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Intimacy with millions. Single-handed polar explorer Ben Saunders harnesses blogs to relay the steps in his journeys to the North and South poles, letting the web amplify a one person event to touch people across the globe.


Analyst's profile:

Danny Meadows-Klue has been a researcher and commentator in the digital networked industries since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper - The Daily Telegraph - and has helped run web businesses ranging from social media and mass market portals to online stores, magazines, search and email services. He is the co-founder of the UK and European IABs, held their presidencies for four years, and has been lecturing on digital media and marketing for more than a decade.

“Success in the digital networked economy takes a different type of thinking. We created the Digital Thought Leaders series to help you meet people who have the right formula and are shaping the new digital landscape. As media and communications undergo revolutionary change, there is a sunrise on whole new sectors and a sunset on others. Reading this landscape can be the greatest of challenges, but is key to building wisdom and vision about where to take your own brand and strategy.”

Digital Thought Leader
Extreme blogging

Ben Saunders is a record-breaking polar explorer and by his own admission an ‘extreme blogger’. From the North Pole he wrote to millions using his blog, a PDA, a matchstick and a satellite phone. While becoming the youngest person in history to walk solo to the North Pole, Ben was able to keep us up to date with the progress. In this edition of Digital Thought Leaders he tells how he did it.

Blogs are the most diverse of digital publishing platforms. They can be harnessed by anyone, anywhere for almost any publishing reason. Ben's blogs demonstrate their power both to amplify an offline event and to make intimate connections with millions.

“It's one hell of a camping trip. When you're the only person in a space the size of North America and temperatures as low as -40 degrees, making these connections each day to people all over the world has an amazing effect on your spirits as well as touching their lives.”

We caught up with Ben in London between expeditions after following his adventures online. He runs two types of blogs: ones for the expeditions and a personal one that is rich in the background of planning a polar trip. The logistics are incredibly complex, and blogging is only one part of the high tech story that helped put him into the record books. His team have been harnessing groundbreaking thinking on survival techniques, high energy foods, heat insulating clothing and communications. They even found a way for him to swim across the open water leads that appear in the gaps between ice sheets.

“These expeditions are not about drawing lines on maps. That's been done all over the world. They are about exploring human limits not Geographical limits.”

“I never set out to become a polar explorer, but what I found is that with focus and determination it's incredible what people can achieve.” This is a theme echoed throughout Ben's expeditions and throughout the blogs.

So what's on the blogs?

BenSaunders.com

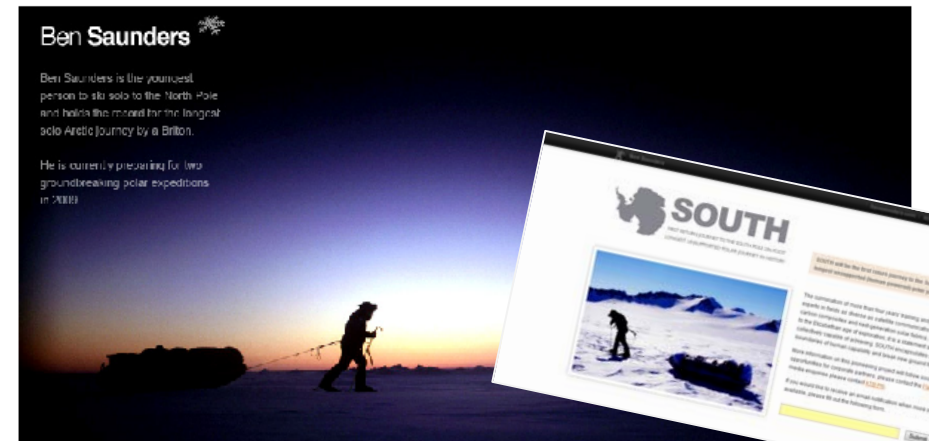
Ben's personal blog is a classic blogger's diary, the story of a journey they are on and in Ben's case one that's packed with details of the training regime and fund-raising projects. It's the sort of content that before the web could have made a few lines in a corporate brochure or a great documentary after the event was over, but either way was inaccessible to most people at most times.

Sercotransarctic.com and South.com

The sites for the expeditions are centred around where Ben is and what the status is. They contain the expected technical acts and background story, as well as neat mashups like Google Earth charting Ben's progress. However it's the blog content that brings them to life.

"We're trying to let people get close to these events; giving them access to what's going on. The blog gives them regular accounts of what happened on the day and what the issues are," explains Ben who is still surprised by the scale of the following. "When we started the blogs we didn't set out to build a massive audience but quickly people realised who we were and what we were doing. They began logging in, registering for our RSS feeds and really getting into the expedition. Lots of schools became involved too with teachers and pupils leaving comments on the site and emailing in."

A network of blogs



Mocking and Elusive Dreams

From *The North Pole*, Robert Peary's account of his 1909 expedition ([published in its entirety as a free Project Gutenberg ebook](#))

"The consequent delay of a year, was a serious blow to me. It meant that I must attack the problem one year older; it placed the initiation of the expedition further in the future, with all the possible contingencies that might occur within a year; and it meant the bitterness of hope deferred.

Yet, when I gathered myself together and faced the situation squarely, I realized that the project was something too big to die; that it never, in the great scheme of things, would be allowed to fall through. This feeling carried me past many a dead center of fatigue and utter ignorance as to where the rest of the money for the expedition was to be obtained. The end of the winter and the beginning of the spring of 1908 were marked by more than one blue day for everybody concerned in the success of the expedition.

Racing Vicariously

My brother's currently competing in the [Surrey League Revolutions five-day stage race](#) ("Around 100 of Britain's top riders will be taking part in the gruelling 5 day long race. Each day they will cover around 100 miles - as well as climbing some of the steepest hills in South East England.") He's been giving me a blow-by-blow account over the phone every evening, and [he's posting daily update's on his cycling team's website](#).

"The strong riders wouldn't let things go clear, until the second lap of a big circuit... where Rob Hayles slipped away and opened the gas up... I looked at the moves and thought 'If I don't get across to that, it will be even more GC time and the stage over' so I took a deep breath, shifted up and went for it. Steve Golla (Sigma) and one of the other riders..."

Ben's personal blogs supports the expedition's official site.

Digital Thought Leaders
Thought Leader
Author and President of Capgemini

“You are the community you keep – or more importantly you are the community that keeps you.”

SEARCH INSIDER
Life After the 30-Second Search

Digital Strategy Consulting

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www.DigitalStrategyConsulting.com/thoughtleaders

Why do some firms get it so right, and their audiences and revenues explode? Our Digital Thought Leader interviews bring you closer to people and brands shaping the digital networked economy. They are based on discussions we've had with them since 2000 and are published monthly.



Meet Ben Saunders

Ben Saunders is a record-breaking long-distance skier, with three North Pole expeditions under his belt. He is the youngest to ski solo to the North Pole and holds the record for the longest solo Arctic journey by a Briton. Since 2001, Ben has skied more than 2,500km (1,500 miles) in the high Arctic, which he recently worked out equates to two percent of his entire life living in a tent. When he's not pulling a sledge, Ben divides his time between planning and training for his next expedition, and earning a crust as one of the UK's leading motivational speakers. He is an Ambassador for The Prince's Trust, an Honorary Vice-President of the Geographical Association, and supports the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the Orchid Cancer Appeal.

What do the blogs do for the expedition?

Many websites still lack meaningful connection to the organisations they support. This polar expedition is from a tiny organisation, and yet the website allows a massive amplification in the number of people they touch.

“The web is letting the polar expedition story be told.”

What is it like blogging in a tent at -40?



When it's -40 degrees outside your tent, blogging may not be the first thing on your mind, but for Ben Saunders these are the tools of the trade. Millions around the world had access to the latest news from the expedition thanks to a PDA, sat phone and a flask of hot water (needed to keep the batteries warm in the freezing air temperatures inside the tent). During the last trip in an attempt to save weight, Ben used match sticks instead of a stylus for writing on the HP iPaq he bought on eBay.

The blogs allow this project to benefit from:

- Telling the story as it unfolds: They give a window into a world none of us will experience, tracking the highs and lows of the expedition itself, the build-up and countdown before, and the recovery and reflections after
- Creating intimacy with millions: Creating a connection that builds buzz and discussion around the event
- Building a personal brand: Creating brand equity for Ben as the focus of the expedition and building depth into the brand
- Resources for journalists and stakeholders: Making it easy for stakeholders to find reference information about the event and its progress

What do polar bears drink? Making consumer connections

“What do bears drink? When you're trekking through a landscape inhabited by the world's largest land carnivorous mammal, you find yourself thinking a lot about polar bears. Out on the ice I have to melt snow to create water, but when you look around you don't see polar bears switching on their camping stoves when they're getting thirsty. I kept asking myself the question and just couldn't figure it out. So I posted that onto the blog – what happened next was amazing.”

“Rather alarmingly I spotted polar bear tracks round my tent.”

Ben didn't know much about the scale of the following his adventures were getting at the time, but schools around the world had come across his site and were starting to track the progress of the event. School teachers took up the challenge and got their classes googling up the answer – something Ben didn't really have the time for as he marched on to the pole.

“500 responses came in from schools around the world by that lunchtime; it was staggering”, explained Ben. “When you tap into the energy of the people who are out there, it's incredible what you can harness. In this case we found out there's an enzyme that synthesises the water, but the more you explore the power of people's enthusiasm, the more you can achieve.”

Ben is an experienced internet user, writing the code of the sites himself and not shy of hacking into the html when there are problems. “The experience with the bear question made me realise that this wasn't just one way interaction, but people could take part and talk with me; that changed the expedition and the way we thought about this. I could tell the story of life around me on the poles as it's happening and young people around the world could get involved. It was blogging that made the connection.”

“I found that I could simply tell the story of what was happening in the arctic. I could tell people about what I saw, giving a more personal take about what was going on.”

What are the marketing models and strategies behind these blogs?

As well as generating connections with individuals and building a strong following, the expedition blogs and sites are several examples of how digital tools can be harnessed by brands:

- The online amplification of offline events: Ben’s team are using the web to take an event with only one participant and let millions share in it
- Communications hub: Everything the organisation is communicating goes through these pages, turning them into a focus for all knowledge about the expedition, and providing a rich and scalable resource – this allows the rest of their communication to focus on ‘drive to web’ because the websites will answer almost any question people have
- Leads generation: The site works well for assisting in generating or converting leads among partners and sponsors. It builds credibility and confidence for partners and helps those interested (from equipment providers to private donors) see how the expedition works and gain confidence in the people and processes

Technology is no substitute for content

Ben is lucky with the content, or rather he and the team have made their own luck. The story is one people want to hear and whether it’s told in maps, photographs, blogged text from the expedition or in the television and radio interviews that get posted along the way, it’s still a story people really want to hear.

Most brands will lack the exceptional power of Ben’s story, but there are many lessons that can be drawn along the way.

“I had an Iridium satellite phone and a PDA that could be plugged in. It was powered by a couple of AA batteries and that’s all I needed to be blogging every evening from the tent.”

What captured people’s imagination on Ben’s blog was the human interaction, the stories of personal experiences. “Our original plan was to cross the whole polar ice cap, but you can’t be sure what will happen next on these expeditions. We were blogging the whole thing, telling the story as it unfolded, all through my website”.

“Nothing can describe what it feels like to be dropped on your own out there. I had 95 days of food and fuel, 180kgs in total and just a frozen ice cap in front of me. We became obsessive about weight on the expedition; cutting out everything that wasn’t essential, even the handle of my toothbrush. In the end it was all food and fuel, and only the most minimal of kit. That’s the stuff we started to explain through the blogs.”

“We started by telling the story of simply getting the kit together, the adventure of getting one ton of excess baggage on British Airways, and then the increasingly less conventional flights. Deep inside Russia we were on an airline called ‘KrasAir’, and then we took helicopters across the frozen sea of Siberia to reach the starting point for the expedition.”

What’s next for Ben?

In 2009, Ben will be attempting two ground breaking expeditions. In March, Ben will return to the Arctic for a second attempt at setting a new speed record to the North Pole. Then in October he will embark on SOUTH, which will be the first return journey to the South Pole on foot, and the longest unsupported (human-powered) polar journey in history.

Exploring blogging and the Poles



Ben Saunders at a Digital Training Academy talking about blogging and the power of

When blogging went mainstream

Blogging began in a tech ghetto; a space dominated by people with the crossover in skills of being web savvy, strong at writing and having something to say. The blogging tools that came from Blogger, MovableType and later WordPress and others revolutionised access to web publishing, transforming personal home pages and making high quality publishing technically simple and low cost.

After 2003, as the barriers to setting up blogs began to crumble, the approach went truly mainstream, persuading a mass consumer audience to try out this alternative route to personal home pages. These simple publishing tools let people take part in the web, expressing their views and creating conversations.

What Ben's blogs typify

The expeditions' communication budgets were tight. Blogs and the web were chosen as much for budget reasons as for effectiveness, but what they delivered was far beyond the scale of investment. The websites became the communications engine of the expedition, connecting people to what was going on and scaling in a way traditional communications channels never could. This process typifies how creative thinking can unlock a step change in the way organisations communicate.

Tips for blogs supporting organisations

From reviewing the success of these blogs, here are a few core principles that can be applied by other organisations looking to harness blogs effectively:

- Freshness: Say something new, say something frequently – this builds following and engagement
- Tell a story: Ben's blogs are good stories told well – craft the story of your organisation into something that develops with time and takes people on a journey
- Harness all types of content: The expeditions have a variety of content formats, from photos and posts from the expeditions, to maps of progress and notes from the support team, to the back story complete with radio and TV interviews – look for formats you can harness

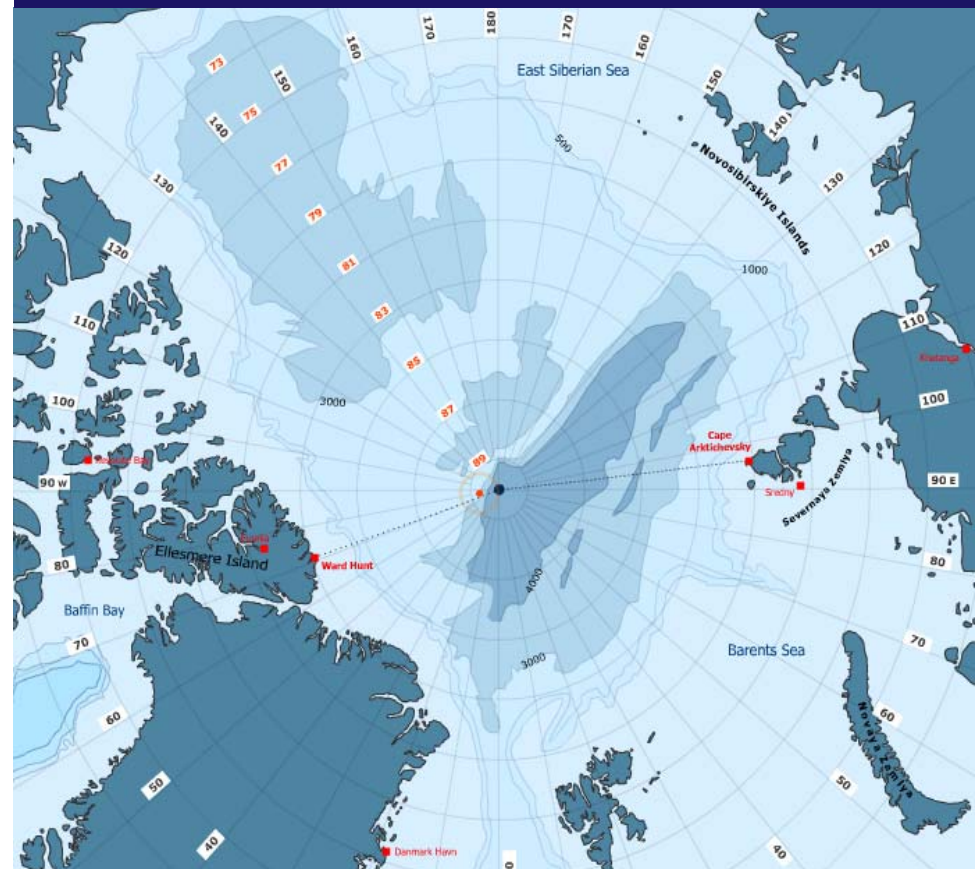


Digital Insight Report: A blog is for life and not just for Christmas

www.DigitalStrategyConsulting.com/insight

Blogging moved from the margins to the mainstream of digital publishing around 2003. This Digital Insight Report gets you thinking about how you might be able to harness blogging for your brands.

About the first record breaking expedition



On 5 March, Ben set out to ski solo more than 1,200 miles across the Arctic from the Russian edge of the arctic ice pack to Canada via the North Geographic Pole.

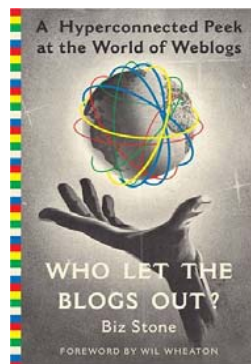
In the weeks that followed Ben experienced what NASA called 'the worst conditions on record'. Of the four solo expeditions that started out that year, one died and two were rescued suffering from frostbite and injuries. Ben was the only solo expedition to make it to the North Pole and in doing so set a world record; he is by far the youngest person to reach the North Pole solo.

Ben continued on towards Canada, but conditions worsened and he was told by his expedition team that he would have to be picked up. Despite not being able to reach Canada, Ben set another British record for the longest solo arctic trek, skiing more than 1,000km in treacherous conditions.

- Honesty and passion: Talk from the heart, explain the story and write with passion – never impersonate others or stretch the credibility of brand truths
- Take part in the conversation: Ben’s team enjoyed a great many posts and comments from readers. Even on thin resources they were able to reply to some of those people and posts, building conversation and dialogue
- Create shareable content: Build content that is designed for sharing – make parts of it rippable for people to post onto their own blogs and social media profiles
- Write for search engines: Search engines are pivotal to the discoverability of content on the web so write with the searcher in mind as well as the primary reader – remember keyphrase frequency and the use of keyphrases in headlines

Digital Action Plan

1. Consider the role of your websites in the communication mix; whether a large retailer or small entrepreneur, business service or consumer brand.
2. Look for ways that blogs can be used to tell the story of your products, as seen through the eyes of those who create them and are at the heart of your business. Look for ways to explain the products with passion.
3. Evaluate the strategic fit for blogs alongside other communications, looking for the business case for where blogging would add value by generating leads, enhancing customer service and boosting brand metrics.
4. Be clear on the monitoring techniques you would use to track effectiveness and include these in your plan.
5. In terms of resourcing, develop a prototype blog and run it with live posts to a small group of internal stakeholders to uncover the level of resource the blog will need.
6. Make the final judgement about the launch of the blog only once a full cost benefit analysis has been completed.



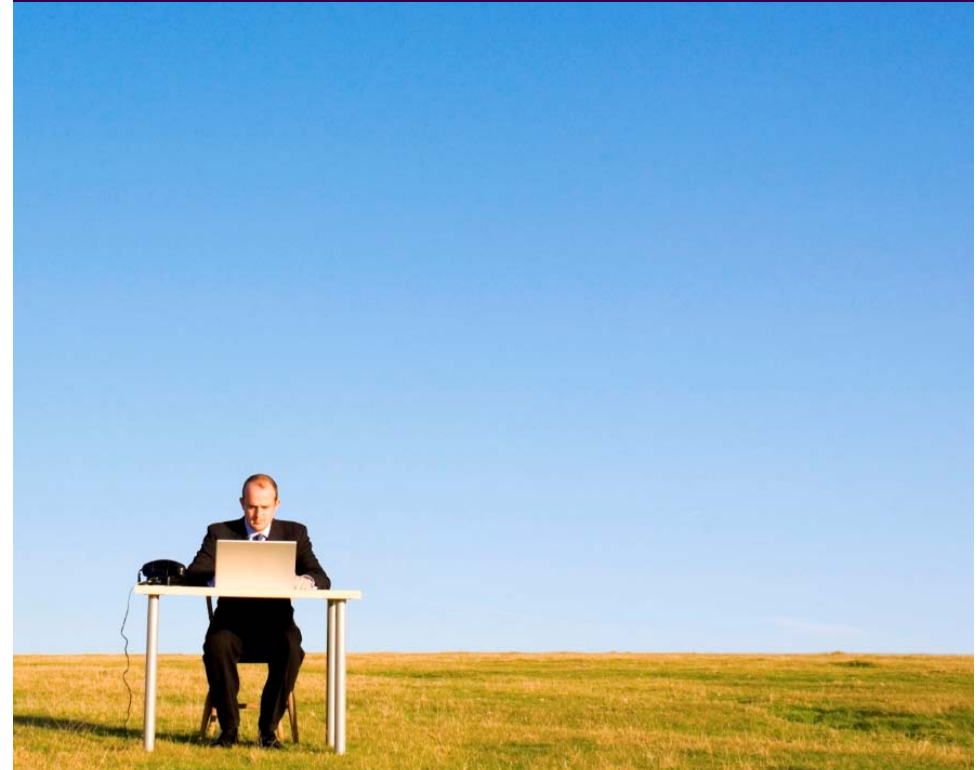
Digital Book Club: Who let the blogs out?

www.DigitalStrategyConsulting.com/bookclub

Billed as a 'hyperconnected peek at the world of blogs', Biz Stone unpacks the rise of blogging and delivers a simple, accessible, 'how to' guide for those who want to get to grips with one of the latest crazes to hit the online mainstream. Publishing tools that would have cost \$100,000 a few years ago, are now given away for free, letting anyone enjoy the benefits of powerful content management systems. But the technology is only the starting point: what should you write and why? Stone has some intriguing answers.

Digital Blogging Academy

If you need to harness blogging and social media marketing for your brands, then our digital management coaching workshops will create the right roadmap for your blogging activity, teach you about the rules of the medium and get your plans on track.



“Blogging gave us a way of telling the story, right from where it happened.”

Marketing manager on the Digital Training Academy specialist training for bloggers

Who is it for?

A programme for to help marketing teams and board directors explore how to harness blogging effectively as a way of getting corporate and brand messages across.

What is it about?

Blogging has moved into the mainstream and transformed the role of corporate communication. This Academy shows you how to make your writing work hard for you online, build traffic to your blogs and avoid the common pitfalls.

Our strategy and training programmes

- Corporate and product strategy development
- Business plan analysis and risk assessment
- Executive digital management coaching
- Digital skills and knowledge training
- Customer acquisition strategies
- Market research and analysis

If you have any questions about our approach to training, or the detailed content of the course then please email or call the team.



Making sense of a digital world

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