

Setting Knowledge Free: A Conversation with Steve Rubel about Blogging

By David Maister

I launched my blog (or “web log”) in January 2006 in order to experiment with this relatively new way of interacting with my audience. Twice or three times a week, I post thoughts or comments on topics that interest me.

In addition, I search online for blogs written by other people discussing these topics, sometimes joining in the conversation by adding comments to their “blog posts.”

As recently as three months before I began, I had barely heard the term “blogging” and did not know what a blog was supposed to do. When I asked around for guidance, I would pose the question, “Who is the role model for doing blogging well?” Almost uniformly, the name of Steve Rubel would come up.

Since he started it about two years ago, Steve Rubel’s blog about web-based interactive communications practices (including blogging) has become by some tracking measures the most popular blog in the world. (See www.micropersuasion.com.)

Steve has received a great deal of media attention as the one person who best knows and understands what is going on with this emerging technology and set of communications tools.

The following telephone conversation took place on March 2, 2006, just as Steve was joining Edelman, the international public relations firm.

David Maister - Apart from you and Richard Edelman, how well do you think the PR profession is using blogging to create conversations with its clients? Are PR advisors communicating well with their audiences, or are the shoemakers’ children going without shoes?

Steve Rubel - It’s moving slowly, but it will accelerate. Everyone now has a good understanding of what these technologies are. But they are not yet being used well. There are individual evangelists involved, individuals within firms, but it’s not an enterprise-wide effort yet. However, I will say that the PR industry is way ahead of the advertising industry in this regard.

Maister - A lot of what has been written about blogging refers to the opportunities for corporations. Do professional firms that are engaged in business-to-business services have an easier opportunity to use blogging than do companies that serve the mass consumer market, or is it harder?

Rubel - One should not just focus on clients. For PR firms, as for all professional businesses, blogging is an

opportunity to engage the industry, the media, the community, and the government. It would be very misleading and limiting to think of blogging as only about conversations with customers or clients. It's about connecting with a wide group of stakeholders.

However, if you do think about connecting with clients, it should be easier for professional service firms to take advantage of blogging.

When buyers think about hiring firms, one of the things they care a lot about is "smarts"—having really good advice and counsel to offer. Blogging brings that to life—it's a perfect way to demonstrate that you have something to say and something to offer.

If you are the buyer evaluating an agency, you would try to evaluate the specific account team that is being proposed for your business. Normally, you would not have any way of assessing those individuals other than going to a meeting, reading the bios in the proposal, maybe checking some references. That's not a lot of insight. Whereas if the professionals have been blogging for several months, the buyer can go back and find out all kinds of stuff about you and your points of view before they even meet you.

That's good for the buyer, and if you really have something special to offer and something special to say, it's good for you. That's the kind of transparency that will help the buyer choose a better professional, whether it's a law firm, an accounting firm, a PR firm, or an advertising agency.

It's a lot harder to hide now. If a firm or agency really thinks it has the smartest people, then it has a real incentive to get them out there and to show them off.

Maister - The essence of blogging, especially your version of it, Steve, is being generous in giving away your ideas. I can understand that if you are trying to impress or serve a client. But who's doing the listening and participating out there? Is it the clients you are trying to serve, or is it just other consultants picking your brains and stealing your best ideas?

Rubel - In my world, what I'm doing is called "setting knowledge free." That's not only a good thing, it's inevitable. It's also very beneficial to you to do it rather than try to protect your knowledge as proprietary. That's not how you will get known.

It may seem like an "echo chamber," with the same people talking to each other, but the average person just looking at the blogs is not able to see the website data that I'm looking at. I can track how people arrive at my blog, and the buyers arrive through Google. Buyers search for my topics on Google and, because I've been creating and giving away content for two years, they find my blog and me.

I don't want to be immodest, but look at the media profile that I have been blessed with. The media found me through blogging—they are there and they are listening and watching. And then the buyers found me through the media attention. They don't necessarily join in the blog conversations, but they *are* listening and lurking silently, and in big numbers.

We have won business from clients who have just been reading without participating. In my last firm, new clients would call us and already know all about us and would be just about ready to hire us by the time they first contacted us.

Maister - One of the things blogging was supposed to achieve was to create conversations with the audience, yet when you look at most blogs, very few seem to attract added comments. Most consist of the blogger talking, with no-one responding. Is this an accurate perception?

Rubel - There are two types of conversations. You are asking about “intra-blog conversations,” where people add comments within a given blog. You’re absolutely right that there’s only a little of this.

But there are also “inter-blog conversations,” where separate bloggers pay attention to what other people are blogging about, and then blog about those topics on their own blogs, using links to draw the readers’ attention to the existence of the other blog. There’s a tremendous amount of that going on.

It’s a different kind of conversational approach being created in real time. It’s like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* trying to talk to each other, and serving the reader by referring to the precise place in each other’s paper where other people are commenting on the same subject.

It’s a new concept, still being worked out, with no guiding hand deciding how it will ultimately play out.

So, it’s not necessarily a failure if you don’t get direct intra-blog comments on your own blog. It depends on your objectives as a blogger.

However, it *is* a failure if you can’t build an audience. It takes time to build an audience and get them to the point where they want to start interacting with you. You have to be patient and reach a critical mass in the amount of content you have put out there, the familiarity

you have built, and the size of your audience.

People think it’s impossible to break through and get an audience to respond, but it’s not. You just have to keep plugging away and slowly build your audience until it passes the “tipping point,” when, if you have done it right and are also lucky, things can really accelerate very fast.

Maister - Sounds just like the advice you’d give a rock band or young performer trying to make it! There are few true overnight successes.

If someone truly did want to do a better job of eliciting reactions and creating true conversations, what should they do?

Rubel - One thing they definitely should do is begin by visiting other people’s blogs and participating in their conversations by adding comments there. It’s a good strategy to be prepared to be a little provocative and controversial, without being rude.

Think of it like going to a cocktail party or a dinner party. If you insisted on waiting for people to come to join you, you wouldn’t get very far. You start by going where the other people are and respectfully and politely joining in their conversations. Eventually, if you have been doing it often and regularly, they will notice you, come to you, and join in your conversation. There’s no shortcut or quick hit here.

Just as in real life, the more well-read you are the more able you are to engage in good conversations. You should read widely among other blogs so that you know what people want to talk about. In the “blogosphere” that means subscribing to and reading a lot of RSS feeds so that you know what’s being discussed and what’s hot.

(Note: The blogosphere is the term used to describe the community of people who are writing, reading, and commenting on blogs.)

Much like the way a traditional news wire works, RSS—really simple syndication—delivers content you are interested in, directly to you. It takes the hassle out of staying up to date by bringing to you, automatically, the latest updates of all your favorite sites and blogs.)

Last, and most important, you should use the technology to “trackback” and link to other bloggers so that you help visitors and yourself to be part of the larger interblog conversation. You won’t get a lot of intrablog conversations going if you try to keep it all on your blog. You’ve got to link in.

(Note: Trackback is a tool that allows readers to easily follow conversations spanning several blog authors. A commenting blogger can notify the author of an original article or blog with a trackback—essentially a message that says “I am writing about your work and your ideas.”)

Readers can click on the trackback messages to follow the conversation as it develops around the blogosphere and the original author can see where his or her ideas are being discussed and expanded upon.)

Ultimately, it’s about providing value and making people want to interact with you because they derive benefit when they do.

Maister - These sound like life lessons, not just blogging lessons.

You recently wrote that the four “Ps” of blogging were be Passionate, be Purposeful (clear about your goals), be in the Present (talk about what’s happening now), and take a Position.

Aren’t these guidelines what communications always should be in any setting and medium? Are they peculiar to blogging or are they more general rules?

Rubel - Yes, these lessons are general. But the blogosphere has its own culture,

just like a dinner party in China is going to be different from a dinner party in the UK.

If you want to join in, you need to take the time to learn the specific manners and mores. Unfortunately, it is very easy to make a big faux pas in a foreign country by doing what you would normally do at home.

That’s what it is like in blogging. The playbook or general principles of successful communication may be the same, but there is already a clear blog culture that you need to understand if you are to be accepted.

Maister - You’ve written that you are aware of your international audience in the blog world. Have you found that there are national or regional differences in how blogging is playing out in different parts of the world?

Rubel - Absolutely! The U.S. audience is far more expressive, while (for example) the European audience tends to be a little bit more reserved and a little bit more respectful. When people in Europe disagree with you, they do it in a very polite way, whereas people in the U.S. can be—well, sometimes you have to strap your helmet on!

Maister - Are there national and regional differences not only in style, but in whether people will engage in conversations at all?

Rubel - The volume of people reading blogs in Europe is huge, and maybe they are not participating as much. Neither blogging nor participating is for everybody.

Maister - What else can blogging do for the blogger?

Rubel - While you must always be a source of value personally, blogging also

allows you to serve your audience by collecting, linking, and aggregating the knowledge, facts, and arguments of others, so that you serve by becoming the single best place for audience members to go to in order to keep up on “your” topics.

Whether it’s blog-based or news-based, you can be really valuable by being the best aggregator of information in your field. The blog is the perfect tool to make that possible.

I try to be the best possible aggregator I can be on the topics I cover. That’s not just doing a cut-and-paste job on other people’s blogs, although too many people are taking that approach. You must work at contributing. I have developed systems that help me find stuff, and find it before others do. That’s part of making yourself the “go-to resource.”

As you get bigger, with a higher profile, an interesting thing starts to happen. People start sending you stuff to blog about without you having to put in the work to find it. I have gone from being, as a PR counselor, the person who spent time pitching ideas to being the person who is being pitched.

Lots of people now want me to pay attention to them and their ideas. It’s like punishment for being in PR for 15 years!

I’m not a journalist. I’m a finder of information, a sharer of information, an aggregator of information. And it works, because I’m out there every day uncovering things and sharing them with my audience.

Maister - Any disappointments or surprises in all of this for you?

Rubel - I’m surprised there have not been more Fortune 500 companies

blogging. It was always obvious that the tech industry would take it up. I think the automotive industry has done a good job, too.

I’m surprised I’m not seeing more sports teams having blogs, or more people in health care doing it. Health care blogging is an open playing field right now.

I’m even surprised that the financial service industry and the corporate sector are not using it much to create “stock blogs.” Or perhaps it will start to happen from the investor side. The point about blogging is that it is multidirectional. Many corporations only got into blogging because their customers were talking about them online.

When it comes to the web, anything can happen. I keep getting surprised. I had no idea that MySpace was going to be so huge.

(MySpace is an online community where members can post personal profiles, share pictures, host blogs, and link to friends. According to one source, as of March 2006, MySpace was the world’s fifth most popular English language Web site, with over 77 million users.)

I can’t go anywhere without hearing about this. I’m now saying to myself, “I’ve got to learn more about this.” The key thing is to keep learning, keep reading, and keep up!

Reflections

In writing up my conversation with Steve, I was particularly struck with the fact that while he (correctly) stressed that there are new cultural mores to learn about the blogosphere, there was also a great deal to learn about marketing communications in general from his advice.

His dinner party metaphor is one I also have used (in my article “Marketing is a Conversation”) and his emphasis on having something to say that is different, timely, and felt with passion is a great rule for seminars, speeches, and articles, not just blogging.

I also received some early media attention for my blog, and was being interviewed by a journalist about my advice to professional firms about blogging. (It’s amazing how quickly—just a matter of weeks for me—one can go from actually being a neophyte to being treated as an expert!)

Like Steve, I argued that the key to all successful marketing communications was having something interesting and valuable to say, something that is not the same as what everyone else is saying.

The journalist asked what my advice was to professional firms that *didn’t* have an original point of view to offer. My response was that if you don’t have anything special to offer, perhaps the wisest course of action would be to shut up!

I must rush to report that I have been exceedingly fortunate with my blogging experience. As the automobile advertisements say, “Your actual mileage may differ!”

My technical advisors, Justin Evans and Colin Vernon, did a thorough job of researching the opportunities that blogging had for me, and they did a superb job of guiding me through my choices. I’m very glad I took a customized approach with real professional input, rather than relying on standardized blog software and doing it on the cheap.

I didn’t always accept their advice. As is (apparently) conventional wisdom

among bloggers, they advised me to keep my blogs short, so that people could read them quickly and move on. Those who know my work will not be surprised that I found myself writing “mini-articles” instead.

But that may be exactly in accord with Steve Rubel’s advice. Above all else, he stresses that blogging, like all forms of communication, works best when it is honest and in the author’s true personal voice. Any attempt to use marketing communications to “craft” an image or perception that is not real is almost certainly doomed to failure. For better or for worse, my blog audience receives David Maister—warts and all! I think Steve would approve.

For professional firms, one of Steve Rubel’s most important points may be the fact that blogging permits, in ways that were never available before, the opportunity to interact with and engage multiple constituencies.

As Steve Rubel pointed out, blogging first began to receive attention and be taken seriously when corporations’ customers started commenting publicly on the products, services, and behaviors of the company.

This could still happen to professional firms. As many professional firms are only beginning to take tentative steps on client feedback systems, imagine what would happen if an uncoordinated, free-market version of a “J.D. Power-style” firm-rating system began to emerge in a public discussion forum like the blogosphere.

This has not yet happened to many professional firms, but it is happening—and it is *very* likely to expand rapidly among the tech-savvy people the firms themselves want to reach—their

potential recruits. Many firms discovered that their websites (yesterday's frontier) were being used more by recruits than clients.

In the ongoing war for talent, the battleground will clearly shift to blogs. Firms have barely begun to deal with the fact that current staff, ex-employees, potential recruits, and third-party observers are already discussing what the work experience is like at different firms.

Like the corporations and their customers, professional firms will find that, if they are wise, they will find a way to engage in these discussions, not try to avoid or suppress them.

Your reputation is, by definition, what people say about you, and the place they will be increasingly having these conversations is in the blogosphere. Firms need to monitor what is being said about them and become engaged in the discussion.

Last Thoughts

While there are many bloggers who really don't have anything to say, it has proven easy, as a reader, to filter them out and to ignore them. On the other hand, my experience has proven to me that there are many, many people contributing challenging, original, insightful thoughts on many topics directly related to my field of interest.

Perhaps more importantly, I have discovered many people whose contributions are not aimed at the world I have traditionally served, but who have nevertheless become essential reading.

It is now clear to me that if I am to keep up with the best thinking in my field, it is not books, articles, magazines, or newspapers that I must watch

carefully—it is the blogosphere that is discussing those things long before the other media notice the new issues and insights.

It has also become clear in my short career as a blogger that I have no choice but to be an active participant. As a professional provider, I cannot refuse to be part of the fast-moving debate on issues of great importance to my clients. I must, as Steve says, jump in, learn the social code of the foreign territory in which I have landed, and start to contribute.

It is wonderful when people do comment on your blogs, so I hope readers of this article will contribute their reactions. See you in the blogosphere!

Steve Rubel can be reached at 212-704-8266 or steve.rubel@edelman.com.

The address of his blog is <http://www.micropersuasion.com/>



David Maister is the author of *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) (co-author), *Practice What You Preach* (2001), and *First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals* (2002) (coauthor).

Prior to launching his (solo but global) consulting practice in 1985, he served as a professor at Harvard Business School.

TEL: 1-617-262-5968

E-MAIL: david@davidmaister.com

WEBSITE: www.davidmaister.com

BLOG: www.davidmaister.com/blog/

**OTHER RECENT ARTICLES BY
DAVID ARE AVAILABLE AT
www.davidmaister.com:**

**It's Not How Good You Are, It's How
Much You Want It**

Marketing Is a Conversation

Do You Really Want Relationships?

[Strategy and the Fat Smoker](#)

**[Young Professionals: Cultivate the
Habits of Friendship](#)**

**[Are You Abusive, Cynical, or
Exciting?](#)**

[Doing It for the Money](#)

[A Great Coach in Action](#)

You can automatically receive David's
future articles via e-mail (at no cost) by
subscribing on his website,

www.davidmaister.com.