Blog Marketing Strategies for Mature and Emerging Markets

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Abstract—The recent popularity of blogs as fascinating interactive media for online communication has attracted a large chunk of Internet users to publish their views and share knowledge with each other on various topics of interest. Apart from their social impact, the power of online conversation via blogging has also been witnessed in different domains of Improving corporate functioning. market reputation management, brand building, search engine optimization, CSR reporting and crisis management are some of the activities being increasingly addressed using corporate blogs along with other traditional modes of communication. In this paper, we first study and analyze the response of mature markets towards blogs and identify their benefits and limitations for the purpose of marketing. Next, we find out how blogs are being exploited by corporate organizations in India. Finally, we devise strategies for adoption of blogs by companies as useful marketing media in emerging economy markets.

Index Terms—Blog marketing, blogging strategies, corporate communication, interactive media.

I. INTRODUCTION

A blog [1], [2] is a web-based publication written in an informal tone with tags and links to other related blogs and websites. Postings are frequently updated and listed in reverse chronological order [3] with the latest entry appearing first at the top. This one-to-many communication mode encourages readers to participate, give suggestions and post back their opinion [4]. Today, blogs are frequently created and updated [5] and messages posted back by users on topics including entertainment, music, sports, politics, health & lifestyle, business and technology. There has been tremendous growth of blogs [6], [7] in the last few years with more and more people expressing themselves using this online media. Blogging platforms like TypePad, Blogger, WordPress, Movable Type, Tumblr, Xanga and Livejournal are quite popular and one may easily create a blog and start publishing within a few minutes. In order to attract visitors and initiate discussions, it is desirable that blog contents are interesting and innovative and are based on honest and frank opinion of the blogger. Apart from social issues, the list of popular blogging topics also includes different aspects of corporate functioning [8], [9] like marketing, sales, reputation & brand management, PR, CRM, HRM and crisis

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management. Corporate blogs [10]-[12] present a more human face to the organization and its business and provide an opportunity for interaction with stakeholders, employees and consumers. Blogs have been successfully used in mature markets [13] and present new opportunities and challenges for their adoption and efficient use by companies operating in emerging markets [14]. In addition to their capability of humanizing an organization or a product, blogs also help to boost search engine rankings. Blog linkages to web pages and other blogs help to attract customers [15], [16] and often lead to direct sales of the company products and services. Corporate blogs offer an excellent platform for connecting with customers and for developing and building relationship with them. Blogs also help to understand the customer in a better way by knowing their preferences about the products and services offered by the company. As blogs are normally updated more informally and frequently compared to websites and other available media, they are very suitable for informing customers regarding launch of new products, product modifications, latest offers, promotions, etc.

Corporate blogs offer flexibility for addressing and focusing on specific groups associated with the organization e.g. employees, stakeholders, service providers or select customers. They may also be used as a one-one communication tool [17]-[19] by receiving valuable feedback from an individual who responds to a blog topic with his suggestion and acknowledging him with a simple reply. One-one interactions with a consumer using a blog makes him feel important and automatically builds a positive relationship, which in turn improves his loyalty for the company. Similar interaction with an individual helps to improve customer experience, attracts more buyers and helps to keep them longer and more attached with the products and services offered by the company. Corporate blogs are also very useful for interacting with high value customers who place more emphasis on the experience with the company or product.

Blogs present unique opportunities for advertisers [20] to move their messages to the audience in a fast and focused manner. With instant access to information about a product, service or company the smart consumer checks out prices and compares features/ performance with products available from competitors. Blog advertising is gaining in popularity but requires a different mindset and level of creativity for marketers and advertisers to address the new breed of 'up-to-date' consumers. Instead of an assertive top-down message delivery, it is now felt by many experts that advertisements should be used as a tool for conversation with customers. In today's fragmented world, advertisers need to develop skills for communicating with focused groups rather than a large group as applicable in the case of advertising



using traditional media. Honest advertising with less of selling gimmicks and more of value in the messages enables a faster and stronger connection with the blog audience/participants. In the blogosphere, it is more important to deliver the promises by the marketer. This helps to fetch positive response from consumers resulting in improved sales and automatic brand building. On the other side, lack of transparency and honesty may irritate the blogging community resulting in instant tarnishing of the brand as has been witnessed for many cases in the past [13].

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The paper aims to examine the following (a) To study the significance of blogs as new media for marketing communication (b) To understand the current scenario regarding use of blogs for marketing in mature as well as in emerging economy markets and (c) To devise blog marketing strategies for their effective use in emerging economies.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Blogs, in conjunction with other modes of corporate communication, could be efficiently used for brand building and carrying out other marketing campaigns in emerging economies.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF BLOGS IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION

There are many reasons that justify inclusion of blogs in the marketing communication [21], [22] toolkit. Unlike traditional media, blogs are always operational even beyond business hours. One can access a blog or post a message at any convenient time. The set of postings are instantly available in reverse chronological order at one place and linkages to related resources are also provided that gives a more holistic view of the topic. Moreover, blogs provide a channel for reaching a large number of geographically distributed audiences, which in turn increases awareness and boost sales. Also, blogs are cost-effective, easier to implement than most of the other modes of communication and preferred due to their simplicity and informal nature.

Blogs help to humanize the organization, gain competitive advantage and open up business opportunities [23], [24]. Well known examples are Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Nokia and a number of professional service providers. They help to engage and create closer relationship with the customers, employees & other stakeholders [25], [26]. They also help to get back useful feedback and gain knowledge from customers. Companies get a chance to view reviews about their own products as well as those from their competitors thereby getting a chance to improve based on the feedback [27] from opinion leaders, critics and customers.

Use of blogs facilitate search engine optimization [11] & improve traffic to company websites which are normally packed with information. Blogs help in brand building for the company by employee bloggers & co-branding by

consumers/ online audience. There are many companies where employee bloggers attract attention by posting fresh and interesting information that in turn improves the image and reputation of the company [28], [29]. In some other cases, blogs have been useful for swift handling of crisis situations [16] and providing instant clarifications before substantial damage is done. There have been instances where reputation of companies was maligned due to unavailability of online media for clarification and quick response.

V. PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH CORPRATE BLOGS

Despite several promises, a number of problems are also encountered by companies using blogs. A blog consumes skills, knowledge & precious time of CEO or senior marketing executives, which may be difficult to spare on regular basis. In case blogging is outsourced, the posts may not be able to reflect the true message or spirit of the company. In many situations companies join the bandwagon but their culture may not support two-way open communications leading to a failed exercise. Moreover, the value of speed & time in the blogosphere may not be appreciated by many companies with old mindset, as action is required within hours and minutes instead of weeks and days.

By nature, blogs are fresh and dynamic and have a negative impact if taken half-heartedly by the company (either when topics are not interesting or postings are not updated regularly). Also, audience shies away if blog is presented in a professional marketing tone. Often, blogs may be subjected to criticism and unknown audience may try to shatter the corporate brand. Similarly, a disgruntled employee may not respect blogging policies & publish confidential information causing intangible losses.

In many countries, a substantial percentage of customers may prefer to interact with the company using more traditional modes of communication like telephones or face-to-face discussions. A substantial population in different parts of the world does not have easy access or is not accustomed to handling online media. Funding of costs associated with blogs is normally done by PR or marketing departments. The company expects regular hard returns, which may not be always possible. On the other hand there could be a number of soft returns due to blogs that many senior executives fail to understand and notice.

VI. BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

Blogs are relatively new mode of communication in the corporate world. They present a basket of opportunities to be exploited by companies for improving their brand value and gaining an edge over their competitors. Blogs in conjunction with other traditional and online media could be effectively used for addressing different corporate functionalities. However, blogging has its hidden risks too. Many organizations are still not clear about the benefits and returns that blogs could bring to their businesses. This study is conducted for addressing the following issues (a) To establish the current status of blogs as new media in marketing communication (b) To identify the actual benefits

and inherent risks of blogging for marketing activities (c) To find out which sectors are benefited more by participation in the blogosphere and (d) To develop blogging strategies for improving marketing efficiency in emerging economies like India.

VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Secondary information has been collected from various sources including company websites, articles & journal papers, news items and blog discussions. Websites and blogs specific to blogging [30], [31] were consulted for additional information. Independent and corporate bloggers were contacted by phone/mail/e-mail and a set of 10 open-ended questions was posed to them for obtaining information on recent trends and other corporate blogging developments. Similarly, a set of 12 open-ended questions was designed for Chief Blogging Officers/ designated company bloggers. This helped to acquire a rich description of the information needed for our study. Survey participation was invited from 55 companies from different parts of the world including Europe, US and Asia. The list included most of the Indian companies that have blogs and also a few others that deal with traditional businesses and do not have blogs. 58 influential / independent bloggers from different countries (including 18 from India) were contacted for their opinion regarding the present status of corporate blogging.

A close-ended questionnaire with 16 queries (given in the Appendix) related to general corporate blogging practices, blog marketing and consumer expectation from blogs was also prepared. A Likert scale with five response options 'strongly disagree', 'tend to disagree', 'neither disagree nor agree', 'tend to agree' and 'strongly agree' was used and response values were coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. More than 100 respondents in the age group 18 - 50 were directly contacted who either blog regularly or have a fairly good idea about corporate blogging. Out of the total number of respondents, 80 were selected after scanning their responses. A few respondents had either not filled up many entries or chose to tick the neutral response i.e. "neither disagree nor agree" for most of the statements in the questionnaire. This showed their lack of confidence in the subject or their unwillingness to respond on specific issues and hence was not considered in our analysis. Detailed analysis based on the information collected from respondents has been carried out and empirical findings are presented in the succeeding sections.

VIII. OBSERVATIONS & ANALYSIS

A large number of corporate and independent blogs were studied for understanding different aspects regarding their usage by the business community. It is observed that different companies are using blogs in their own unique way for carrying out internal communication, external communication or both. About 22% of the Fortune 500 companies [6] are presently using business blogs [32]. Google, Microsoft, SAP, Cisco Systems, Boeing, Dell, HP, General Motors are using blogs for the benefit of the

company as well as their customers. Some of the large companies have many blogs addressing different issues [7], [33]. Indian companies [34] like Accenture (India), Cleartrip, Frito-Lay, Gridstone, HCL, Hindustan Unilever, IBM (India), Microsoft (India), Mahindra & Mahindra, Milagrow, Naukri, Infosys, Rediff, TCS, Tata Interactive Systems, Wipro etc. are using blogs for addressing different corporate functionalities. A few Indian companies have taken up blogging quite seriously and senior executives regularly post new and relevant information. However, some of these companies (global as well) do not blog regularly with relevant topics/contents and hence are unable to create the desired impact. It has also been found that blogs engaging customers or stakeholders in the true sense are not common.

Out of the selected large and mid-cap Indian companies only a few use blogs for marketing and promotion. Others use these for projecting their image & culture, knowledge sharing, social interaction, attracting potential employees etc. It is obvious that in a country like India blogs as marketing media would be effective only for a fraction of the billion customers in the next few years (though this fraction of customers is quite large and has high buying potential). However, with the increase in the number of Internet cafes in rural India as well as substantial online participation in urban cities, companies would be able to influence a larger audience using blogs. Present findings are reported below.

A. Corporate Outlook

The facts and observations below are based on interviews conducted with corporate bloggers (who blog officially on behalf of the company) and independent bloggers (who blog on different corporate issues).

1) Current State of Corporate Blogging

Corporate blogging is growing globally as a two-way low-cost interactive mode of online communication for companies to reach their intended audience [18] instantly and easily. Compared to the west, corporate blogging in the Asia and Pacific region is not catching up as expected. Many companies are cautious about blogs and social media and are reluctant to adopt these for corporate communication. Some of them are trying to adopt these blindly with their old mindsets without even deciding what they want to achieve using blogs. It seems that the benefits of blogging have been over hyped and companies have started expecting too much from these new online media even before their maturity. On the other hand, many organizations are successfully using blogs for addressing different corporate functions.

2) Corporate Functionalities Addressed

Companies have exploited blogs mainly for internal communication and thought leadership. Blogs have been used more as a top-down tool for message propagation by the CEO or senior managers. More recently, blogs are being used for addressing end consumers, potential employees and stakeholders as well. Community building, PR, HR, branding, marketing, customer service and reputation management are some of the corporate functionalities being presently addressed using blogs.

3) Blogs for Two-way Communication

Only a few organizations have felt the need for two-way communication using blogs. Most of the companies are not



used to initiating a dialogue or discussion with stakeholders or customers. Others are not willing to take the risk and fear loss of control over communication, which may in turn affect their reputation. Blog discussions have sometimes invited lawsuits and landed companies in legal trouble. However, those who have engaged their customers, employees or stakeholders have also benefited from these interactions.

4) Impact on Specific Sectors

Most of the bloggers believe that every sector could benefit by use of blogs. This fact is also reflected by the consumer response statistics compiled and placed in the Appendix. In general, blog communities have helped to improve products and other professional services. Bloggers desire that Governments should also take up community feedback to improve their services. Healthcare and education are other sectors that could really benefit by using blogs and other social media.

Consumers today refer multiple sources before purchasing. Brand and product reviews are frequently available and updated by individual bloggers. It is also convenient to fetch useful information from blog posts and compare these with the information provided by the company. Blogs could be really useful for marketing of high involvement category products/services like electronic gadgets, luxury items, automobiles, real estate, tours & travels etc.

5) Impact on Specific Demographics

Many companies and expert bloggers believe that blogs and social networks are more suitable for the youth as a large chunk of audience on the Internet comprises of the youth community (in the age group 18 - 35 years). As youth seek transparency and authenticity, blogs are more suitable for communicating with them. However, other demographics including the senior market should not be discounted as more and more seniors are becoming active on the Internet.

6) Blogs for Traditional Businesses

Bloggers feel that any business could benefit from corporate blogging. Whatever be the business, use of blogs could help in their internal communication, knowledge sharing and branding initiatives. For communication, it requires change of mindset of the management by allowing others to participate in different aspects of their business. The impact of blogging on a particular business also depends upon the target audience and the available technological infrastructure. Traditional business should adopt technology to stay competitive and address the changing needs of the modern tech savvy customer.

7) Blogs for Customer Feedback/ Product Customization

Many companies (though not a large fraction) around the world have started taking customer feedback seriously. A number of cases have been quoted in which companies are using or have used blogs to customize / improve their products for different markets. In India, a few products and services have been successfully customized / modified based on customer feedback.

8) Blog Advertising

Blog advertising is fairly successful in developed markets but still immature in most of the emerging markets. The main confusion is regarding the practical value of advertisements on blogs and lack of a reliable system for their evaluation on blogs. Blog advertising in India is in its infancy. A number of bloggers have reported being offered advertising by companies on their blogs. More action is expected as the number of bloggers and blog participant increase in this region.

9) Future Usage of Blogs

Blogs are fairly stable in mature and established markets and are used to address all the above-mentioned corporate functionalities. Blogs would further be able to increase their impact with better penetration. They would help enterprises to understand the need of customers and keep active relationship with them. It is expected that they would play a prominent role in the integrated communication and marketing mix.

The penetration of broadband Internet in emerging economies is much slower than expected. On the other hand mobile communication is growing at a much faster rate. As a result, popularity and growth of blogs in general and specifically for business communication has been slower than projected before. However, usage of corporate blogging and other social media is increasing with increase in customer participation. Organizations may primarily focus on building trusted relationships with new customers, partners and stakeholders and then move on to other specialized functions. 10) Suggestions regarding Blog Marketing

Before starting a corporate blog, companies should be clear about their goals and objectives that they want to achieve by using this media. They should then plan strategies for integrating blogs along with other online and traditional modes of communication to reap the expected results. They should try to be transparent and honest to the extent possible otherwise the purpose of blogging would be defeated. The enhanced power of blogging comes from the freedom to participate in a two-way communication. Companies should also trust their employees and give them the liberty to speak and voice their opinion on blogs. As a precaution it makes sense to monitor employee online behaviour at workplace. They may lay down blogging policies and give guidelines to their employees. It is important for companies to realize that lack of online presence may risk them of losing reputation and market share and gradually push them out of place.

Companies should also control their expectation regarding the returns from corporate blogging. It should be clear that inclusion of blogs and other social media in the corporate communication toolkit demands a different mindset and also a different way of conducting business. Corporate should frequently use blogs for messaging and community outreach. Most of the experts suggest that a blog should not be used as a pure marketing tool as it would drive customers away.

In India, companies should start encouraging two-way communication and take customer feedback more seriously. Many companies in the mature markets have improved their brand image, built their reputation online, increased their marketing ROI and used blogs for crisis management. Now it's the turn of emerging markets to take the maximum advantage from blogs.

B. Consumer Outlook

Percentage response values corresponding to each

statement were calculated for the selected respondents and are given in the Appendix along with the questionnaire. Other statistical parameters like the minimum and maximum response value, average response score and standard deviation were also computed from the data. The second, fourth and sixteenth statements posed in the questionnaire fetched the most consistent responses (lowest standard deviations of 0.62, 0.63 and 0.57 respectively). This shows the confidence of respondents in blogs as a corporate communication tool. People feel that blogs present a more human face to the organization and help to increase awareness about a product/service and boost its sales. With the increasing number of Internet savvy citizens, blogging is likely to be a useful tool in the hands of corporate India.

Respondents also felt that blogs may be used to project a positive image about the company and also for brand building. A higher percentage of them believed that traditional businesses could also benefit by including blogging into their corporate communication toolkit. Majority of them agreed that blogs are useful for attracting potential employees and may be used to encourage social interactions and generate harmony among employees. Employees should also be empowered to blog officially and it's their own responsibility to follow the company policies and guidelines and understand the legal implications. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (average response score = 4.36) that multinationals and global brands could benefit by taking feedback from the audience using blogs and accordingly modify their products for the local markets.

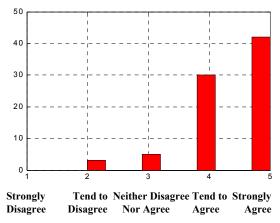


Figure 1. Response statistics for the statement "Blogs are useful media for companies to interact with their customers"

There was high inconsistency in the response given against items 6 and 15. There was no uniform opinion regarding the fact that blogging can be risky for companies as unknown audience may write negative comments. Respondents were also not sure how blogs could be practically useful for handing crisis situations.

C. Final Comments

11) Impact of Corporate Blogging on Mature Markets

Marketers around the world have understood that influencing customers solely using mass media is not possible today. Customized, personal and interactive communication is the need of the day and blogs along with linked corporate websites are quite suitable for this purpose. Blogs are being used to address a broader market as well as finer segmented communities having specific requirements.

Marketing contents communicated by traditional channels are being added to corporate blogs for more effective online coverage.

It can be seen that larger companies are using blogs for thought leadership, reputation and brand building, CSR reporting, knowledge sharing and social interaction. Mid and small sized companies are exploiting blogs more for sales promotions, PR, CRM and improving market awareness. Blogs are helping companies improve their brand image. Engaging online citizens have helped companies to improve their reputation. Product reviews on blogs help consumers to take better purchase decisions. Previous postings & archives along with honest audience feedback are all available together in a blog. Product information available on blogs is treated as more credible, authentic and uncensored compared to information posted by companies on their websites or in other traditional media. In addition, consumers are providing critical & useful feedback that is helping companies to constantly improve existing products/services. Innovative ideas from consumers are encouraging companies to come up with new products. However, a major percentage of companies are still not blogging and are also unable to judge the investment returns of blogging.

12) Reaction of Corporate India on Blogging

Technology inclined companies including IT, telecom, consumer electronics, media & entertainment, FMCG, professional services etc. have been early adopters of blogging and use it to address various corporate functionalities. Leaving exceptions, traditional companies have shown little interest in blogging. A few companies have successfully used blogs to project themselves as domain leaders, improve their reputation and brand image and build positive relationship with customers. Most companies try to influence their audience by advertising in traditional media or using face-to-face PR strategy. They do not yet consider blogs as significant media for corporate communication.

A large number of companies are not conversant with the implications of using this new media. ROI of blogging is a concern for the Indian corporate as well. Companies fear losing control over communication by inviting people to post their opinion about corporate matters. Most of the blogs are used for message broadcasting by the CEO or senior executives and are not used for community interaction or engagement. Some companies are blogging but in a half-hearted tone. Postings are inconsistent, irregular, commercialized and mostly authored by a single person. This is turning away audiences and the entire purpose is being defeated.

13) Significance of Blogging for Companies Operating in Emerging Economies

Frequent message postings and interactions are required by companies to handle the dynamics of emerging markets. Many events & activities occur simultaneously affecting the communication & performance of companies. Moreover, the size of the currently emerging markets offer opportunities for using blogs to address a large audience & take their feedback. This process helps to gather relevant information regarding customer behavior and carry out marketing research. Blogs help companies to gather information about new trends so



that they may take appropriate actions prior to their competitors.

Blogging has the potential for addressing customers at different levels of the pyramid. For the bottom of the pyramid, customized blogs/mobile blogs using regional or primary languages may be a good option. Blogging is an excellent media for addressing the youth community that is greatly influenced by global brands. MNCs or foreign companies wishing to enter and exploit the potential of emerging markets may use blogs and websites along with traditional modes for positioning and customizing their brands in the local markets.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Blogging, an unconventional approach for two-way online communication and customer participation, is gradually finding its way into the corporate arena. Many organizations quickly included blogs in their corporate communication toolbox and are successfully using it as a cost-effective media with instant reach. Some organizations have started using blogs for marketing, sales, brand building, CRM, HRM and CSR reporting & discussions. Others are unaware or reluctant to adopt it in fear of losing control over their communication. The impact of corporate blogging varies substantially depending upon the degree of market maturity and also across different demographic segments. In many countries, particularly in the Asia Pacific, blogs are not yet considered important compared to other traditional media, which are more popular and influential. Despite the hype, corporate blogging has not gathered momentum to the extent it was expected.

However, the scenario in India is rapidly changing. IT and communication infrastructure including mobile and broadband connectivity are rapidly improving (even in smaller towns and villages) together with literacy regarding usage of computers and the Internet. Social networks have been a hit among the urban youth. Many companies have shown interest and want to start their blogs in the next few months. The significance of two-way communication and customer participation is also gaining momentum and blogging would help companies interact with customers more freely and frequently and take their valuable feedback. In addition, the blogosphere would be faster, livelier and more attractive domain in the future with instant micro-blogging messages and rich linked media like pictures, podcasts, online video and multimedia files.

Blogs would gradually find a respectable place in the corporate communication toolkit of organizations competing in emerging economies due to their characteristics to handle high market dynamics and scale and diversity of operations. Cost-effectiveness, instant penetration over wide geographical areas, scope for community participation and brand building would make this online media a favorite for marketing communication in emerging markets. Blogs along with corporate websites have a huge potential for addressing the youth market in India. Companies using it seriously, intelligently and with precaution would certainly benefit from this exciting media. A study regarding the financial

returns of blogging as an isolated media and also in the integrated communication environment would be conducted as an extension of this research. We feel that it's a matter of time when blogs would deliver significant value to organizations using them for marketing campaigns and brand building.

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APPENDIX - Consumer Response Statistics (Response Values Coded as %)

S.No	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Tend to Disagree	Neither (2) Disagree Nor Agree	Tend to (5) Agree	Strongly G Agree
1	Blogs are useful media for companies to interact with their customers.	0	4	6	37	53
2	Corporate blogs present a more human face to the organization.	0	0	30	59	11
3	Blogs may be successfully used for marketing & brand building.	0	4	25	48	23
4	Blogs may help to increase awareness about a product and boost its sales.	0	0	10	54	36
5	Blogs may be useful for handling crisis situations by companies.	1	21	46	28	4
6	Blogging can be risky for companies as unknown audience may write negative comments.	15	30	5	41	9
7	Empowering employees to blog is a waste of time and resources.	24	52	20	4	0
8	Blogging is useful only for technology-oriented companies.	9	31	20	36	4
9	Corporate blogging can also be useful to companies with traditional businesses.	0	13	21	55	11
10	Blogs may be used to project a positive image about the company.	0	14	9	41	36
11	Blogs reflect the company culture and hence may be useful for attracting human resources.	0	4	25	52	19
12	Blogs encourage social interaction & help to generate harmony among employees.	4	5	27	50	14



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13	Corporate blogs may be used by companies to target the youth more than the older generation.	4	25	12	33	26
14	Global brands may benefit by taking feedback & modifying their product in the local markets.	0	8	0	41	51
15	Indian companies normally do not take customer feedback and hence blogging is not of much use.	14	19	29	23	15
16	Looking at Internet usage statistics in India, blogging may be useful for companies in future.	0	0	4	52	44

Total Respondents = 80