



Building and evaluating a customer value blog

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Abstract

Organizations often use blogs as a promotional vehicle to create superior value for their stakeholders. While blogs are one of the most utilized digital marketing tools, there has been limited academic research and in-depth applications on how to successfully design and execute such initiatives. This article fills that gap by providing a sound and systematic approach for implementing and improving this marketing communications priority. The case study explains how to launch, assess, and enhance a customer value blog to inform and engage readers. Using blogging and customer value literature as well as qualitative and quantitative metrics, research and strategic marketing insights are offered. Data are presented and analyzed from the Customer Value blog on viewership, comments, popular topics, categories of interest, and usage by geography, technology, and traffic sources. Recommendations to generate strong content, adapt and promote the blog, and teaching ideas are offered. Students, marketers, and businesspersons gain real world knowledge on the latest customer value topics from thought leaders. The process described in this article is readily adaptable by marketing educators and businesses interested in creating a blog to strengthen relationships with their target audiences.

Keywords Blogs · Customer engagement · Customer value · Marketing education · Metrics · Value creation

Blogging isn't about publishing as much as you can. It's about publishing as smart as you can.
—Jon Morrow, CEO,
Smartblogger.com.

Introduction

Businesses today must drive innovation and create value (Kotler and Keller 2016). Given increasing competition and demanding buyers, organizations must focus on customer desires. The American Marketing Association and the Chartered Institute of Marketing (United Kingdom) have recently updated their marketing definitions to prioritize value creation. Delivering customer value was the number one research priority for the Marketing Science Institute from 2020 through 2022 (MSI 2020).

Value creation is the key to successful business strategy. The author of this case study has been teaching customer value for more than two decades. As part of a course redesign to dovetail with the fourth edition of his textbook, *Superior Customer Value—Finding and Keeping Customers in the Now Economy* (Weinstein 2019), a marketing blog was created as a supplemental pedagogical tool. The book has been reviewed in leading marketing journals such as the *Journal of Marketing Communications* and the *Journal of Marketing Analytics* (McFarlane 2019; Santonino III 2020).

The Customer Value in the Now Economy blog (hereafter referred to as the CV blog) was launched in September 2019. The blog has two target markets—marketing students and marketers. The CV blog provides students opportunities to dive deeper into course-related topics, critique blog posts, participate in digital conversations with worldwide scholars and business practitioners, and contribute original content. The blog may be found at: <https://scv-weinstein.blogspot.com>

The purpose of the Customer Value in the Now Economy blog follows:

This marketing blog is all about the customer! It is based on research by Art Weinstein from the book *Superior Customer Value - Finding and Keeping Cus-*

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tomers in the Now Economy (Routledge 2019). Topics include the digital economy, customer-centricity, business models, value propositions, segmentation, service, quality, pricing, image, CRM, metrics, loyalty, and retention. Expert contributors offer related insights/best practices.

An objective of the blog is to enhance marketing coursework in customer value. At the author's university, a large private business college in the southeastern United States, three courses in this area are taught annually. Customer Value and Relationship Marketing is an undergraduate marketing elective that enrolls about 40 students—70% are marketing majors, 20% are entrepreneurship students, and 10% are other business or non-business majors. Customer Value is a graduate course in the MBA marketing concentration. About 60 students take this course yearly in evening and online formats. The CV blog is also a reference source for material in customer value/related courses at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) Worldwide, University of North Carolina—Wilmington, and other universities.

This case study is structured into the following four sections: 1) the value of blogs as an educational tool, 2) the Customer Value blog as an information source, 3) findings—key blog metrics, and 4) managing and enhancing a marketing blog.

Overview of the literature—marketing blogs as communications resources

Blogs are effective social marketing tools that build brands, engage customers, and foster long-term relationships (Wright 2006; Thackeray et al. 2007). Today's customers value being connected. A blog uses the internet to connect with customers to maintain relevance, build brand awareness, and foster business relationships. Keller notes that successful communications promote favorable experiences, create loyal relationships, and affect brand equity. He adds, "integrating marketing communications involves mixing and matching different communication options to establish the desired awareness and image in the minds of consumers" (Keller 2009). Blogs allow organizations to stay in touch with customers and to obtain feedback while building relationships (Safko 2012; Weinstein and McFarlane 2016).

While blogs are generally thought of as social media forums, they can also be value-adding learning resources that resonates with information-seekers. Colton and Poploski (2018) stress the importance of assessing communications objectives to gain an understanding of strategic perspective in their analysis of *Fortune 500* corporate blogs. Corporate blogs are well-designed, searchable, and navigable. They often fail, however, to develop strong

user relationships as information is presented in a one-way manner with limited dialogue with readers (Waters et al. 2014).

An interactive forum promoting customer-centricity creates something special in an age where co-creation of value matters and where social media marketing resonates with consumers. This is particularly important for millennials and Generation Z who are technology-oriented, social media-dependent, and prefer accessing information in short forms (i.e., knowledge chunks) rather than reading books or journal articles (Barton et al. 2014).

A blog is an effective tool which establishes information sources; provides news on programs/services; offers practical business advice; answers key marketing questions; and demonstrates the technical, conceptual, and social skills of marketing faculty (Castronovo and Huang 2012). Wright (2006) adds that blogging is a new way to gain visibility, build brands, increase sales, and connect and service customers. As blogs are an important communications tool, providing exposure to such a forum is valuable to marketing students.

Note that blogging is a neglected area in the marketing curriculum. For example, Kotler and Keller's (2016) *Marketing Management* textbook offers only one paragraph about blogs in the communications mix (p. 362). Competitive books such as Marshall and Johnston (2023) have a single paragraph on this topic (p. 357) while Peter and Donnelley, Jr. (2019) has a two-line listing about blogs in a table (p. 125).

Business school blogs are used as a teaching tool at top universities worldwide such as Kellogg School of Management—Northwestern University, Leeds University Business School, Reed Business School, Staffordshire University Business School, and the Wharton Business School—University of Pennsylvania (Agarwal 2021). An exploratory study by Wayland and Lin (2015) assessed the value of educational blogs in the Services Marketing course. They found that students were positive about the use of a blog as a supplemental teaching tool and that it enhanced the overall learning experience. Blogs have also been found to advance leadership skills in managerial communications courses (Kodish 2017).

Many graduates will work in digital communications and blogs will be one of their go-to methods to reach targeted audiences. While 43% of business owners are unfamiliar with blogging, those that do blog are quite successful. Fifty-five percent of users state that it is their number one inbound marketing strategy. Companies that regularly publish blog content generate eight times the traffic and three times the leads than non-bloggers. Furthermore, blogging helps reduce marketing spend on communication by more than 60% (Sean 2020). Figure 1 lists twenty facts about the importance of blogging in business today.



Fig. 1 Why Blogs are Important in Marketing

1. There are over 152 million blogs
2. 25% of all websites are blogs
3. A new blog post is published every 0.5 seconds
4. Two-thirds of all blog content is in English
5. The average length of a blog post is 1,151 words
6. Most posts are less than 1,000 words; the most effective ones are 2,250 – 2,500 words
7. 77% of internet users read blogs regularly
8. 55% of marketers say blogging is their top inbound priority
9. 64% of B2B marketers outsource their blog writing
10. 60% of bloggers write guest posts
11. Blogs are the second most popular form of content marketing, behind videos
12. 89% of content marketers used blog posts in their content creation strategy
13. 86% of companies produce blog content
14. Marketing spend for blogging is expected to grow 14%
15. 83% of traffic to marketing blogs comes from desktops
16. WordPress users produce 70 million new posts monthly
17. WordPress viewers write 77 million new comments each month
18. 70% of marketers actively invest in content marketing
19. 77% of companies have a content marketing strategy
20. 40% of marketers say that content marketing is a very important part of their overall strategy.

* Sources: Items 1-10 from 99Content (2020), Items 11-20 from Hubspot, Inc. (2021)

About the customer value blog

Users' perceptions of involvement opportunities and credibility impact the performance of marketing blogs (Colton 2018). The Customer Value blog engages students, alumni, scholars, and the business community. This is the third marketing blog project developed by this author. It follows Huizenga School Means Business Success and Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies (Weinstein and McFarlane 2016, 2017). Unlike the previous blogs which were departmental and college-wide endeavors, the CV blog is built around a single theme—customer value.

The Customer Value blog provides students with practical applications to learn how marketing is executed today. In the CV blog, posts are typically about 1000 words and fall into one of four topic areas: customer value mindset, customer value strategies, customer value metrics, and customer value—other (this category includes marketing issues that may not be covered in the course).

As Rowley (2001) notes, “the internet demands a significant review of approaches to marketing communications at both the strategic and tactical levels” (p. 203). The Customer Value blog operates on both fronts. Strategically, it represents part of the course design and structure (10% of the course grade). Tactically, the blog provides value-added services and relationship-building opportunities for marketing students (Barton et al. 2014). These dual benefits yield a competitive edge over other course content applications.

As a digital platform, the Customer Value blog provides important supplemental content written by the author and an evolving team of worldwide expert contributors. The

heart of the blog resource are short articles called posts (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi 2012). In addition, the CV blog offers useful features such as a comment box, key word indexing, multi-language translations (more than 110 languages), search capabilities, subscription links, and usage metrics. The CV blog encourages knowledge transfer and dialogue which are important blog functions identified by Ojala (2005). Students may access the blog in several ways including accessing links containing marketing posts published under various customer value issues and selecting specific topics by categories, authors, or date.

The blog was launched on September 11, 2019 via Blogspot.com. Blogspot is a respected, user-friendly, limited function, and free housing platform for millions of blogs worldwide. As of May 1, 2023 (44 months in existence), a rich archival library of 44 blog posts in the four major categories has emerged to amplify important customer value topics that are not adequately covered in the textbook or courses. To date, 28 posts (64%) were written by guests and 16 posts were written by the author (36%).

Good business decisions are built on having the latest and best information. The CV blog is an academic resource that offers such knowledge. Users are exposed to marketing posts with relevant figures, links, and materials to augment in-class and online discussions. Students submit blog-based assignments to facilitate comprehension of the material, improve analytical skills, and develop a real-world marketing perspective. In addition, students/teams present the writers' key findings, apply the ideas to a managerial situation, and offer thoughts on how the work can be extended.



Findings—key blog metrics

Over the course of its duration, the Customer Value blog has generated strong engagement from marketing students and the digital business community. To date, the CV blog has received more than 28,500 views and 312 comments from readers (Table 1). In fact, the blog has played an important role in the success and growth of the Customer Value courses at the focal university. Such an academic accomplishment makes it a pedagogical innovation according to Niederhoffer et al. (2007).

The impact of the marketing blog

The Blogspot hosting platform is a free service that has limited technical functionality and metrics. Ideally, blog metrics would include consumption, engagement, email, search outcomes, and conversions which is available from Google Analytics and social measurement tools (Seth 2021). Nonetheless, there are still several insightful measures to report.

Twenty-one of the 44 blog posts (48%) were read more than 200 times; five of the posts (11%) were read more than 500 times. Customer value strategy was the most popular theme—five of the ten most read posts were in this category (see Table 2). Surprisingly, the customer value mindset topics were not frequently read even though this area was the most emphasized based on number of posts ($n = 16$, 36%). There was considerable interest, i.e., highest

number of full text reads, in other customer value issues yet there were relatively few articles on these secondary topics ($n = 6$, 14%).

The secondary and strategic posts were the most engaging averaging 11.7 and 8.3 comments, respectively. In contrast, the mindset and measurement posts averaged only 5.6 and 3.6 comments, respectively. “Designing the Customer Engagement Strategy” was the 12th most popular blog post based on reads but had 42 reader comments which was 12 more than any other topic. Tables 2 and 3 provide a further review of blog metrics by top posts and content areas.

Seventy-two percent of viewers visited the blog from North America (96% of them were from the US) and 16% were from Europe. The CV blog’s built-in translation feature which allows users to read posts in their preferred languages led to a solid 12% viewership in other countries. Two-thirds of the viewers accessed the blog via Google Chrome and 62% used Windows devices. More than nine in ten readers (93%) went directly to the blog while 7% were referred by associations, companies, search engines, social media, universities, and other sources. Table 4 summarizes the audience profile for the Customer Value blog.

Table 1 Customer value blog—summary data

Year	Posts	Views	Comments
1	24	10,232	78
2	10	8,105	59
3 & 4	10	10,200	175
Totals	44	28,537	312

Table 2 Top 10 posts

Topic	Customer value emphasis	Number of reads	Number of comments
1. Value creation and value capture	Mindset	791	4
2. Store brands	Secondary	731	30
3. Experiential retailing	Strategy	596	13
3. Designing a Questionnaire	Secondary	596	9
5. Customer ownership	Strategy	506	12
6. Australian Denim brand	Strategy	399	12
7. Jamestown entrepreneurship	Secondary	370	4
8. Better customer experiences	Strategy	304	10
9. Customer retention	Measurement	293	10
10. Customer value management	Strategy	267	0

Table 3 Blog metrics—full-text reads

Customer value emphasis	Number of posts/(%)	Average number of reads
Mindset	16 (36)	161
Strategy	15 (34)	242
Measurement	7 (16)	193
Other	6 (14)	352
Total	44 (100)	220

$n = 9705$ (34% of views were full-text)



Table 4 Audience profile

Geographic region	Browsers	Device	Traffic Source *
US/Canada 72%	Chrome 67%	Windows 62%	Direct 93%
Europe 16%	Firefox 17%	Macintosh 22%	Indirect 7%
Rest of the World 12%	Safari 12%	Mobile 7%	
	Other 4%	Other 9%	

Direct means viewer goes directly to the Customer Value blog. Indirect sources came from Linked In, search engines, university servers, American Marketing Association, consulting firms, and other sources

Managing a marketing blog—challenges and solutions

Administering a high-quality Customer Value blog is time consuming. Building a strong blog product on any subject is arduous. Nonetheless, it is encouraged as it can create an educational resource of useful marketing knowledge chunks for students and business practitioners. Students can strengthen their skills in communications, research, and analysis—critical areas that new hires must master in corporate, small business, and non-profit settings. Marketing blog opportunities are discussed next.

Generating great content

Developing interesting and insightful content on a regular basis is challenging. Since customer value is a niche area in marketing, there are a limited number of scholars that have the expertise and interest to contribute to the blog. As professors face the usual academic pressures of teaching, research, and service, writing marketing blog posts is not a top priority for most. Nonetheless, the author (the blogmaster) regularly reaches out to academic contacts and leading marketing thought leaders worldwide to encourage their input.

Calls for blog posts are placed through Elmar.edu (the American Marketing Association's electronic marketing forum) and have yielded numerous articles from professors abroad. Top marketing conferences such as the Academy of Marketing Science (AMS), Association for Marketing Theory and Practice (AMTP), and the Society for Marketing Advances (SMA) have occasionally run announcements about the CV blog in their e-newsletters. Practitioners that regularly write about customer value on LinkedIn and other blogs have also been contacted which resulted in several excellent contributions.

Blog posts are more evergreen than other forms of content marketing with an estimated shelf life of two years. According to Murphy (2021), a blog post's life cycle has three distinct phases. The shout phase (first ten days after posted) generates about 50% of the total views, followed by the echo

phase (days 11–30) where 36% of blog post impressions occurs, and finally the reverberate phase which accounts for the remaining 14% of the readership (days 31–700). Popular blog posts may be rewritten and updated to keep the material fresh and extend their life.

A recent initiative has been giving MBA students the opportunity to write about an original customer value topic. To date, this has led to two publications to the blog. Millennials/ Gen Zers are capable of writing high-quality material and relate well to their peer readers. Furthermore, these students are digital savvy and share their work with friends and associates via social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter which promotes the blog. Enhancing this skill set will be helpful to them as many employers expect new hires to take on similar tasks in managing social media marketing initiatives.

Adapting the blog

According to Ahuja and Medury (2010), business blog content may be organizational, promotional, general, and relational. Most of the posts in the Customer Value in the Now Economy blog are considered relational content. Blogs emphasizing relational content have been found to be the most successful (Strong and Beetles 2017). Relational content maximizes reader engagement (measured in consumer views and comments) and relates to topics that solicit feedback, presents controversies, provide media reports, deal with important consumer issues, or generates emotions.

In the first iteration of the blog, our objective has been to provide useful marketing information to students, alumni, and the marketing community. The short pieces have been designed to blend relevant academic theory with best business practices. Writers have been asked to keep their topics current, interesting, research-based, cutting-edge, and useful. As we transition to Blog 2.0, new objectives may include tying topics closer to the curriculum, branching out beyond relational content, and exploring new media formats such as vlogs (video blogs).

Promoting the blog

While the primary target market for the Customer Value blog is marketing students, the content is quite useful to marketing practitioners and entrepreneurs, too. While the work is well grounded in academic theory, each topic has practical ideas that can be put to immediate use to improve marketing operations. The blog is shared with real-world marketers via LinkedIn Groups, Facebook, and websites. Guest contributors are always happy to promote their excellent work with their professional social networks which are often extensive.



Teaching ideas—using a custom blog in your marketing course

Here are eight best practices based on using the Customer Value blog as a learning vehicle in 12 courses, MBA (8) and undergraduate (4), over the past four years.

- Launch your blog with at least eight posts. Successively, add new content throughout the term and every semester.
- Stress the value of the blog to students from the first class (it is part of the syllabus) and throughout the entire course.
- Assign one or two blog posts every week as supplemental reading material.
- Use the blog as a major assignment about halfway through the course to replace a midterm exam.
- Have students work as a two-person team and do a 10-min in-class presentation (live or pre-recorded).
- Students can also prepare a two-page critique of a blog post. Specifically, they will provide: (1) a review of the topic, (2) a marketing application about a company not mentioned in the post, and (3) an extension of the work—e.g., new ideas, limitations, the future of this area.
- The blog work should be graded assignments worth 10–20% of the overall course grade.
- Encourage students to visit other marketing blogs as a source of research and the latest thinking by marketing practitioners and scholars.

Concluding remarks

Research on blog usage is a neglected area in the marketing and communications literature and worthy of further study. This case study offers a compelling application of how organizations and readers can benefit from such an initiative in a customer value context. Marketing and business professors should share the best ideas that they teach students in the classroom. Strong blogs offer a valuable course enhancement activity as well as a promotional vehicle to provide interesting and useful marketing content to the global business community. Business schools must differentiate and disrupt to succeed in the changing and highly competitive knowledge market. An insightful and well executed marketing blog can be one excellent tool to stay ahead of the pack and enhance the reputations of universities and scholars.

Discussion questions

1. How will you use a course-specific marketing blog to meet learning outcomes?
2. Which marketing topics will you address via the blog?

3. How will the blog be designed? Consider the appropriate blog platform, capabilities, desired features, and key metrics to capture.
4. What are the expected deliverables (e.g., presentations, written critiques, comments to blog posts, original content) and how will students be graded?
5. What type of digital content will be provided? Options include text, graphics, exhibits, links, references, and video.
6. What will be the source of your material—instructor-generated content, academic contributors, marketing practitioners, breaking marketing news, student posts?
7. Who will manage your blog—instructor, teaching assistant, students?

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