

HOW BLOGS DAMAGE BRANDS

Blogging threatens to smother brands in an avalanche of negative coverage. But it is also a powerful new tool with which brands and agencies can fight back. By Larissa Bannister

Customers no longer retain any loyalty to products and the "brand" has run out of juice – that's according to Kevin Roberts, the world-wide chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi. And people don't respond to sales pitches from products anymore; instead, they want personal, instantaneous connections.

So imagine if there was a new marketing tool that allowed your clients to connect one-on-one with consumers, get immediate feedback and respond to them before they decide to turn their backs on a product. Wouldn't you be advising them to use it?

The tool does exist, and it's called a blog. Kevin Roberts has his own at www.saatchikevin.com, as does Bob Lutz, the vice-chairman of General Motors. Last year, Bill Gates told a conference of business leaders that blogging could be a better way to communicate than e-mail, and has since been rumoured to be planning to start his own web diary.

If he does, he'll be joining a huge community of bloggers who regularly post about their lives. The internet now hosts more than 12 million, and the number is growing by 40,000 every day. Essentially, blogs are web diaries that contain comment, opinion and sometimes audio or video clips. The majority exist in isolation, rarely (if ever) read, but the best of them link through to vast communities who are interested in the same things as they are. It's like talking to thousands of like-minded people all at once.

Many bloggers write about brands and companies – some of this coverage is positive, much of it less so (see box) – and some of the feedback from consumers is bad enough to make marketers' hair stand on end. Forrester Research says young consumers in particular are influenced by blogs, and predicts that within five years they will be "a key component of corporate communication strategies".

At the moment, UK companies are

proving slow to take advantage. According to a survey from the blog monitoring business Market Sentinel, not a single FTSE 100 company currently runs its own blog. But the volume of negative comments being made about brands is starting to make marketers sit up and take notice.

"If you search for a brand on Google, you'll find that a lot of the top spots are dominated by unauthorised and often negative blogs," Mark Rogers, the chief executive of Market Sentinel, says. The company has just produced a report showing that of the top 50 UK grocery brands, 40 per cent have problems with detractors' comments appearing high up on Google searches for the brand name. "If the brands are blogging themselves, they can react to criticism and suggest solutions to the problem," he explains.

Blogs perform particularly well on search engines because they are frequently updated and use RSS (Really Simple Software), which makes tracking new posts easy. Corporate websites, on the other hand, rarely change

their content and, as a result, sometimes do not appear at the top of a search for a brand name.

It's not just small specialists and public relations companies that offer blogging advice to marketers. Carat Interactive recently launched its own blogging division in the US and is planning to do the same in the UK in a couple of weeks' time.

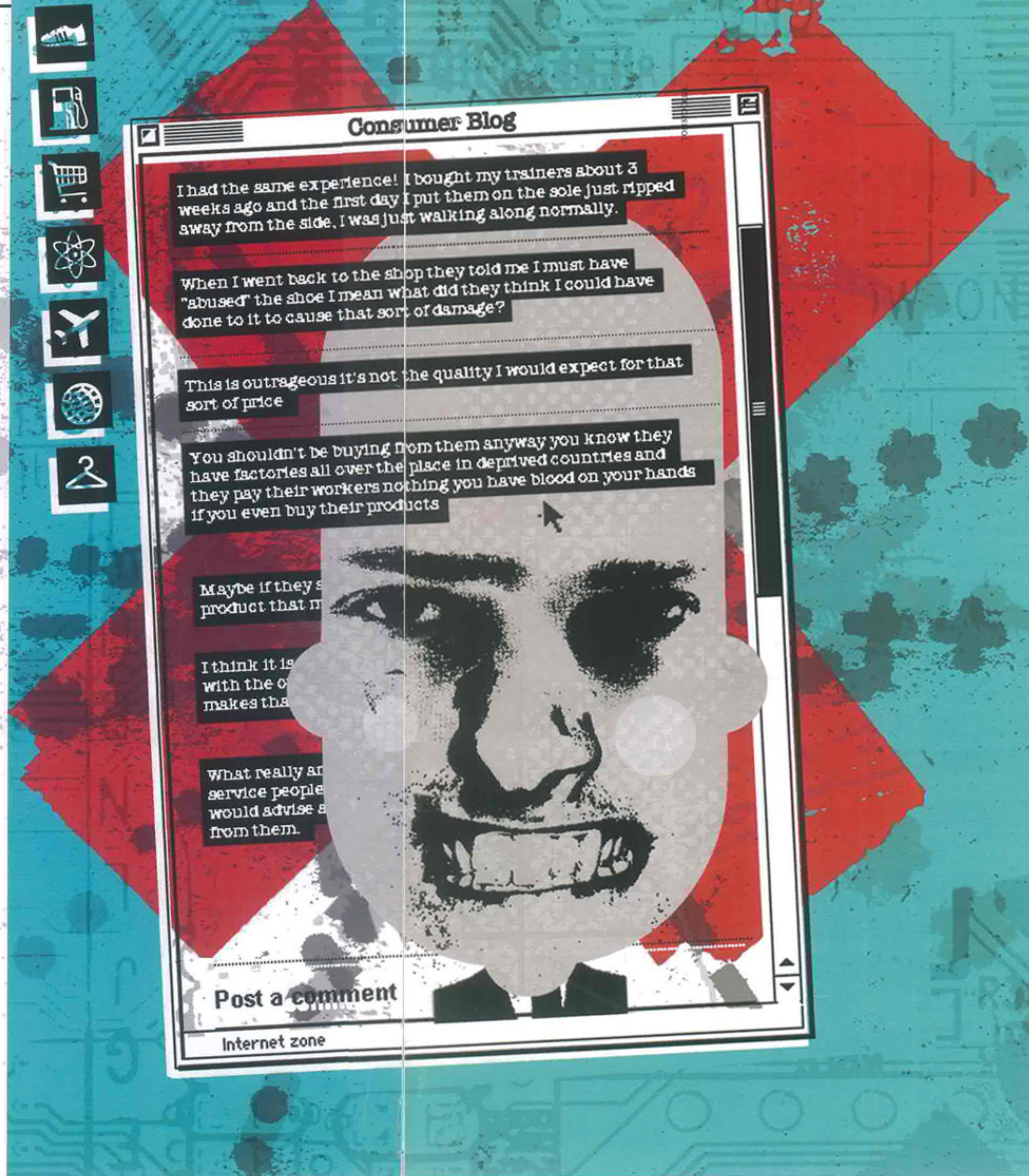
Wayne Bickerton, the head of partnerships and emerging media at Diffiniti (formerly Carat Interactive UK), argues that agencies are best-placed to provide clients with advice and consultancy on blogs because they are involved in the overall communications strategy that brand blogs should fit into. "We would never sell blogs on their own, they are just one part of what a company should consider doing," he says.

There are three areas in which agencies can help clients use blogs, he adds: advertising, monitoring and creation. Advertising on blogs is straightforward enough and, though they remain a niche medium, some are already taking bookings from the likes of Nike and Absolut Vodka.

Blog monitoring – searching for and tracking a particular brand name – is equally self-explanatory but presents a "unique" opportunity, according to Bickerton. "Research is key to the communication process and companies invest heavily in it, but this is a completely new way to find out what people think of your brand," he says. "It's even possible to spot new trends in what consumers want early enough to do something about it."

The creation of a brand blog is the most complicated area to master. In this, as in other areas, the UK lags behind the US, where companies such as Microsoft, General Motors and Boeing run successful corporate blogs.

GM used its blog to counter claims that it was planning to ditch its Pontiac and Buick brands, while the Microsoft blogger Robert Scoble – one of about 1,500 Microsoft employees with a reg-



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ular blog – has almost single-handedly managed to dispel the company's reputation as a monopolist among its all-important audience of software developers. Scoble talks a lot about industry issues, rather than just the company, and is credible because he writes about what he likes – something that he has admitted can make Microsoft's PR department want to "whack" him.

As Scoble's popularity has proved, the key to success is to be honest and steer clear of corporate-speak. Blogs should therefore be monitored, rather than pre-screened. The problem with this is the company's lack of control over what is published – cue reeling horror from corporate communications departments.

But there are ways to avoid leaking secrets or falling foul of libel laws. Clients should ensure content guidelines are in place from the start. Justin Hunt, the managing director of the blogs consultancy Itsblogs, says. That means no blogging about new products before they are released or about sensitive company information, especially for listed companies.

"A blog needs some form of moderation but if content is too moderated, it will drive people away," Bickerton adds. "Companies need to realise that negative feedback is OK – Piaggio USA is running a blog for Vespa scooters and has said it will not remove negative comments from consumers." Whatever you do, don't fake it –

blogs that are just ad campaigns in disguise tend to backfire and alienate the audience they were trying to reach. McDonald's felt the weight of bloggers' disapproval last year when it launched a fake blog that claimed to be written by a customer who had found a French fry shaped like the head of Abraham Lincoln. As one blogger wrote: "What's the point? No-one in their right mind would believe the blog is real. So while it is not deceptive, it still stinks. The site is so very camp to begin with; the fake blog is simply trying too hard."

That said, the easiest way for a brand to learn how to get involved in blogging is to start small, perhaps by using a blog to support an ad campaign, as the

'Traditional websites have started to look like museums, whereas blogs are dynamic. They have fresh content every day, which keeps people coming back'
Justin Hunt, managing director, Itsblogs

games company Eidos did for the launch of Championship Manager 5. The game has a large number of unofficial websites dedicated to it, according to Mark Iremonger, the managing director of Unit9, the digital agency behind the campaign. "We wanted the official site to be the best online community for people who play Championship Manager," he says. "It was the first time a major [UK] brand had used blogging and we integrated it so that people could own their own page on the website. If you allow a community to create content, that's an extremely powerful way to communicate with an audience."

The popularity of the blog even made monitoring easier, he adds, be-

What blogs say about...

MCDONALD'S
About a recent ad campaign
"Are those McDonald's ads getting on your nerves too? The ones where it's 99p and with the penny change you can get your hands on a Hawaiian island, or in the latest one, Neuschwanstein Castle (where they filmed *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*). I mean, McDonald's is supposed to sell fast food... and they obviously seem to think that the way to sell it is to persuade you that fast food = posh holiday. Hmm. Not convinced."

After McDonald's set up a fake blog to promote a spoof French fry shaped like Abraham Lincoln
"Fake blogs fly in the face of why blogs were created in the first place, to create an honest, direct dialogue with customers. It shows a clear misunderstanding of the medium and will pay off with tons of negative buzz online for our fake fry friends."

On a blog written by McDonald's employees
"I'm sorry but I'm NOT FUCKING LOVIN' IT anymore."

TESCO
A blogger commenting on Tesco's decision to move magazines such as Zoo and Nuts to the top shelf
"Tesco isn't censoring the magazines at all, but by changing their position on animal products... they could damage the magazines' sales. Tesco is effectively saying to the publishers of these magazines: 'If you want your titles to look like porn, we'll treat them like porn.'"

NIKE
Positive blogging on its new range of sustainable footwear
"A few months ago, I highlighted Nike's re-use-a-shoe programme as a good example of the company using service initiatives to up its social responsibility

cachet after the sweatshop debacle of the 90s. And now they've come up with something that does this on the product front as well – Nike Considered... I like to think that Nike's drive towards 'sustainable product innovation' comes out of a genuine desire to make a difference... But even if it is a marketing scam, it's one that will be seen by a lot of people. And if it changes their perspective on sustainability, all well and good."

VOLKSWAGEN
On the "Singin' in the Rain" ad
"For Volkswagen, much is riding on the Golf finding the status it once had. But doing that takes more than a bit of fancy dancing."

NATWEST
On the bank's mortgage services
"We were supposed to exchange contracts on Tuesday for selling our flat and buying our new house... but yet again NatWest have failed to provide a mortgage offer on time."

WALKERS
A Planet Veggie campaign resulted in Walkers changing the recipe of its cheese and onion crisps to make them vegetarian
"From a consumer: 'I recently noticed that many of the vegetarian-sounding Walkers Sensations flavours contain animal products. My vegetarian boyfriend has been caught out by this as he didn't read the packaging carefully enough. Walkers obviously aren't bothered about making flavours suitable for vegetarians.'"

From Walkers: "The Walkers cheese and onion crisps has been changed and is now suitable for a vegetarian diet. Please see the back of the pack for the label suitable for vegetarians."
Source: Campaign and Itsblogs

GARY NELL