

Utility Bloggers

NEW COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

BY JOE GIMENEZ

THE BLOGGING PHENOMENON HAS swept America, with some 15 million actively managed blogs comprising the blogosphere, an online network of corporate or individual commentaries on news, events, public policies, products or just about anything under the sun. Major corporations across virtually every industry vertical are using blogs to have discussions with their customers and clients, or communicate internally among project teams. Boeing, Coca-Cola, Dell, General Motors, Google, Microsoft and countless other companies all have blogs.

North American utility companies are conspicuously absent from the ranks of corporate bloggers. None of the top-10 investor-owned utilities operates a consumer-oriented blog on the front page of their website. An informal survey for this article confirmed that none have any definite plans for doing so.

So why aren't utility companies blogging?

Ellen Raines, FirstEnergy's director of public relations, offered the typical response: "We have not really given blogging any serious consideration, so I can't say that there is a reason we don't – other than we haven't seen a need for it."

Larry Comstock, with Dominion Resources Internet & Corporate Communications Technology department, echoed Raines: "We have evaluated blogs at Dominion, but have made no decision to develop one at this point. Although blogs offer some additional possibilities, our current communications vehicles are working quite well for us."

Matthew Joyce, a manager at the utility research organization E Source, said he studied utility blogging in 2006 and observed that staid, conservative utilities aren't rushing into blogging because their corporate cultures aren't really wired for adopting communications channels that can sometimes border on the unruly and unmanageable. And, Joyce asked, compared to cars, electronics or air travel, what topic would a utility blog about that would have widespread consumer appeal?

Energy production is "a low-interest category, somewhere around soap flakes. Maybe people are more interested about having clean laundry," Joyce said.

Meanwhile, for companies selling products and services into the industry, blogs have become dynamic marketing platforms that push ideas and differentiating statements about products and services to potential customers. Utility industry software companies – like NeuCo, SunGard, and the ROME Corp. – have enabled robust blog discussions. Indeed, blogs are more engaging sales tools than static websites and they enable continual contact with customers.

Curt Lefebvre, the CEO of optimization software company NeuCo, said his skepticism about blogs changed when he realized his company's three-day users summit wasn't long enough to share ideas about upcoming challenges. Now NeuCo is operating a blog to change that.

"We hope that our blog will give customers and others in the industry an outlet for sharing ideas, which in turn will help us to better understand their needs and feed our product development efforts," Lefebvre said.

Blogs are also being used to shape public discussions of energy issues. The Nuclear Energy Institute has been operating the NEI Notes blog since 2005. Its 19 contributors have logged nearly 3,000 entries about the prospects for nuclear energy development in North America. Typical entries take reporters and activists to task for furthering misconceptions about nuclear energy. Or they report on deals that are bringing more nuclear power online and anything else surrounding the continuation and increase of nuclear power in North America.

Blogging is infinitely versatile, limited only to the communications objectives of its authors. Joyce said utility companies are known for being "prudent, careful cautious and conservative and blogging is none of those things," squelching their willingness to adopt blogs.

Nonetheless, there are tangential uses for the posting and commenting software, Joyce said.

David Hagelin, principal communications consultant at American Electric Power said AEP's Internet strategy manager maintains two blogs on its AEP Now intranet. The "Public Image" blog features comments about AEP from its customers, news media and the general public. The other blog offers a behind-the-scenes look at the AEP intranet.

Conceivably, Joyce said, utility companies might consider publicly blogging their advice on energy efficiency, to create a record of their concern for cutting utility bills and offer that to public utility commissions during rate hearings. Or, he added, a utility's key account managers could collectively create a blog that addresses technical or service issues that would be of interest to all of the company's top customers.

Meanwhile, blogs are spreading throughout corporate America. In December a number of corporations joined the Blog Council, a group dedicated to discussing best practices for corporate blogging. Whether utilities will join the discussion remains to be seen.

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