

IUPUI event helps bloggers find audience

IUPUI event focus: Boosting 'your brand' via the Web

By Meagan Ingerson

Posted: August 16, 2008

"People are finding us for that specific product," she said.

Since she started her Greenfield Liquors blog of drink recipes and reviews in the spring, Brand said the store has experienced a noticeable boost in sales.

"A lot of people that shop for wines and interesting beers are tech-savvy," she said. "This is a cost-effective and, just in general, effective way of getting the word out to those people."

Business owners aspiring to follow State Street's example will get a chance to hear from the pros at the Blog Indiana 2008 conference, being conducted today and Sunday at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

The event is the first blogging conference in the state. It is sponsored by IUPUI's School of Informatics.

Shawn Plew said he and fellow IUPUI alum Noah Coffey organized Blog Indiana to give Hoosiers access to the type of networking and workshop event usually held on the coasts.

"The biggest reason we wanted to put this on (is) a lot of people are like us," Plew said. "We don't have the money to grab a flight (and) go out to, say, San Francisco."

Plew said the goal is twofold: to teach small and midsize businesses how to use blogs to boost Internet traffic and to help individual bloggers learn to market themselves and their writing.

"It's very difficult to make money in blogging, and that's something that I don't think a lot of people realize," he said.

Attendees will hear panelists speak about everything from the ethics of Internet writing to podcasting to building readership.

Most of the speakers are Indiana-based writers and consultants, Plew said. But the event also will feature the Obama campaign's chief blogger, Laurin Manning.

For business owners, Chris Baggott, co-founder of Indianapolis' Compendium Blogware, will lead a discussion on how to use blogs to boost a company's Web presence. Greenfield Liquors is one of Compendium's clients.

"There's a huge myth out there that small businesses are stupid," Baggott said. "Historically, the real problem is that they've been resource- constrained."

Most small businesses create Web sites that depend on consumers remembering the domain name to find the company, Baggott said.

But most customers will find the business from a search engine, he said, which means small businesses need to improve their "searchability," or how easily they are found by search engines like Google.

A blog makes a business's site more easily found, Baggott said. For example, a search for "Paige 23 wine Indiana" lists the Greenfield Liquors blog as the first result. The store's sommelier wrote a blog entry about the specialty wine on July 4.

Brand said she has been impressed by the rewards for a few hours of work each week.

"With even a little bit of information on there, people are finding us," she said. "That's what's so amazing to me. You can start with just a little bit, and it starts working for you."

A blog also adds a human face to the company image, Baggott said.

"Businesses are just kind of corrupted to hide behind brands or to be anonymous," he said. "If you think about what the social media phenomena is telling us, it's 'I want to deal with people. I'm tired of institutions.' "

For individual bloggers, Bil Browning will lead a discussion on how to publicize a blog. The first step to gaining Internet popularity, he said, is having good content. A successful blog has a narrow focus for a specific topic.

"(Beginning bloggers) think that everyone else will be as interested in their topics as they are," he said. "It's not quite true. You have to make it interesting."

Browning started his Web site, the Bilerico Project, in 2004, as a personal blog, recounting details of his everyday life. It didn't get many hits.

But once the site switched to covering gay and lesbian issues, it quickly gained attention both in Indiana and across the country. Four years later, the Indianapolis native is now a contributor to political blog The Huffington Post, and his writing has appeared in several national magazines.

"Three years ago, would I have ever thought I would be quoted in American Spectator? Or Sports Illustrated?" he said. "I can't even play ping-pong."

But he also suggested bloggers make connections with other successful Web sites to promote themselves.

"It's not just taking out an ad," he said. "It's getting engaged all around the Web and becoming part of the circle."

