

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Beware the Blog!

Anyone with a cause or a grudge can set up a blog on the Web and publish opinions for all the world to see. That makes the economic developer's job a lot harder than it used to be.

By Debbie Kurtz

Let's play a mental exercise. Pretend that we work for the economic development partnership of my hometown, Richmond, VA. Assume that we're trying to recruit a corporate headquarters to the region, and one of our sales pitches is the great quality of life that makes it easy to recruit executives from outside the state.

Once upon a time, we largely controlled the flow of information – not the statistical information, which any diligent consultant can ferret out, but the qualitative information that requires an intimate knowledge of the community. We would take the visiting CEO on a tour of the region and set up meetings with the local politicians and business leaders whom we knew would create a good impression.

But what if our prospect or their site location consultants were savvy enough to search the Internet for alternative voices – voices that weren't part of the local power structure? What might they find? A lot more than you think. With the proliferation of blogs – more formally known as Web logs, a type of interactive journal on the World Wide Web -- every crank, gadfly and



activist group with an axe to grind now has a platform to express their views.

If our imaginary prospect were diligent enough to Google the blogs in the Richmond area, they might find some unflattering observations, such as this real posting that appeared the other day:

A few years back, someone had the great idea that it would make some kind of difference if Richmond had a catchy slogan to call our own. They came up with the saccharine "Richmond: Easy to Love", probably spending boodles of \$\$\$ in the process. ... Now, years later, there is some movement for a new and better slogan. ... As an accurate and appealing description of the city, "Richmond: It sucks less," can not be beat.

That's an endorsement you can live without!

I recount this story about my own home town because I can also assure readers from first-hand experience that Richmond is, in fact, a really great place to live and work! But that's not the point. The point is that literally millions of opinions are floating around the Internet, and they are no further away than a keyword search on Google.

Economic developers must come to grips with a new reality: we no longer control the message.

If you thought that websites were a force for the "democratization of information," they're nothing compared to blogs. Where it took at least a rudimentary knowledge of HTML programming to launch a website, it takes no technical expertise whatsoever to set up a blog. Just go to www.blogger.com, and you'll see that you can get a blog up and running for free in just a few minutes.

Blogs are being created by the millions. According to the Technorati website, which tracks blogs, a new weblog is created every 7.5 seconds, at the rate of about 12,000 a day. Not all bloggers live in America, and not every blog is maintained with any diligence, but there's no denying that blog content is multiplying at a dizzying rate. Technorati estimates that there are 275,000 new blog posts, or entries, per day.

The vast majority of blogs are personal in nature – digital diaries, so to speak – and they're maintained mostly by the 20- to 30-year-old age group. Although most blogs are too mundane to generate widespread interest, the more literate blogs are fast becoming mainstream reading. Blogs covering national and international issues, such as *Daily Kos*, *InstaPundit*, *Michelle Malkin* and *Power Line* – have tens of thousands of regular readers. Recently, credible community blogs have begun popping up in significant numbers. Not surprisingly, many take an anti-establishment slant – sometimes protesting unpopular industrial locations, real estate deals and civic projects – and contradict the official party line of govern-

ment officials and economic developers.

Don't delude yourself that "nobody's reading that junk." According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, about 11 percent of all Internet users read blogs. And readership is accelerating as technologies make the content more readily available. Google, owner of the wildly popular Blogspot blogging service, now indexes [blog content](#) and makes it available through key word searches. Other websites, from [Technorati](#) to [Blogwise](#), organize blogs by content category.

Technology companies are figuring out how to data mine this ocean of content. Blogs are becoming recognized as an important channel for the expression of popular sentiment that venture-funded tech companies are developing techniques for sifting through the blog sludge to track public perceptions regarding major brands and corporate reputations.

There are some obvious lessons here for economic developers who want to stay abreast of local perceptions and opinions that may affect prospects' opinions.

First, be aware that some blogger you've never heard of could be contradicting you. It's only a matter of time before site location consultants begin employing these tools to check the assertions made by economic developers and their local stakeholders.

Second, find out what the bloggers are saying; although you can't control it, you can be informed to counteract any half-truths.

Internet clipping services can monitor websites, blogs and message boards automatically

for the mention of your community's name – and send you an e-mail that will update you on a daily basis. Using these new tracking tools, site selection consultants can learn as much about your community – its prevailing attitudes towards business, towards work, towards creativity and authority, towards local controversies, conflicts and tensions – as you know about it yourself.

The Internet is scrambling all the old rules. The Web is not just a place to post a digital brochure about your community. It's a source of business intelligence – information that's accessible to the whole, wide world.

Talk to us -- 310 Ltd. can help make sure that you aren't the last to know.

*310 Ltd.
4909 Augusta Ave.
Richmond, VA 23230
(804) 422-031-*

