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The Art of Blogging in Public Relations: A Reflection

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Intro: Why Blog?

If I have learned anything through my public relations coursework at Grand Valley State University over the past few years, it is that the industry is ever-changing - now more rapidly than ever. To be an effective PR practitioner, keeping up with the latest technology and trends is an absolute must. Traditional “soft skills” like relationship-building, problem-solving and writing are still incredibly important. However, they are being practiced in new ways with the evolution of digital technologies like social media, video chatting software, and blogging.

As a capstone to my studies, I took up the task of learning the art of blogging for public relations, all the while researching current PR issues to broaden my knowledge of the industry. I truly think that there is a difference between learning about a topic and explaining that topic to others. You gain a deeper understanding of the concept and contribute something meaningful to scholarly discussion with your own insight and unique perspective. As a student and a proponent of lifelong learning, I believe that there is nothing more important than asking thoughtful questions and seeking the answers. This is the best way to advance human understanding of the world around us, and it is what I have sought to do with this project. Hopefully, by sharing my process, insight, and the best practices I have discovered here, I might inspire somebody else to do the same.

The Research Process

I began my search on the GVSU Library online database to find books, articles, and other scholarly sources about effective writing for public relations. Given the changeable nature of the PR field, I tried to stick to works published within the past five years to ensure relevance and reliability. However, a couple of books published in 2014 ended up making the cut due to the

high quality and volume of information they contained and the concurrence of that information with newer sources. Using a combination of search terms like *blogging*, *best practices*, *guidelines*, and *public relations*, a total of nine references were selected from the GVSU database for further reading. I then proceeded to consult Google Scholar and three reputable industry blogs - Ragan's PR Daily, PR News, and PRSay - using the same four principal search terms. This expanded my total number of sources to 15.

While I collected most of my references within the first three weeks of blog-writing, reading them was a more gradual, ongoing process. It was my goal to improve my blogging by putting at least one new best practice to use in each of my 12 entries, building upon my prior knowledge base as I went. Upon an initial skimming of the 15 sources I accumulated, a few keywords consistently popped out at me: *simplicity*, *clarity*, *storytelling*, *visual*, and *voice*. It is with these key concepts that I began my deeper dive into the material, the results of which will be discussed in detail in the next section. Overall, I was able to discern 14 best practices discovered by other communications scholars to put to practical use on my own WordPress blog site.

Best Practices in Action

Time and again, books and articles about blogging drill the importance of **developing a personal voice** for your blog-writing. This first best practice serves as the foundation for many other blogging guidelines, and I quickly realized that I needed to get this right from my very first post. Content marketing agency Brafton calls it a “dash of secret sauce” - that thing that makes your writing special and truly yours (H. Jennings, 2018). I crafted my own “secret sauce” in my first blog post ([To Outsource or not to Outsource?](#)) with a bit of humor, wit, and conversational

tone of voice. I also used italics to emphasize certain words and bring my voice to life, as suggested by J. Mizrahi in the book *Writing for public relations: A practical guide for professionals* (2016).

If having a voice is the most critical best practice to master, then learning to **be a good storyteller** is a close second. As public relations writer Jonathan Rick claims, “Facts tell, stories sell” (S. Arenstein, 2018, para. 9). People are drawn to read compelling stories, not dry lists of facts. I tried my best to ensure all of my blog posts told a story by following an arc format, starting with the main idea, delving into details in the middle, and circling back to where I started at the end. Looking at my second entry ([Managing the Managers: A New Role for PR](#)) as an example, it begins with a question: “Ever wondered what it’s like to tell your boss what to do?” (M. Ireland, 2020, para. 1). I go on to explain how and why public relations serves as a management function and then revisit this question in the context of the details provided.

Speaking of questions, they help to put another blogging best practice into action: **engaging readers** and piquing their interest. By starting off a post with a question, the audience feels invited to take part in the conversation, something that Mizrahi maintains is very important (2016). The opportunity for two-way engagement is one of the things that makes blogging unique, and it can happen in more ways than just the comments section of your posts (J.A. Gilbert, D. Clark, & D.P. Roy, 2016). Asking questions, being conversational, and incorporating humor are just a few of the ways I tried to engage the readers of my public relations blog.

The headline of your blog post needs to be the most engaging part of all because it is what first draws readers in. It will not matter if the post contains the secret to the universe if it does not have a **clear, catchy, and intriguing headline** to prove it. C. White and J. Biggs,

authors of *Bloggers boot camp*, say that “headlines are gold. Without a good headline, no one will read your story” (2014, p. 87). A separate long list of best practices exists for writing headlines alone, including using questions, using action words, highlighting unusual things, and limiting yourself to eight words. I tried to use as many of these as possible in my blog headline creation, including a catchy play on words in my third post, [Robots and Data and Skill: AI!](#)

I have talked about writing headlines and using voice, but one best practice I discovered does not involve any writing at all: **doing quality planning and research**. Before crafting a post, it is essential to choose a topic carefully, gather your research and thoughts, and organize that information, looking beyond the first page of Google results (M. Leccese & J. Lanson, 2015). Authors White and Biggs suggest setting aside one hour of research time for every blog post (2014). By the time I wrote my third or fourth entry, I settled into a pattern of scanning industry trade publications for about 10 minutes to determine a topic. Then, I took 30-45 minutes to gather and skim through at least six relevant articles, books, or blog posts before putting anything down on the page. In fact, I gathered as many as eleven articles as I worked on my tenth post, [How Important is Media Relations, Really?](#)

Besides being knowledgeable and prepared, another reason to spend quality time researching is that you can use the sources you find to **insert hyperlinks** into your blog posts. Links boost your credibility as a blogger and connect readers to other bloggers or places where they can get more information (J.W. Rettberg, 2014). They also perpetuate the social, interactive nature of blogging - as A. Lupold Bair describes it, they are the “currency” of the blogging community (2019). In fact, to write about someone else’s findings and not link back to them as a contributor is considered unethical and against copyright laws. In my fourth blog post entitled

[Investor Relations: It's More than a Financial Investment](#) (and every subsequent blog post thereafter), I made sure to quote and link back to at least two other blogs or articles that supported my argument, specifically those from industry trade blogs like Ragan's PR Daily.

It is important to cite what others have found in your blog posts, but it is also important to **be unique and provide your own perspective** on the issues you choose to write about. E. Weisberg communicates the necessity of publishing unique content in retaining readership, as nobody wants to read a mere rewording of something that has already been published (2017). Therefore, I strove to introduce a new thought, opinion, or question in every blog post I produced. For instance, in [Blog 5: In a World Full of Technology, Dare to be Human](#), I recognized that a lot of the conversation surrounding trends in PR revolved around new digital technologies. I then chose to spin this topic around and focus on the importance of brands stepping away from technology and remembering to show their human side. I also wrote my ninth post, [The Melting Pot of Sound](#), in an attempt to make my blog unique. It is not every day that you see music industry knowledge incorporated into a blog about public relations!

Simplicity is another best practice of paramount importance in blogging. Blogs should be easy to read and understand, using simple words, short sentences and paragraphs, and avoiding jargon (F. Goumas, 2014). Lupold Bair says that a balance must be struck between stream-of-consciousness writing and overthinking, resulting in direct, open, and plain language (2019). One way to keep blog posts simple (and another important guideline to follow) is by placing the **most important information at the beginning**. Research has shown that the average blog-reader consumes writing in an "F" pattern, reading the first few sentences closely and skimming over the rest. The simpler your word choice, the more information you can get across

to those who read for the “F” (C. White & J. Biggs, 2014). I kept this idea in mind while writing my sixth blog, [Selling With a Song: Music as a Marketing Force](#), as I got straight to the point in the first paragraph: music has the persuasive power to help marketers sell.

Maintaining **clarity** in blog-writing is a guideline that goes hand-in-hand with simplicity. This is where a solid understanding of grammar, punctuation, and other simple rules of writing comes in - even though blog-writing is meant to be informal, that does not mean such rules should be tossed out the window (A. Lupold Bair, 2019). To maintain clarity and readability, White & Biggs suggest to “proofread everything you write, fact-check everything, edit for clarity, add new facts, and continue to polish” for a set amount of time after writing your first draft (2014, p. 47). I began a more rigorous editing procedure like the one they propose with my seventh entry, [CSR and the Great Ethical Divide](#). This post underwent quite an operation, as it was originally conceived as a discussion about the benefits of engaging in corporate social responsibility activities and gradually morphed into a debate about the ethics of philanthropy.

One guideline that is often disputed is the appropriate length of a blog post. Some writers, like Mizrahi, assert that 300-600 words is the optimal post length to keep readers fully engaged (2016). On the other hand, A. Lupold Bair presents data showing that entries of around 1,750 words draw in the most readers (2019). Regardless of length, it is always a good idea to **keep consistency**. Jay Baer of Amex believes that “consistency is the single most important proposition” - for both length and frequency of blog posts (J.A. Gilbert, D. Clark, & D.P. Roy, 2016, p. 11). It is also important to keep your site’s look consistent with your personal voice (B. Williams, D. Damstra, & H. Stern, 2015). Keeping in line with these guidelines, not only did I

keep all of my blog posts between 500-800 words, I designed my site using colors, fonts, and a format that reflected my fun and friendly writing tone.

M. Leccese and J. Lanson give bloggers the advice to **incorporate at least one image into every post**. “The more on-point images are, the more they enhance and complement what you’ve written, the more likely readers are to stay with your words” (2015, Ch. 1, para. 25).

These authors are not the only professionals who attest to the power of visual content in blogging. In fact, almost every source I read over the course of this project cited the use of visuals as a best practice. Many of my blog posts provide examples of the use of eye-catching, “popping” visuals, but Blog 8 ([Year of the Micro-Influencer](#)) and Blog 11 ([The Secret to Success in a PR Career](#)) specifically include graphics that I created in an effort to draw readers in visually.

Optimizing your blog for search engine results is another guideline to follow in order to help reach as many readers as possible. SEO using keywords that encompass your blog post’s main idea can majorly boost your visibility in searches and lead to increased readership (E. Sidley, 2017). While I tried to optimize all of my blog posts for searches, the best example is perhaps [Blog 12: How to Handle a Communications Crisis Like a Pro](#). In this entry about crises and how to train CEOs on handling them, I used the keyword “crisis” or “crises” a total of 10 times in about 700 words, and the acronym “CEO” six times. I also made sure to add these words as tags on the post.

As an overarching final best practice, **professionalism** can be incorporated into every aspect of blogging, from the writing to the design to the way you respond to commenters. As a general rule, Lupold Bair notes that it is okay and even encouraged to show emotion in

blog-writing - however, choose your words carefully and do not put anything out on a blog that you might want to take back later (2019). T. Tran agrees that one of the most important aspects of blogging is to write in a truthful manner (2019). It may be tempting to use blogging as a platform to ridicule other writers or products, but “it’s always easier to tear things down than to build them up” (C. White & J. Biggs, 2014, p. 103). Besides, you can get into legal trouble if you start attacking someone or something with false accusations. This best practice may seem obvious, but I took extra caution to fact-check all of the information in my blog posts and to be honest yet kind when commenting on others’ work, thus appearing more professional and avoiding any sort of legal trouble.

Conclusion: Forward Directions

It is one thing to read about blogging best practices and completely another to put them into practice. While my findings are nowhere near exhaustive, using them to maintain a blog over the course of three months certainly helped me to become a better writer and to understand the challenges that industry bloggers face. I have also discovered a passion for blogging that I hope to carry into the future, continuing to study the art of blogging as I hone my craft. Perhaps I may move forward and explore blogging best practices in different industries, on different platforms, or for interacting with the blogging community. Regardless of my own future direction, it is my hope that other public relations students might find my work a useful example for how best to get started in their own blogging careers.

Appendix: Blog Posts

Blog 1: To Outsource or Not to Outsource?

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/01/20/to-outsource-or-not-to-outsource/>

Blog 2: Managing the Managers: A New Role for PR

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/01/26/managing-the-managers-a-new-role-for-pr/>

Blog 3: Robots and Data and Skill: AI!

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/01/28/robots-and-data-and-skill-ai/>

Blog 4: Investor Relations: It's More than a Financial Investment

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/02/01/investor-relations-its-more-than-a-financial-investment/>

Blog 5: In a World Full of Technology, Dare to be Human

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/02/11/in-a-world-full-of-technology-dare-to-be-human/>

Blog 6: Selling with a Song: Music as a Marketing Force

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/02/14/selling-with-a-song-music-as-a-marketing-force/>

Blog 7: CSR and the Great Ethical Divide

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/02/24/csr-and-the-great-ethical-divide/>

Blog 8: Year of the Micro-Influencer

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/03/02/year-of-the-micro-influencer/>

Blog 9: The Melting Pot of Sound: Moving Beyond Genre to a New Era of Music

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/03/05/the-melting-pot-of-sound-moving-beyond-genre-to-a-new-era-of-music/>

Blog 10: How Important is Media Relations, Really?

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/03/08/how-important-is-media-relations-really/>

Blog 11: The Secret to Success in a PR Career

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/03/28/the-secret-to-success-in-a-pr-career/>

Blog 12: How to Handle a Communications Crisis Like a Pro

<http://meganfireland.home.blog/2020/03/30/how-to-handle-a-communications-crisis-like-a-pro/>

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