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by Jennie Starr
Consultant

The Blogging Experience: Hosts, Add-On Content, and Monetizing

Technorati, one of the top search engines for blogs, claimed it was tracking 63.2 million blogs as of late December 2006. That's a lot of bloggers. What surprises me most about the blogosphere, though, is the vast number of free publishing tools available to bloggers. My February column focused on tools that help you find the gems — namely, blogs publishing valuable content. This column will try to help the blogger publishers among us by identifying the best hosts and services available for bloggers who strive to provide the best experience possible for their readers.

Blog Hosts: The Good (WordPress.com) and the Better (Blogsome.com)

The best publishing experience begins with the choice bloggers make for a host. If you are tech savvy, you'll want to self-host. However, not everyone has the knowledge or means to self-host. In my last column, I recommended Blogsome.com [<http://www.blogsome.com>] and WordPress.com [<http://www.wordpress.com>], open source blogging services, over Blogger and others, because both offer features that make blogs more user-friendly. Features such as the ability to search the blog and to display categories of posts promote easy navigation.

WordPress offers a self-hosting solution. They also offer a hosted

service at WordPress.com. Both services — WordPress.com and Blogsome.com — are easy to set up, offer themes that you can select for a personal "look and feel," support the ability to categorize posts and tag posts, search within the blog, provide a rich text editor, collect some statistics, easily upload images and videos, and assist the creation of new pages and links. These are standard WordPress features.

Unique to WordPress.com, however, are the easy drag-and-drop "sidebar widgets," used to add basics such as new pages, a calendar, recent posts and comments, statistics, and links. It also includes code for popular third-party content, such as Flickr or del.icio.us, as sidebar widgets. (See more on these items below.) The feature makes it remarkably easy to add and place these widgets in one of the two columns in the blog layout and to reorder them as you wish. For non-techie, this is very appealing.

WordPress.com also has a large blogger community and they are building a variety of features that leverage the community of bloggers and encourage the social aspect of blogging. Here are some features that help you connect with other blogs and bloggers:

- Friendsurfer pulls in recent posts from your friends' blogs.
- My Comments tracks your comments across WordPress.com and follow ups to your comments.

- TagSurfer lets you see posts from other WordPress.com blogs bearing tags for topics of interest.

None of these features were all that appealing to me personally, I must admit, but I suspect they could be wildly popular with people more interested in blogging from a community or social perspective.

Blogsome: The Choice that Offers More Control

The main reason I prefer Blogsome.com to WordPress.com for hosting is that Blogsome.com permits you to edit every file of your blog from the index page through the Cascading Style Sheet and fairly easily. WordPress.com charges you for this service and you must be able to write a style sheet from scratch. Creating and then publishing a blog with a style sheet costs you \$15. Its not the fee that bothers me, but the fact that, even for the themes WordPress supports, WordPress doesn't make the HTML pages available for bloggers to modify. I suspect WordPress doesn't want to have to handle the customer support that would result from questions related to writing HTML, but it's still a shame, because it unnecessarily locks the blogger into functionality that WordPress.com selects for them.

I have run into many occasions in which I wanted to make a change in my blog layout and didn't have a

clue how to do it. However, I searched the Blogsome.com forums and, in all but one case, found my answer and successfully edited my index.html or style sheet. I had to post a question on one occasion as well and was pleasantly surprised to have a response within 24 hours.

I gave WordPress.com the benefit of the doubt and created a new blog on its service, but I ended up moving the blog to Blogsome.com when it started to gain traffic, because I wanted to know much more about who was visiting my blog then WordPress.com's statistics feature supplied. WordPress.com offers basic counter information; essentially, number of visitors or hits, but does not provide referring site information, IP, or location information. I prefer to use a product called Onestat.com [<http://www.onestat.com>], which provides more detailed information (see more on this below). I also wanted to explore advertising offerings, but realized I was essentially barred from doing so if I used WordPress.com.

Blogsome.com offers a variety of plug-ins for self-hosting WordPress users, including anti-spam services; if you do not self-host, Blogsome.com will add the plug-ins for you if you send an email asking for assistance. Another nice option from Blogsome.com is the ability to post to the blog via email. This method is password-protected to make sure you can control who can post.

Blogsome.com Improvements?

While I'm clearly a fan of Blogsome.com, there are several fairly major deficiencies. I'd love to see Blogsome.com make these changes in the near future and have shared my sentiments in its forums.

1. WordPress.com offers its users the ability to create a Private blog (up to 35 users for free) and/or make specific posts private. This is a really

nice feature, especially for corporate use. An upgrade is available to increase the number of users.

2. There is no import tool to bring in posts from other blogs into Blogsome.com. WordPress.com has import and export options from a variety of other hosts such as Blogger, Typepad, Live Journal, and MoveableType.

3. Domain support is available on WordPress.com and should be available on Blogsome.com as well.

One other issue involves occasional slowness on the servers. The founders claim that they are working on this, but as long as the service remains small while the user base grows rapidly, they will face this challenge.

Interestingly, both Blogsome.com and WordPress are organizations run by developers who choose to make some terrific tools available to the public on their own terms. If your blog is going to be a commercial venture, you need to consider that support from either entity will be limited. Having said that, both seem to be widely utilized; WordPress has even taken on a few larger hosting clients for a fee. (See more at <http://wordpress.com/vip-hosting>.)

The bottom line? If you are more focused on publisher tools and control, you'll want to use Blogsome.com. If you are less technical, need more publishing tool wizards, and focus more on reading blogs and viewing the blogosphere through your host service, you'll probably prefer WordPress.com.

Adding More Content — Help with Keeping Your Blog Fresh

A host of new products can make it easy to add new content to your blog or Web site. You can select or customize the content, but because blogs are social or community driven, you can also have the content update automatically, based

on additions made by others in the community. Make some selections on these sites first, then paste the code you are given into your blog, and watch the content flow.

del.icio.us [<http://del.icio.us>] is a site that calls itself "social bookmarking" because it allows people to pull together their favorite site URLs and then access them from anywhere via its site and/or share them with anyone. You can also display the URLs in a simple box on your Web site or blog by inserting the code provided into your HTML page. Visit the del.icio.us site and you can see what everyone else is bookmarking for any given topic. Users of the site tag their bookmarks in meaningful ways, which helps ensure that the company can connect people to similar interests via their bookmarks.

Flickr [<http://www.flickr.com>] is a Yahoo! service for sharing, collecting, and publishing photos. Want to post some photos on your blog? Flickr essentially provides blocks of photo thumbnails that are either your own or collections made available to the public. You can keep them private or display them (Flickr calls this a "dynamic badge") in a block on your Web site or blog by using the code that is generated for you. The service is free up to 100 MB of photos. After that, you must pay \$24.95 to get a pro account, which gives you unlimited space, ad-free browsing, and permanent archiving. If you have any concerns about copyright and others' use of your photos or want to limit your own use of other's photos, the bottom line is that Flickr's API links back to the photo page as it appears in the Flickr user's photostream and, by user agreement, is for noncommercial use only. Otherwise, the use is unauthorized use and you can submit a Notice of Infringement to the Yahoo! copyright team. For more on Flickr's copyright policy and its suggestions

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143 Old Marlton Pike
Medford, NJ 08055
custserv@infotoday.com
www.infotoday.com

to those with concerns, go to <http://flickr.com/help/website/#24>.

Meebo [<http://www35.meebo.com/index-en.html>] is a Web site for instant messaging from anywhere from one spot regardless of what service you use. AIM, Yahoo! IM, Google Talk, and MSN Messenger are all accessible from the Meebo site. The advantage in using this service is one-stop shopping and the elimination of the need for your computer to have the software for each of these services installed.

Songspot [<http://sonific.com>] allows you to create a songspot or free music player widget and insert it into any Web page or blog. As you can imagine, the music library is not huge, but the content is growing and Songspot is encouraging uploads to help improve its collection. Songspot forbids use of the content for commercial purposes or for distribution outside of the site registered to their Web site. More on what you can and cannot do appears at <http://sonific.com/home/faq#id5>.

Statistics Package: Tracking Your Visitors and Marketing Efforts

Statistics—good ones, about who comes to your Web site, from where, how often, and to use what pages—are critical. Detailed information of this kind helps you determine what content is most valuable to your visitors. Whether you are concerned because you are spending marketing dollars or want to attract advertisers, or if you're just generally curious, the information regarding where visitors learn about your site can be very valuable.

I have used OneStat [<http://www.onestat.com>] for more than 6 years on my Web sites. I like its free package for its robustness. It allows you to see key statistics beyond just the number of hits (as most counters do), including such information as visitor location, server/host name,

who referred them (i.e., what site they came from), and even geography (i.e., what part of the world they came from). There is a fee for more archival information, more detailed information, and to keep the link to the statistics private. The free service requires you to post a link to your account and an icon of its logo from your site.

I hadn't researched options in statistics packages for quite a while and took the opportunity to look around a bit more. I was impressed with Sitemeter [<http://www.sitemeter.com>]. Sitemeter offers similar statistics to OneStat, but the free version misses the referring Web sites and referring search engines, which is critical information.

Apparently Google has an analytics package too — <http://www.google.com/analytics>. I confess, I didn't have the patience to wait for pages to load at the feature tour, which seemed the only way to discern its functionality before signing up. At a quick glance, the package seemed more focused on giving you stats related to the integration with AdSense than on general traffic statistics.

Driving Traffic to Your Blog

There are several good ways to let people know about your new blog. Most blog search engines provide free services to help bookmark or track favorite blogs, keep you apprised of the popularity of blogs, and serve as RSS aggregators, permitting you one place to subscribe to feeds of all different kinds.

Report or "claim" your blog on Technorati [<http://technorati.com>] as an important first step. Technorati is one of the most successful search engines to index blogs. It also offers a variety of publisher tools, all branded, of course, to help you drive traffic to your blog. See some of them at <http://technorati.com/tools>. Then visit the other popular choices as well: Alexa [<http://alexa.com>],

Bloglines [<http://www.bloglines.com>], and NewsGator [<http://www.news-gator.com/home.aspx>].

Alternate Ways to Read Your Posts: RSS Feed or Email

Make your RSS feed available through Feedburner [<http://www.feedburner.com>]. While I think most Web users are not yet techie enough or interested enough to read blogs regularly through RSS feeds, I did wonder if an easy way existed by which visitors could subscribe to get posts via email. That's something I'd want. And sure enough, Feedburner offers publishers this option.

Feedburner email is free and "brandless." The feed appears as if it has come directly from you as the publisher. There is no jump page or other interruption taking the visitor to Feedburner's Web site or anywhere else. This differs from the Yahoo! method for discussion lists, which stores emails in a Yahoo! group and makes you go to Yahoo! to read the archives. Feedburner does give you access to the email addresses that subscribe and you can export them as well. It makes it easy to use a few other services for email too.

Squeet [<http://squeet.com/home.aspx>] and FeedBlitz [<http://feedblitz.com>] both offer more features if you want to brand your email or offer subscribers more options in terms of time frames for delivery. Feedburner also provides the option to offer subscriptions to podcasts.

Monetizing Your Blog — To Advertise or Not to Advertise?

I approach this topic of advertising reluctantly. Personally, I dislike advertising on Web sites and blogs. Ads are terribly distracting and often time intrusive. There's no doubt that this subject carries with it the same stigma as

search engine optimization, meaning there are gimmicks galore for sale promising you guaranteed traffic to ensure you'll make gazillions of dollars and gain immortality.

That said, I can appreciate that many very useful online resources take time to build and maintain, and, if advertising helps to encourage writers, publishers, and the like to produce quality sources, then we should support them. It seems to me, though, the ideal advertising solution would have ads as nonintrusive as possible. And publishers should be able to have advertisers create their own ads immediately on their site or blog and post them as well. From a publisher's perspective, this could cut down on calls, emails, etc., and maximize revenue/return as well.

The most-popular choice of bloggers and Web site publishers for advertising is Google's AdSense [<https://www.google.com/adsense>]. You can select from multiple formats; a long list of links, banners, images and links; and images and descriptions. It's free to sign up, and easy to insert the code in the pages. I'm not very happy though with the ads that serve on my blog. The links often seem relevant, but only take you to a new page of not very specific links. It's a terrible user experience. Not to be outdone, Yahoo! also offers a service at Yahoo! Publisher Network [<http://publisher.yahoo.com>]. Feedburner offers its own service now too, but it requires a minimum of 500 subscribers to participate [<http://blogs.feedburner.com/feedburner/archives/001762.html>].

A newer kid on the block is AdBrite [http://www.adbrite.com/mb/landing_both_ad.php], founded by Phil Kaplan of F**D Company fame and funded by Sequoia. This service offers more control over pricing for ads on your site, the ability to approve and reject ads, and makes it easy for advertisers to simply submit an ad from your site. I like that the service offers this much control. There is some dis-

agreement among professionals, however, as to whether you can use both AdSense or Yahoo! Ad Network and the AdBrite service at the same time.

An interesting newer option comes from text advertising, as opposed to banners and long boxes of ad links. Text ads are far less distracting in my opinion, and if the technology can successfully improve on the quality of what is served, I think it would be a huge improvement. Two companies lead the way in text advertising, but both require substantial traffic (500,000 page views/month) before a publisher can participate. Intellitxt [<http://www.vibrantmedia.com/webpublishers/index.asp>] by Vibrant Media is used by companies such as HP, Microsoft, and others. Another company, Kontera, backed by Sequoia as well [<http://www.kontera.com>], offers similar technology.

Backing into the Blogosphere

There's no question that blogging is here to stay. I confess, I've enjoyed exploring the blogosphere, learning about the growing numbers of tools for publishers, and even experimenting with my own blogs. I've learned a lot, and, I admit, I have finally found a few blogs that I enjoy and have returned to read on several occasions. I may even add them to a del.icio.us spot on my own blog. Though I began as a skeptic, I've been impressed along the way. And with that, I'll get back to work. I have to "claim" my blog in a few search engines, add an email option from Feedburner, pick out photos for my San Diego Flickr, consider the addition of an AdBrite campaign, and write some new posts!

Ah ... the life of a blogger. ♦

Jennie Starr [jennie@jenniestarr.com] is a consultant and lawyer specializing in software product marketing and a freelance writer living in San Diego, Calif. Her new blog is located at <http://sandiegomom.blogspot.com>. She also edits KMTool [<http://www.kmtool.net>], a knowledge management resource she launched in 1999.

