

How to Bring Blogging to Life

By writing a blog, legislators can keep constituents informed in a new way.

An increasing number of legislators are finding that a blog is a great way to communicate with constituents. A blog—short for “Web log”—is a personal journal on the Web expressing thoughts, linking to news of interest, relating experiences, or commenting on issues.

To understand the power of blogs, let’s compare them to legislators’ newsletters:

- ◆ What would be called an “article” in a newsletter is called a “post” in a blog. Posts are usually less formal, more conversational and shorter than a typical print article, although this varies with the personal style of the writer.
- ◆ Instead of storing up news and comments and publishing them all at the same time in a hard copy newsletter every month or two, legislator-bloggers post their ideas and thoughts online as they occur to them, often daily or even several times a day.
- ◆ Constituents receive newsletters weeks after the events that they cover occurred. “[Blogs] have the immediacy of talk radio,” says *Wired* magazine’s Andrew Sullivan. (Of course, that immediacy can be both good and bad, just like talk radio: The heat of the moment can generate comments that bloggers might later regret.)
- ◆ Newsletter writers can tell their readers about an interesting article or book that is worth reading; bloggers can include a hyperlink that takes readers directly (and almost instantly) to a reading of interest.
- ◆ Unlike a newsletter, a blog has no printing or distribution costs.
- ◆ With newsletters, the only feedback a legislator receives occurs when a reader takes the trouble to write a letter or fill out and mail a survey form, or makes a comment to the lawmaker when he runs into him or her in the grocery store. But someone who reads a blog can respond with an online comment immediately. Blogs can include online surveys.
- ◆ Just as with a newsletter, bloggers can send their thoughts to a mailing list of constituents who want to receive their blog postings. The blog software will automatically send it to subscribed readers via e-mail or “RSS [Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary] feeds.” But blogs can also be read by anyone in the world who has a connection to the Internet.

Intrigued? Here’s how to start a blog and some advice about writing for it.



SIGN UP WITH A BLOG SERVICE.

The technology of blogging is reasonably easy. A wannabe blogger needs to sign up with any number of services that host blogs and provide the software to do it. Popular blog-hosting software providers include Blogger, WordPress, TypePad and Drupal, among many others. Just add “.com” after any of these names and you will find them on the Web. Most of these services provide free hosting of blogs, but premium features may require a small fee.



READ LOTS OF OTHER BLOGS.

The best way to learn how to blog is to blog. Read other blogs to



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learn how others approach this medium. Check out NCSL's blog, The Thicket [nctl.org/thethicket], for links to legislators who blog.



POST REGULARLY.

If you start a blog, you must post regularly. If your site looks like an archive, readers won't come back to it. The standard for the most popular blog sites is several posts per day. Marketing professionals say that bloggers should post at least two to three times per week. That may be unrealistic for most legislators who are juggling legislative life, "real" jobs, and family and personal life. For legislators we suggest that if you don't think you can post at least once a week, you probably shouldn't start a blog.



FIND A CONSISTENT VOICE.

Make sure you know why you are blogging and what you are trying to achieve. Find a voice and stick to it. Make your comments personal and conversational. Be sure to include some humor. Write in newspaper style in an inverted pyramid: Put your key thoughts and conclusions in the first two or three paragraphs and elaborate in later paragraphs. Don't bury your lead. View yourself and your blog as part of a community. Provide lots of links to other blogs that interest you and sources of information that are potentially valuable to your constituents. Your goal should be to create an informal dialogue between your state legislature and your constituents.



MARKET YOUR BLOG.

Once you have found your blog voice, you will want to promote and market your blog. An Internet program called RSS feed is an "aggregator" or news reader that makes it easy for your constituents to receive your blog. One of the best of these services is Feedburner (feedburner.com). Technorati (technorati.com) tracks and indexes more than 56 million blogs and is the industry standard for analyzing the blogosphere. For more advice about blogs, try entering "art of blogging" in an Internet search engine.



GIVE IT A TRY.

But if it doesn't work for you, be comforted by these statistics, courtesy of Technorati: More than 100,000 new blogs are created daily, but only 50 percent of new bloggers are still posting three months later.

Still skeptical about the viability of this new medium? Ponder this *New York Times* editorial from 1939: "The problem with television is that people must sit and keep their eyes glued to the screen; the average American family hasn't got time for it. Therefore, the showmen are convinced that for this reason, if no other, television will never be a serious competitor of [radio] broadcasting." 

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