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## Businesses ignore bloggers at their own peril

By: Lauren Otis , Business Editor

### eCommerce

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PLAINSBORO — There is a lot more to the Internet than Web sites and e-mail, and businesses ignore the feisty, egalitarian world of blogs and podcasts at their own peril, said communications and technology consultant Steven L. Lubetkin.

At the very least, companies should monitor these newly emergent realms of communication, because they are often the first place where information about certain of their products, both good and damaging, emerges, Mr. Lubetkin, managing partner of Cherry Hill-based Lubetkin & Co. Communications LLC, told a luncheon gathering of the New Jersey Communications Advertising and Marketing Association at the Doral Forrestal Hotel last week.

Those companies with the right touch can also use such mediums to initiate communication with tech-savvy consumers, broadening the reach of their products and services, he said.

The most successful and widely read blogs — known more formally as Web logs, or online journals — are often "shrill and hysterical" like the many far-right and far-left political blogs, said Mr. Lubetkin, a veteran blogger and podcaster himself. As a blogger, "to maintain authority you have to be really outrageous. That may be out of your comfort zone, out of the comfort zone of your clients," Mr. Lubetkin told NJ CAMA members. However, "blogs have influence out of proportion, way out of proportion to their readership," he said, and recommended that companies attempt at the very least to keep abreast of what is being said about them and their products in these online postings.

We may be used to the power of bloggers to regularly set the national political agenda, but less well known is how bloggers can radically affect a company's reputation and bottom line, said Mr. Lubetkin. He cited several examples including the disclosure in 2004 on the blog engadget.com of the fact that Kryptonite bicycle locks could be picked with a cheap Bic pen, complete with illustrations on how to pick the locks.

"This cost Kryptonite millions to recall and replace those locks," he noted.

Because blogging is such an intensely personal, and difficult to control, form of cyber-communication it is often hard for corporations to find the right touch in using them, or encouraging them among employees.

"There are limits to corporate blogs," Mr. Lubetkin said. "If you are going to commit to the open and honest dialogue when things are good, you have to be there when things are not good."

Mr. Lubetkin cited the example of Microsoft Corp., whose ranks of employees include thousands of bloggers. One Microsoft middle manager, Robert Scoble, is considered a leader of this small army of bloggers, said Mr. Lubetkin. Mr. Scoble's "Scobleizer" blog has been well read and respected for giving a peek into the secretive Microsoft corporate world. But, according to Mr. Lubetkin, this past winter a serious flaw was found in Microsoft's widely used WMF clip art files making online surfers vulnerable to receiving destructive code even if they simply viewed WMF clip art at a Web site.

It took Microsoft 10 days to create and post a patch for the problem, during which time — an eternity in cyberspace — Mr. Scoble's blog was silent about the WMF clip art breach, likely because of pressure from his corporate parent, according to Mr. Lubetkin. The credibility of Mr. Scoble's blog took a serious hit as a result, he said.

Convincing readers that a corporate-based blog is authentic and not a product of the public relations or marketing departments can be a challenge. Yet corporations have experimented with officially sanctioned blogs, with General Motors being one of the most prominent companies to do so, Mr. Lubetkin said.

GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz writes a blog called FastLane on car and truck design, Mr. Lubetkin said. "GM went to great lengths to prove it was Bob Lutz" writing the blog, he said. On the other hand Boeing inaugurated a blog ostensibly authored by the head of its aircraft division. When it emerged that Boeing was just stringing the blog together from press releases — and blog readers and writers are good at ferreting out such ruses, Mr. Lubetkin assured the audience — Boeing lost a huge amount of credibility in the online world.

GM maintains its blog experiment has been a success, said Mr. Lubetkin, who voiced his own doubts about whether this was true. Writing a blog is a "huge commitment" for a corporate vice chairman, said Mr. Lubetkin who questioned whether this was the most worthwhile use of such a senior executive's time, particularly at a corporation reporting record losses and employee layoffs.

"My concern about corporate blogging is putting it at the right level of the corporation," he said.

Podcasts on the other hand, are far better suited to the purposes of corporations, he said. Simply digitized audio and video files, often in MP3 compression format, that can be sought out and downloaded on the Internet, podcasts are not just the sole province of individual broadcasters who disseminate their eccentric personal interests — everything from discussions of their sex lives to audio tours of the churches of the Netherlands — but can be used to distribute business meetings, as well as other corporate events and even product rollouts online, according to Mr. Lubetkin.

In an interview following his talk, Mr. Lubetkin gave some examples of commercial podcasts he has facilitated. He set up a podcast for a December 2005 New Jersey Bankers Association annual panel discussion in Woodbridge examining the future of the state

banking industry. To date, this podcast, which is still available online, has been downloaded around 350 times, Mr. Lubetkin said. Timothy Doherty, vice president of the Princeton-based NJ Bankers Association, said the original meeting only attracted 60 to 70 attendees.

Mr. Lubetkin noted, however, that podcasts don't "cannibalize" meetings, lowering attendance, but instead broaden the distribution of the meeting after the fact to people who couldn't originally attend. "You are giving people the content when they want it, not when you give it," he said.

Mr. Lubetkin said he recently set up a podcast of a panel discussion on Southern New Jersey's economic outlook, jointly sponsored by Rutgers Camden and the South New Jersey Chamber of Commerce. There were 300 to 400 attendees to the original panel discussion, and to date approximately 450 downloads of the podcast, he said.

Mr. Lubetkin said he has also been engaged by Vineland-based Sun Bank to introduce a new home mortgage subsidiary and by insurer ACE Professional Risk to launch a new professional risk product via podcast.

Corporations have more control over the content of a podcast but a balance still must be struck, he said. "The thing about a podcast is you can't be too commercial. People don't want to be sold in a podcast. It has to contain useful, actionable information."



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