

## Chapter 1

# Checking Out Business Blogs

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Creating buzz with a blog
  - ▶ Finding out how businesses use blogs
  - ▶ Discovering what characteristics good blogs have in common
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**T**raditional business marketing is changing. More ads, catchier slogans, louder television commercials, brighter colors . . . everything's been done to catch the consumer's eye. Your company may have a great product that people love, but if you can't make them pick you out of a crowd, you're sunk.

So what's the solution?

Stop talking at consumers, and start talking to them. Begin a conversation with them that encourages them to talk to others about your business or product. That's what buzz marketing with blogs is all about: getting a conversation going between business and consumer.

The term *blog* is a combination of the words *Web* and *log*. Blogs are online chronicles that are updated frequently, sometimes even daily. An *update* (also called an *entry* or a *post*) is usually quite short, perhaps just a few sentences, and readers can often respond to an entry online. People who write blogs are commonly called *bloggers*. Bloggers, tongue in cheek, call themselves and their blogs the *blogosphere*.

## *Generating Buzz for Your Blog*

The power of blogs is *buzz*, or conversations and Web links that bounce from blog to blog and gather mass and impact. Companies that use blogs as buzz-building tools are finding substantial readerships of people who avidly want to know what the blogger has to say and respond with comments to every new posting. The best part is that they often spread that message to others within their sphere of influence through blogs, instant messages, or e-mail.

Word of mouth is one of the strongest marketing tools your company can use. For example, a recommendation for a product or service from a trusted friend is more memorable and convincing than the cleverest television ad — and more likely to be turned into action.

What if you had a tool at your disposal that could reach hundreds of people at once who are actually interested in your products or services and appreciate the fact that you're making information available to them? A Weblog is such a tool. Blogs are all about opening up your knowledge, expertise, processes, and goals to your customers. Done right, they can give back loyalty, goodwill, and valuable feedback.

The blog format is breaking new ground for business by:

- ✓ Providing a way to interact with customers
- ✓ Being a clearinghouse of information and expertise
- ✓ Getting valuable feedback — including criticism — from those who know your products and services best: customers
- ✓ Changing public opinion during times of negative attention
- ✓ Simplifying and amplifying collaboration between employees

The informal, engaging style and interactive format of blogs make them very attractive for companies looking to change public perception, take part in a dialogue begun in the press, correct a mistake, take a position, and get feedback from customers.

Best of all, blogs are a nearly instantaneous publishing format; the software that runs a blog speeds up, instead of slows down, the publication of news and information to your Web site. They're easy and cheap to set up; from a cost/benefit point of view, blogs are very easy to justify, and results come quickly.

Blogs are a great way to keep employees and customers abreast of the latest news faster and more effectively than a traditional company newsletter. They disseminate announcements more quickly than the most centrally placed bulletin board. And they can get you customer feedback more cheaply than any focus group or survey.

But what makes a blog different from any other corporate Web site? A blog is designed around a particular form of publishing: frequent, short updates often using links, accompanied by a corresponding set of comments from readers. Blogs are an organic process, meant to be written and read regularly — even daily — and simply aren't as “packaged” and controlled as a press release. Their tone is usually informal, almost stream of consciousness. In fact, many bloggers don't bother to use capital letters or spell-checkers!

## A typical business blog

A good blog format contains a combination of these elements:

- ✓ **Name:** You almost always find the name of the blog at the top. It is usually short, catchy, and humorous.
- ✓ **The latest post:** The date, and occasionally the time, display so that you know which entry is the latest one. Unlike the front page of most business Web sites, a blog home page is usually quite long, because older entries also display on the home page.
- ✓ **Comment link:** After each entry, most bloggers invite the reader to add a comment.
- ✓ **A collection of related info:** On the right-hand side of the browser window, this info may consist of e-mail subscription opportunities, explanatory or biographical information, archived entries, and links to other blogs that the blogger reads regularly and recommends.

The following figure is a good example of a standard blog format and layout. Blog Maverick ([www.blogmaverick.com](http://www.blogmaverick.com)) is the blog of Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban.

The screenshot shows the Blog Maverick website layout with the following annotations:

- Latest post:** Points to the main content area on the left.
- Blog name or logo:** Points to the 'blog maverick' header.
- E-mail signup opportunity:** Points to the 'Sign Up' button in the 'Announcements' section.
- Latest date and time:** Points to the 'Posted Oct 25, 2004, 5:34 PM ET' text.
- About explanatory link:** Points to the 'About Mark Cuban' link in the 'Resources' section.
- Comment link:** Points to the 'Reader Comments (7)' link at the bottom of the main post.
- Archived entries:** Points to the 'Recent Entries' section on the right.
- Links to other Web sites and blogs:** Points to the 'Sites To Visit' and 'Weblogs, Inc. Sites' sections on the right.

The website content includes:

- Header:** 'blog maverick the mark cuban weblog'
- Main Post:** 'Two Good Reads' by Chris Byron, dated Oct 25, 2004. The post discusses reading suggestions and mentions 'The SEC might not watch out for small investors'.
- Resources:** Links to 'About Mark Cuban' and 'Contact Mark Cuban'.
- Announcements:** A 'Sign Up' button for an email subscription.
- News Feeds:** RSS feeds for 'Blog', 'RSS', and 'Atom'.
- Link To Blog:** A link to 'Blog Maverick'.
- Recent Entries:** A list of recent posts including '10/25/2004 Two Good Reads', '10/22/2004 Getting My Attention', and '10/17/2004 Applications for your future TV'.
- Sites To Visit:** A list of recommended websites including 'Dallas Mavericks Home', 'Dallas Mavericks History', 'The Fallen Patriot Fund', 'GoSquad', 'HNNet Home', 'Landmark Theatres', 'The Benefactor Promo', and '10 MB .wmv file'.
- Weblogs, Inc. Sites:** A list of sites including 'Consumer', 'Autoblog', 'Blogging Babr', 'Enquadet', 'h3c3 a gas', 'Joomla', 'Technology', 'Apple (Unofficial)', 'CSS', 'Digital Photography', 'Google (Unofficial)', 'Grid Computing', 'JavaScript', 'Microsoft (Unofficial)', 'Office', 'Open Source', 'Panic! at the Disco', 'Photoshop (Unofficial)', 'RSS', 'Search Engine Marketing', 'Social Software', 'Spam', 'Tablet PCs', 'VoIP', 'Yahoo! (Unofficial)', 'Wireless', 'Bluetooth', 'Enquadet Cellphones', 'Enquadet GPS', 'RFID', 'Ultra Wideband', 'WiFi', and 'The WiMAX Weblog'.

Although the writing may be free-form, a blog has some common organizational structures that make understanding and participating in the conversation easy for readers.

## *Discovering How Businesses Are Using Blogs*

Blogs aren't the be-all, end-all solution for marketing, but they go a long way toward establishing rapport, trust, and information exchange — things that are hard to create between companies and the rest of the world. Using blogs effectively is a two-part strategy:

- ✓ Being aware of what is being said online about your company. More and more consumers are using blogs to articulate their own thoughts and feelings about a company and its products. Starting a business blog helps you to be a participant in the conversation.

To find out what's being said about you, simply search for your company name in a search engine, such as Google. In many cases, some of the top returns are blog posts of consumers who've expressed an opinion about your company or products.

- ✓ Considering whether your company can benefit from a blog.

In the following sections, I discuss just how businesses are putting blogs to work for them to do a better job reaching and talking with customers, increasing interest in a company or product, setting themselves up as leaders in their industries, and more.

## *Communicating with customers*

Blogs can be used to convey news, events, plans, and customer support information to your customers — and to engage them in dialogue that can be used to improve the way your company functions.

Fast Company, a business publication tracking new business practices, competition, and processes, started the FC Now blog ([www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)) in order to discuss ideas, business news, and resources with its readers. Shown in Figure 1-1, it encourages readers to suggest topics and to post comments. Several staff members contribute to the blog, each posting on a subject that interests them personally. FC Now is a way for Fast Company to respond quickly to breaking news and to let its readers know about resources and tools. Postings range from asking former customers why they aren't still

customers, a link to a Web site that covers technical horror stories, news about the company's *a cappella* music groups, and articles from other publications pertinent to the Fast Company audience.



The effect of the blog is an open, informal interaction between Fast Company and its readers — achieving something that is more free-form, frequent, and organic than the rigid format of a print publication can deliver.

**Figure 1-1:**  
FC Now  
uses its blog  
to further  
dialogue  
with its  
readers.



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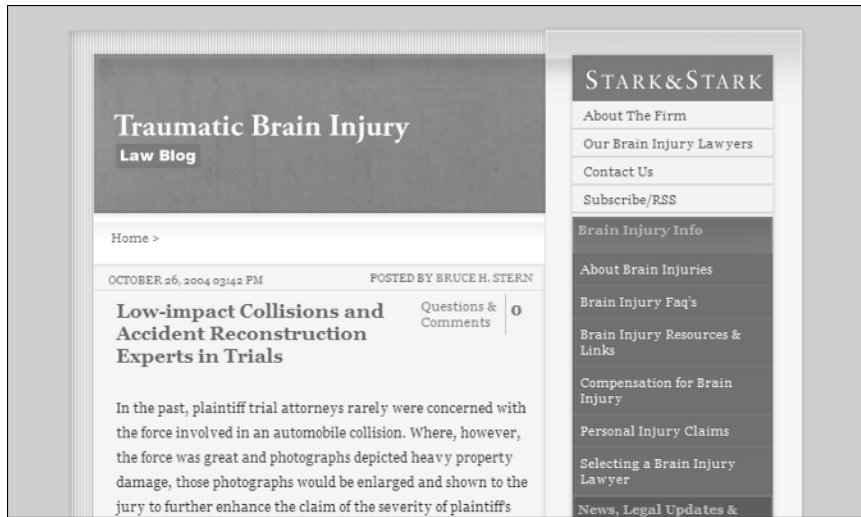
## Establishing expertise

The law firm of Stark & Stark is promoting the expertise of its lawyers through the Traumatic Brain Injury Law Blog. Lawyer Bruce H. Stern posts regularly to the blog on topics intended to keep his readers fully informed on new case law, news, events, and courtroom strategies. Posts often include information on new medical treatments and research that Stern's clients may find useful.

Postings from October 2004 included information about accident reconstruction experts, pediatric brain injury treatment research, a new online medical journal, and a recent court ruling on the admissibility of computer simulations of car accidents.

The blog is actually part of a larger package of information pertinent to brain injuries that includes articles about brain injury cases, FAQs, and a bulletin board. This strategic positioning is a service for existing clients and makes a strong case to potential clients that Stark & Stark has a great deal of expertise in this area. It's a win-win for the law firm and for Stern, both of which get great exposure and provide a genuine service to clients. Find the blog at [www.braininjurylawblog.com](http://www.braininjurylawblog.com) and in Figure 1-2.

**Figure 1-2:**  
The  
Traumatic  
Brain Injury  
Law Blog.



## *Generating interest*

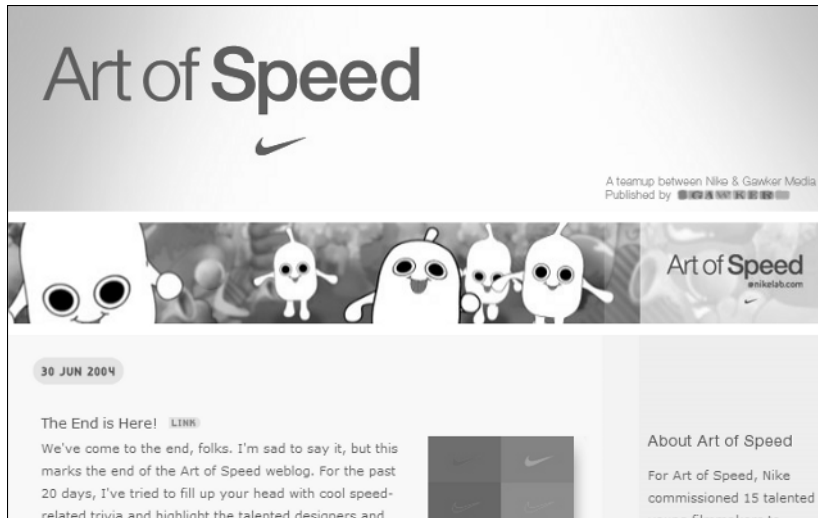
A deliberately short-lived June 2004 blog called the Art of Speed showcased the work of 15 filmmakers in a 20-day blog collaboration between Gawker Media and Nike. The blog was an experiment in brand blogging, designed to bring together an established and successful brand with a format that reaches the online market.

Posts covered everything from the background of the filmmakers to a speed hiking record, and visitors watched videos of each film online in high or lowresolution. The point? Get the Nike logo in front of an audience that's interested in content, not advertising, while demonstrating Nike's unique company ethos of encouragement and challenge. The blog, which you can still view at [www.gawker.com/artofspeed](http://www.gawker.com/artofspeed), is shown in Figure 1-3.

## *Driving action and sales*

Buzz Bruggeman, one of the founders of ActiveWords, is a firm believer in the power of blogs — because he experiences their effectiveness every day. ActiveWords (shown in Figure 1-4) is a small company, the maker of software that lets you set keyword shortcuts to any file, folder, or application on your Windows computer. Its target audience is the constant computer user looking for ways to do common tasks faster and with less effort. Buzz says more than 50 percent of the company's trial software downloads are the result of someone blogging about ActiveWords and sending readers to [www.activewords.com](http://www.activewords.com). A review of ActiveWords on a blog with 500 or 600 readers garners the company more software downloads than a four-star writeup in *USA Today*, which sells more than 2.3 million copies a day.

**Figure 1-3:**  
The Art of  
Speed blog  
focused  
on the  
work of 15  
filmmakers  
and the  
concept of  
speed.



**Figure 1-4:**  
Active  
Words co-  
founder  
Buzz  
Bruggeman  
uses his  
personal  
blogs to  
give the  
company a  
human  
feeling.



ActiveWords – US™

“In The ClueTrain Manifesto, Doc Searls [and co-authors] writes that ‘markets are conversations,’” Bruggeman says. “I say products are also conversations. And if markets and products are conversations, blogs are a terrific way to have that conversation with people.”

Part of why ActiveWords has been covered so well is because Bruggeman himself has a blog at [buzzmodo.typepad.com/buzznovation](http://buzzmodo.typepad.com/buzznovation) “I want people to see that behind ActiveWords there are real people with real ideas trying to solve real problems, who will engage in a real conversation, respond, and react,” he says.

## Fixing what's broke

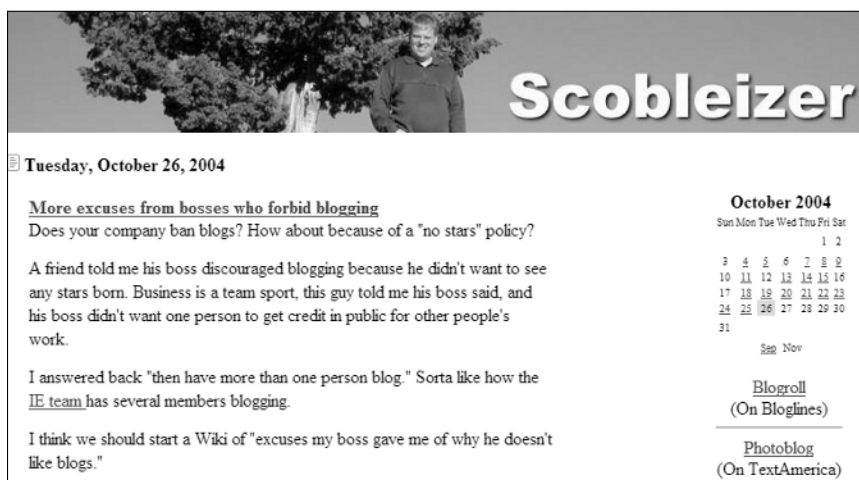
Thanks to years of monopolistic business practices, Microsoft's reputation in the marketplace has been, shall we say, not the brightest. (A search on Google for the phrase "more evil than Satan" used to return the Microsoft home page. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googlebomb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googlebomb).) That feeling has deep roots in much of the technical community, the very group Microsoft relies upon to buy and use its products.

In 2000, Robert Scoble started a blog whose focus was on Microsoft technology. Scoble's smart technical writing attracted a large and dedicated following. Some of the folks at Microsoft admired Scoble's open, honest style so much that the company hired him. He is now a technical evangelist for the company.

Scoble walks a fine line between promoting Microsoft products and being a real resource for technical information, often going so far as to gently criticize what Microsoft is doing. He never hesitates to acknowledge a better competing technology, and he says this straight-shooting attitude has earned him respect in the blogosphere and within the company. Though he is not a spokesperson for the company, Microsoft does not edit his blog.

The overall openness of what Scoble is doing and Microsoft's demonstration of noninterference and trust that Scoble won't misstep have gone a long way toward changing the attitudes of many tech folks — and that's good news for Microsoft. The company has established a culture of blogging and actively encourages its employees to contribute to the knowledge marketplace. The Scobleizer is at [scobleizer.wordpress.com](http://scobleizer.wordpress.com) and is shown in Figure 1-5.

**Figure 1-5:** Scobleizer has helped changed Microsoft's image among technophiles.





## Using internal collaboration, project management, and communication

Entertainment industry magazine *Variety* uses an internal blog to keep staff informed of screenings, position changes, and the competition. The Have You Heard blog is just that — a clearinghouse for “around the water cooler” information sharing. Former Web site editor Travis Smith started the blog as an answer to the common office complaint that employees had no way to keep current on everything happening in the company.

The blog was a moderate success within the main newsroom but got rave reviews from employees in *Variety*’s far-flung offices. Have You Heard lets them experience the newsroom culture of the magazine despite the intervening geography, though they do get frustrated when the blog is used to announce that doughnuts are in the break room.

Any staff member can post to the blog or comment on other posts. Interestingly, *Variety* allows staff to post to the blog anonymously; this is not done to permit gossip, but to allow staff to make critical observations that might not ordinarily be exposed to the light of day. You can’t visit the blog yourself, but you can take a peek at it in Figure 1-6.

**Figure 1-6:** Entertainment magazine *Variety* uses an internal blog called Have You Heard to keep staff current.



## *Finding Out What Makes a Good Business Blog*

Many early blogs focused on technology and the ubiquitous “this-is-my-life” blog produced by teens and adults; an intermediate wave focused on news, politics, and the Iraq conflict; more recently, the hottest blogs are business blogs. Why do businesses want to participate in a medium that is commonly perceived to be the stomping ground of narcissists, egomaniacs, and children?

Your company may already have a Web site. (It doesn’t? Put this book down, and get yourself a copy of *Creating Web Pages For Dummies*, 7th Edition, by Bud E. Smith and Arthur Bebak. I’ll see you in three months.) You may even have some great mechanisms in place for sharing company news or handling customer support. What makes what you’re already doing different from a blog? Three words: writing, updating, and dialogue.

### *Writing*

The biggest strength of blogs is in establishing dialogue with readers. For that dialogue to be successful, you need a blogger whose style, personality, and knowledge meet the needs of the audience.

Keeping the writing in your blog short, to the point, and useful. You don’t need to finely craft every word; in fact, levity and a casual, friendly style can serve you well.

Blog writing is all about openness, honesty, and information. Blog writing isn’t formal, so keep the tone conversational and personal. A blog is not the place for business jargon or marketing propaganda.

### *Posting new material often*

Most blogs are organized reverse-chronologically for a reason — it’s so you can’t miss the latest post. The blogging format lives and dies on current information.



Current doesn’t mean every couple of weeks. Current means posting often, even multiple times daily if you can swing it. Many bloggers post several times a day; most post at least a few times a week.

Posting religiously has its benefits as well:

- ✓ Your readers return more often, because they know they're likely to find new information.
- ✓ Your blog is more likely to show up more frequently in search engine results lists as well. Quantity is definitely your friend in this medium.

Don't let your quality slip in your quest to post regularly. You may drive readers away.



## *Gathering feedback through dialogue*

Every company can benefit from knowing what its customers want, what they like about its products and services, and what they don't like. Getting that feedback can be a nightmare, though. Focus groups are costly and time consuming, and can be conducted only in areas where you can physically locate a group of appropriate people. Surveys are also time-intensive, nothing to blink at costwise, and are hard to get people to return to.

Blogs can help you gather feedback from your customers more cheaply and faster than almost any other technique. By tracking the feedback you get on your own blog and reading what is said about you on other blogs, you always have a current picture of just how your company is doing in the public's perception.

A blog can also gather responses over time and provide a way to see changes in attitude and perception. If you are doing things right with your blog, your customers will jump at the chance to tell you what they and what they hate about your company, products, and services. These people know what they are talking about; they may even know individual products better than you do. As a Macromedia software developer told me once, although he may be developing the software, he's not a user of it.



So why not use your blog to tap into this rich vein of knowledge? Your organization can benefit at almost every level from knowing whether it's giving customers what they want. A blog is a nonthreatening, nonintrusive, and interactive way to get that information from your customers. Even better, they'll appreciate the opportunity to give it to you!

## *Fitting Blogs into Your Business*

I paint a pretty picture of blogs throughout this chapter, but even the most ardent fan of the format has to admit that blogging isn't always smooth sailing. Business blogs, especially, must fight the traditional culture of control and secrecy to make good use of the blogging format.

Of course, you must consider the technical aspects of setting up, maintaining, and running a blog. The good news is that blogging doesn't cost you an arm and a leg in hardware and software! And finally, where go people, go legal concerns.

## *Extending corporate culture*

Blogging is a great format and can be a dramatically effective tool for many businesses — but not all. The internal culture of some companies simply doesn't lend itself to the openness and honesty the blogging format requires. Does your company maintain rigid walls of secrecy between development groups? Is there a “need-to-know” attitude from upper management? Is your company equipped to handle the additional feedback from customers a blog can produce?

For some companies the answers to these questions is yes. If that's the case for your company, rethink creating a business blog. Be realistic about whether your company is one that suits the blogging format before you jump in, because if you try to hide from customers, even just by spinning information, they won't react well. You're likely to get negative attention and criticism from the blogosphere that can turn into something ugly. Many bloggers are muckrakers who are looking for scandals to expose, especially in business and politics. They pay attention to other blogs because they are fans of the format and they don't take kindly to manipulation of it.

## *Finding a good blogger*

A blogger is your company's Web interface with the public, someone who represents you to readers, conveys new information, makes amends for company mistakes, and generally makes the company more approachable and friendly. Your blogger may serve the role of ombudsman, translating customer needs to the company and rephrasing company positions for the public. Or your blogger might serve a more traditional marketing purpose by letting people know about upcoming events, changes in structure, new ventures, and so on. If your blogger manages this task with humor and flair, this normally dry task becomes a way to establish rapport.

What this really means is that a traditional marketing person is almost definitely not who should be writing your blog. Ideally, it's the company's CEO or someone within the company with real knowledge and expertise who can speak with authority and answer specific questions — maybe even a technician or an engineer.

If the blog is designed to help people use your service or just better understand it, you might be looking for someone who normally handles customer support or someone who is involved in the day-to-day maintenance of the system. In almost every case, you're looking for a blogger whose everyday job is "doing" rather than managing or communicating. Wouldn't you love to have a direct line of communication with someone influential at say, your phone company, rather than talking to a customer service person with no real authority and who perhaps is only peripherally connected to the company?

See Chapter 10 for more information on selecting a good blogger for your company.

## *Controlling the message*

One of the scariest aspects of starting a company blog can be the lack of control over the final message. Even at companies where a blogger's entries are edited before they're posted, the resulting presentation is much more informal than the communication most companies have with the public. This informality is what makes the medium so appealing to readers, so don't succumb to the conservative voice in your head that's thinking, "Well, I'll just run these posts through a blogging committee with a representative from sales, legal, and marketing before I put them online." Nothing kills the spontaneity and genuine feel of a blog faster than giving editing power to a committee.

Use a light hand when editing comments on your blog. Edit for factual accuracy, spelling, and style consistency, but leave in the color that gives your blogger a unique voice and that conveys his or her enthusiasm. Having concerns about propriety of the content is natural, so work with your blogger to establish a set of guidelines for what kinds of material are acceptable for the blog. Take care, also, in choosing your blogger in the first place. If you can't trust the person writing the blog, there's little point in creating it in the first place.

Some companies have even posted their policies online to make it clear to the public that the blogger is speaking on behalf of the company but is not its spokesperson. The home page of Robert Scoble's blog for example, makes clear he is expressing personal, not Microsoft opinions, with a little legal-speak thrown in for good measure: "Robert Scoble works at Microsoft (title: technical evangelist). Everything here, though, is his personal opinion and is not read or approved before it is posted. No warranties or other guarantees will be offered as to the quality of the opinions or anything else offered here."

## *Dealing with technical concerns*

Blogs can be both incredibly easy and quite complex to set up, depending on the software and functionality you use. If you can arrange it, your best bet is to have a programmer or technical person assist you, especially during the setup phase. You may also need the assistance of a graphic designer. Your blog needs to reflect the nature of your business, and few businesses can get away with amateurish or sloppy design, even if the writing is outstanding.

Neither of these things is necessarily a stumbling block, and in fact, if you are willing to accept a few limitations, you may be able to go from zero to blog in about five minutes — and without technical help. In Chapter 4, I go over how to make the decision between an easy, quick blog software package to a more complex, more flexible solution.

Keep in mind that a really successful blog can pull in loads of traffic. Therefore, your Web servers can take a beating, so you need quite a bit of bandwidth to meet the demand. If your company gets to a level of success where this becomes an issue — congratulations! The corresponding level of readership, interaction, and publicity that comes with this problem probably makes it all worthwhile.

## *Handling legal issues*

The blogosphere is riddled with stories of employees who lost their jobs because of what they were posting on their personal blogs — though the actual numbers are not that high, the shocking stories were passed quickly via, what else, blog posts. In the early days of the Web, a company's employees were typically more Web-savvy than its management and felt safe in posting what was obviously inappropriate material about fellow employees, business plans, and even customers. The original personal focus of blogs, and the perception that they were written for family and friends, blinded some bloggers to the fact that a simple Web search could uncover what they posted. Heartache, loss of valuable employees, and lawsuits were often the result. Why does this concern you as you consider starting a business blog?

Be aware that starting a company blog will send a message to your staff that blogging is acceptable, even encouraged. This is no reason to be scared away from creating a blog. However, it does mean that you may want to consider establishing some blogging guidelines or at least letting employees know what kinds of business information need to stay in the office.

There's another aspect to this as well: If an employee of yours starts a personal blog, he will no doubt reveal aspects of his or her life that would normally be invisible to you and to your customers. Consider these situations:

- ✔ Do you have employees who do freelance work on the side? Would it be harmful for your company if it was known that they were freelancing for the porn industry? It may not be anyone's business — but that doesn't mean your company won't be criticized if it becomes public knowledge.
- ✔ Perhaps you employ people with strong political opinions. (Of course you employ people with strong political opinions!) Posted on the employee's personal blog, those opinions are suddenly in closer proximity to your company.
- ✔ Are you familiar with the saying "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas"? Well, it doesn't stay there if your employee blogs about it on his or her personal blog! Will the office gossip tomorrow be about an employee's wild weekend?

Not every company is impacted by public opinion if its employees blog, and in fact, many companies respect employees' right to free speech, and blogging isn't an issue. But if you're concerned, you can prevent a lot of attention simply by asking your employees to leave identifying business information off their personal blogs.

