

One of a series of fact sheets on economic issues for communities

How can I better tell my business story online?

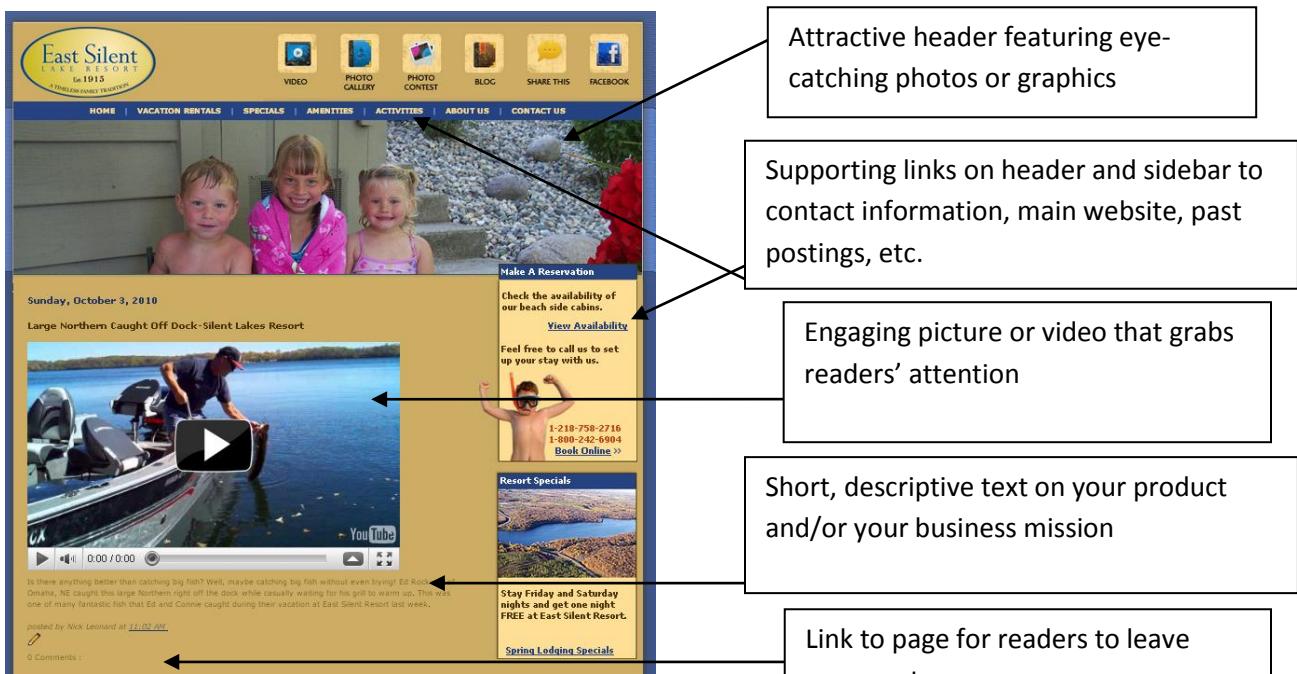
Tip: Use a blog to reach existing customers and find new ones

As the owner or operator of a small business, you are probably looking for an effective, yet reasonably priced way of promoting your products or services online. A blog might be a good choice.

A blog is a specialized type of web page that acts as an online journal or “web log.” Blogs contain “posts” of text and/or photos, videos, and links in a reverse chronological order so your most recent entry is on top (see figure below). Although blogs do not suit every type of business or organization, they do offer the following advantages: (1) easy to update and maintain, (2) effectively communicate timely information, and (3) allow interaction with readers through a comment function.

Like other social media tools, blogs lend themselves to creating personal connections and engaging customers. Research even indicates that readers can discern a blog writer’s personality online, which affects attraction to a blog (Li & Chignell, 2010). Some businesses tactically employ blogs to drive traffic to their main websites or demonstrate responsiveness to customers. Other businesses use blogs to show off the inner workings of their operations or provide other value-added information of interest to customers.

What does a blog look like?



<http://blog.eastsilentresort.com/>

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How do I decide whether to use a blog?

Although most basic blogging software is free, time is also money and you must commit to blogging regularly to be effective. Bernoff and Li describe the POST (People, Objective, Strategy, and Technology) decision tool to figure out whether to use social media, such as blogs.

- **People:** Start with your customers. What are their online habits and how can you best reach them?
- **Objective:** Determine your primary goals. Do you want to find new customers? Get feedback from current customers and persuade them to promote your business on your behalf? Or simply announce new products, services or events? You might want to do all of these, but focus on your main goal in this analysis.
- **Strategy:** Envision how your use of social media—and all its features—will reach your main objective.
- **Technology:** Choose your technology last; adopt the social media format that best meets your main objective.

After working through this decision tool, you may decide that another form of social media, such as Facebook, is a better choice for your business. Or you may decide that a blog best fits your situation after all. Either way, intentional planning will pay off.

How could I use a blog?

1. As your primary website

For organizations that have no web presence, a blog is a low-cost, easy way to get online. Even if most of your blog content is static (with basic contact information and the like), you're better off than you were with no website at all. (You will still want to post new items some times, though, to avoid looking out of date.)

You also may consider registering a custom domain name for your blog. A domain name is the address of your page, such as <http://www.yoursite.com>. This allows for clearer identification than the cumbersome address you get when starting a blog ending in .blogspot or .wordpress.

2. To feature products and knowledge

Since you can quickly update blogs with a variety of media, they are a natural for highlighting expertise and products. Information-rich business providers often use blogs to show off what they know. For example, accountants can feature pertinent changes in the tax code and mechanics can give advice on simple maintenance. Product-rich business providers, such as resort operators, retail store owners, and

manufacturers, might use photos to show off their wares or behind-the-scenes videos of production.

3. To drive traffic to your website

Many businesses use blogs to drive customers to their main websites, where customers can buy products or services and learn more. Fresh content delivered via a blog increases your chance of being found online and getting visitors to your website.

4. To engage customers

A blog works well to solicit feedback or feature customer reviews. For example, a bed and breakfast could ask readers to recount favorite memories at their establishment. A blog also can act as a customer service tool via your responses to customers' comments. Dissatisfied customers might leave negative comments; however, you can nip problems in the bud with prompt, sincere responses (and changes in your business, if necessary). You also can delete inappropriate comments and/or disable the "comment" feature temporarily until you have resolved issues.

5. To manage online content

If your business uses other online tools, such as Facebook or Twitter, you can link your blog to them for automatic and efficient distribution. Or you can set up an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feed to automatically notify email subscribers of your blog posts. Subscribers can then track your content with RSS feed readers.

How do I get started?

You can create a blog site and start posting entries within minutes. Most blog services are easy to use. You will need to create an account, set up your blog page, and generally learn the basics of posting entries.

There are two major free blog providers today: 1) Google's Blogger at <http://www.blogger.com>, and 2) Wordpress at <http://www.wordpress.com>. Each offers pre-designed templates or the ability to create a blog with your own "look and feel." You may want to use another blog service. To help you decide which service would work best for you, take a look at some business blogs via Google's blog search at <http://blogsearch.google.com>.

When you find some blogs you like, make a list and for each one note the blog service (typically found at the bottom of web pages), features you like, and how the blog is used (refer to "How could I use a blog?" above). This research will give you good ideas for topics and for setting up your blog.

Creating an account

To set up an account you will need to provide information about yourself, including an active email address. Go to the main page of your blog provider and follow the screen prompts to get going. Both Blogger and Wordpress offer written instructions, as well as short videos on account creation. Go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/BloggerHelp> or <http://learn.wordpress.com/> to learn the basics.

The art of blogging

The key to a good blog is your content. People like blogs with useful and/or interesting information, as well as appealing visuals (Keng & Ting, 2009). Don't be afraid to inject some personality in your blog, too. You also can periodically tell customers about special offers and promotions, but resist the temptation to simply advertise in electronic form. That will turn off existing and new customers.

Plan ahead for how you will keep your content fresh. Consider how often your customers would like to hear from you and how blogging will fit into your daily work schedule. There is no standard on how often to update a blog, but an abandoned or forgotten blog certainly sends a negative signal. Remember that short posts are fine; you can write a quality blog post in as little as 5 to 15 minutes. Or simply publish a photo or video with a few accompanying sentences. Concise writing is always important, but especially on the web where attention spans are short.

References

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