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December 24, 2006

Section: BUSINESS

Edition: CITY

Page: 1D

The new .com era
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STAFF

By WILLIAM RYBERG

REGISTER BUSINESS WRITER

Joe Kristan writes an Internet blog that mixes tax issues with references to O.J. Simpson and **the** movie "Psycho."

"You have to find something that makes people look at things a little differently," said Kristan, co-owner of Roth & Co., a Des Moines accounting firm. "Taxes are pretty dry for most people unless you lighten it up."

Kristan blogs every workday, convinced that his online columns increase his firm's visibility and show that it's on top of tax issues important to clients and prospective clients.

Mike Ralston, president of **the** Iowa Association of Business and Industry, says that blogs are becoming increasingly important tools and resources for business.

"I read four blogs every day. I know that our members read them, too," said Ralston. **The** association is looking into starting its own blog, he added.

Mike Sansone, owner of Bizolution, a Clive company that specializes in advice on business blogs, estimates that about 80 Iowa companies use blogs.

It's not a big number, considering that **the** state has an estimated 260,000 businesses. However, more companies are beginning to ask whether it's time to enter **the** blogosphere.

A blog is an online column, offering information, advice or opinion, sometimes spiced with humor or tidbits from **the** blogger's personal or professional life. Readers can respond, creating a virtual conversation.

Blogs are public relations and marketing tools. They help companies get their name out in a **new** medium and provide them with a showcase for their expertise in their field. Good writing is a plus.

Des Moines lawyer Rush Nigut blogs on corporate and business law issues. "On **the** Seventh Day She Rested," said Nigut's headline on a blog about Des Moines lawyer Roxanne Conlin's days-long opening statement in a consumer case against Microsoft.

Nanette Rodriguez, president of Vivamedia of Clive, writes about topics related to her firm's speciality: helping firms market to **the** Hispanic population.

Her blog gets **the** most visits of any page on **the** company's Web site.

"I live a bilingual lifestyle," Rodriguez said in a recent blog. "My house is in West Des Moines. Yesterday I ate a cheeseburger for dinner, but tomorrow I may ... make some yummy "tostones" (a Puerto Rican fritter/side dish)."

Most Des Moines-area business bloggers are lawyers, financial consultants, accountants, technology and Web companies, public relations firms and real estate agencies.

Sansone expects other types of companies to get into **the** act, too. In other parts of **the** country, bloggers include retail stores, bakeries, manufacturers, restaurants and businesses of virtually every kind.

Des Moines-based Bankers Trust Co. is looking into blogging.

"It's definitely trendy," said Randy Remington, a bank vice president and director of information technology. "We just haven't really identified that need for us to have one."

Among **the** concerns: People misidentifying themselves to post false statements.

Kristan spends about a half-hour a day writing his blog. He says it's important to write regularly, and to limit writing time so it doesn't interfere with **the** rest of **the** day's work.

He thinks it's important to "have a point of view, to be willing to take a little bit of risk and be a little irreverent." He lightens up **the** subject of taxes with interesting or humorous cases.

Kristan recently wrote about an Internal Revenue Service agent convicted of sending in a tax return with **the** agent's dead father listed as a dependent.

"Meet Norman Bates, Ex-IRS agent," said Kristan's blog headline, referring to **the** "Psycho" killer who kept his dead mother's body in his house. He included a creepy vintage photograph of **the** Bates character from **the** original 1960 movie.

In another blog, a police mug shot of O.J. Simpson accompanied Kristan's comments about tax protesters.

Tom Root, an associate professor of finance at Drake University, said it's too early to say whether blogs will become a standard, long-term operating tool for lots of businesses.

Ralston agreed, but added: "My gut feeling tells me it's not a fad and it will stick around."

E-mail and Web sites have evolved from **new** and unproven tools to crucial elements of business operations, he added.

Start-up costs, not including **the** blogger's time, can range from virtually nothing to several hundred dollars depending on whether a company uses available online software or uses commercial software and hires a professional designer.

Blogs can help companies in other ways, said Sansone. Including a blog on a Web site can help a company's main site rise higher on listings provided by Internet search engines such as Yahoo! and Google. **The** reason: **The** engines zero in on sites where **new** material has been added.

Signs of business blog growth are showing up nationally and locally:

- **The** National Association of Manufacturers just launched a "Business Blog Roundup" on its Web site, giving links to about 60 blogs written by business biggies such as General Motors, Boeing and Sun Microsystems. **The** association has its own blog, too.

"Businesses are just beginning to discover **the** technology. More and more are going to do it," said Pat Cleary, an NAM senior vice president.

How businesses would measure effectiveness in terms of profits is still hard to pin down, he added.

- Some marketing and Web design firms recommend blogs for clients. A handful of businesses are popping up in **the** Des Moines area to help zero in on blogging and related business ideas such as posting images, video or audio on popular sites such as Flickr, YouTube and iTunes. Among them: Sansone's Bizolution and Blogwhiz, an offshoot of Jordan Creek Web Design of West Des Moines.

Another sign: About a dozen people showed up at a suburban restaurant/coffee house at 6:30 a.m. one recent day for one of Sansone's twice-a-month workshops on blogging and other **new** media.

Jenni Pullen, 24, an account manager for an employment agency, was there. She's thinking about starting a blog as a way to get leads on companies with hiring needs.

"Technology is everywhere. I don't want to miss out on **the** wave," Pullen said.

Reporter William Ryberg can be reached at (515) 284-8104 or bryberg@dmreg.com

BLOGGING COACH

Name: Mike Sansone

Age: 45

Job description: Blog coach, giving advice to businesses on reaching customers using **new** "social media:" blogs and Internet image, video and audio sites such as Flickr, YouTube and iTunes.

Businesses: Bizolution, a "social media" consulting firm, owned by Sansone and Sandra Renshaw,

whose background is in Web publishing and business strategy.

The company's blog is www.converstations.com, and its Web site is www.bizolution.com.

Background: Grew up in California, attended college, but decided he wasn't being taught **the** real secrets to running a business. Worked in jobs from sales to sous chef to part of **the** front office of a minor league baseball team. Gravitated to **the** online world, working for America Online and start-up Internet companies. Moved to Iowa three years ago.

Family: Wife, Cindy. Two grown children in California.

ACCOUNTING EXPERT

Joe Kristan

Co-owner of Roth & Co., a Des Moines accounting firm.

www.taxupdateblog.com

Target audience: Iowa-based businesses that need accounting services, bankers and lawyers who refer customers to accounting firms.

BUSINESS LAWYER

Rush Nigut

Business and corporate attorney with **the** Des Moines law firm Sullivan & Ward.

www.rushonbusiness.com

Target audience: Businesses and individuals who need **the** services of a business and corporate attorney.

From his site: "(A lawyer) used every penny of his personal savings to start a law firm that is turning **the** practice of law on its head by charging for services only on a flat fee basis."

HISPANIC MARKETER

Nanette Rodriguez

President of Vivamedia, Clive

www.virtualviva.com/weblog

Target audience: Companies that want to market their products and services to **the** Hispanic population within Iowa and nationally.

From her site: "2006 will go down in **the** books as a phenomenal year as far as press attention goes for **the** Latino population right here in Des Moines and all over **the** nation."

Sansone's tips for bloggers

SCOUT: Start by reading other blogs to get ideas on length and tone and to see what you like in a blog. Whatever your like and don't like probably holds true for your readers, too.

KEEP IT SHORT: A blog of 150 to 300 words is a good length. A short blog will keep **the** attention of readers.

WRITE OFTEN: Four or five times a week is ideal to keep your blog fresh.

LINK: Include a link to at least one other Web site or blog. This makes your blog a source for further information.

A PLACE TO START: Sansone said three Web sites can help people get started blogging for little or no money.

·www.typepad.com

·www.blogger.com

·www.wordpress.com

IOWA BLOGS: Lists of Iowa blogs can be found at www.iowabizevents.com and iowablogs.net.

Award-winning blog

Blawg IT, a blog written by Des Moines patent attorney Brett Trout, was a finalist for best law blog in **the** 2006 Weblog Awards, based on online voting. Blawg IT placed sixth.

See it at <http://blog.bretttrout.com>.

Web design firm's 'wiki' fosters internal communication

Therese Wielage, a partner in Spindustry Systems Inc., a Web design and development business in Des Moines, expects more internal company blogging.

Spindustry has an internal blog, known as a "wiki," a Hawaiian-language word for quick or fast.

Many companies have internal blogs that allow employees, and sometimes key customers, to engage in discussions in a blog-like format, Wielage said.

An internal blog has an author to keep **the** wiki fresh with **new** ideas and to keep **the** conversation going among employees, Wielage said.

Spindustry has a wiki area on its company intranet where computer programmers share tips, ideas and other information.

"When you have programmers working at various times of day and from various locations, they can look there to see if someone hit **the** same roadblock they did and what worked," Wielage said. "This

is helpful when they don't have **the** benefit of poking their head over to **the** next cube to ask."

iTunes and running boards: Podcasts give insight on products

Don't look for blogs from Dee Zee Inc., but get ready for podcasts about **the** company's products, such as aluminum running boards and toolboxes for **the** backs of pickup trucks.

Podcasts are another part of **the** "social media," according to Mike Sansone, a Des Moines-area adviser on blogging and other Web features. **The** term "social media" refers to **the** fact that people and businesses use sites such as iTunes and YouTube to share opinions, information and experiences.

Dan Kruzic, director of marketing for Dee Zee, a maker of aluminum truck accessories, said a blog wasn't a good fit for Dee Zee. Blogs allow people to make comments about equipment or products that could be incorrect, Kruzic said.

Podcasts don't have a comment feature so a business has greater control, he added.

"It's really unbelievable how big this is," said Kruzic. "It's really one of **the** hottest things out there based on **the** popularity of Apple iPods and MP3 players."

Dee Zee plans to post audio spots on iTunes beginning in January and video spots beginning in April.

The spots, both audio and video, will be mini-advertisements about Dee Zee product features. Videos also are expected to include instructional spots now used primarily for training specialists who install Dee Zee equipment on vehicles.

Kruzic said it will work this way: iTunes visitors searching for information on trucks, for example, will get a list of postings on **the** topic and can download a Dee Zee audio or video.

Dee Zee gets its message out to a customer for virtually no cost, aside from producing **the** audio or video, which was being made anyway for radio or TV spots or other uses.

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