Smart Blogging for Chemical Engineers

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Blogs allow anyone — even people with minimal computer knowledge — to easily publish text, photos, and audio and video files on the Internet. They are places where chemical engineers can trade technical information, expound upon their expertise or interests, and assemble a network of correspondents.

Blogs have come a long way since their first appearance in the late 1990s, when they were little more than online diaries. Today, people are just as likely to turn to blogs (Internet shorthand for "Web log") as to newspapers or magazines for information and news *(1)*. Blogs exist for virtually every topic imaginable, with science-related ones accounting for at least 3.3 million of the over 164 million blogs *(2)*.

This article, the third in *CEP*'s social media series, discusses the benefits chemical engineers can derive from blogs, outlines how to start and drive traffic to a blog, and follows *CEP*'s three fictional chemical engineers — Marissa, a process development engineer; Joel, an engineering consultant; and Parker, a business development manager — as they use blogs in different ways to further their professional and career goals.

Blogging and the chemical engineer

Blogs provide forums where chemical engineers can discuss technical and societal issues with their peers and other interested people. "Chemical engineers can write blogs on many topics and help educate society," says Subhash Bhatia, a chemical engineering consultant. "We can, for example, contribute our professional knowledge about the environment, renewable energy, medical products, drinking water, and biodegradable products."

Chemical-engineering-focused blogs range from the broad, industry-level *ChemEngineering Posts* (http://chemengineeringposts.wordpress.com) to the process-technology-specific *The Oil and Gas Engineering Guide* (http://www.toblog.fr/en/baron/baron/-/1/blog.html). Other blogs are written with a more personal approach, such as *Chemical Engineering World* (http://chem-eng.blogspot.com), which describes the blog author's "challenging, interesting and stimulating life" as a chemical engineer. The AIChE *ChEnected* blog (http://chenected.aiche.org) serves as a community for chemical engineers, and includes relevant book reviews, industry news, reports from major AIChE meerings, humor, brainteasers, and video clips.

Blogs offer opportunities for chemical engineers to:

• *Connect and communicate in depth*. Blog articles and comments can be much longer than LinkedIn or Twitter updates, and therefore allow for more substantial discussion of a topic amongst participants. AIChE's *ChEnected* blog (Figure 1) is one of several that enable chemical engineers to communicate quickly and publicly with the larger engineering and technical community.

• *Explore and learn*. Blogs offer a way to access relevant information sources and acquire basic competency quickly, which can be especially important for those new to an industry or technical area. For example, through Marissa's LinkedIn connections, she was offered an interview for

a project manager position at a new biorefinery. Before her interview, she visited several well-known biofuels blogs and read posts by industry experts about the hiring company and its new refinery contracts. The knowledge she gained helped her to ask insightful questions at her interview.

• *Clarify ideas and build insight*. Whether you choose to publish your own blog or write as a guest on someone else's blog, the discipline of writing these articles can help clarify your thinking. The monthly articles that Joel writes for his *Separations Source* blog, for example, are based on his consulting firm's most recent projects. Writing these blog articles often gives him new insights and helps him to develop more effective separation solutions for his clients.

• *Collaborate and problem-solve*. You can also blog about a technical problem and ask others for help. Parker, for example, was asked to write a series of blog articles on biocide safety — a common concern for several clients — for his company's *Talking Specialty Chemicals* blog. Parker's posts received many comments from others with similar problems, and a lively discussion ensued on the blog. He shared the posts and comments with his company's engineers, who tested several potential solutions in the company pilot plant.

Start blogging

Many bloggers get their start as contributors to existing blogs. A chemical engineer might add a comment to a blog article (Figure 2), or share a link to an interesting blog post via social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter. Once bitten by the blogging bug, some chemical engineers create their own blog site. Vi Brown, Principal at Prophecy Consulting Group, LLC (Phoenix, AZ), is a good example. "I started my *ABridgeforBizSTEM* blog (http://abridgeforbizstem.wordpress.com), so that I could write on two topics I'm passionate about — business and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). These topics aren't often discussed in the same context and they need to be, so that's the focus of my blog," says Brown.

If you, like Brown, have a topic that you are passionate about, consider starting your own blog. First, decide on your blog's purpose and goals. Will it be a purely technical blog, or will it include personal commentary about the industry? Summarize the purpose of your blog in a short phrase, and use it as the blog subtitle so that readers understand your blog's context. *The ChemEngineering Posts* blog, for example, is subtitled, Reflections on the Chemical and Energy Industries.

Name your blog using relevant keywords, so that it can be found more easily by search engines. Joel uses the word "separations" in his blog's name because his consulting specialty is separation technology. Similarly, Parker's company blog includes the keywords "specialty chemicals."

Plan your posts *before* you start writing. Parker, for example, knew that his spring travel schedule would leave him little time to blog for *Talking Specialty Chemicals*. He set aside time several weeks in advance to draft his first three articles, so that they could be published when he was out of town. Joel goes one step further and sets up a quarterly editorial calendar so that he knows well in advance the topics for the articles he has to write.

After planning and writing your first articles, choose a

▲ **Figure 1.** AIChE's *ChEnected* blog is an online community where chemical engineers can read and contribute to articles, and engage with everything ChE.

blogging platform — such as Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com) or Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) — and register your blog. Then learn your way around the platform and upload your articles. "The good news for bloggers is that online resources are available at little or no charge, and they can be launched with minimum effort," says Brown. For example, Wordpress and Blogger offer short online tutorials to help you publish your blog.

Writing for your audience

When you write a blog article, you can use less-formal language and phrasing than when you are writing a technical paper. However, it can still be challenging to create content that your audience will *want* to read. The following tips can help you write to engage your readers *(3)*:

• Identify the three main messages you want to get across to your reader before you start writing. Stick to discussing these points in your article, even if other ideas are competing for your attention. A good rule of thumb is to write articles between 400 and 800 words each. You risk losing the reader's interest if you pack too much into your article or if you write too lengthy an article.

Speaking of Blogging *(4)*

Blogging has a vocabulary all its own. Here are some of the key terms to know.

Archive	Links at the side of a blog that organize previous posts, usually by month.
Blog	A shortened version of the term Web log.
Blogosphere	All blogs, or the blogging community.
Comment	Feedback that blog readers can leave at the bottom of a blog post.
Keywords	The terms that information-seekers type into a search engine.
Permalink	A permanent link; the unique URL of a single post.
Pingback	An alert that the original blog poster receives when someone else writes an entry concerning the original post.
Post	Content published to a blog. Videos, articles, podcasts, and photos can all be published, or posted, to blogs.
Subscribe	A link on a blog page that allows readers to receive email notifications when new blog posts are published.
Tag	A word or multiple words connected to a post that describe what the post is about.
Thread	A series of comments on a post.
Traffic	The number of visitors to the blog site.

▲ **Figure 2.** Blog readers can easily comment on posts, using features built in to the blog's software.

• Write about customer or industry problems and solutions so that your audience can relate your blog articles to their own challenges. You can also include checklists or how-to tips to help your reader.

• Create an article title that catches your reader's attention. For example, if Joel were writing about a new separation technology solution, his title might be "New Separation Technology Reduces Risk, Increases ROI."

• Do not be afraid to have a strong point of view in your blog. "This isn't the place to pitch your product or services, but you certainly can take a stand," says Bodo Albrecht, CEO of BASIQ Corp. (Westfield, NJ), a technology consultancy. When you express a point of view, you will often get others to respond with comments for and against your viewpoint. This creates more engagement with your blog.

• Make your points as simply as possible without dumbing down the topic. When reading gets too complex, readers find better things to do with their time. Using industry jargon is acceptable, but keep the whole audience in mind; not everyone reading your blog will be well-versed in the subject matter or terminology. A good practice is to define a technical term the first time you use it or link to a definition elsewhere on the Web.

• Support your points with relevant examples, analogies, or short stories to bring your content to life. You can also link to photos, videos, white papers, or technical information elsewhere on the Web. In Joel's post about new separation technologies, for example, he links to a white paper on his website.

Direct traffic to your blog

The downside of a blogosphere that has more than 164 million authors is that you will need to promote your own blog if you expect others to find and read it. After two years of blogging, for example, Joel knows that a good way to drive readers to his blog is to refer to his blog at his public speaking engagements and when he meets with clients. He also includes the blog URL in his email signature and on his website and LinkedIn profile. For each new blog article,

Illustrations by Rich Byrnes

Joel posts a LinkedIn status update (see *CEP*, Mar. 2012, pp. 55–58) with some introductory text and a link to the article. He uses LinkedIn's direct messaging feature to send a link to those on his contact list for whom the new article is relevant.

A final tip

You will need to commit to writing blog posts at least once or twice a month if you expect to reach the goals you set for your blog. Any less frequently, and your blog readers will lose interest in what you have to say, or forget that your blog exists. Some bloggers find it helpful to commit to a specific time to blog, for example, Thursday evenings after work or early Saturday morning. Make your blog a regular and reliable destination for the people in your sector of the blogosphere.

Looking ahead

Chemical engineers collaborate to brainstorm new product ideas, solve technical problems, manage projects, and more. The next articles in *CEP* 's social media series will investigate Internet-based tools such as shared calendars, virtual meeting applications, and online knowledge management and interactive editing platforms that are allowing engineers to collaborate in new and more effective ways. CEP

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