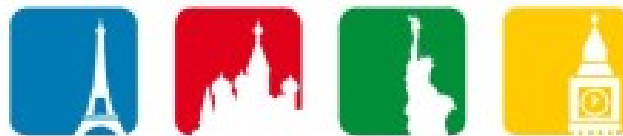




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BLOGGING BASICS FOR HOSTELS



Voya**Internet**.com

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Content

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1.- Blogging basics and how can our hostel get profit from them



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What is a blog

- It's a media allowing anyone to communicate whatever they want through publishing articles (posts) on the Internet.
- A blog is not a journalist gender, neither define a way of writing. It's only a technological support for contents. Style, frequencies, theme, design and other content related issues are defined by the blog administrator.
- The first blogs were created as an electronical versions of logs and diaries. But the flexibility of the format evolved fastly into low-cost news services, local news gazettes, corporate and personal branding communications tools and other commercial purposes.
- It's an extremelly flexible format. It allows to publish as much users want, with the frequency they want at no cost.
- One of its most valuable addings to communication was the possibility of interacting with users trough comments, as an early stage of the current social networks.

Why a blog for our hostel?

- **To communicate what we do:**

Lots of things and activities happening at the hostel we can communicate.

- **As an added value tool for future guests:**

A way to distinguish from other hostels in town and motivate future guests to choose our hostel instead of other options.

- **As a marketing tool:**

Improve search engine positioning, using it as a tool for exchange or even monetizing the contents

Communicating

- We arrange hundreds of **activities** every year. A blog allow us to communicate them more and in a better way.
- There are **things happening in town** that may be unique. Let's show the guests prior to their arrival.
- There are curious **things going on at the hostel**: our staff, our building, funny histories that will create the idea of a possitive environment.
- We have amazing **guests**. Many of them have incredible travelling or personal histories to tell.
- We belong to a huge **hostels network** in the world. Let's introduce our partners to the rest of the world.

Selling

- Our **activities** are a very important added value element for our guests. If potential guests know better about them before making their decision on where to stay in Toronto, we have more chances to attract them.
- A blog can offer more detailed **descriptions of our own lodging packages** and also a more encouraging communication. Let's finish some of our articles pointing directly to our booking engine.
- We do have **special products to sell** both from us and our partners. Our articles can introduce them to our guests or other hostelling members.
- Planning a road trip? Why not use the blog to sell also **other hostels** on the route?

Marketing tool

- If the **amount of our quality contents** on the Internet is higher, we can reach more people and have the chance to make casual readers our future guests.
- **Search engine optimization (SEO)**: The blog is one of the most powerful tools to boost positioning on search engines both for our hostel and for other HI hostels in the world.
- **Exchange tool**. What if we need something from an external supplier and offer him a reference on our blog as part of the compensation?
- **Coupons and promotions**. Low season? Need for more guests? A partner wants to increase its business through us? Let's use the blog to publish some promotional coupons or offers.

SWOT for a hostel blog

STRENGTHS

- Lots of activities going on and interesting guests to tell about.
- Several staff members as potential contributors.
- Support from hostelling network.
- Working communities on Facebook and Twitter.
- Running business, very strong product selling portfolio.

WEAKNESSES

- Require frequent updating from already busy people.
- Some non-native and not used to publish staff.
- A basic blogging maintenance training required.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Attract more potential guests.
- Let the customer know what can he buy from us at arrival.
- Improve our SEO.
- Trading article on partnerships.
- Monetization.

THREATS

- Unhappy guests or competitors using the blog to make negative comments.
- Increase in the amount of incoming questions and e-mails.
- Maintenance taking too much time for the person in charge.
- Privacy issues.

2.- Contents: The core of the blog



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Content creation

- Contents are the core of the blog. We are **free to define style**, length and the topics we want to talk. Text is the king, but the flexibility of this format allows us to combine it with pictures and video.
- Contents are introduced through a very easy to work content management system (CMS) included on the WordPress.org package. The text part is similar to a word processor and some other additional options related to plugins and classification are added.
- Style and length of texts depends on the writer. Some people prefer update frequently with short texts, some others prefer long reports. Too much text is good to be more likely found on search engines, but becomes boring if it's too extensive.
- A more or less average amount of words for a good post would be **between 400 and 800**. Depending on the topic, the interest and the contributors preferences.
- If the content is based on images or videos, could be enough with a very brief introduction and the multimedia content.

Categorizing

- As time goes by, more and more articles appear on the blog. In order to make a theme classify and to create theme filters, blogging engines allow us to classify them using **Categories and Tags**.
- Categories are generic topics **defined by the user**, that could be applied to one or more of the articles on the blog. (Examples: life in the hostel, our guests, activities, HI Hostels...). A post could be included in more than one category.
- Tags are a much more informal classify. They have not to be created in advance and can be included on every single post. Normally, are **one or two words related with the content** of the article.
- As an example, a post about a group going together to a baseball game could be under the category “Activities” and including tags like “baseball” or “Blue Jays”.

Categorizing proposal for our hostel

- The following list is a proposal for potential categories and article topics for a blog targeted to potential guests of our hostel.
 - **Activities:**
Walking tour? Baseball game? Let's show the guests what can they do if staying with us.
 - **Hostel life:**
Renewing basement? Introducing the patio? A TV in the main lounge for the Olympics? Launching monthly rates or packages? Let's people know how is our hostel.
 - **Our guests:**
So many interesting profiles visiting us every day... Some of them have amazing histories to tell, some others are artists, bloggers, travellers. Let's introduce our guests some potential travel buddies or show what they do.

Categorizing proposal for HI Toronto

- **Toronto and surroundings:**
Have we found a nice video on YouTube? A nice new restaurant? Is there a place or an event we consider interesting our guests to know? Let's show them what can they find in Toronto.
- **Trips:**
Staff members coming back from Montreal? A short break in Niagara Falls? Vancouver train trip? Let's give some tips to our guests travelling around Canada.
- **HI Hostels in Canada:**
A new video from the hostel in Edmonton? New openings at the Rockies? A discount coupon from Montreal? Let's tell the guests about the whole HI network in Canada.

Comment moderation basics

- Comments to posts allow our readers to **leave their opinions**, impressions or references to our posts. It's one of the most valuable parts of the blog format, but it has at the same time the risk of leaving complete strangers to write their opinions on our site.
- It's up to the blog administrator to leave the possibility of comments open or closed on every post or, even, to close them anytime in any desired post. A consistent and unique comment policy is advisable, after all.
- Allowing contents provide a **great feedback** from customers and mostly positive reviews. But, at the same time opens the door to competitors, dissatisfied customers, spammers and trolls to **make critics or insult us**.
- Comments to any post can come anyday, at anytime. The **moderation tasks** are permanent and constant for the administrator.
- Comments are intended to allow the customers to talk. Answers from administrators could be nice and sometimes useful, but if too often can overwhelm the readers.

Comment moderation basics

- Comments can be **answered, edited or deleted** anytime. Those two last options are extremely dangerous if readers consider that as a fact of censorship.
- Same as customers, not all the comments come from innocent people. Some of them are **intended to create trouble** or destroy our reputation. **'Don't feed the troll'** is the usual consign.
- Answering to negative comments is a typical **crisis communication situation** and has to be considered as an important issue: never answer when angry, never rush to answer and, if in doubt, always consult with management.
- **Spam** on contents is very common on blogs. Most of the times, its main goal is to create links for helping other sites SEO. Internal pluggins against spam are quite useful, but some others have to be deleted as soon as possible.
- More developed 'fake spam' ways have been practised lately. Most of them consist on inserting very standard or neutral comments, but including links to other sites. Administrator has to decide if the comment is still valuable or if it has to be deleted.

3.- The blog as a marketing tool



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A blog is a tool for...

- SEO and positioning.
- Internal and external communication.
- Advertising and sales.
- Trade in alliances and partnerships.
- Revenue source.
- Market research.

SEO and positioning

- SEO is the acronym for Search Engine Optimization, the techniques and procedures applied to **improve the visibility of contents** for users looking for information on web search engines.
- SEO is natural positioning and direct payment is not required. That's the main difference with SEM (Search Engine Marketing), that involves paid advertising.
- Search engines privilege **quality sites** with useful contents and popularity, but as this has to be focused in more objective concepts, we can translate that into coding optimization for quality, text for contents and links for popularity. Social Networks are also gaining influence in the evolution of algorithms.
- The key point for this sort of online marketing is **attracting customers to our contents** to make them choose our services or buy our or our partner's products.
- **Text content** is nowadays the most effective way of improving our SEO ratings and increase our Search Engine reach. A blog is one of the easiest ways to increase our online content.

Internal and external communication

- We do lot of things at the hostel, but if we can't communicate in an effective way we are loosing very important audiences. And not only as potential guests, but in our community: citizens of Toronto, associations, potential partners, business owners, competitors, policy makers and- of course- media.
- A blog helps to communicate what we did in the past, who we are, what are we doing know and what are going to do next. It's a most atemporal way of communicating than press releases, and -thanks to search engines- keeps contents alive **for ever**.
- A blog is a way to invite **our community** to know about us and, specially, to **inspire media** to publish histories related to our hostel and showing us as a reference for the independent lodging in the city.
- A blog can also be used as a tool for **internal communication**, as it can explain in a more detailed way future projects and changes related with the hostel and keep employees updated about the products sold.
- Articles are also an exceptionally nice opportunity to recognize the work of the staff or make public recognitions to good practices.

Advertising and sales

- Sales on the Internet are not only online shops or booking engines. It's a whole procedure from attracting the customer to the final sale, presenting products, explaining their advantages and showing rates and how to buy it.
- A blog is a very handy tool for presenting our products on a **communicational and non enterelly commercial content**. Every new post is a new chance to promote our products.
- The main goal of this kind of marketing should be **make the potencial customer claim for our products** specifically from the whole common offer. To make them choose our hostel when booking on external booking engines, to make them feel the atmosphere is better here than in other places in the city or making them aware of which tour or ticket are they going to buy from us when arriving at the Front Desk.

Product integration: Selling online

- One of the main mistakes when creating a commercial blog is targeting it as a **pure sales tool**. That makes the content too commercial, looking like continuous advertising and, sometimes, causing rejection from potential users.
- On other occasions, the products to sell are very well inserted on the contents, but those **contents seem too artificial and are not interesting** by themselves.
- One of the strengths of the hostel is the **highly amount of interesting histories** to tell. That makes a great 'wrapping' for inserting references to the products we or our advertisers sell. The idea is not making the guest ask to himself if he wants to buy a product, but how can he buy something that **allow him to get that experience**.
- Having **good content**, readers interest is guaranteed. From that point, we need to inform him about products related to those contents and let them know where can they get them: online or at their arrival at the hostel.
- **Pure advertising posts** from our services and partners are also useful and appreciated for readers, of course, but only if they are more informative than commercial and if are only a minor part of the total amount of posts.

Trade in alliances and partnerships

- A very cheap way of getting resources for new activities is through service **exchanges** with other business, individual and organisations.
- A blog mention, insertion or link makes a very good additional **trading opportunity**. There is no extra economic expense for the hostel and there are multiple ways of offering compensation: an article about a product or service, a mention in other articles about various issues or- the most valuable on online marketing- a relevant link valid for SEO, banner or content insertion, etc.

Monetizing

- Apart from selling our product, a blog allows us to monetize its contents and become a **new revenue source** -or, at least, compensate expenses- for our hostels. It's a risky and controversial marketing practice for a corporate blog, but it's available and absolutely correct if management decides to use too.
- There are several **ways of monetizing Internet content**. Those are some of the basics related to advertisement and affiliation:
 - **Direct advertising**: Agreement between publisher and advertiser. Fixed payment or Cost Per Mille (CPM) impressions scheme.
 - **External advertising**: Main example is Google AdSense. Advertiser provides a generic code and sell the ads by itself automatically or per request. Extremely easy, but no control at all of the ads published, so you can be selling stuff from competitors on your site. Payment on Cost Per Mille (CPM) or Cost Per Click (CPC).

Monetizing

- **Affiliation schemes:** Publisher applies for a standardised affiliation programme from an advertiser, takes care of implementation and promotion and get commissions for final sales referred by the advertiser.

It's a very profitable advertising for published very related with the advertiser's business and, in special, in the travel vertical. Some booking engines associated to our hostel as Booking.com, HostelBookers or HostelWorld, as well as other relevant companies as Expedia or Viator have available affiliate programmes.

- **Sponsored posts or link sales:** Very controversial practice, but very commonly used in the last few years. As links are essential for SEO strategies, webmasters and link builders offer payments in exchange of sponsored articles containing customized links or reviews. Links sales payments are not dependant on visitors, and are an easy way to earn money, but they are hardly rejected and even punished by Google.

Market research

- One of the main advantages on online communications is the possibility of having an extremely detailed **tracking of user interactions** with our contents. That interaction comes mostly through two ways: reader contribution or user statistics.
- **Reader contribution** was probably the most innovative addition when blogging started. Users used to -and liked- to leave comments to the posts and articles that could be publicly read and replied. Comment moderation was a newly required skill and censorship effects on negative comments were also a new risk. But the qualitative feedback and the often positive inputs are very valuable.
- Traffic and statistic data are not so notorious, but extremely useful. **Web analytics** has become a science and a powerful tool for further marketing actions. Statistics allow us to know which articles are more popular, which search keywords bring visitors to our site, and when and from which part in the world are our visitors coming -not only countries, but even cities-. That's of great help when defining targets for new marketing actions. Traffic tracking is easy and cheap to follow thanks to programs like Google Analytics.

4.- Requeriments and budget



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What do we need to create a blog?

- Most of the tools required to create a blog are **free or very cheap**. Some of them, as the Blogger application, are even for free.
- **WordPress.org** is a powerful and free blogging tool and, probably, the best way of managing a blog. Downloading is for free.
- We need some **hosting space** on a server in order to install and run WordPress.org. The requirements are standard for most of the Linux servers. If hosting would be required, it's possible to find it from 5-6 CAD/month. It's also possible to host it on any other Linux server available from main office or partners.
- After install, it's possible and advisable to **customize the design** and layout. Templates are available for free, and more advanced templates are also available for a reasonable price.
- One or several **blog administrators** in charge of publishing and taking care of comments and reactions.

Budget

- A blog is a **relatively cheap** marketing tool. Some of the required resources have already been in use as required by other applications, and even 100% free options are available.
- The highest cost of maintaining a blog is mostly due to the **time required by the authors and moderators** in order to keep it updated.
- A commercial standard blog proposal may require the following applications:
 - **WordPress.org** application package: Free software online.
 - **Linux hosting**: Traffic and storing sizes depending on specific requirements. Sometimes, possible to share hosting with current website hosting.
 - **Template**: The layout of the site. There are dozens of them free of charge on the Internet and some other premium are available for a small amount of money.
 - **Online standard applications for mail or statistics**: Gmail, Google Analytics, etc.

Budget

BASIC EXPENSES	APROXIMATE (US\$)
Basic Linux Hosting (per year)	70.00
WordPress.org	0.00
Basic template	0.00
Analytics, mail, software (freeware, free services or provided with hosting)	0.00
TOTAL AMOUNT	70.00
PREMIUM FEATURES (If required)	
Domain name	10.00
Premium template	70.00
TOTAL AMOUNT - INCLUDING BASICS	150.00

5.- Conclusions



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Conclusions

- **A blog allows us to:**
 - Reach potential guests.
 - Promote and advertise our products.
 - Increase revenue selling other partner's products.
 - Tell potential guests and our own community what we do.
 - Receive feedback and statistics about our customers.
- **A blog requires:**
 - A limited economic expenditure.
 - One or several people in charge of publishing and moderating.

6.- Glossary, software and applications



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Glossary

- **Administrator(s)/Admin:** Person in charge of all the technical tasks related to the blog. Most of the times, also a contributor, but not required. Is in charge, also, of moderating comments.
- **Affiliate schemes:** Advertising scheme where publishers join a more or less standard agreement alliance with the advertiser and receive a commission on sales volume referred by the publisher.
- **Blog:** Online publishing application available for everyone. Born as an online version of diaries and logs, has become a multiuse publishing tool for many different purposes.
- **Categories:** User created filing labels for an easy classify of posts.
- **Comments:** On blogging, more or less brief contributions by readers to be added at the content of the posts.

Glossary

- **CMS:** Acronym for Content Management System. Also known as content interface. Allows the user to introduce new posts and manage comments and other global options of the blog.
- **CPM / CPC:** Acronyms for Cost Per Mille and Cost Per Click. Related to advertisement and prices. On CPM, advertiser pays a price for every 1.000 ad impressions. On CPC, advertiser only pays an amount for every click on his ad.
- **Hosting:** Space to be rented on a server to host our contents and files and making them accessible to all the users.
- **Plugins:** Small add-on applications for WordPress.org helping on adding practical additional functionalities to the contents and layouts. Easily available online, most of the times for free and, on last WordPress versions, also easy to install.
- **Post:** Each one of the articles and updates of the blog. Related, but not similar to Pages, intending to be for more permanent sections.

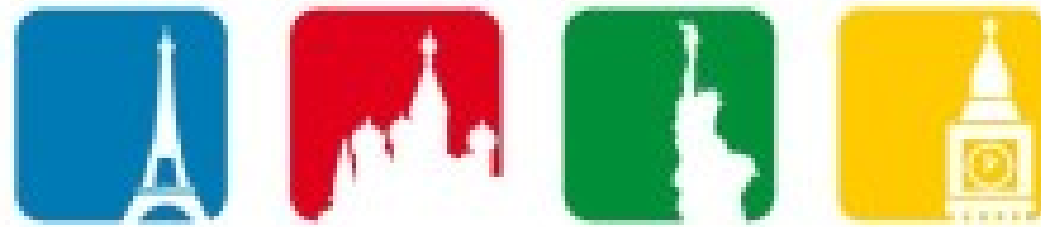
Glossary

- **SEO:** Acronym for Search Engine Optimisation. Involves all the techniques and tasks required to improve in a more or less natural way the position for a certain site on search for specific keywords on online search engines. Doesn't involve advertising -task for SEM (Search Engine Marketing)-.
- **WordPress.org:** Free and most commonly used blogging application based on PHP language and MySQL databases. Highly customisable and flexible. Do not confound with WordPress.com, blogging application with similar basis but not allowing installs on own hosting.
- **Spam:** Not desired and not related content. On blogging, mostly related to comments and trying to divert traffic or be a SEO tool for other sites.
- **Template:** Blog layout. Standardized design and content placements, easily interchangeable, but also allowing customization.
- **Tags:** Relevant terms added manually by the administrator related to the contents on every post for filing purposes. Similar to Categories, but much more flexible as they don't require to create manually a pre-existent category to classify.

Related Software and Applications

- **Blogging:**
 - Own hosting:
 - WordPress.org
 - Hosting provided:
 - Blogger (Google)
 - WordPress.com
- **Statistics:**
 - Google Analytics
- **Google indexing issues:**
 - Google Webmasters Central
- **Advertisement:**
 - Google AdSense
 - Affiliate programmes:
 - Expedia (Flights)
 - Booking.com (Hotels)
 - HostelWorld (Hostels)
 - Viator (tours)
- **Rankings and influence:**
 - Alexa
 - Klout

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