

Executive Life

The Corporate Blog Is Catching On

By THOM WEIDLICH

CORPORATE executives aren't known as the spill-their-guts type. But some are beginning to participate in an activity once thought to be the preserve of technology geeks and political partisans.

Executives are beginning to blog.

Blogs, short for Weblogs, are Web pages on which the author posts diary-like entries, often commenting on other articles or other blogs while providing links to those sites. Popular blog topics include technology, politics, sports, law (on sites known as lawlogs), the Iraq war and knitting.

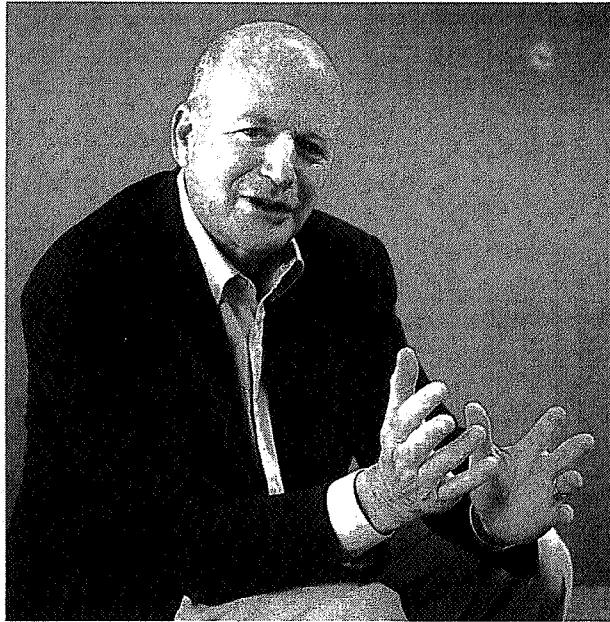
For companies and executives, blogs provide a way to talk informally to customers, vendors and employees. But the so-called blogosphere can also be a minefield. Saying the wrong thing or revealing trade secrets could come back to haunt a company. And public companies need to worry about disclosure rules.

"There is a sense that blogging is about to explode in the business area, but who's brave enough to do it yet?" asks Halley Suitt, director for client development at Yaga Inc., a company in San Francisco offering a payment technology for Web sites. She is also a blogger, at halleycomment.blogspot.com. "Many early bloggers were wild entrepreneurial types," she added, but now the phenomenon is drawing "more legitimate executives."

One who is brave enough — or senior enough — is Alan M. Meckler, the chief executive of Jupitermedia in Darien, Conn., a technology market research firm. Jupitermedia is planning a conference called the Computer Digital Expo, to be held in Las Vegas in November, to compete with the huge Comdex show. In February, Mr. Meckler began keeping a blog (weblogs.cdexpo.com/meckler/) that he describes as "a diary of the ups and downs of trying to do something monumental."

Here is a sample entry: "If an organizer truly pushes the intellectual side first with a well thought out and honest seminar program, critical and financial success ultimately comes one's way. Just like the movie 'Field of Dreams' — 'if you build it, they will come.'"

Mr. Meckler views blogging as a



Anne Dowle for The New York Times

Alan M. Meckler, the head of Jupitermedia, keeps a Weblog, an online journal of his thoughts. He says he didn't notify the company's lawyers.

marketing opportunity. "But it doesn't work unless you have some personality in it," he said.

James L. Horton, senior director at Robert Marston & Associates, a public relations agency in New York, started his blog more than a year ago. It is available through his Online Public Relations Web site at www.online-pr.com.

Five days a week, Mr. Horton posts his thoughts, ranging from a description of his jitters about having to write a white paper for a client to speculation that Hillary Rodham Clinton's portrayal in her new book of her husband's infidelity could be a plus for Democratic presidential aspirants because "Bill might have to disappear and let them stand on their own."

Tim O'Reilly, president of O'Reilly & Associates, a Sebastopol, Calif., producer of technology books, Web material and seminars, started a blog at www.oreillynet.com/weblogs/author/27, two years ago. He estimates that it has more than 10,000

regular readers.

He views blogging as a way for chief executives to do an end run around the company's public relations firms and "glossy brochures" and speak directly to customers and vendors. For example, last month, he used the blog to follow up on a Baltimore Sun online column, saying that the writer had "quoted only a few lines of my rather extensive e-mail interview in his article, so I thought I'd reproduce the entire text here."

However, Mr. O'Reilly cautioned, "It's not like an executive can add a blog and magic will happen."

MAYBE not, but at least blogs can be fun. Christopher Ireland, the chief executive of Cheskin, a marketing consulting firm in Redwood Shores, Calif., vetoed a proposed newsletter this year as "too tired and overused" and instead created a space on the company Web site for employees' blogs. On hers, www.cheskin.com/weblog/cilog/ciperspectives.html, she chats

about a gadget-oriented scavenger hunt in which she participated and frets about how fast time seems to be going these days.

"It's very personal, almost like writing a journal," Ms. Ireland said. But you have to hit just the right tone or you will turn off customers, she said, by making it seem "like you're trying to market the company."

Blogs have drawbacks. Ms. Ireland has already been unsettled by a query from a reader for more personal information. And because blogs are supposed to contain spontaneous, sometimes provocative musings, they may have trouble gaining favor at companies that want to control what is being disclosed.

"Once you get to the point where lawyers review everything in a blog, it ain't a blog anymore," said John G. Palfrey, executive director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at the Harvard Law School, who keeps a blog himself, at blogs.law.harvard.edu/palfrey/.

Indeed, some experts suggest allowing only trusted employees to engage in the activity — and requiring that no trade secrets be divulged. Ray Ozzie, chief executive of Groove Networks, a software company in Beverly, Mass., has posted a widely cited corporate blog policy on his own blog, at www.ozzie.net/blog/2002/08/24.html.

Lawrence Savell, counsel at the law firm of Chadbourne & Parke in New York, suggests posting a legal disclaimer concerning the links listed on a corporate blog, in case it inadvertently points readers to a Web site that advocates illegal conduct.

Mr. Palfrey and Mr. Savell agree that libel laws in the print world apply to blogs. Mr. Meckler of Jupitermedia says that he did not talk to his lawyers before starting his blog. But he says they read it — and sometimes tell him to be more cautious.

Mr. Meckler says he has reluctantly toned down his language from some of his early entries about Key-3Media Events, which runs Comdex. "We got some people saying, 'Oh, that's not fair ball,'" he said. He considered their objections ridiculous, but under pressure from vendors, he said, "I'm not stirring the pot anymore, which isn't my nature." □