

Networking In the Age of Social Media

By Michelle Golden, Golden Marketing, Inc.

Blogs, despite their silly name, are the “next generation” in networking. Without leaving the comfort of your sofa and jammies, you can simultaneously snuggle with your kiddos and connect with people who share your professional interests, namely referral sources, prospects, peers and even media. For many young professionals juggling work and family, online networking is a viable alternative to cocktail parties and evenings away from home. For shy professionals, it’s even more appealing.

Professionals are discovering how to leverage social media technology — blogs and networking sites like Linked In and Pulse — to make good connections and demonstrate their expertise, mostly by participating in online discussions related to their practice areas.

Some (not many) CPAs are even starting their own blogs. If you have a blog or want to have one, the sort of networking discussed in this article is requisite for a blogger to build a

solid readership base, gain respect, and have their efforts really take off. But plenty of opportunities exist through this same sort of networking approach for non-bloggers, too.

Good blogs serve to connect the dots between ideas while adding authors’ perspectives. Good bloggers take a concept — their own idea, someone else’s article or blog post, a bit of news, a situation, or a new requirement — and they make it relevant to their readers. Their readers, in turn, offer their own observations and further the conversation by submitting comments. Bloggers appreciate good comments, and blog protocol is such that your comments include fields for your name and URL. Thus, each comment displays your name and a link back to your bio or Web page of your choice. These links elevate your name in search engines, and increase the popularity of your Web page, too.

If they’re intelligent, thoughtful, and helpful, commenters establish a following of their own. They become an interesting and essential part of the

Letter From the President



Neil Fauerbach

Wow! That was a fast year! And a fun one at that. Since this is my last column in this space, I want to thank the people who make AAM a great organization.

Our committees, committee chairs, task force members, board members, officers, and staff. AAM is a wonderful gathering of talented and passionate people. I am impressed with how much you know and how much you care about the organization, your fellow members, and your profession. Thank you. In particular I would like to thank Past President Jayne Bates for advice and counsel. And President-Elect Jamie Trayner, who has done a great job at helping us focus on important key issues throughout the year.

The work of these volunteer leaders is what keeps AAM growing, in membership, services, and stature. The educational opportunities and products generated have attracted new members to AAM who have

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“community.” If you comment on blogs in the circles in which you practice, you can become well known and respected, even without having your own blog.

Social media has taken the old-fashioned, one-way information stream of traditional communications, and opened up a multi-directional exchange that not only benefits the source, but potentially elevates all others who contribute to the Web site.

If a tree falls in the forest...

One of the first struggles every Web site runs into after going live is being found. By someone — anyone! And as a business Web site with specific service offerings and a need for uniquely qualified talent, your target audience isn't going to be extremely broad. In fact, it's quite focused and audience needs are not served by most professional service firm (PSF) Web sites.

The perpetual problem with PSF sites remains: how to interest people enough to merit a return visit to your Web site?

Blog content fulfills this quest. The very nature of blogs is to post with some regular frequency — somewhere between 6 and 10 times per month is a good, minimum pace. The continual addition of conversational content (which is expected of blogs) creates a nice bank of highly findable terms and phrases (keyword strings of three-four words are best) to draw relevant readers to your Web site.



AAM members connect at the First Timers' Reception at AAM Summit 2007.

Without enough content, or the right kind of content, your site can remain invisible to search engines forever, no matter how much you invest in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) services. And without compelling content, your Web site cannot convince people how amazing you are at what you do.

If you elect to become a blogger yourself, you won't succeed if your blog is simply a monologue that ignores the rest of the Internet and existing blogging communities, especially those within the same space as yours. Your individual posts should all have links to sources of information, news, and others' ideas. To find these sources (aka “blog fodder”) requires a bit (needn't be a ton) of reading. By linking to sources, you show people you respect their work and this gesture helps you become part of the community of people who are reading their blog.

All this linking helps to make blogs like SEO on steroids.

Making connections

If you're a blogger, recommendations from other popular writers are invaluable in building the credibility of your blog. Validation from recognized experts implies that you have expertise as well. Imagine a computer programmer's site being included on Bill Gates' list of favorite blogs. Would you consider that person skilled and credible?

Begin the process by finding about three to five blogs that get a lot of traffic and are already established as authorities on the subject matter of your choice.

Some tips on finding these sites:

- Search blog search engines like Technorati, IceRocket and Google Blog Search to find blogs that are already attracting attention from your core communities.
- Look at the Web sites of professionals in your industry whose opinions and views you know are widely respected to see if they have a blog.

Begin following the conversation — read posts and comments regularly to get a feel for the place. As soon as you feel comfortable, begin acting “social” by commenting on posts. Pace yourself and be conscientious of substance. You don't want to seem uninspired by simply writing “great post!” or rub people the wrong way by sounding too “salesy.” Don't blatantly pump your business or agenda. When you join the public conversation, your guiding motive should always be: “What value can I offer this community?” Abject self-promotion almost always backfires.

You probably won't receive an immediate wave of site visits and critical acclaim from your first few comments, so just focus on contributing to the discussions. Get enthusiastic about the conversations you have. If you don't have a genuine interest in being involved, your comments are likely to reflect that and potentially turn off other community members. So be sincere or move on.

After you get into the habit of regularly reading a few blogs, branch out. Explore

Thoughts on Attending the AAM Summit



“Tuttle Printing has been a proud supporter of AAM and the annual Summit for many years. We appreciate the increased company recognition and product awareness the Summit has provided and it has been an excellent way to make new contacts and grow business. Building relationships with AAM member firms and being a partner in their continued success has been very gratifying.”

— Patrick J. Mc Morrow
Director of Marketing
Tuttle Printing & Engraving

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blogs linked in other comments or check out what your favorite author recommends (found in a sidebar labeled “Links” or “Blogroll”). Visit those sites and start commenting on what you read there, too. This is how an online professional network is born.

Once you do this for awhile, if you feel inspired, you’re ready to become a blogger, too. If you do, be sure to reference good posts you read elsewhere (with full attribution and links, of course) and watch the goodwill

build. Learn how to use “trackbacks” to place excerpts of your posts on the blogs of those you’ve cited.

Impact

Technology is far from stagnant, especially in the digital age. So it’s easy to be skeptical when others recommend investing your precious time into something that seems new or faddish. But social media is part of everyday life among younger professionals and many in the 40+ crowd, as well! Far from a short-lived trend, blogging is becoming commonplace for professionals. B2B has a special place in social media — it’s reshaping the way companies do business.

One way social media has changed PSFs is through leveling the playing field for practices of all sizes. Good blogs are garnering solos and boutiques equal attention and visibility as the big firms for recognition as experts. In fact, small firms can move faster than large, so they have a distinct advantage.

Reading blogs, commenting on them, and even authoring one of your own, is now a reasonable objective within your personal marketing plan. Participating in social media can establish your credibility in the public eye, reaching an audience you may never have found otherwise. And those conversations may be preserved for years to come, continuing to bring publicity to you and the firm. Blogs market for you 24/7/365!

Anyone with an Internet connection and the desire to communicate with like-minded individuals has the power to become a valuable part of an online knowledge base. And the more people who get involved, the richer these resources become. Wikipedia, for instance, has only succeeded through the sheer volume of participants willing to contribute. On a somewhat smaller scale, your own Internet presence is helped immensely when you act on the “social” part of social media. *AA*

About the Author:



Michelle Golden, president of Golden Marketing, is an award-winning accounting firm Web site and blog developer and authors a well-respected blog, goldenpractices.com, about firm management and business development. Her 20+ year career includes leading the marketing departments of an 80-person CPA firm and a 400-person law firm prior to starting her own consulting firm, Golden Marketing, in 1999. Michelle facilitates, trains, and coaches professionals from solos to the Big 4 and her company supports them in implementing marketing plans and processes. Heavily involved with AAM since 1993, Michelle is a former board member and conference co-chair, and founded AAM's

Discussion List. She will be presenting a session entitled “Blogs, RSS and Web 2.0: What CPA Firms Need to Know” at AAM Summit 2008 in San Diego. Michelle can be reached at 314.416.1201 or via e-mail at michelle@goldenmarketinginc.com.

Letter From the President

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the need to learn and improve. Several years ago we started offering more services to the sales and business development professionals in our industry. And this February we held the AAM Executive Leadership Conference, the first conference geared toward our more experienced members. All these efforts have been well received and have provided value to your AAM membership.

The Education and Membership Committees continue to have success with our roundtable calls segmented by firm size and tenure of the marketer.

And the AAM High! Sessions during the last year were all well received.

In the works is the redesign of our Web site to give you access to more tools, and an enhanced, searchable library. Also on a roll is the re-branding of AAM to reflect what we have become, a leader in our field, and leaders within our firms.

I hope you plan to join AAM at the Summit, June 3 – 6 in San Diego. The hard working Conference Committee has a fantastic program planned. There is something for everyone including a full day of pre-conference programming, and some spectacular speakers, break-out sessions, and social events.

Membership continues to grow as we increase the value we provide. We project that AAM will have 825 members by the conference. And, as we approach our 20th year, a thousand members sounds like a great goal!

All of this takes hard work and dedication on the part of our members, volunteers, and AAM Headquarters staff. Thanks again for all you do.

Cheers!

Neil Fauerbach
AAM President