

Blogs as PR tools

Case study: *Athlone & Associates Ltd*

Athlone & Associates (“Athlone”) is a niche business development consulting company based in Hong Kong. Its clients are thoroughbred stud owners, stallion promoters, syndicators and trainers, and suppliers working within the thoroughbred industry who require specialist industry knowledge to allow them to better serve their clients.

85% of the company’s client base resides in Australia.

Issues

- *Geographic separation between head office and clients*: client perception that company lacked the relevant Australian Industry expertise.
- *Ineffective web presence*: static website and minimal search engine interest due to content being infrequently updated.
- *Low profile*

Objectives

The challenge was to counter these issues and raise the company’s profile using a marketing budget of AUD\$1,000 per month (excluding time costs) over a 12 month period.

The strategy evolved from the basic principle that the foundation of any good marketing campaign is name recognition and that most often comes from name repetition. A blog, in combination with some more traditional marketing tactics, seemed the perfect solution.

The strategy evolved as follows:

- PR (traditional media)
 - Stage 1: submission of one article a month to an Australian racing magazine [for 12 months] (this then led to Athlone being commissioned by an Australian Race Club to write a thoroughbred stud series)
 - Stage 2: Submission of articles to other racing magazines
 - Stage 3: Completing a major research report. The subject chosen was pinhooking and *The Bloodhorse* commented on the results

- PR (online)
 - Become an occasional writer for one of the major racing portals in Australia – the aim was to be associated with one that ranked high with the search engines. (This was achieved by becoming associated with *Cyberhorse*)
- Viral marketing
 - Occasional commentary on selected race forums with links back to the Athlone site.
 - Adding a series of photo albums from major race carnivals to the Athlone web site and encouraging people to link back to the albums.
- PR: Blogging

Two blogs were added to the site in July 2004. There were a number of objectives behind this:

- To increase daily traffic to the website
- To be first to market with a new model of web marketing
- To keep abreast of – and comment regularly on - major industry developments; and
- To develop a distinctive voice amongst the racing media.

Both blogs were originally **hosted** offsite (on the Google platform) but after 3 months they were incorporated onto the main Athlone site to:

- focus web spider attention
- cross sell the site; and
- allow us to track detailed site statistics in terms of where readers were located (by geographic location), how long they were on the site and what else they were looking at. This then influenced the ‘angle’ of the writing.

To create a seamless image a design company in the US was employed to create new **templates** (‘skins’) to integrate the blogs’ corporate identity with the remainder of the site.

The blogs were **listed** with every major blog portal. Whilst this has been helpful from the perspective of linking and search engine rankings it has driven limited quality traffic to the site (in terms of repeat visitors) due to the vertical Athlone works within.

By November 2005 the main blog “Athlone Thoroughbred Marketing: An Eye on the Industry” was beginning to find its ‘voice’ and multiple posts were being added daily rather than on a more ad hoc basis.

The site remained (and indeed remains) reliant on **one central writer** with occasional posts from a second writer in Australia (who also acted as site editor). Some of our regular readers also began to alert us to issues that they thought should be commented on.

We also commenced a **relationship-building exercise** with a number of PR professionals at the various US/Australian stud farms as well as a select group of trainers, syndicators etc who also started sending us their press releases.

We also subscribed to a variety of **news aggregators** such as Factiva and Lexis Nexis in addition to the major industry portals and newspapers to ensure we remained abreast of all recent developments. This was the most significant of the marketing expenses.

In the same month Athlone received its first “blogging” project to assist a stud farm in Australia in setting up a basic weblog. Athlone was also awarded the *Let it Ride* Site of the Day **award**.

By Christmas 2004 all major web spiders were now trawling the website daily (some twice daily) and the **search engine rankings** reached top 5 in every category. The site stats also exploded – an 800% increase in traffic in just 5-months.

In December more work came in from an Australian client via a referral from the blog.

In January 2005 the second site blog was shut down. It was not feasible for one person to keep two blogs updated on a daily basis and it was diluting concentration on the main blog. The template remains (hidden) on the site map should we ever take on another writer and resurrect it.

Advertising was secured in three Australian and New Zealand publications to promote the blog as Athlone was not only the first thoroughbred industry blog in Australasia but it was also the only blog worldwide that commented on industry marketing developments; facts worth promoting!

Given some people's reluctance to sign up for email newsletters (a recurring problem these days due to spam concerns) an **RSS feed** was integrated on the site to appeal to those who were more technologically savvy and who were using news readers. The blog 'feed' was then added to all company correspondence and email footers. We also adopted the **Feedburner** scrolling text button which we added to the front page of the Athlone site.

Tagging through Technorati was established.

We flirted with the idea of adding a few gimmicky **add-on's** like site counters, global counters/maps etc but none of these fit with the image we were trying to create so we didn't pursue them.

To drive targeted traffic to the site **sponsored search** (keyword) advertising was also established with Google. An account was also set up with Overture (Yahoo! Search) but company finances did not allow the Overture campaign to extend past a 3 month trial phase. The Google account is still ongoing.

We had originally used **Bloglet** to alert people to site updates. This software proved unsatisfactory and in February 2005 an email account was established with **Bronto**. Bronto is an anti-spam compliant bulk email service allowing us to email **fortnightly blog summaries** to a central database (which is cleansed monthly) as a 'flag' to all subscribers to remind them to check the blog (as the industry remains unfamiliar with RSS feeds). Bronto is a sophisticated web tool and allows us to track who opens email, the percentage clicks throughs, forwarding of individual posts etc.

In June 2005 a **search function** was also added to the site as the word count has surpassed 130,000 words.

In June 2005 we also established a **blogroll**.

A list of blogs was also added to the **links page** on the main site.

As we approach our first anniversary we face the following challenges:

- redesigning the template to better manage images (which we currently have trouble formatting for the site) and also the size of the side columns.
- We also wanted to shift the blog to a new hosting platform that allowed subject categories and better technical support but the system we looked at could not transfer the archives and the company simply doesn't have the resources to transfer historical posts on an individual basis.

Other **issues** we have faced include:

- the infancy of the technology
- self-taught html knowledge which has slowed us down on occasion when amending the blog templates
- financial constraints
- time pressures (there is a reason so many blogs don't survive the '3 month mark'. It takes incredible discipline to update a site on a daily basis.)
- general ignorance of the blogging phenomenon in the racing industry
- the fact that our commentary is not beholden to advertisers so we have come up against some strong resistance and obstructive conduct from a number of traditional media who see us as competition and/or a threat. We expect this will ease as more blogs are established.
- There was also a conscious decision taken early in the blog's history not to include a comments section on the blog due to the prevalence of "comment spammers" on the Blogger platform. Traditionalists would say that it is impossible to create an online community without a comments facility; considering Athlone's objectives we remain happy with the decision we made.

The Athlone blog now attracts an average of 150-200 unique visitors a day (increased numbers for the 3 days coinciding with the fortnightly newsletter) which in such a niche vertical has been a very pleasing result. Of note a large percentage of all readers spend more than 30 minutes on the site when they visit. A number of projects are also now coming in to Athlone from blog referrals and we have an increasing database of subscribers. We are also increasingly mentioned on alternative sites and people recognize the company name when it is mentioned to them.

The **next stage of promotion** will include:

- A more sophisticated viral marketing campaign
- Increased linking with other blogs
- Additional research to encourage media commentary
- Sponsorship
- A PR campaign to coincide with the blog's anniversary; and
- The employment of 2 - 3 more writers.

For such a small company with only part-time support from an editor and limited advertising/general marketing budget we have been extremely pleased with the results to date. Without the blog Athlone could never have expected to raise its profile the way it has done in such a short span of time and without investing in traditional (and expensive) advertising campaigns. Athlone can also lay claim to being the first website to offer a dedicated marketing-related thoroughbred blog.

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