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Corporate blogging today – usage and characteristics

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ABSTRACT

In the much-observed field of weblogs, corporate blogs are of particular relevance and interest. This study¹ empirically examines the corporate blog phenomenon by reviewing the blog status of 250 companies from the consumer goods industry. Their blogs – if any – were tested with the help of different variables, such as the location of the company, the blog's updating frequency or its interactivity. This allowed for testing certain hypotheses, in particular concerning the existence of corporate blogs in certain companies, industries and regions, or whether a blog's traffic rank depends upon these variables. This survey suggests that a blog's traffic rank is significantly influenced by the frequency of blog postings and its interactivity features. These factors seem to greatly depend upon the sales volume of a company. However, the data sample at hand suggests that there is not yet a widespread usage of corporate weblogs.

Keywords

Blog, weblog, corporate blog, communication tool, public relations, blogs and marketing, new media

INTRODUCTION

Corporate blogging is a rather new phenomenon. Initially, weblogs or 'blogs' were written by individuals to document their lives' and to express opinions on various topics (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht and Swartz, 2004). Since then the blogosphere has evolved. Companies discovered the new medium for internal communication, and also for communication with customers, which offers additional marketing channels. According to Fredrik (2004), a corporate blog is "a blog published by or with the support of an organization to reach that organization's goals." Blogs differ from conventional websites by i) their interactive elements such as votings, comments and questions (contact form), which allows customers to give feedback; ii) by being written in a conversational voice; and iii) by being created using instant publishing software, which does not require technical expertise (Weil, 2006). Moreover, blogs can achieve higher rankings in search engine results than static sites if frequently updated. This is due to the fact that they are heavily linked to one another and they contain individual posts that can each be indexed as separate files by search engines (Li, Stromberg, North and McHarg, 2007).

Even though many companies do employ corporate blogs, the existing research focuses mainly on tools employed to create and maintain corporate blogs. This paper aims to understand the factors that play a role for the corporate blog adoption decision. To reach this goal, the paper utilizes an exploratory quantitative analysis. The underlying research questions are: Where are companies which blog located? From which industry sectors are they? How successful are companies that maintain blogs? How often do they update their blog? Is the update frequency related to the popularity of the blog? What kind of features do corporate blogs have? Do these features determine the popularity? For the purposes of the study we have examined all companies listed in "Global powers of the consumer products industry: The Top 250 (2009)", which is published by Deloitte each year.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Firstly, related work is outlined. Secondly, different criteria and variables are developed in order to classify corporate blogs. These are selected according to their applicability with regard to our data sample. Thereafter, the empirical findings are presented and subsequently serve as a basis to test the validity of certain hypotheses with regard to existence and traffic of corporate blogs. The study concludes with a summary of the findings, its limitations and relevance for future work.

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RELATED WORK

Classification of corporate blogs

Blogs are generally classified based on the accessibility (Fredrik, 2004), on their content or on certain characteristics of the authors (Lee, Hwang and Lee, 2006).

The main distinction of blogs is whether they are internal and external. Employees can access internal blogs via the intranet. These blogs can improve communication and thus contribute to the identification and loyalty of the employees with their company. They can be grouped as knowledge blogs, collaboration blogs and culture blogs, depending on their content (Fredrik, 2004). External blogs can be accessed publicly and be subdivided into sales blogs, relationship blogs and branding blogs (ibid.). They can provide information about products and services, about the history or the culture of the company. The most predominant external corporate blog is the sales blog. It usually aims at (potential) customers to show them existing or upcoming products. Due to interactive features, customers' feedback can be integrated into such blogs, adding credibility. Customers generally trust customer reviews more than the product information given by producers or retailers (Komiak and Benbasat, 2004). Another aspect is the dissemination of selective information. A company's 'culture' and branding can serve as one example: Many companies have a long history, which can potentially increase customer's confidence in their products and conduct. This is underlined, for instance, by a well-known soft drink company that was established at the end of the 19th century, and that has its blog written by their own historian and archivist.²

Another possible classification of blogs depends upon certain characteristics of the authors, the purpose, and the content (Lee et al., 2006), e.g. employee blogs, group blogs, executive blogs, promotional blogs, or newsletter blogs. Authors of product blogs normally work in the marketing/PR or in the management department, in private SEO companies, as journalists or as employees.

The CEO blog can be named as another type of blog, the outstanding feature of which is that the author is the CEO of the company. Considering the role and responsibility of a CEO, Taylor (2005) mentions that CEOs should not spend time on blogging, but rather focus on responsibilities coming along with their leading position. However, Sessum (2005) argues that blogs written by CEOs have advantages such as an increased interest in the blogs, a personalized relationship of the reader to the company; also, it is thought to encourage employees to work on their careers.

Advantages

Most blogging companies believe the customer's insights gained with the help blogs is invaluable compared to the relatively low investments required: "You can set a blog up for \$0. You can host one for \$8-\$30 a month and you can have them designed and optimized for a price-range from \$500-\$5000." (Durbin Media, 2006). Corporate blogs can help to construct and maintain a certain image of the company, as well as building long-term relationships with customers. Through the two-way communication it provides, customers can interactively personalize their relation with the company. The company can benefit from the feedback of the customers (Singh, Liza and Cullinane, 2008). Another important aspect is the 'empowerment' of the customers. By being organized in a blog-based community, customers can easily exchange information and if necessary pressure the company with the help of public opinion. They can build awareness and loyalty by engaging the customer to participate in the product development process (ibid.), e.g. by voting upon product features. Furthermore, corporate blogs can contain customer reviews and thus facilitate the buying decision process by providing additional information.

Disadvantages

Setting up a corporate blog can be facilitated by plug-and-play software. Specialized companies offer blog content and blog monitoring (Singh et al., 2008). However, customers will only visit corporate blogs regularly if they are "rewarded" with new, interesting content. This updating process can be a communication very time-consuming task, although this highly depends upon the update frequency. It requires researching relevant information, reading other blogs and updating the blog with new posts and uploads. Furthermore, comments and questions have to be answered.

A crucial issue with interactive tools is the loss of control. Any person can leave (possibly anonymously) negative comments or reveal confidential information. Depending on the company's policies and on the validity of the criticism, such entries are deleted or replied to.

Another important point why companies are reluctant to blog is the difficulty to measure the impact of blogs in terms of their

² <http://www.coca-colaconversations.com/>

influence upon concrete business goals. Therefore the additional risk and exposure linked with blogs can be difficult to justify. Possible solutions are to compare blog-reading customers vs. non-readers in customer satisfaction surveys, to monitor the volume of revenue originating from bloggers, and to measure the reduction of customer service inquiries. Likewise, companies can extend their ROI (return on investment) metrics by taking into account goodwill, loyalty, and brand equity (Li, 2004).

Delineation

There are other studies examining corporate blogs from different sectors and according to specific variables: Mattson and Barnes (2009) examined US-based companies across different sectors (Fortune 500 List 2008) in an attempt to quantify the adoption of corporate blogs by using descriptive statistics. Adding to this approach, Xifra and Huertas (2008) use a correlation analysis, but they limit their analysis to public relation blogs, and also include both personal blogs and corporate blogs.

Our study aims at giving a representative overview over corporate blogs specifically, focussing on blogs across different industry sectors and from different countries. Furthermore, this study combines the variables of previous studies in order to get an insight into the interrelations between the characteristics of corporate blogs, the success of the blog and certain characteristics of companies that blog.

RESEARCH METHOD

We focused our analysis on external blogs due to their public accessibility. 250 companies from the worldwide consumer products industry (Deloitte, 2009) were analyzed according to different variables by using descriptive statistical data and variable correlation. This sample was chosen because the consumer industry comprises different industry sectors. Also, there is a presupposition that they are more likely to blog than e.g. companies producing mainly B2B products. Finally, this sample allows to analyze geographical aspects since those companies are located all over the world. The “Top 250” Deloitte list contains an adequate preselection of such companies. The data was collected at the end of 2009 through the Internet.

Selection and definition of variables

In the following, we will discuss possible variables regarding their suitability and availability for the analysis and their scales of measurement. The variables are divided into four dimensions according to the research questions: company characteristics, company success characteristics, blog characteristics and blog success characteristics. Figure 1 depicts possible relations between the four dimensions.

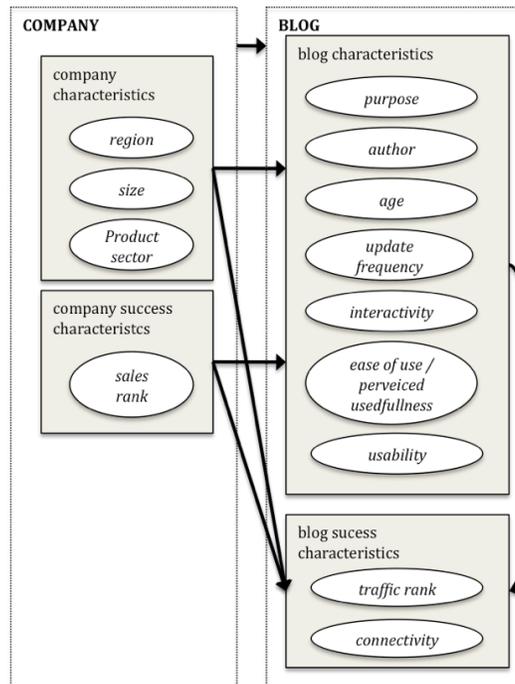


Figure 1. Overview over dimensions and variables

The most important variable is the blog existence. All companies that do not blog are separated from those who do in the first step:

- i.) Blog existence. Dichotomous nominal variable, i.e. 1-“yes” and 0 – “no”.

Company characteristics

- ii.) Region. Ordinal scale, where 1 – ‘North America’, 2 – ‘Asia/Pacific’, 3 – ‘Europe’, 4 – ‘Africa/Middle East’, and 5 – ‘Latin America’. This information is taken from the Deloitte report (2009).
- iii.) Company size. This variable can be measured either according to the number of employees, or to the company turnover, or the balance sheet or market capitalization (Office for National Statistics, 2010; Little, 2010). For each industry segment, a different metric is significant, so there was no metric that was available for all blogging companies considered in this study. Hence, this variable is no longer considered hereafter.

Company success characteristics

- iv.) Sales rank. This variable is linked to the company size by measuring the sales volume. It is measured by an ordinal scale and the information is provided in the classification of Deloitte (2009).

Blog characteristics

- v.) Purpose of the blog. We attempted to classify the examined blogs according to Fredrik (2004) (i.e. sales blogs, relationship blogs or branding blogs), but many of them showed mixed characteristics. Therefore, the purpose was left out in our analysis. Xifra and Huertas (2008) employ the variable ‘content’, which would have left us with the same difficulties as with the variable ‘purpose’.
- vi.) Author of the blog. Lee et al. (2006) distinguish between employee blog, group blog, executive blog and promotional blog. This variable could not be used due to the fact that blog authors only publish under pseudonyms, which does not allow to conclude which company department they are working for, what kind of position they occupy, etc.
- vii.) Age of the blog. This information is not consistently available and therefore not considered.
- viii.) Update frequency of the blog. This variable is measured ordinally: 1 – ‘every day’, 2 – ‘every week’, 3 – ‘every month’, 4 – ‘more than a month’. The fourth category also contains abandoned blogs, because these companies have not updated their posts for at least a month, and some of them even over years. This variable is crucial to maintain a faithful audience.
- ix.) Interactivity of the blog. The interactivity of a blog describes the possibility of communication between the company and the customer. Interactivity can be achieved through the possibility to comment on postings, through a contact form via email, through participation in votings, downloading or uploading documents or photos, through enabling customers to send postings to their friends via Twitter, Facebook or email, or through subscribing to specific content (Xifra and Huertas, 2008). The variable ‘interactivity’ is divided into four groups: 0 – “no possibility to interact”, 1 – “one possibility to interact”, 2 – “two possibilities to interact”, 3 – “three possibilities to interact” and 4 – “four possibilities to interact”.
- x.) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and usability. TAM variables (Davis 1989) such as perceived usefulness³ (PU) and perceived ease-of-use⁴ (PEOU) can only be measured by the evaluation of blog readers and are therefore not comprized by the scope of this study. However, some variables influence TAM variables: the update frequency probably influences the PU, and the interactivity of the blog probably influences the PEOU. The same reasoning applies to usability, which is a necessary requisite to develop efficient interactivity (Hallahan, 2001) and is therefore partially measured by that variable.

Blog success characteristics

- xi.) Traffic rank. This variable measures the popularity of a website. It was measured with an ordinal scale using a tool called Alexa traffic rank⁵. The rank is calculated by combining the average number of daily visitors and page views

³ This was defined by Davis as ‘the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance’.

⁴ This was defined by Davis as ‘the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort’.

⁵ <http://www.alexa.com/>

over the past 3 months.

- xii.) **Connectivity.** Blogs are usually linked to other blogs and websites with related content. Those links lead to higher rankings in search engine results. This information cannot be measured accurately and is therefore not considered hereafter.

In summary, the following variables are included in the analysis: i) blog existence, ii) region, iv) sales rank viii) update frequency, ix) interactivity of blogs and xi) traffic rank.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Analysis of variables

Existence of external corporate blogs regarding region and product sector

Of the ‘Top 250’ companies from the consumer products industry listed by Deloitte, 31 do external corporate blogging (i.e. 12%). The majority of 88%, i.e. 219 companies do not have external blogs. This can be called surprising, as the consumer products industry expectedly should have the highest rate of corporate blogs.

		Blog existence		Total
		yes	no	
Product sector	Electronic Products	22	11	33
	Fashion Goods	13	4	17
	Food, Drink & Tobacco	126	6	132
	Home Furnishings & Equipment	14	0	14
	Home Improvement Products	12	1	13
	Leisure Goods	3	4	7
	Personal & Household Products	20	5	25
	Tires	9	0	9
	Total	219	31	250

Table 1. Blog existence with respect to the product sector

Out of the 31 companies that maintain a blog, 11 (36%) were from the electronic products industry, so it can be considered as the sector with the greatest presence in the blogosphere. Concerning the percentage within one sector, the leisure goods sector has the highest percentage of companies with a corporate blog (4 blogs, representing 57%). In the product sectors “home furnishing and equipment” and “tires”, the companies examined have no corporate blogs at all (table 1).

		Blog existence		Total
		yes	no	
Region	North America	75	15	90
	Asia/Pacific	67	9	76
	Europe	64	7	71
	Africa/Middle East	5	0	5
	Latin America	8	0	8
	Total	219	31	250

Table 2. Blog existence with respect to the location of the company

The 250 companies surveyed are located in five regions (table 2). None of the relevant companies from Latin America and Africa/Middle East have any corporate blogs, however, this region is underrepresented and therefore this finding is not cogent. The highest number of corporate blogs was found in North America – 15 companies (17%). Asia/Pacific and Europe have very similar results - Asia/Pacific 9 companies (12%), Europe – 7 companies (10%).

Update frequency and interactivity of corporate blogs

As for update frequency, corporate blogs in this study showed various patterns. The blogs with the highest update frequency posted more than one entry a day, while the least frequently updated blog had last entry recorded in the year 2006. 32% (10 blogs) of the surveyed blogs had not been updated for more than a month. As it can be assumed that these blogs that have

been abandoned, this seems to be quite an outstanding finding (figure 2).

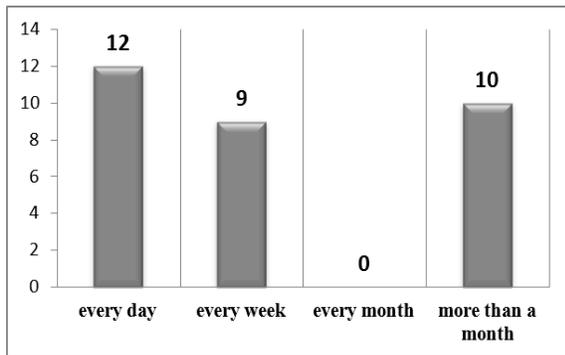


Figure 2. Update frequency

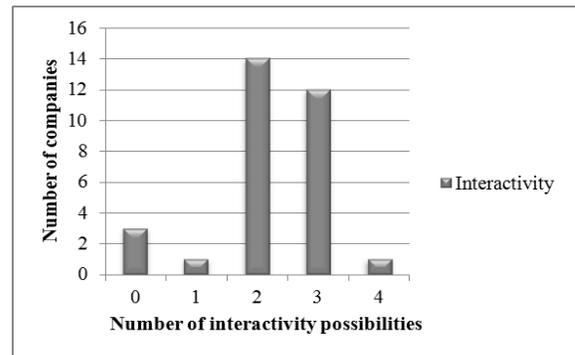


Figure 3. Blog interactivity

Interactivity of the existing corporate blogs has a homogenous structure; most companies (84%) have two or three possibilities to interact (figure 3).

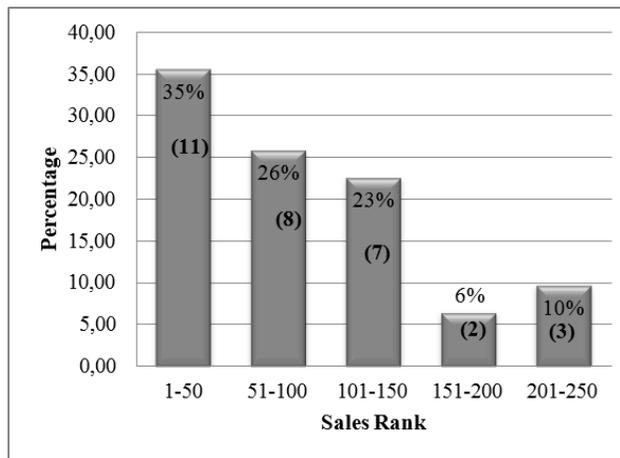


Figure 4. Blog existence with respect to sales rank

Sales rank apparently influences the adoption of blogging by our sample companies. As far as companies with a sales rank up to place 50 are concerned, 35% (11 companies) have a corporate blog. Of the group listed 51st-100th, 26% (8 companies) have a corporate blog. Among the group listed 101st-150th, 23% (7 companies) have a corporate blog. In contrast, the bottom 100 (those listed 151st-250th) account for 16% (5 companies) of the corporate blogs (figure 4).

Correlation analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS⁶. First, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data is not normally distributed. Therefore, we based our analysis on non-parametric correlation analysis tests such as Spearman’s rho, Chi-square (χ^2) and Cramer V. Spearman’s rho was used as a correlation coefficient between two ordinal variables. The crosstabs were used to get the chi-square and Cramer V test of association for the nominal and ordinal data (as suggested by Garson, 2004). A cross tabulation displays the joint distribution of two or more variables simultaneously, they can be used for any kind of measurement: nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio. Cross tabs treat all data as if they were nominal. χ^2 tests the statistical significance of the cross tabulations. The Cramer V coefficient gives the strength of association of the cross tabulations (ibid.). It is a variant of the Phi coefficient that adjusts for the number of rows and columns. Values range from 0 (no association) to 1 (the theoretical maximum possible association).

The main four research questions that were solved through testing hypothesis theory using SPSS software were: i) Does the location of the company have an influence on blog existence and blog properties?; ii) Does a blog update frequency have

⁶ Statistical Package for the Social Science

influence on the blog's traffic rank?; iii) Does the blog's interactivity influence the blog's traffic rank?; and iv) Does the sales rank of the company influence blog existence and the blog properties?

Figure 5 depicts the variables and the hypotheses that are discussed subsequently.

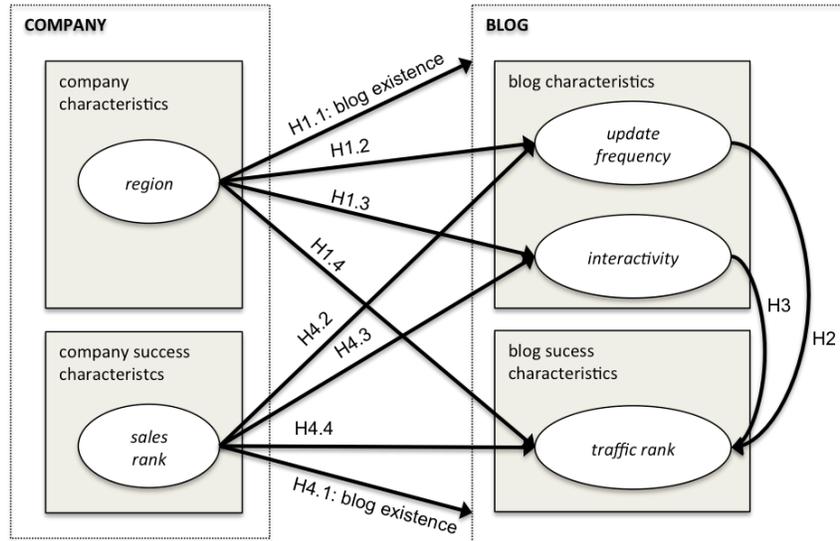


Figure 5. Overview over the variables and the hypotheses

H1. The location of the company has an influence on the blog existence and the blog properties.

This hypothesis stems from an article by Kolari, Finin, Lyons, Yesha, Yesha, Perelgut and Hawkins (2007) and claims an influence of geographical distribution on corporate blogging. However, it was unclear whether such influence was due to the common language that has bridged geographical distances. The following sub-hypotheses are conceivable:

H1.1. The location of the company has an influence on the blog existence.

H1.2. The location of the company has influence on the blog update frequency.

Symmetric measures: Blog existence				
Nominal by nominal	Location of the company		Value	Appr.Sig.
		Phi	0,123	0,435
	Cramer-V	0,123	0,435	
Total		31		

Table 3. Blog existence and region of the company

Symmetric measures: Blog update frequency				
Nominal by nominal	Location of the company		Value	Appr.Sig.
		Phi	0,410	0,266
	Cramer-V	0,290	0,266	
Total		31		

Table 4. Blog update frequency and region of the company

Symmetric measures: Blog interactivity				
Nominal by nominal	Location of the company		Value	Appr.Sig.
		Phi	0,455	0,600
	Cramer-V	0,322	0,600	
Total		31		

Table 5. Blog interactivity and region of the company

Symmetric measures: Blog traffic rank				
Nominal by nominal	Location of the company		Value	Appr.Sig.
		Phi	1,414	0,335
	Cramer-V	1,000	0,335	
Total		31		

Table 6. Blog traffic rank and region of the company

H1.3. The location of the company has an influence on the blog's interactivity.

H1.4. The location of the company has an influence on the blog's traffic rank.

With the available data it was possible to test these hypotheses, because the study took into account the location of the companies, and not the region's language. All four hypotheses could be rejected (see table 3-5 representing the crosstabs for

the χ^2 and Cramer V test) i.e. the location of the company has no significant influence on the blog existence, nor on the update frequency, nor on the blog’s interactivity, nor on the blog’s traffic rank in our sample.

H2: The blog update frequency influences the blog’s traffic rank.

H3: The blog’s interactivity influences the blog’s traffic rank.

H2 is based on Du and Wagner (2006), who argue that blog success largely depends upon the value the blog provides to its readers. However, their study captures both static (popularity rank) and dynamic characteristics (popularity growth) of weblog success over a period of time. To test this hypothesis only the weblog popularity rank was used. H2 could not be rejected (table 7). The correlation between these two variables is very strong (0,6). This result indicates that increasing the blog update frequency increases the traffic rank of the blog.

To test H3, we used the blog’s traffic rank, which is referred to as ‘weblog popularity rank’ by Du and Wagner (2006). This hypothesis was rejected (table 8). The correlation between the blog’s interactivity and the blog’s traffic rank is negative (-0,4), which can be explained by the ascending order of the blog’s traffic rank.

Correlations: Blog traffic rank			
Spearman-Rho	Blog update frequency	Correlation coefficient	0,597
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000
Total		31	

Table 7. Blog traffic rank and update frequency

Correlations: Blog traffic rank			
Spearman-Rho	Blog interactivity	Correlation coefficient	-0,392
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,029
Total		31	

Table 8. Blog traffic rank and blog interactivity

H4: The sales rank of the company has an influence on blog existence and the blog properties.

By using the example of blogs from the Fortune 500 companies, Mattson and Barnes (2009) show that the rank influences the adoption of blogs. However, the sample used in their study comprises only US-based companies, whereas our blog sample contains companies from all over the world. Furthermore, we want to examine these relations by the following hypothesis in greater detail:

H4.1. The sales rank of the company has an influence on the blog existence.

H4.2. The sales rank of the company has an influence on the blog update frequency.

H4.3. The sales rank of the company has an influence on the blog’s interactivity.

H4.4. The sales rank of the company has influence on the blog’s traffic rank.

H4.1 and H4.4 were rejected (see tables 9 and 12). However, we could state a strong correlation between the sales rank and the blog update frequency (H4.2) and the blog’s traffic rank (H4.3) (see tables 10 and 11). The correlation coefficient for H.4.2 is negative (-0,468), which can again be explained by the ascending order of the sales’ rank.

Symmetric measures: Blog existence				
Nominal by nominal	Sales rank		Value	Appr.Sig.
		Phi	1,000	0,470
		Cramer-V	1,000	0,470
Total		250		

Table 9. Blog existence and sales rank

Correlations: Blog update frequency			
Spearman-Rho	Sales rank	Correlation coefficient	0,401
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,025
Total		31	

Table 10. Blog update frequency and sales rank

Correlations: Blog interactivity			
Spearman-Rho	Sales rank	Correlation coefficient	-0,468
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,008
Total		31	

Table 11. Blog interactivity and sales rank

Correlations: Blog traffic rank			
Spearman-Rho	Sales rank	Correlation coefficient	0,238
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,197
Total		31	

Table 12. Blog traffic rank and sales rank

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the blogging status of 250 companies from all over the world that produce consumer goods showed that only very few run corporate blogs. Half of the companies from our sample that maintain blogs are located in the USA. Moreover, one third of the companies which have blogs produce electronic products. This may be explained by the fact that customers that buy electronic products are more open to technology in general, and to the Internet in particular.

This paper suggests that the update frequency influences the number of visitors of the blog. All hypotheses concerning the location of a company could be rejected, i.e. according to our findings it has no significant influence on the blog existence, update frequency, interactivity, nor on traffic rank. However, a significantly high influence was detected between the blog's traffic rank and the blog update frequency, respectively its interactivity. By increasing the blog's interactivity and update frequency, one should be able to increase satisfaction of the target group and thus considerably increase the traffic rank of the blog. The last group of hypotheses which connect the sales rank of a company with the blog's existence, respectively its update frequency, interactivity and traffic rank, revealed that only the influence of the sales rank on the blog's update frequency and on the blog's interactivity is statically significant. This means that the higher the sales volume, the higher is the frequency of updates in a company blog, and the more likely it is that one would find a diversity of interactive features in the respective blogs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results presented above could be biased by the small sample size. Although our initial data basis comprised 250 companies, this was soon reduced by the fact that out of these only 31 did maintain corporate blogs. Many of the variables that could have been relevant had to be neglected because of a lack of data. Therefore, future studies should examine the corporate blog status of a broader number of companies, possibly chosen from more specific regions or industries.

Regardless of the limitation mentioned before, our study supports certain hypotheses and set a trend that others must be rejected. These results can and should be tested in subsequent studies which use similar statistical tests and methods.

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