

## Blogging and the B-School

*Reap the institutional benefits from student- and faculty-written blogs.*

by Karen Buck

**Blogs can help business schools add a** valuable human dimension to their marketing and communications efforts. But to attract attention effectively, institutional blogs must tell true stories with genuine voices and provide meaningful information from knowledgeable sources. To achieve such authenticity, business schools must be willing to resist the temptation to control or censor their content.

“Blogs offer a level of transparency that didn’t used to exist,” says Will Donaldson, a second-year MBA student at Tulane University’s Freeman School of Business in New

Orleans, Louisiana. Donaldson runs the independent student blog, [tulanemba.org](http://tulanemba.org). When students plan to spend \$150,000 for their educations, says Donaldson, they want to know what it’s truly like to be a part of a school’s community. Blogs offer this kind of access without an expensive campus visit.

That kind of transparency can

make some administrators nervous. If a school’s administration is afraid that a blog will reveal negative information about its community, then it probably isn’t a good option, says Alex Brown, a senior admissions counselor at Clear Admit, an organization that provides counseling services to prospective business students.

“Blogging only works if you have a school experience that students are excited to blog about,” says Brown. On the other hand, he adds, the transparency of blogging can also

## Five Steps to Starting a Blog

**Find the Right Staff.** If a blog is to be written independently by students, it may not need a great deal of strategic guidance. But if it origi-

nates with the school, staff may be required to create an editorial plan or schedule, develop the appropriate tone, and monitor and approve comments.

Columbia Business School takes what it calls a “curated” approach to its blog. A full-time staff member leads the editorial planning and development and does much of the writing. Faculty, alumni, and others often contact her with questions about how to contribute.

**2 Enlist the Right Author(s).** Blogs don’t always have just one author. In fact, a variety of voices can appeal to a broader audience. If the blog is written by students or volunteers, choose people who are comfortable online and already spend a great deal of time there, since blogging requires a time commitment.

Also consider “archetyping.” Seek contributors who represent your target audience. For admissions, seek authors who are similar



ANTENNA/GETTY IMAGES

bring problems to light, so administrators can know about them and fix them more quickly.

### **Set the Stage for Successful Blogging**

For a business school, successful blogging rests on the fundamentals of any marketing effort: Identify objectives, create a plan, and enlist talented people to carry that plan out. Six keys to success:

**Create an open forum.** At the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business in Charlottesville, Dean

Robert Bruner has his own blog at [www.darden.edu/html/deansblog.aspx](http://www.darden.edu/html/deansblog.aspx). Before the blog was launched, the school's marketing department did have concerns.

"At the time, the dean had just started," says Ken White, vice president of communications and marketing. "I didn't know how he might react to a critical response on the blog." But when White mentioned to his student advisors that he planned to police the blog for negative content, they responded adamantly.

"They said, 'You can't. That's not how it works,'" says White. "They were good about teaching us that a comment that doesn't agree with the dean is actually an opportunity for him to facilitate a whole new conversation."

White forecasts upcoming topics of importance and suggests them to the dean as possible subjects for the blog. The posts themselves, however, come directly from the dean. "The dean writes on planes, in the car," says White. "Wherever he is, he'll do a post."

to the school's ideal candidates—a New Yorker interested in a financial career or a Californian focused on tech operations. Prospective students identify with bloggers who are most like them or whom they aspire to be.

Let authors know how many posts they'll need to write per week, month, or quarter. Authors should also be identified on an "About Us" page or with a short bio and photo at the end of each post.

**3 Set Parameters.** Like a Web site, a blog is an opportunity to tell a school's story; therefore, authors must know well the school's core values. They also must know what topics are off limits. You may want to consult with the school's legal team to create a blog policy and have authors agree to its terms.

But once authors know the parameters of the blog, let them go. Don't editorialize or control content. A blog's audience appreciates real people, so blog posts should be written in the same voices that authors would use in their face-to-face interactions.

**4 Pick a Platform.** Blogging is made possible by user-friendly platforms that work much like course management systems. Among the most popular are WordPress, Typepad, Moveable Type, and Vox. Emerging platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, which allow for very brief messages, represent where blogging might be headed.

Different packages offer hosted service, which means you don't have to maintain the software or servers where the blog lives. Others offer downloadable software packages that your IT group can deploy on your own servers. Or, if you have the right staff, you can develop your own blog software in-house.

**5 Be Creative.** Make sure your blog is attractive, professional, and engaging at first glance. Choose a memorable name for your blog and a Web site address that's easy to spell—and even witty and fun, if appropriate. That's what Columbia Business School had in mind when it branded its blog "Public Offering." An effective name ties in well with your school's brand.

**Blog with purpose.** To create a blog that means something, first know what you want to accomplish by starting one. Don't let technology alone drive the decision, White emphasizes.

"I get a call about once a month from a school whose dean or president wants a blog. My first question is, 'Why?' Most of the time, the answer is, 'I don't know.'" That's not the right answer, he emphasizes. A blog should do more than simply increase event sign-ups or applications. It should add value to the world—or at least to the conversation about topics important to the school.

For instance, Darden's student advisors suggested that Dean Bruner use his blog as a forum to share his speeches and presentations. "They said that when they heard the dean speak, they walked away feeling that they had heard something meaningful," says White. "That indicated that the blog format could offer a powerful differentiator."

The students pointed to examples, offered tips, and explained that the dean should treat the blog just like a classroom, with the intent to facilitate reader questions and feedback.

# Technology

**Use the blog well.** Some schools have made their blogs the centerpiece of their communications plans. For instance, Columbia Business School relaunched its Web site in early 2008, giving its institutional blog top billing on its home page.

Columbia also uses tags, the topic keyword links found in most standard blog layouts, as an alternate organization and navigation system across the entire site. Visitors to the site can click on tags such as “corporate finance,” “real estate,” or “world business” to view all site content related to that topic.

Writers for the blog, [www.gsb.columbia.edu/publicoffering](http://www.gsb.columbia.edu/publicoffering), cover subjects ranging from Dean Glenn Hubbard’s bailout proposal, to Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke’s remarks, to milestones in the graduates’ lives, to faculty perspectives on the day’s headlines.

When all of the posts are taken together, the variety of information on a blog can showcase the business school in a way no press release could.

**Choose a strategy.** Admissions offices are increasingly using blogs to complement their traditional recruiting

strategies. Blogs that show students on study tours abroad, interning at Fortune 500 companies, or working on class projects help the school demonstrate what is valuable and different about individual programs.

A blog also can help a school keep internal audiences informed—student services can announce a change in policy or remind students of registration deadlines, for example. It’s also a venue for information the school might publicize in a traditional press release, such as the arrival of a new MBA student who happens to be an Olympic medalist.

**Build your readership.** Encourage blog readership by asking people at your school to read the blog and post comments on it. If they’re willing, ask them to spread the word about the new blog. Ask for feedback on blog content.

To help increase your blog’s audience, include its URL in other marketing pieces. Offer RSS feeds or e-mail subscriptions, and register your blog with aggregators like Technorati, Icerocket.com, Google, and Yahoo.

Set up reverse feeds that pull in relevant information from other

sources to accompany the content on your blog. Link to other blogs on related topics. Linking is a great way to get readers on other blogs interested in what you’re saying on yours.

**Track your progress.** Once it’s up and running, be sure to track and analyze the traffic on the blog. Analytics software can tell you how many people are reading the blog and even test the effectiveness of certain marketing messages.

“The blog has led to quite a few media hits,” says White at the Darden School. “Reporters call and say they’ve read the blog today. And we’ve seen inquiries by people who wouldn’t ordinarily consider Darden. That’s exciting.”

At a time when online communication is growing by leaps and bounds, never underestimate the power of a blog. When well executed, blogs can reach a variety of audiences with relevant, timely, and engaging content.

Karen Buck is director of cross media strategy at Zehno Cross Media Communications, a marketing communications firm in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Reprinted with permission from **BizEd**, published by AACSB International - The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.