the incoming links that that search engine has indexed for your blog. There are also browser plugins and easy-to-use web services that will show you the same thing.

Referral Stats

Most statistics packages offer the ability to track where your readers come from to get to your blog. This shows you the things they are searching search engines for but, also the sites that are linking up.

Search-Engine Results

Getting to the top of a search-engine result for a certain phrase can be the ticket to a flood of traffic and admiration from your peers. Some people take this to the level of a sport, seeing it as a game or competition, whereas other people make an entire career out of it because some search results are worth a great deal of money if you have something valuable to sell. Take a look at Figure 1-6 to see an example search result where Darren ranks top.

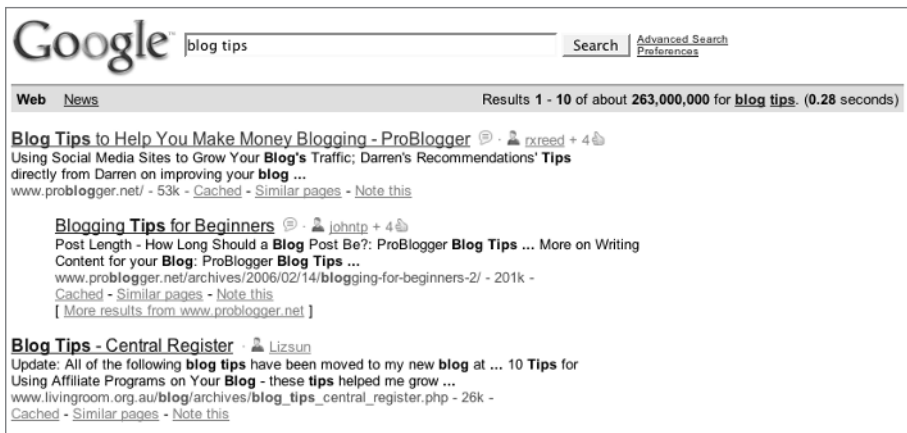


Figure 1-6: ProBlogger coming in at the top in an example Google search.

PROBLOGGER BLOG TIP: USEFUL WEBSITES

The following websites and tools are useful for keeping track of your own progress or comparing one blog to another:

<http://tools.seobook.com/>
www.seomoz.org/tools
<http://alexa.com/>

EXERCISE

Go back over your list of blogs to read one more time. Do your favorite blogs show any signs of success under the preceding criteria? Do the best have more RSS subscribers, more comments? Can you find them in Google.com and Alexa.com?

PROBLOGGER BLOG TIP: STAT ADDICTION

Although monitoring all the statistics mentioned in this chapter can be useful, some bloggers fall into the trap of becoming quite addicted to checking these types of statistics, which can become a pretty competitive and unproductive exercise.

Remember that unlike a lot of endeavors, a blogger doesn't really have competition as such; your fellow bloggers are more normally a source of help, friendship, and traffic rather than adversaries. Plus, it is worth growing a thick skin and keeping your ego in check; sometimes "conversation" can become heated, so keeping a balanced head can be critical!

I, personally, take note of all of these varying degrees of measurements, but it's best not to give them undue attention.

Summary

In this chapter we examined what a blog is and some of the ways you can use blogging to make money.

Though we do not want you to be pessimistic, we cautioned that it is not something that you will make a ton of money doing overnight, so better hold on to that day job! At the same time it is a great way of earning income, both in terms of the amount of money you can make and the fun you can have doing it.

Over the remainder of this book we go into detail and show exactly how to choose a topic for your blog, what you need to do to build your blog, and how to make it a success.