

The Art of Blogging

Interview with David Maister

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David Maister has enjoyed great success as a management author. I have been following his work almost since I started working as a consultant. He has been writing influential articles and books since then. Several years ago I interviewed him for the first time on this site ([here](#)). After a few years of relative quiet he is now fully back in business with a splendid [blog](#), [new articles](#), [videos](#) and [podcasts](#). Something must be going right with David Maister. Let's find out what.

Coert: "David, how come you're so productive now?"

David: "As I briefly mentioned in my article [It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Much You Want It](#) I had a period of two or three years of extreme tiredness, just after completing a book per year for three years. I did not know the cause, but it turned out to be a medical condition called sleep apnea, which basically meant I had not had a good night's sleep in that time. The treatment is to sleep every night with a breathing mask and to lose weight. I lost 30 pounds and also managed to give up my lifetime habit of smoking. Suddenly, I had the energy of a teenager!

As I always do, I turned the personal experience into a business and management lesson, which became my article [Strategy and the Fat Smoker](#) which has been my most well-read piece for many years. This all happened at a time when my wife and I

decided that we did not want to do the same amount of global traveling as in the past, cutting back to about 50 percent of the previous level. (As a natural performer, I still need audiences from time to time!)

So, I decided on a strategy of trying to serve my global audience by really committing to the internet. Realizing that people like to receive information in many different ways, I tried to offer alternative ways of absorbing my messages: traditional articles, audio podcasts and videos. Interestingly, the video is the least visited portion of the site so far. I think it's because video commands your full attention, while you can multi-task with an audio (listen while you are driving) and an article can be printed out to be read at any time. However, I will keep experimenting.

There has not been a problem with material. In my 2-to-3 year "sleepy time" I still did consulting work. It was only the writing that I stopped. So, I had years' worth of ideas that I had been thinking about while lying on my couch. I also discovered the fun of blogging. At first, the thought of putting something relatively new or fresh down many times a week was scary, but now, three months later, I find it exhilarating. It's a perfect place to share "smaller" thoughts that do not yet deserve an article, and quite frequently, you get really helpful and stimulating reactions from people around the world. I am learning a lot.

There's an old writer's joke that says "You don't know what you know until you write it down." I am finding that to be true. The mere act of committing to writing on a regular basis is forcing me to think more clearly, and also more deeply about my work experiences. I am now writing at least once a month, and posting a blogpost four or five times a week. Readers can subscribe to these at no cost by registering on my website. I'm having a wonderful time! And I'm healthy!"

Coert: "It's interesting that you mention your blog. I wanted to ask you about that. It seems like blogging is exploding! Even I have one now. :) What do you think about this trend? Is it the next hype? Do you think it will last? And what are your thoughts on how to make a blog really successful?"

David: "I must rush to say that any advice I have about making blogging work is the result of a great deal of advice I have received from other bloggers, and from my own technical advisors (including Shaula Evans.) I only began in January of this year, less than four months ago. As with everything in life, there are a few key principles to bear in mind.

First, you do not get half the rewards by showing half the effort. If you want to make something work, you must really commit serious effort. Don't just try things a little. I now post new thoughts four and five times a week, in order to make it worthwhile for people to come to my blog on a regular basis. That's a serious commitment, but as I pointed out in one of my posts entitled [Is Blogging Dead](#), blogging, like everything else, is about relationships, not quick hits.

Second, it must be recognized that, at this stage, blogging is an act of faith. There is just not enough time and evidence to show whether consultants can get a return for the effort. I published an [article](#) with Steve Rubel, the master blogger, who has won a lot of business that way, but he is in the business of

blogging about blogging. His audience is likely to be reading blogs.

For general management consultants (or other professional advisors like lawyers, or PR advisors, or accountants) it's not yet clear that the customers and clients you want to reach are watching and reading. However, here's why I think it's a good idea, even if they are not. You get the chance, as I have pointed out, to capture your thinking in writing. Putting it in a blog is not the final use of the material. I fully expect that I will turn small blogs into articles, and maybe (perhaps one day) turn collections of blogs into books, probably e-books. Blogging helps me make progress.

This is not a new thought. I have always argued that the benefit of writing articles was not just the initial publication, but the fact that you had readily available things you could reprint and give to new and existing clients. I am already finding it very helpful (when I get an enquiry from a prospective client who asks about me) to be able to say: "Well, actually, I just wrote about that topic last week and you can go, right now, to see what I had to say."

Coert: "I think you raise some very interesting points on blogging and I'd like to ask a bit more about it. Thanks for mentioning Steve Rubel, I did not know him. This makes me curious: who are some of your favorite bloggers? What makes their blogs fascinating to you?"

David: "I will confess that there are very few bloggers that I read every post, and few bloggers that cover the full range of my interests. But, I think that's the point about the "blogosphere". It's very fluid, constantly changing. The "feeds" that automatically come into my Outlook email program (using the Attensa add-on program which costs US\$30) include [Guy Kawasaki](#) (who has written many terrific books about entrepreneurship), [AccManPro](#) (or Dennis Howlett) who writes about the accounting

profession, John Sviokla from consulting firm DiamondCluster who is thoughtful about the future of technology, Brian Sommers (blogging under the name Services Safari), an ex-Accenture partner who is good on consulting.

You can find all these people listed (with easy click-through links) on my blogroll (the listing on the right hand side of my blog.) These are only a tiny fraction of the blogs I monitor – I actually look at about 100 per day, just to see what's there. It's like quickly flipping through the index and content pages of a lot of magazines before deciding whether to stop and read.

What I have found useful are the emerging attempts to provide guidance. There are so-called carnivals (one on marketing, one on capitalism, one on law) where someone lists the interesting links for the week. I watch out for those, in order to get an early indication as to where to go and new places to discover. It's hard work, but the whole point of the blogosphere at the moment – its wonderful, wonderful attraction, is the ability to hear new voices from around the world and engage them in conversation. So, I try NOT to stick to the same old places.

Like everybody else, once I find an interesting blog, I click on THEIR blogroll links (the people THEY like) to see if the philosophy that “I will probably like a friend of a friend” is true. It's a bit hit-and-miss, because there are so many people playing reciprocal blogroll games “You list me and I'll list you, and we'll both go up in the automated rankings.” I hate that, and do not play that game. I only list other blogs that I actually visit regularly myself, and the list changes frequently.

At the moment, there is no choice but to hunt a lot and find you own favorite 'magazines' to read.”

Coert: “What are your thoughts on how to write a good blog message? What helps well to get many readers' responses?”

David: “I think there is a danger in asking the question that way. This is a little silly, but many people know that I love popular music and I love to make analogies from my personal life. In this case, the analogy I would make is “why are you making music?” There are two possible approaches. One is because you just have music in you and would pour it out even if you didn't have a place to perform. (Let's call that the “Artist” reason) Then there are those, equally “noble”, I think, who are “Entertainers” – they do not pretend to be making art, but are just trying to give the public what they want.

I don't think one approach is more noble than the other, but I would point out that it is, in fact, easier to be an artist than an entertainer. Worrying about whether or not people are going to “like” you, and constantly changing your music to catch fashion is actually (if pop music is any guide) a very, very difficult thing to do, and one that usually gives you an immediate lack of credibility.

For me, the only viable approach to blogging is the same approach I give as marketing and career advice – “figure out who you are and what you feel passionate about. The people who like that will seek you out, and you can focus on helping them. There's no point trying to be someone you are not, and no point pretending to care about issues or people that you do not. Most of us are not good enough actors to succeed that way.

So, I guess my real answer to your question is that I am not entirely sure what causes people to join in conversations with me. I don't go out of my way to be provocative, but I do try to tell truths that I think are being ignored. I have a personal point of view and I am not afraid to let it show. As I said in one of my blog posts, there is a quote from Confucius that all is well if the good people like you and the bad people do not.

I have seen that; everyone likes to join in discussions about what THOSE GUYS are

doing wrong. You'll get lots of response if you criticize bosses or big companies or traditional media. However, I think that's too easy and not very enjoyable. I may get fewer responses, but I try to create conversations where we learn something that we can use personally.

I am also told that there are "tricks" like making lists. Apparently, there is some evidence that people love lists (so do I) and respond to "top 10 reasons why..." I think that's true, but personally I do not want to be too self-conscious in the way that I write, and only write to be referenced or quoted. That's a little too planned for me. So, I use that approach sparingly."

Coert: "You mention that making blogging successful is hard work. Do you think there will be a big shake out soon?"

David: "As with everything in life, I think hundreds of people start things, and only a few finish them. But in the case of blogs, the cost is so small that blogs won't disappear – their authors will just stop adding new posts. It's not like real-world magazines where you go bankrupt or the cost of distribution gets too high.

However, eventually, I think that the "neighborhoods to hang out in" will become a lot clearer than they are now, and only a few groups of blogs will make up the interacting community where people with a special interest go. But note, that event is still a long way off. I don't think that at the moment there are any clear neighborhoods to go to if you are interested in things like consulting, or strategy or management. There is still a lot of room for individuals to turn themselves into the "hub" around which a network of other people concentrates. It's still very early days.