

The ABCs of Blogging

A play-by-play on content marketing and how to expand your company's online presence.



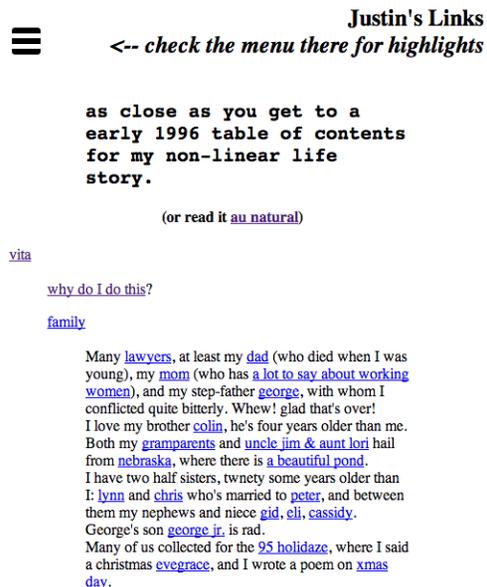
Union Street Media is a web development, web design, and internet marketing company that creates lead-generating websites for the best and brightest of the real estate world. We work closely with real estate agents and office to deliver user-friendly web experience that target qualified buyers and sellers in their respective local markets. Our team thrives on innovation and lives on the front lines of real estate technology.



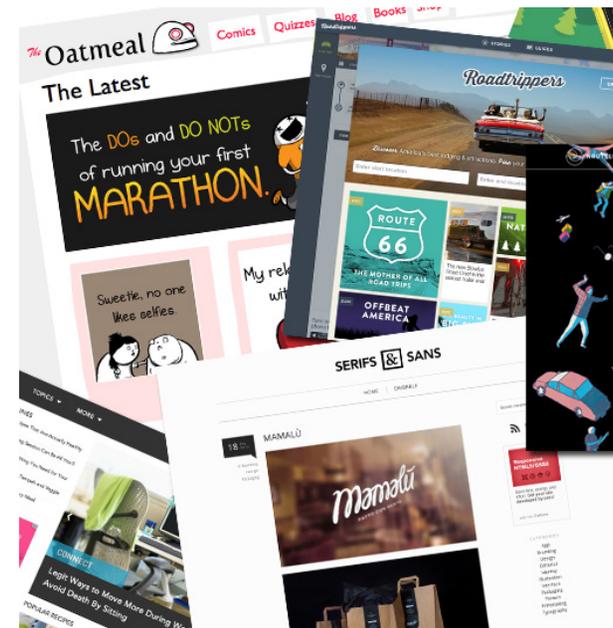
So... what exactly is a blog?

At its most basic definition, a blog is a story. It's an online diary or journal that is published for a public audience to read. Swarthmore student Justin Hall created the first blog ever in January 1994; it was called Links.net.

This is what it looked like **back then:**

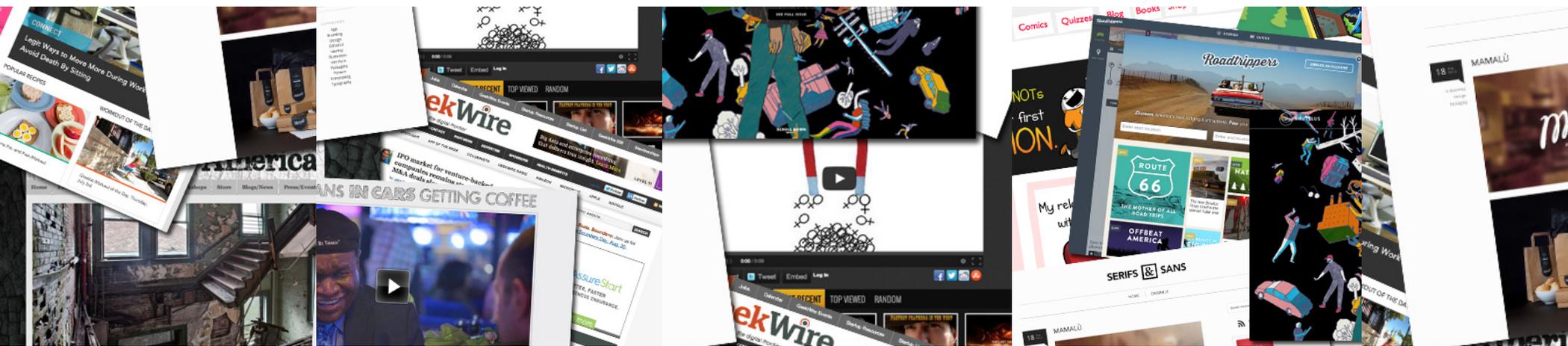


Fast forward two decades. Blogs look like this **now:**



Blogs have changed a lot since the early 1990s. There's millions more of them now. While the first blog documented the personal musings of a twenty-something college student, businesses big and small now use blogs to grow their company and build a following of loyal clients.

This is where the definition of a blog changes: it's a key **lead generator**. It's a way for your company to communicate with real people and showcase your expertise in the real estate world. It's the easiest way to demonstrate your expertise and to share helpful tips and interesting news with your clients. It's the cornerstone of any internet marketing strategy.



Important Terms

Drafts: These are versions of your blog posts that have not been published yet. Drafts are not visible on your website, and they must be published before your visitors can see them. It's a good idea to create drafts of blog posts if they need approval from someone on your team or if you need to write part of a post at a later time.

Preview: This option allows you to see how your blog post will appear to your site visitors. Use preview to see how your text and images display. If they look strange in the preview, go back to the editing screen and tweak your content.

Publish: You should publish your blog posts after you review the content and see the preview. Publishing a blog post makes it live on your website, which means that your visitors will be able to see what you wrote. Published blog posts appear in reverse chronological order; the newest blog post will always appear first.

Date & Time: The date and time of blog posts are set automatically from the moment you publish a post. However, you can change the date and time of publication to better suit your schedule. If you write and edit a post on Monday, but you don't want to publish the post until Wednesday, you can set the publication time for then.

Categories let you sort your blog posts into relevant groups for easier navigation. Possible categories for real estate blogs include *DIY Projects*, *Local Market Trends*, and *Local Attractions*. Existing categories often appear in the sidebar of your blog.

Tags are similar to categories; while categories show people what your blog posts are about, tags show search engines what your blog posts are about. If you tag a blog post as "real estate marketing," then your blog is more likely to appear on a search engine results page when a person searches for that phrase.

Featured image: This image is the main visual element for your blog post. When you set a photo as a featured image, that picture will appear next to your post's headline on different sites.

Add Media: The "Add Media" button lets you add visual elements to your page. You can upload GIFs, infographics, photos, or YouTube videos to your content to make your post more engaging.

Read More Tag: Include a "read more" tag after the first paragraph of your post to shorten the post's appearance on the blog's main page. When a reader visits your blog and browses through recent posts, the "read more" tag acts as a teaser to encourage readers to click on the full post.

The **format** of your blog post is essential to engaging your readers. You can put text in **bold** or *italics* for added emphasis, increase the size of your text, or make bullet points to easily guide the reader through your content.



First, let's take a look at the numbers:

Companies that blog have 55% more website visitors than companies that don't blog.

Small businesses with blogs generate 126% more leads than small businesses that don't blog.

81% of people trust advice and information from blogs.

70% would rather learn about a company through articles than ads.

Why should I **blog**?

Bloggng is a proven method for lead generation and long-term **SEO** success for four reasons:

1) Blogs provide valuable space for successful CTAs. Your readers are a captive audience that trust the information you provide; they are more likely to see a CTA and convert from a casual browser to a qualified lead.

2) Blogs increase SEO value. When you optimize your titles, tags, and descriptions with targeted keywords, you drive more organic traffic to your site. More blog posts mean more indexed pages for search engines and more searchable content. Google is kind of like an elephant: it doesn't forget. When you have a slew of blog posts that stretch back for several months, Google indexes all of the posts and present them to potential clients when they're looking for information months from now.

3) Blogs position you as a thought leader of real estate. Blogs showcase your expertise in your local market. People respect authors of smart, innovative information. Once you have several publish blog posts under your belt, potential clients, competitors, and search engines recognize your authority.

4) Blog posts offer long term ROI for your business; once live, a good blog post keeps working for you and continues to attract more visitors to your site. By contrast, print media, TV commercials, and radio spots only offer a short term ROI; once the impression is over, the effect of the investment is gone.



SEO is term that stands for "search engine optimization." SEO is the process of optimizing your website for greater search engine visibility.

CTA stands for call to action. A call to action encourages a site visitor to convert into a lead or sale.

Interesting content is one of the top three reasons why people follow brands online.

Too many real estate agents choose not to blog because they don't see the business return of blogging, or they believe that blogs take too much work to maintain.

Others start blogging with the best intentions and become disappointed when they can't track immediate results from their efforts. Blogs are marathons, not sprints; blogs have the highest return when posts are published consistently over an extended period of time. You have to start small. It requires some patience and perseverance, but you don't need to be a journalist to do it.

Take one of our clients - Maple and Main Realty - for example. They joined our team in the fall of 2013. They took a simple inventory of their available time and resources, and they committed to a flexible schedule of one blog post every week.

Their first blog post was published on September 23, 2013. Maple and Main picked up some steam and chugged along with posts on decluttering your home, local market trends, and showcases for local artists. The blog is filled with engaging images and lots of great tips for their clients.



Within a year,
Maple and Main
saw major
increases in traffic
and engagement.

1) Their blog drives a major percentage of referrals to their website, and their blog is the most popular source of referrals after social media.

2) The blog has a healthy bounce rate of 29% - lower than the average for many real estate websites.

3) People visit an average of 6.37 web pages after landing on their blog.

4) Their average session duration on the blog is more than a minute longer than their site average.

5) Their blog generates a healthy conversion rate of 1.63%.

Here's the moral of the story: every great success story begins with a single step, a single word, a single idea. Patience and diligence are key to blogging success. Start small and stick with it.

Blogging Best Practices:

Create a vision for your blog and content.

In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

If you want your blog to succeed, it's important for you to figure out what you want it to accomplish. If you set out publishing blog posts without an idea of where you want to go, your content will appear messy and your visitors won't engage with it. To help you understand your blogging goals, we've create a short checklist for your to think through:

- What's your business' mission? What concepts and ideas are you founded on?
- What do you want to say about your company to current and future clients?
- Think about your potential clients. What questions do they often ask you?
- What kind of information would encourage a warm lead to convert to a sale?
- What kind of information would turn an existing client into a better client?
- What kind of gaps do you want to fill in your local real estate market?

This list isn't exhaustive; you may find that you need to tweak this checklist to suit the goals of your business. For instance, maybe you should write about hot-button issues of the day, week, month, and year in your local community. Think about your favorite amenities, restaurants, and experiences that would make people want to move to your town, and describe those attractions on your blog.

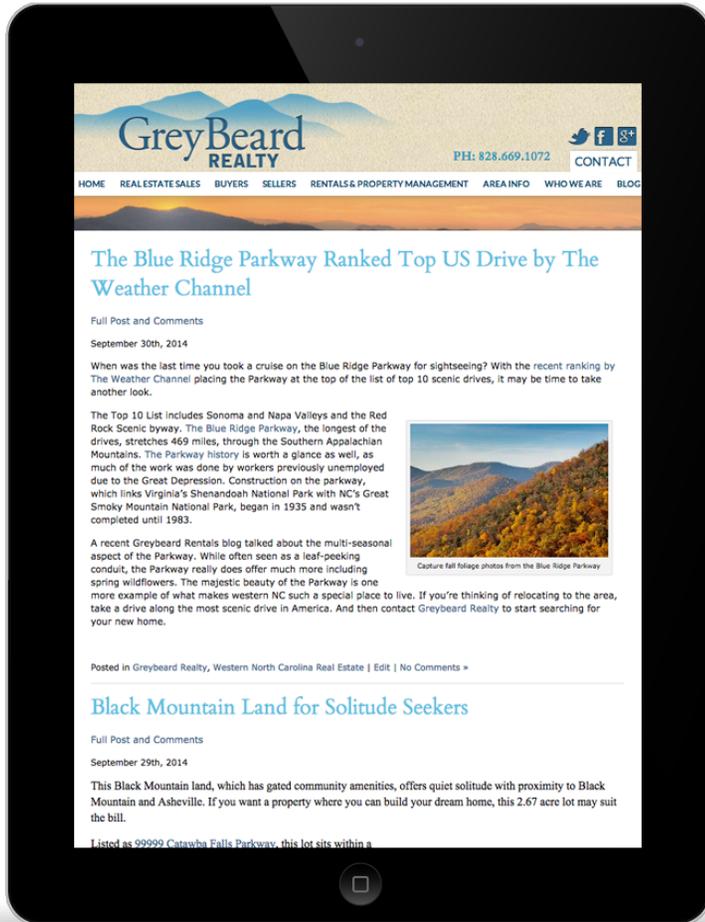
No matter what your answers may be to these questions, it's important to write them down and discuss them with your company. Once it's written down, share the information with employees who create blog content so everyone will start on the same page with the same expectations.

77% of all internet users read blogs on a regular basis.



Blogging Best Practices:

Create a blog schedule and stick to it.



Once your vision is in place, your next step is to create a schedule for your content. Schedules are important because they force you to publish your posts on a regular basis. They also act as a blogging metronome to help you keep pace with your posts; that way, you never speed through all of your content too quickly, and you stay on track for long term success.

First, decide what schedule works best for you. Large businesses often blog once a day or multiple times a day, but most small businesses benefit from simply posting once a week. If you decide to post once a week, choose the same day every week to publish your posts. Then, your readers will know which day to check back for new content from your company.

For instance, one of Union Street Media's favorite blogs is Moz's Whiteboard Friday series. They publish an SEO-related video once a week every Friday, so we know exactly when to look for the latest post. Posting on the same day every week also builds anticipation for your followers who will look forward to your posts in the days leading up to their publication.

As you set out to create your schedule, write it down on a calendar or a spreadsheet to keep everything in order. Think about your schedule like a web, not a line. Although your posts should always be moving forward, they should also refer back to previous posts and create an interconnected group of ideas.

Let's say you're getting ready to write a post called "10 Easy Ways to Boost the Curb Appeal of Your Home." One of the tips you decide to include is to consider giving the exterior of the house a fresh coat of paint. Then you realize that you published a post a few months ago about how to choose the right color of paint for your house. These two posts represent a way to link back to previous posts, revive old content, and create a web of engaging ideas for your blog.



Blogging Best Practices:

Create great content.

Blogs are the equalizers of the internet. They give small business authors the same access to readers as business giants. The key? You need to create smart content that speaks to your targeted audience. Thankfully, creating niche content is easier than you may think. We created a short checklist to get you thinking about some good ideas:

- What kind of business do you specialize in? Land transactions? High-end properties?
- What do your clients need to know about these markets?
- What are common questions that come from your clients?
- What should buyers know about your area?
- What should sellers know about your area?



If you optimize your site with our internet marketing team, they should also be able to provide you with good information for blog content. Once you have some solid ideas down, start writing. Keep these unwritten rules in mind while you craft your posts:

- 1) Make sure your ideas and sentences are concise. If you have trouble reading your post, your readers will have trouble.
- 2) Use examples to illustrate your point. If you write about pre-qualification, walk your buyers through the actual process of qualifying for a home loan.
- 3) Remember your targeted keywords. If you want to rank well for “martha’s vineyard real estate,” consider putting genuine content about the region in your posts.
- 4) Consider using bulleted lists for easily digestible information. People skim more than read and will appreciate bite-sized formats.
- 5) Reread and always revise. You’ll always find a pesky typo or a way to make your post a little better.
- 6) Above all, don’t be afraid. Readers expect blogs to be informal and colloquial. You can change all content on the fly - any time. Don’t wordsmith to perfection, just get it out there.

92% of companies that blogged multiple times a day acquired a customer through their blog.



How to Optimize Your Blog Posts

So you've written your first blog post. The next step is to make sure that your posts can be found by people in search engines. You can do this by optimizing your blog **title**, **meta tags**, and **meta description**.

Images and videos within your blog posts can also be easily optimized. People tend to respond better to visual content than text content - the

release of the Facebook timeline points to this fact. But simply including visual content in your posts isn't enough. Be sure to optimize them as well. Describe your images and videos with simple alt tags and file titles. Since search engines can't "read" images, these little pieces of text alert them to the relevancy of your visual content.

Posts with videos attract 3 times more inbound links than plain-text posts.



Titles are the first thing that people see when they search for something on Google, so it's important to make sure they are concise and engaging. Make your blog title specific to your topic and engaging to readers. A title like "Summer by the Sea: 10 Outdoor Attractions in Portland, ME" is better than a title like "Local Attractions." If you can, try to integrate one of your targeted keywords into the title - but don't force it if the title sounds better without it.

Meta tags are the keywords that you assign to your posts based on their content. These tags give hints to search engines about the topic of your blog posts, and they help search engines determine the relevancy of your post when a person completes a search query. If you write a blog post about DIY projects, you want your meta tags to reflect that: "DIY," "projects," "do it yourself," "real estate," etc. Google states that while they ignore most meta tags, they do use the description meta tag as the text for search result snippets that are displayed under page titles.

Meta descriptions are the short blurbs about pages that appear directly beneath the titles in search engine results pages. These are often the second things that people read when they conduct an online search, so you want to try to captivate them in 160 characters or less. If your meta description includes one of your keywords, it signals relevancy of your post to search engines.



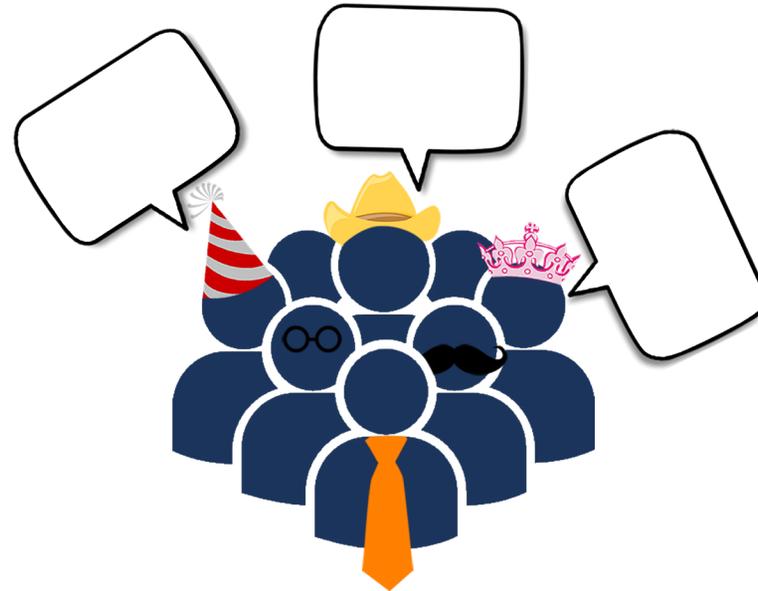
Blogging Best Practices:

Engage your community and mediate comments on your posts.

CTAs are invaluable to blog posts, and too many real estate agents neglect to make use of them. If you want to funnel your blog traffic into other areas of your site, place CTAs in the header, footer, and sidebar of your posts. If you write about an issue that one of your products or services solves, include a banner ad on your post for one of your product landing pages. If you have an older blog post that is relevant to your current topic, link to it. Short CTAs are a great way to engage your followers and direct them to other interesting spaces on your site.

Up until this point, we've talked about how to engage your followers and encourage them to interact with your blog posts. Here's step two: talk back. One of the biggest mistakes that small business bloggers make is never responding to their readers' comments. A blog should be an open dialog with your client, not a one-way lecture. When you talk to your readers, let your personality shine through. People like to know that they're interacting with an actual human being rather than a company with the personality of a robot.

Every once in awhile, your blog posts might attract a negative comment. It's bound to happen sooner or later; you can't make everyone happy all of the time. So how do you take the headache out of client criticisms? Be genuine and transparent. Answer all of the reader's questions and apologize if necessary. Show appreciation for their efforts; ask how you can help them, and then do so to the best of your ability. You might even consider following up a few days or weeks later to make sure that all of their questions were answered.



Blogging Best Practices:

Promote your blog on social media.

Never think singularly about your content. Every article you write or infographic you create should be repackaged and shared through different channels to reach a maximum number of potential clients. This rule extends to social media as well.

Along with a blog schedule, you should create a separate schedule dedicated to promoting your posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.



Facebook

Choose an engaging photo, and post it with a short, eye-catching description. Include a link to your blog post; you can use a bit.ly link to keep track of who visits your blog via your social media pages.

Twitter

Find an enticing fact or sentence from your blog post, and tweet it to your followers with a link to your blog post.

Pinterest

Keep your Pinterest posts focused on the visual content you produce. Your Pinterest page is a great place to share infographics and informational charts that you create.

Most importantly, make sure you use clear social media sharing tools that encourage your loyal readers to share your posts with their friends.

With any luck, this ebook has inspired and encouraged you to start blogging. The best real estate blogger you know had no experience in blogging before a few years ago. You can do it, too. The blogosphere is an ever-expanding place that welcomes blogging newcomers to its ranks every day. All you have to do is dig in.

