



The future is now

BY LAURIANNE McLAUGHLIN

The virtual newsletter

Create a blog to share your club's activities in cyberspace

One way clubs can keep their members informed is by publishing a newsletter. But newsletters have their drawbacks. They take time to edit and design, more time to print and assemble, and finally, money to mail.

What if you could simplify the process? Enter the blog. Derived from the words *Web log*, a blog is an online journal where you (the blogger) can write (blog) whatever you want to share with the rest of cyberspace. Some blogs feature firsthand stories and photos from a trip. Others offer political commentary or humorous reactions to the news, along with links to related material on the Web. Some include video and audio clips.

For Rotary clubs, blogs can keep members up-to-date and encourage people on the other side of the globe to join a service project. For Rotary-sponsored travelers such as Group Study Exchange participants, Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholars, Rotary World Peace Fellows, and Rotary Youth Exchange students, blogs can help everyone back home keep in touch.

Quick and easy

You're no programmer? Don't worry. You might be surprised by how little technological savvy you need to publish a blog and how quick the process is. You can inform your club

about an upcoming speaker in less time than it takes to make a trip to the grocery store.

Publishing via a free blogging service like Google's Blogger.com or Microsoft's Windows Live Spaces is really not much harder than typing in a Word document. You sign up, choose from ready-made design tem-

authors to contribute, and he can customize the look by adding graphics and other features. Not just anyone can write on the blog, though: Vander Well shares a password with club members who want to post. Many blogs allow any reader to post comments, however, which can spur community interaction and become part of the blog's appeal. You can choose who gets to post comments when you're setting up your blog.

Go public

Once the blog is up and running, you can organize and publicize your club's activities and service projects. Vander Well uses the Pella club's blog, which has replaced its newsletter, not only to describe what happens at club meetings but also to promote annual events, such as a chicken barbecue fundraiser. Local newspaper editors like the blog as a source of information about the club's activities. It also serves as an automatic archive of the club's work. "It's like a running scrapbook," Vander Well says.

Elias Thomas III, a past district governor from the Rotary Club of South Berwick, Maine, USA, created a blog through Blogger.com to inform people about his trip to India, where he helped build homes for families devastated by the December 2004 tsunami. Thomas, who says he's no tech expert,



plates, and enter text using simple tools. These services help you upload photos to your blog as well.

If you're tech-savvy or want more flexibility to customize your blog's look, consider a fee-based blogging service like Six Apart's TypePad. Tom Vander Well of the Rotary Club of Pella, Iowa, USA, uses TypePad to run his club's blog because he can allow an unlimited number of

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Tips for aspiring bloggers

- **Start simply.** If you're using a blog for your club, consider it initially as just a vehicle for internal communication among club members. Later, gradually expand the content to appeal to media or prospective members.
- **Post at least once a week.** People are turned off by blogs that show only periodic activity.
- **Write informally if you're doing a first-person narrative.** Blogs often work best when the writing sounds like your everyday voice.
- **Provide photos to enhance your accounts of activities, trips, and service projects.**

wanted to encourage people to correspond with him during the trip. His blog allowed for that, and it was an easy way to share photos with the volunteers and donors who made the project possible. "They were excited about seeing photos and reading my narratives," he says.

You can also use blogs to raise money from readers, sometimes unexpectedly.

That's what happened with Thomas' blog. "A few people did find the blog and contributed to the homes," he says. "Some were Rotarians; many were not." The Rotary Club of Colombo Regency, Sri Lanka, on the other hand, intentionally used a blog to raise money to help tsunami survivors.

For a different kind of Rotarian-created blog, look at Geof Lambert's Digaria, sponsored by the International Fellowship of Digital Technology Rotarians. It's what he calls a "blogworking" magazine—a hub for blogging and social networking among Rotarians and other service-minded people worldwide. Rotarians can write about club projects and get ideas from other bloggers, or they can simply learn more about the problems facing a particular area, such as natural disasters.

Started in March 2005, Digaria has about 1,500 registered mem-

bers and about 100 active bloggers, says Lambert, a member of the Rotary Club of Fair Oaks, Calif., USA. He says some of them are Ambassadorial Scholars who use Digaria to stay in touch with each other and share their experiences.

"This is an avenue for someone to communicate with Rotarians all over the world," Lambert says. He hopes to add technology to the site this year that will allow bloggers to chat online in real time through instant messaging with built-in language translation.

Lambert also aims to drive membership through the site. "This is my attempt to attract younger people and introduce them to the idea of Rotary," he says. ■

Have a look

Wired up and ready to start a blog? Get going with these popular blogging services, then get inspired with blogs by Rotarians and Rotary program participants.

Blogging services

- Blogger.com — blogspot.com
- TypePad — www.typepad.com
- Windows Live Spaces — spaces.live.com

Sample blogs

- Digaria — digaria.com
- Group Study Exchange — www.gsemanchester.blogspot.com
- Rotaractor — raclife.blogspot.com
- Rotary Club of Pella — www.pellarotary.com
- Rotary World Peace Fellow — www.aventurasamanda.blogspot.com

LAURIANNE McLAUGHLIN lives in Massachusetts, USA, and specializes in technology journalism. Her husband fervently wishes she could make a living by blogging about fishing.