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A BLOG AS AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOL IN E-BUSINESS

Summary: In the early stages of the blogosphere, blogs were run mainly by individuals and representatives of media, the entertainment industry, politics and sport. Nowadays, blogging is undergoing commercialization, which means that companies more and more frequently launch canvassing, advisory or image-building projects based on communications blogs. As a result, they offer a range of possibilities. Corporate blogs are becoming a universal tool which enables organizations to achieve diverse business goals. They are easy to set up and run compared to corporate websites and generate minimum or no costs at all. The paper focuses on the specificity and possibility of using a blog as an effective e-business communication tool in comparison with a website.

Keywords: blog, corporate website, b-blogging, Google Analytics.

Introduction

Modern reality based on ICT is called Web 3.0 era. According to D.M. Smith, it began in 2011 and it is characterized by such factors as mobile services accessibility, cloud computing and real time IT systems [1]. In the preceding Web 1.0 era (1989-2003), companies started running e-business and websites. They were based solely on HTML code and therefore static, which determined one-way communication with prospective users. First online shops, online marketplaces [2] and tools for sharing and exchanging information came into existence, for example discussion groups, which later turned into forums and blogs.

The rise of Web 2.0 (2004-2010) marked a turning point as it enabled interaction between website owners and their users. Websites became dynamic and social networks, Internet applications and the blogosphere started developing.

The idea of Web 2.0 allowed every user to create and publish information on the Internet. Every user could evaluate and comment on the website content and also add their own pictures, articles, audio and video or blog posts [2].

Web 2.0 led to the creation of Enterprise 2.0. The term was coined by A. McAfee, according to whom Enterprise 2.0 allows using social software inside or outside companies, between companies, their business partners and customers [3]. Social platforms enable people to meet, communicate and cooperate as well as create internet communities by means of electronic device [4, p. 58]. In order to attain the above-mentioned goals, different tools are used: blogs, microblogs, wiki, RSS, P2P, tags, mashups, filters, semantic search engines, internet games, podcasts and videocasts [5, pp. 29-31]. By implementing those tools it is possible to increase effectiveness of the business, administration and communications processes in a company. Enterprise 2.0 software improves document management and knowledge management, provides internal communication tools and enhances the information flow within an organization. The application of wiki or blogs encourages employees to exchange information between themselves and between a company and its environment [6].

However, it can be observed that not all modern managers appreciate Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies and the easy access to the tools which can enable companies to gain competitive advantage. They often choose Web 3.0 technologies, unaware of the benefits offered by the tools devised in the previous eras. They don't realize that in order to design and implement a professional Internet project, it is necessary to establish explicit goals, i.e. the expected benefits that a company is to obtain from the use of those tools [7, p. 14].

The paper presents two communication tools of the Web 2.0 era: a typical website and a blog. The aim of this paper is to discuss the specificity and potential of the corporate blog for e-business communication. The comparative analysis of the traffic on a corporate website and a blog will allow the authors to prove that a blog can be used as an effective communication tool in e-business, either alternative or complementary to a website.

1. A blog as a social media tool

Social media is a constantly evolving set of methods and technologies which enable people to interact, communicate and share ideas over the web. Blogs are one of the oldest and most recognizable Internet social tools. They

allow users to create content and build communities around a particular subject matter or the personality of a blog author [8, p. 87].

Blog, derived from “web log”, is defined as an online diary where individuals post thoughts and ideas, daily events, and their personal knowledge about specific topics. Through comments, linking and trackback, bloggers share their knowledge with each other and develop and refine new ideas [9, p. 312]. A blog is a website where information is displayed in date order, with the most recent information at the top of the page [10, p. 3].

Blogs consist of content that is continually updated in a diary format. They can be quite diverse, ranging from written updates to video diaries. Blogs often include photos, videos, music and audio [11]. The main blog elements are: blog posts (the content that makes up the blog), readers’ comments, tags and categories (blog posts are usually organized via categories and tagged keywords that help to readers find posts that interest them), archive (entries are organized into archives which readers can browse by clicking on a particular month, year or date range), related links (important in search engine optimization) and dashboard (accessible only to the blog authors, usually via a login, provides access to administrative tasks such as changing the look of the blog design, managing posts, reviewing and moderating comments from readers, and creating, and editing new posts using a built-in post editor).

Blogs were first introduced as a way to share personal journals. Over time, companies spotted their potential and started using them to promote products and services, publish company and other news, and provide customers with technical support. The beginnings of the Polish corporate blogging date back to 2007, when the first blog devoted to, oddly enough, corporate blogging, was created [8, p. 87].

1.1. A corporate blog vs. a corporate website

A corporate blog is a kind of website which has a particular convention, style and structure. It often happens to function as a company showcase or a first contact website.

The unique features of a corporate blog can be observed in three significant areas [12, p. 18]:

1. Information – on the one hand, a blog provides customers with the information about company activities, but on the other hand, it enables a company to learn what customer think of those activities.

2. Relation – a blog, which is based on the symmetrical communication with the visitors, enables a company to create bonds and establish relationships with the audience, e.g. through customers sharing the user experience with the company' products.
3. Knowledge management – a blogging platform constitutes a pool of knowledge contributed to by the company employees actively involved in blogging as well as the customers who want to share their experience.

Compared to corporate websites, blogs are simple to set up and run, and their content can be easily modified and updated. There are a lot of platforms offering the possibilities of setting up and running a blog free of charge. A blog combines an informal style with the marketing and informative functions. Thanks to regularly posted blog entries, which can be commented on, a company can effectively communicate with its customers, advising them of the new offerings, current promotions and latest developments. Thus, a blog has greater potential in terms of interaction and openness to contact with a company's environment than a typical corporate website, which is mainly focused on the presentation of a company and its offerings. Due to the fact that blogs are easily indexed by the Internet search engines, they can be a competitive positioning tool. They help to build company image, develop customers' trust and their loyalty to a brand. Table 1 shows the features of a corporate blog and a corporate website.

Table 1. The features of a corporate blog and a corporate website

Criterion	Corporate blog	Corporate website
style	informal, direct	formal
content	any, open, unlimited	closely connected with the company activities
author	known by his/her first name, surname or pseudonym	unknown, content written anonymously
comments	commenting is an integral part of a blog	doesn't provide the reader-comment facility
technology	as a rule, simplified to a maximum degree, easy to use	usually based on more advanced technologies
context	a wide range of materials	marketing materials, offers, sales oriented
functional reach	narrow	wide
complexity of structure and navigation	low	high

Source: Based on: [12, p. 19].

The major differences between a corporate blog and a corporate website can be presented as follows [12, p. 19]:

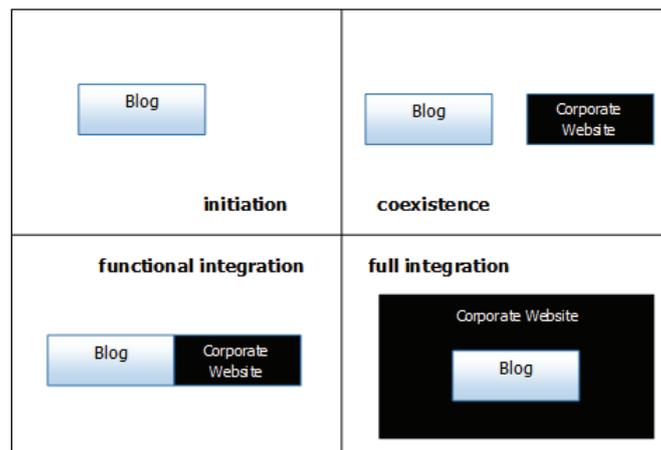
- a blog is interactive, encourages two-way communication,
- a blog is written in a lively, direct and informal style,

- a blog is frequently updated with texts, graphics and video clips,
- a blog is easy to use, a blogger does not need advanced computer knowledge,
- new entries are usually published on a blog immediately after being prepared and submitted,
- a blog provides the opportunity to inform an audience about the new elements in a simple and unobtrusive manner,
- blog content can be easily presented and published in other places online,
- a blog has huge social potential.

G. Mazurek distinguishes four models representing interdependencies between the use of corporate blogs and corporate websites [12, pp. 21-22]:

1. Initiation – in this model a company does not have its own Internet website and is present online only through its corporate blog.
2. Coexistence – a company communicates with the general public by means of a corporate website as well as a corporate blog, but keeps them separate from each other; they exist as two independent autonomous projects, on separate IP addresses.
3. Functional integration – a blog, run by a company employee, specialist or leader, is incorporated into a corporate website structure, i.e. the “blog” bookmark is added to its main menu. A blog becomes an integral part of a corporate website, but its content does not permeate into the other content of the website.
4. Full integration – there is full integration of a blog and a corporate website, not only in terms of navigation and functionality, but also the website conventions and communications (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Corporate blogs and corporate websites: interdependency models



Source: Based on: [12, p. 22].

So, a corporate blog can be a sole form of a company's online presence, a complement to or extension of a corporate website, or it can be functionally and navigationally embedded into a corporate website. However, out of all possible models, the synergistic solution seems to be optimal. The situation when a company has a website and a blog integrated with it in terms of communications and design appears to be the best. Such an approach allows companies to exploit the potential of the Internet and to improve virtual communications.

1.2. Business blogging (b-blogging)

Corporate blogs are taking over some functions that have so far been fulfilled by corporate websites. In the paper, the term business blogging (b-blogging) is used to refer to the possibility of using corporate blogs in business communication. Nowadays, a business blog is an important communication channel (just like other social media, direct mail, email marketing, etc.) that helps support business growth. It does that by driving traffic to firm website and providing opportunities for that traffic to convert in some way [13].

There are two main types of b-blogging: internal and external. Businesses can develop external (outwardly facing) blogs to interact with customers and the public. An external business blog creates content that is similar to a press release, only less formal [9, p. 312]. Internal (inwardly facing) blogs give employees the opportunity to write about a range of issues, from personal experiences to thoughts and concerns about the company and as such are another form of internal communication. An internal business blog generally uses RSS feeds to diffuse content to employees.

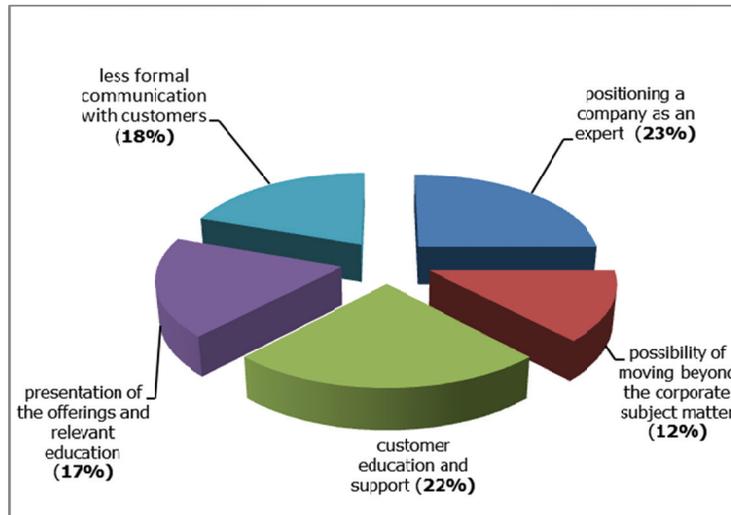
Blogging presents many advantages to business communication. Setting up a simple blog requires a minimum of effort or involvement from the IT Department, and can be done for a little cost. Once set up, blogs can be very effective in promoting products and services, which can help to reduce advertising and marketing costs. B-blogging allows for greater Web visibility and can gain search engine prominence, helping to direct Web traffic to the company Web site [9, p. 313].

An effective blog helps the organization to participate in business enhancing conversations to build relationships for both current and potential customers, partners, and employees. This way blogs help an organization better understand the needs and wants of their customers, obtain feedback on products and services immediately.

Blogs are an effective reputation management tool as they enable companies to promptly react to negative comments and announcements. On the other hand, companies have a lot of freedom as far as the blog content is concerned, which can be a source of competitive advantage, also in terms of communications. The innovative character of a blog can give a company a competitive edge in the industry and create its image as an innovative organization [12, p. 41].

Research findings indicate that companies set up corporate blogs primarily because they want to position themselves as an expert in a particular field (23%), provide customer education and support (22%), establish less formal communication with customers (18%) (Figure 2). For almost 70% of the blogging companies, a blog is an important (63%) or the most important (7%) channel of communication [8, p. 96].

Figure 2. The major reasons for setting up a corporate blog



Source: Based on: [8, p. 96].

The prime goals pursued by the Polish corporate blogs in 2014 were:

- positioning a company as an expert (75%),
- gaining competitive advantage (65%),
- increasing company's credibility and educating the market (62% each).

Sales blogs, image-building blogs and customer service blogs played a significant role in the pursuit of those goals.

1.3. An example: Orange Polska Blog

Nowadays, people and tools are undergoing considerable changes. The same is happening to the blogosphere. New blogs are popping up all the time and their authors want to share new and interesting ideas with others. Some best practices used in the creation of corporate blogs can be identified when the results of the competition for “The Corporate Blog of the Year” are analyzed. The contest, held on the blog “blogifirmowe.com” since 2008, aims at selecting the most active and creative blogs. The corporate blog of Orange Polska has been one of the winners several times.

The blog of Orange Polska (<http://blog.orange.pl>) has been online since 2008 and is considered by many blogosphere experts to be one of the best projects of this kind in the Polish market (Figure 3). It also enjoys great popularity among Internet users. In the latest, sixth edition of the competition for The Corporate Blog of 2014, the Orange Polska blog secured the second position among the professional blogs. In this edition, 191 blogging projects and the most interesting posts were evaluated by the students of the Faculty of Informatics and Communication at the University of Economics in Katowice [14].

Figure 3. Orange Polska Blog



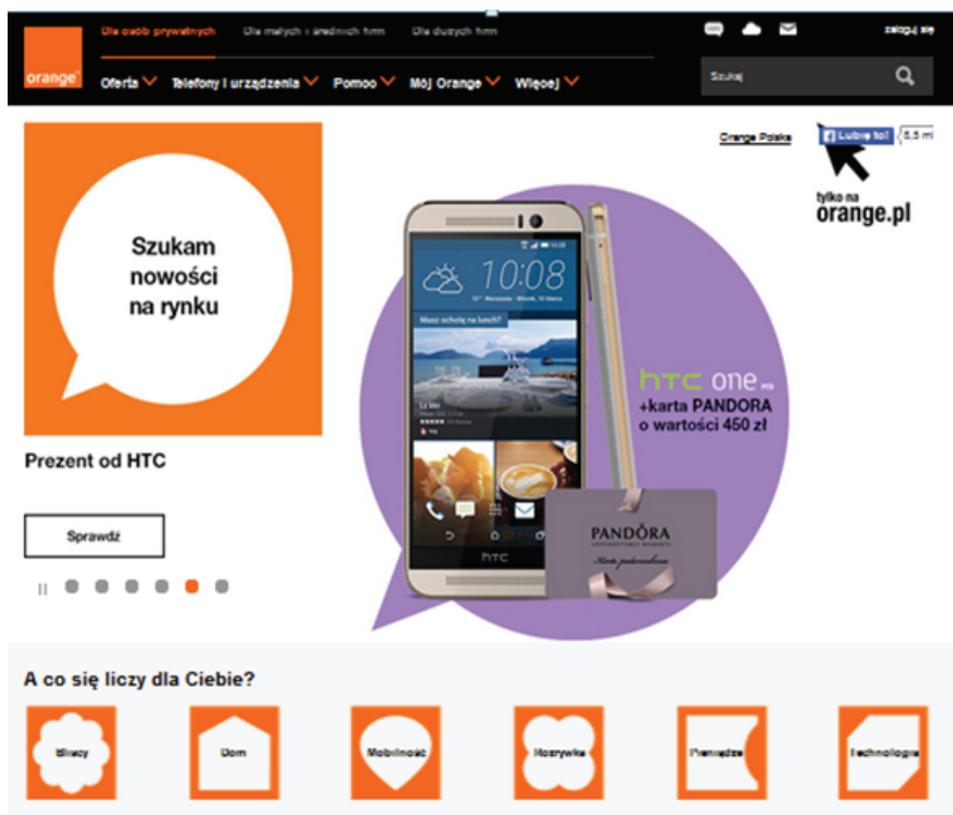
Source: [15].

The data obtained from Orange company indicate that in 2014, the blog had 1.3 million unique users who generated 3.6 million pageviews. There are about 70 posts on the platform a month and they receive nearly 1,500 comments.

At present, a ten-blogger team is in charge of the corporate blog, while the blogging platform is managed by the PR department. The distinguishing feature of the Orange Polska blog is a wide use of the video format. The company has created a lot of formats on YouTube, concerning for example security or a “Webmagiel” – an Internet review of the events. The major aim of the blog is to maintain close contact with the readers and participate in discussions.

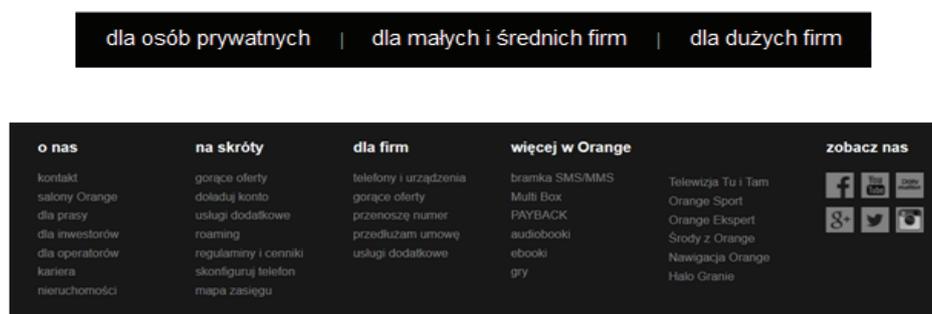
The corporate website of Orange Polska focuses on the presentation of the company’s wide range of products and services for corporate and individual customers (Figure 4). The blog and the website share the top menu (“dla osób prywatnych”, “dla małych i średnich firm” i “dla dużych firm”) and the bottom menu (“o nas”, “na skróty”, “dla firm”, “więcej w Orange”) (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Orange Polska Website



Source: [16].

Figure 5. Shared menu on Orange Polska blog and website



Source: [15].

2. Research Design

In order to prove a thesis that a blog can be employed as an effective communication tool in e-business, alternative or complementary to a website, an experiment was conducted. One of the Authors had a private website and blog designed and built; afterwards comparative analysis of the traffic on the private blog and the website was performed.

2.1. The course of the study

The private website was created using HTML5 and implemented on the University of Economics Server in October 2014. The main site contains contact data and information about the important events in the academic career of the author. On the subsites one can find personal information, biography, research interests, practical information about the lectures, achievements in the work with students, a list of publications throughout 2012-2015.

In order to measure the website traffic Google Analytics code was added to the website source code. The site was promoted by adding link on the University of Economics site in the area of employees' contact data.

Blog was developed by means of free hosting of wordpress.com portal. The blog started in March 2014 and the content included the following sub-sites: "O mnie", "Zainteresowania", "Publikacje", "Konferencje" and "Dla studentów".

The blog was regularly updated. The new entries posted on the blog were the Author's or the readers' comments.

In order to measure the traffic on the blog, the statistics provided by WordPress were used. The blog was promoted by adding links on the sites of the courses run by Author, which are published on Moodle educational platform at the University of Economics in Katowice.

After the services of Google Analytics and WordPress were configured, the key performance indicators, which allow for evaluation of the traffic on the blog and on the website, started to be monitored.

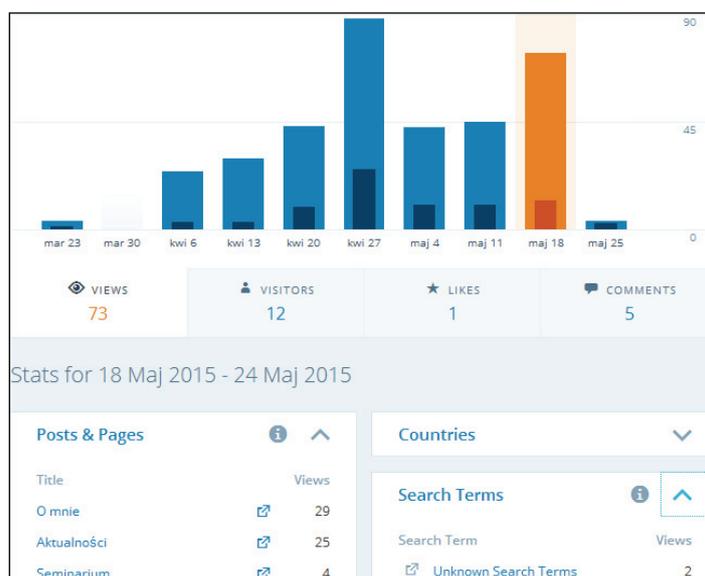
2.2. The results of the comparative analysis

Figure 6 shows the results of the traffic analysis carried out on the website from 6 April to 24 May 2016.

Figure 6. Main visitor statistics – Google Analytics



Figure 7 shows the results of the traffic analysis carried out on the blog from 6 April to 24 May 2016.

Figure 7. Main visitor statistics – Wordpress

The KPIs values are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The values of KPIs for the time period under study

	Private website	Private blog
Sessions	709	–
Users/Visitors	691	72
Pageviews/Views	1144	344
% New Sessions	96,61%	–
Views Per Visitor	1,65	4,78

According to the statistics provided by Google Analytics, in the time period under study (6 April, 2016 – 24 May, 2016), there were 709 sessions on the private website, out of which 691 were UU. This indicates great traffic on the website and interest in its content, which is also reflected in the number of pageviews (1144). A high Bounce Rate (62.34%) may prove that either the incoming users immediately find the information they look for or the content does not suit them and therefore they leave the website at once. The quality of the content may also be responsible for the very low percentage of users returning to the website (3.39%) and the average session duration of about 46 seconds. Similarly, the number of views per visitor is low – the users visited fewer than two pages a visit.

The analysis of the blog statistics obtained from the WordPress application shows that the blog had 72 visitors. The amount of pageviews is smaller than on the private websites and stands at 344. However, the number of views per visitor amounted to 4.78, which indicates a strong interest in the blog content. The sub-site “O mnie” enjoyed the greatest viewership (114), followed by “Aktualności” (69) and “Seminarium” (40). During the study, 4 posts, 13 Comments and 1 Likes were recorded.

Conclusions

The analysis of the KPI values reflecting the traffic on the private website and on the blog was conducted by means of two different tools for the Internet data analysis. Not all KPI values had their counterparts and, as a result, they could not be compared. In the context of the thesis proven in the paper, the difference in the number of users interested in the content published on the website and on the blog is particularly worth emphasizing. This may result from the fact that they were promoted in different places. The information about the website was available to anybody interested in the Author, while only the students enrolled for the courses run by the Author were aware of the existence of the blog. However, the value of Views per Visitor shows that the blog enjoyed a greater interest than the website. The blog users viewed about 5 pages per visit, whereas the website visitors – fewer than 2. This may indicate a strong interest in an interactive dialogue with the Author of the blog. Unfortunately, not many comments were posted in the time period under study, which may be interpreted as fear of joining in the discussion on the open forum moderated by the Author.

Summing up, a blog can be treated as an alternative to a website for e-business communication. Since a blog offers users a possibility of interaction, it can be used as a complement to a website.

In order to execute an Internet project, which is to be an effective communication tool in e-business, it does not suffice to merely set up a visually attractive WWW site or an interesting blog and then passively wait for the reaction of the audience. Each corporate Internet project requires careful planning and active management on the daily basis. It also involves devising a strategy to promote the company image, which will define the interactions with the users and build an Internet community. This is the only way for a modern organization to keep up with, or even surpass, the competitors, find out which of its operations are the most profitable and understand what has to be changed in order to satisfy customers.

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BLOG JAKO SKUTECZNE NARZĘDZIE KOMUNIKACJI W E-BIZNESIE

Streszczenie: W pierwszym etapie rozwoju blogosfery blogi tworzyły przede wszystkim osoby prywatne oraz przedstawiciele mediów, świata rozrywki, polityki i sportu. Obecnie blogowanie podlega postępującemu procesowi komercjalizacji, co oznacza, że firmy coraz częściej decydują się na tworzenie projektów o charakterze akwizycyjnym, wizerunkowym czy doradczym, opartych na komunikacji blogowej. Możliwości ich wykorzystania są dziś ogromne. Blogi stają się uniwersalnym narzędziem, pozwalającym osiągać różne cele biznesowe. W porównaniu do firmowych stron internetowych cechuje je prostota i niskie koszty zakładania i prowadzenia. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie specyfiki bloga jako skutecznego narzędzia komunikacji w e-biznesie oraz efektów jego stosowania alternatywnie lub komplementarnie ze stroną internetową.

Słowa kluczowe: blog, firmowa strona internetowa, b-blogging, Google Analytics.