

Blogging to raise awareness: the DrugScope experience

Introduction

(We)blogs have been around since the mid-1990s, but are only now starting to come into their own as useful tools for information services. Although frequently created by individuals as online diaries or self-publishing ventures, blogs can be seen as the ideal medium for keeping service users up-to-date with new developments.

Background

DrugScope is the leading national charity for drug information, with a collection of over 105,000 books, reports and journal articles and a [website](#) accessed just under 500,000 times a month. Over the last year, our monthly lists of grey literature and monograph accessions have been among the top five downloads from the site, indicating a demand for good-quality, up-to-date bibliographic information. This demand led us to consider offering more frequent updates.

The Technology

Our monthly listings are produced from our catalogue, DrugData. The ideal situation for daily listing would be to generate an RSS- or atom-feed directly from the catalogue, so that users would be notified of new items. Feeds are attractive because they are “pull” technology: the end-user signs up for the feeds they wish to receive via a newsreader and decides how they want them to be delivered: by email, by logging onto the newsreader site, or by visiting the feed’s site itself. In other words, no maintenance is required to deliver news to the user: you simply create the feed and publish items to it.

When we were unable to generate RSS or atom directly from our cataloguing software, we looked at other options, and found that blogging met our needs. With very little knowledge of HTML, we were able to set up a page that matched our corporate look and called it ‘[DrugData Update](#)’. We created two report templates on our catalogue – one for items with a direct URL and one for those without. At the end of each day, it takes 5-10 minutes to generate the two reports, proof-read them, and post them to the web. [Blogger](#) provides an atom feed automatically, and it took less than 15 minutes to create an RSS feed using [FeedBurner](#).

The Market

The AOD (Alcohol and Other Drug) field is specialised, and we saw no merit in launching a service that duplicated those already on offer. We knew certain users who had actively requested more regular updates and, of course, we are part of a network of AOD information professionals. We contacted these people and asked them to test a sample blog, soliciting feedback on whether or not we were meeting their needs.

Content

Following a test period, we drew up a policy for what we would include on the blog. Our market research had indicated that while people have adequate information on news and other journalism about AOD, it is harder for them to find evidence-based reports and policy documents – the core of our collection. We found that even researchers who have been using our services for years were not aware of certain specialist elements within it – such as our collection of campaign materials. Users were wary of a service that was too broad – the real need was for bibliographic information. Therefore, the core content of DrugData Update is full details of new books, reports and journal articles with direct links where available and, when no link is possible, information on how to obtain the item.

Focus Articles

We want DrugData Update to be seen as a service for our users, not a marketing tool for ourselves. Our closest model in the “blogosphere” is [InfoAlert](#), a blog covering community, crime & justice, which provides useful links and bears no advertising of any kind. Following our website guidelines, our blog does bear our logo and links to the main site, as we felt it was important for readers to be aware of the blog’s owners and our wider work. However, we do not want to “push” our services onto them.

Throughout the week, our posts are simple bibliographic lists. Each Friday we post a short “focus article.” This highlights a part of the collection with which users may not be familiar, or an aspect of the wider work of the Information, Web and Library Service that they may find useful. This adds value to the blog, differentiating it from the monthly listings, and provides something interesting to readers at the end of the week.

Publicising the Blog

In October 2005 we began to publicise the blog: there is a link to it from the New Books and Reports page and an advertising bubble on the homepage of our website. We emailed our networking groups within the AOD sector and added a link to our email signatures. We also registered the blog with [dmoz](#), the internet directory, and on blog and newsreaders, such as [Bloglines](#), and [Bloghop](#). We avoided sites that required us to “trade” links or adverts, as we are keen to promote the blog as a professional service.

Other Possibilities

Blogging software is growing in functionality all the time. Other possibilities that it offers include:

- Emailing users – by setting up an email group using a service like Yahoo! or Google Groups, and then altering the blog’s settings so that the group is automatically emailed every time new content is posted.
 - Advantages: opt-in service; news is delivered directly to users’ email boxes

- Disadvantage: time would need to be invested administering the group
- Comments – blogs can receive comments (see The Guardian’s [news blog](#) or [Daily Dose](#) for examples of this in action)
 - Advantages: an interactive service for users; an easy way to receive feedback
 - Disadvantages: comments are open to spam ; need to be clear on how comments will be administered – will any types of comments be deleted and how would this affect the organisation’s image with the user group
- Marketing: as well as raising awareness, blogs can be used for marketing campaigns
 - The tolerance of this would depend on the sector to which the blog appeals

Future Plans

The development of each blog depends on the needs of the user group, and this must be particularly true in the information sector, where best practice is to be user-focused in everything we do. We are monitoring the uptake of the blog and, should this continue to be strong, we will consider posting the blog directly to the New Books and Reports page on our website. In any case, the DrugScope experience of blogging is that it provides an exciting new platform for the dissemination of information: one of our organisation’s main aims.

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To contact the author of this Guest Editorial, please click [here](#).

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