

Business Blogging e-Hub : An Innovative Approach to e-Business

Guo-An Wang

Modern Business and Trade Research Center Zhejiang
Gongshang University, China, 310035

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Abstract

With the rapid development of the Internet, e-business has been entering a new phase. However, there're still some problems to be settled and needs for breakthrough. The paper proposes an innovative approach to e-business models with the aim to resolve the problems. The paper reviews the exiting e-commerce models and points out some of the common weaknesses of the models, and presents the "Business Blogging e-Hub" model for e-business. With the characteristics of all-sided information, multi-dimensional interactivity and trans-model e-commerce platform, the proposed model is created and derived from the integration of the "classical" e-commerce models as B2B, B2C and C2C with the technology and essence of blogging, and is thus sure to meet rapidly changing business needs.

Key Words : E-Commerce, e-Business, e-Hub; Blog, Business Blogging, e-Marketplace

I . Introduction

E-commerce has come a long way since the mid-1990s, when the phrase was first coined. In spite of the ups and downs of the Internet around the turn of the 21st century, great progress has been made in the e-commerce sector. In terms of business models, such basic e-commerce models as B2B, B2C and C2C has been entering a period of maturity, which are well represented respectively by Alibaba.com, Amazon.com and eBay.com. In China, through several years of cultivation, these types of models have been accepted by the Chinese market. Although financial balance and profit have not been made, yet the volume of transactions has been increased greatly, and what's more important, with the rapid development of Chinese e-commerce sites, the world has seen the great potential of Chinese e-commerce market. As a result, almost all the Internet giants have entered the Chinese market and started their purchases of Chinese sites. Someone is so optimistic as to say that the second Spring of the Internet and e-business is coming.

However, there're still a lot of problems that retard the development of e-business, such as the lack of all-round information, mutual trust, means of communication and interactivity, and online business tools required from customers and enterprises involved in online transactions. Although there exist a few relatively successful models for e-commerce, they're still unable to meet the needs of customers and enterprises, and what is worse, development in e-commerce models seems to stop. In recent couple of years, it seems that not many new models for e-commerce have emerged, which is abnormal for such a fast development area as e-commerce, without mention of many problems waiting for solutions.

The paper presents a new and innovative model for e-commerce and e-business, whose objective is to create an e-business portal where both customers and enterprises can satisfy their need for buying or selling goods, sharing information and ideas, conducting office work, and establishing relationships, so on and so forth. This model differs from the exiting e-commerce models mainly in the following four aspects :

- (1) forms of content organization and display;
- (2) variety of information in its sources, types and perspectives.
- (3) means of communication; and
- (4) services related to buying or selling.

The model may possibly become a new standard and trend for e-business and be followed by other e-commerce sites.

Before turning to the discussion of our new model, lets begin by taking a look at two questions which are key to the illustration of the topic.

Two terms are used when we talk about this topic—electronic commerce or e-commerce and increasingly

e-business. For this paper, e-business has been chosen as the better term and thus used in the title of the paper. To understand why, we can begin with a look at the term e-commerce.

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, COMMERCE is defined as : (1) the buying and selling of goods and services;(2) old-fashioned : relationship and communication between people. In line with these definitions, electronic commerce or E-Commerce can be defined as the exchange of goods or services, sharing of business information, and maintaining business relationships by using an electronic medium, more specifically the Internet.

Most of the existing models as B2B, B2C and C2C are falling into the category of e-commerce. B2B, B2C and C2C are shorthand for Business to Business, Business to Consumer and Consumer to Consumer respectively.

In contrast to the term E-Commerce, the term electronic business or e-Business has a much broader scope of meanings which encompasses, in addition to the more narrowly defined concept of e-commerce, all forms of business activities conducted by using computer and networking technologies, including all inter-company and intra-company functions (such as marketing, finance, manufacturing, selling, logistics, customer care, work-flow, conferencing, etc.).

In this paper, we use the term e-Business in the proposed model to mean that the proposed model is not only applied to e-commerce but also to part of the area of e-business. One of thereasons is that the model we create goes beyond the normal e-commerce areas attributed to our creative use of blogging technology, its form and as well as it basic spirit.

An electronic Hub or e-Hub is a third-party Internet-based intermediary platform that specializes in horizontal or vertical markets allowing trading partners to find, exchange and share information related to buying and selling activities.

In this paper, the term e-Hub is borrowed to refer to an online center or portal where business-related information, merchants, enterprises, organizations and as well as customers gather to communicate, buy or sell goods, share information and ideas, and conduct other kinds of business activities.

II. Common and Basic Weakness of the Existing E-Commerce Models

From our almost ten years of business experience in e-commerce industry, we've found there are three major weaknesses with the existing models and have been exploring to find better solutions for them. We'll discuss the issue in a more practical way.

1. Problems with Content of the sites

In such an age of information and knowledge explosion over the Internet, lack of information and content could be a big problem to any Internet sites especially with e-commerce sites to which information and content are playing a key role in attracting the users. We've found the current existing e-commerce models more or less have the content problem in following aspects.

1) Variety of information

(1) It can be noticed easily that the major information on the sites belongs to information that is closely and indirectly related to the buying or selling action, such as trade leads (posts offer to buy or sell), enterprise or product information, and contact information. Although there is other information as industry news and customers' comments, yet, such information accounts for only a very small part of all the information and seems to be as well without it as with it. There's lack of many other important information as economic news and reports, commentaries, experts' views, industry statistics, market information, business resources, etc.

(2) Because most of the information on the sites is released by the corresponding enterprises, most part of it has something to do with marketing and promotion activities. Therefore all the information is favorable and positive. Customers can rarely find any information that is negative or about the weaknesses of product.

2) Information from one source

Because the large part of the information is about products and enterprises, it can be well understood that this kind of information is offered by a corresponding enterprise which has either something to sell or buy or so. Therefore, the information lacks objectivity. At least it is one-way or one-source information.

For a customer, to know information or views from other parties, especially from a trusted third party, is very important before he or she decides to buy a product or service. It involves the question of a customer's right to know the facts.

3) Information volume and updating

Connected with the above-mentioned problems, there's a problem of small volume of information and updated information. On one hand, not many kinds of visitors release their information here because of lack of an effective system of encouragement. On the other hand those enterprises are always releasing the same information (like offers to sell their products) now and then. Too much repeated and old information on the sites

leads to a decrease in freshness and activeness.

4) Way of organizing information

There's some problem with the organization of the content and information. On most of the existing e-commerce sites, information is often organized or arranged in a relatively separate and scattered way both from the point of view of an enterprise and a potential customer. First, from the point of view of an enterprise, information related to or released by it is organized not always around it and may be found separately in several columns without any connections. This way, it will be difficult for the enterprise to manage the information. Secondly, because of the scattered and disordered way of organization the information, it makes a potential customer even more difficult to find all the information related to or released by the enterprises he's looking for.

2. Lack of Functions

Most of the existing e-commerce sites have not performed well in meeting other needs of e-commerce businesses and customers. When a businessman or a customer visiting an e-commerce site, he or she may have many other needs in addition to buying or selling goods. For instance, they may have needs for more effective business and office collaboration online, or, they want to be more interactive with their customers, distributors, suppliers or even ordinary visitors to the sites. In reality, we fail to find such needs can be well satisfied by the existing e-commerce sites.

3. Limit in trans-model operation

For the existing e-commerce sites, it is rather difficult for them to do business in all the three models (B2B, B2C and C2C) on one site or platform. This is owing to the way of organizing and arranging the information on the sites.

In our analysis, the existing e-commerce models are referred to as market-centric or platform-centric ones. By this, we mean that in these models, the information and functions are not arranged and designed around an enterprise or a business or a customer. Because of this, the models are unable to offer services to meet all the needs of the three models, and therefore are unable to achieve the three models of e-commerce on one singleplatform. Take for Alibaba as an example. As we know Alibaba.com was started as a B2B e-marketplace. With its development and ambition going up, it began to realize its limitations only as a B2B business, and wanted to enter C2C sector. But because of theabove-mentioned reasons, Alibaba has to set up a totally new and

separate Taobao.com to do its C2C business. It is unable to achieve its goal on the same platform. And it has caused a great inconvenience to the site users, not to mention the unnecessary wastes in capital and business resources to the site owners.

III. Foundation of Ideas for the Proposed Model

With the above-stated problems in mind, we have been exploring for years in order to find solutions to them and a new and effective model for e-commerce. Now we believe we made it, which shall be attributed to our consistent efforts and practices in e-commerce business and new development of the Internet technology and theory.

1. Practices in e-business

For over 8-10 years we have been exploring in the e-commerce business and have never given up even in the time when the so-called the bubble of the Internet burst. As the first generation of the Internet and e-commerce practitioners in China, we achieved many China's Internet firsts although having made some detours. We started Chinapages.com (the first B2B e-commerce site in China) in 1995, chianexcite.com 1998, the first B2B site catering to foreign enterprises interested in entering the Chinese market and Chinese enterprises to go to outside world, mololo.com 1998, the first B2C site realizing the online payment with international credit cards, chempages.com in 1999, the first B2B vertical site, and ecTrade.com in 2000, one of the best-known e-marketplace in China. As a result, we've accumulated a lot of experiences, technologies and thoughts which have contributed greatly to the formation of our new model for e-business.

2. Source of our ideas

Since its birth, the Internet has never stopped its development even at the time when the so-called the bubble of dotcoms burst. One of the latest development in the Internet's evolution is "blogging", from which we have drawn part of our inspiration for our proposed model. So lets discuss our topic by looking at the following questions related to blogging.

1) What is blog?

Blog is a shortened term for Web Log and is an online diary, a journal or webpage published and updated regularly, and intended to be shared with others on the Internet by an individual, who is known as a "blogger". Blogs generally cover the thoughts, comments, philosophies, observations and views of the blogger (the creator of the blog), The content and quality varies greatly depending on the purpose of the author. There are also blogs that are maintained by a team of people which are called as collaborative blogs, and open-system blogs which allow anyone to contribute to the blog.

Blogs can fall into two general categories : (1) Personal Blogs : a mixture of a personal diary, opinion posts and research links; (2)Business Blogs : a corporate tool for communicating with customers or employees to share knowledge and expertise.

2) What is business blogging

Blogging has now become a very popular publishing method on the web as the software does not require any technical knowledge to use and has been moving rapidly into the corporate world.

When a blog is published by, or with the support of, an enterprise to reach its goals, we say the enterprise is doing business blogging and the blog is hence called a business blog. Business blogs are often written by corporate executives and employees to share day-to-day insights into their businesses, and to open a two-way dialogue with customers and others interested in their products and services.

3) What major benefits can a business get from business blogging?

Now more and more businesses and marketers have began to embrace blogging as a marketing tool which can play its role at least in the following aspects :

Public relations : Corporate blogs provide another way to publish content and ideas, get information to customers quickly, and receive customer feedback.

Sales generation : With transparency heightened, corporate blogs can establish industry-specific thought leadership, build online user communities, and increase sales.

Search engine optimization : Blogs can improve search engine visibility, increase link popularity, and readily allow for RSS syndication. All these add up to increased site traffic.

Trust establishment : A corporate blog with a human voice does help an enterprise to win trust of its customers, collect valuable feedback and foster strengthened relationships while benefiting in ways that are tangible to the sales and marketing side of the business

4) What are the distinguishing features of blogging?

According to our study, there are at least 5 features of blogs that have attracted our attention and benefited us a lot in creating the proposed model :

(1) The Personality

Blogs are not objective and very often contain some random thoughts, casual comments and spontaneous views of the bloggers. Therefore a blog usually represents the personality of the author or the web site. And it is because of this feature that the authors and readers are attracted to join the game and to share information and ideas with each other.

(2) The Voice (Passion)

Closely related to the above, a blog has a voice of its own. A blogger must dare to be a person instead of an official and a voice will be heard. A human voice means passion. A blog with a human voice helps to win trust from others. This is a major difference between a company website and a corporate blog. Therefore people say blogs give firms a human voice.

(3) The Openness

Blogs were started with a color of privacy in its early stages. However, now they have become more and more open and gone to the public, for people have realized that opening and sharing of information and ideas are so important in the age of knowledge explosion and both parties can benefit greatly from it. Therefore, blogging is becoming a new popular way of communication among people.

(4) The Interactivity

A blog will lose vitality without interactive communication among people. On one hand, the interactivity is key to the content of a blog. On the other hand, the technology of blogging has made such interactivity possible. There's always interests shared among blogs and links to each other between blogs. These links make conversations and interactivity between blogs more active and resourceful. And sharing of thoughts and ideas has comprised an important part of blogs.

(5) The Structure

Blogs are often structured and archived in reverse chronological order so that the most recent information is

listed first and thus making old content more accessible. Another very important point is that the information or content is arranged around the author thus making it very easy to be managed or accessed to.

Therefore, the analyzing of these features has helped us to have a better understanding of the essence of blogging and makes us able to integrate the real spirit of blogging with e-business applications and thus resulting in the creation of a new model for e-business.

IV. The Biz Blogging e-Hubs Model

The proposed "Business Blogging e-Hub" model borrows aspects from blogging, the latest application of the Internet in the corporate sector, and the traditional e-Hub (e-marketplace) model, being motivated by both exciting advantages (*referred to 5.2.4*) of blogging and the weakness (*referred to 4*) of the existing models and by their limited ability to meet customers needs effectively.

We are going to present our new model from four aspects as follows.

1. Innovative ideas

The model we're proposing and implementing is described as the "Business Blogging e-Hub", a new application of the Internet in e-business. This is a result of our rich experience in e-commerce and original research on blogging.

So our central idea is to set up a **one-stop trans-model e-marketplace featured in all-round information, effective I interactivity and collaboration, and blogger-centric structure.**

There are two important things that we've taken in from "blogging". One is the blogging technology and form. The other is the spirit or essence of blogging.

Most of the existing e-commerce sites have also noticed the development of blogging and are planning to take use of it. However, what they're thinking or have done is to simply make a copy of it by looking at it just as a collection of the articles or messages left by an individual or a business and therefore serving as a part of the traditional forum.

According to our model, blogging is not an independent column or function separated from other parts of the site. Blogging on our platform is used to such an extent that most of the content is arranged in a blog form not just articles but also information of trade leads, products and enterprises. In fact our whole platform is constructed by taking the form and spirit of blogging. Practically any individual or business can open a blog on

which the blogger can display products, release news, write articles, make comments, etc. and visitors can also leave messages and comments. So in this case, the blog is more than a blog in its traditional meaning. Consequently the platform becomes an online hub collected with lots of this kind of blogs and visited by thousands of consumers. All the platform should do are to provide all kinds of services and tools to the bloggers and consumers.

This idea of build e-marketplace in a blog-like form makes many difficult things easy to be overcome and weakness surmounted. It seems suddenly to become bright open.

2. Distinguishing Features of the Proposed Model

1) All-round information

By all-round information we mean the variety of information in sources, perspectives, angles, kinds and ways. On our proposed platform, information will be from main sources (media, government, third-party organizations, customers, partners, employees, etc., not just from one party as with most of the existing models and related to it the information will cover a lot of kinds like products, business news, customers' comments, their-party appraisals, media reports, and so on. And besides favorable information there may be unfavorable comments or reports. In a word, it will become the center of information related to the blogger. In this way, both the blogger and his customers will benefit from device.

As we've analyzed in 4.1.1, the existing models for e-commerce meet their first key problem in information. Our proposed model provides a workable solution to the problem.

On the proposed "Biz Blogging e-Hub which is run by an intermediary party, everyone or every visitor including a businessman and a customer or an ordinary consumer can open for free a blog-like office or storefront or just a journal to be used to introduce his business, do promotions, keep diaries, publish articles, opinions, thoughts or comments, share information and ideas with others, communicate interactively with others, etc. And to his visitors, they can come to the blog with an interest in buying or supplying goods, looking for information and ideas, or communicating with your or other visitors. And everyone can open a blog-like website for an enterprise which allows all visitors to make comments or release news on it. In this way the information on a blog-like office of someone or blog-like website for a business can be more objective and resourceful because all visitors may contribute content to the blog-like office or website (hereinafter referred to as a blog). The blogger (the opener of the blog is not the only one may says or writes something on it though he may still be the major author who may be entitled to some rights to maintain his blog.

We may well imagine what a exciting picture it would be when all sorts of information are published here

from all people related such as his customers, suppliers, distributors, partners, friends, or even competitors, and as well as from media, third party organizations, and governments. As a result both the blogger and the visitors especially his potential customers will benefit from it. It will greatly help to build trust between the blogger and his customer, for to a customer here he can have a whole picture of you or the business and to the blogger it is a very effective marketing tool.

2) Effective interactivity and collaboration

What we mean by interactivity and collaboration online here is not just limited to leaving messages on a website. With blogging technology it is become possible to integrate tools or software of collaborating and communication into a business blog including IM, e-mail, mobile communication, e-conferencing, multimedia, negotiating rooms, etc. which can be used in strengthening communication and collaboration between businesses and customers(visitors) and among visitors.

With these tools and functions, communication and collaboration will become much easier and more effective between a business and its customers or within an enterprise or within a selected group of people.

To a business, it can not only show its customers products and release its news but also it can take its blog as a platform to communicate with its customers and know what its customers think and need. In this way the business can be able to win trust from its customers and develop a product or service that meets the real needs of the customers and the market.

3) Blogger-centric structure

Blogger-centric structure refers to that the content or information is organized and arranged around the blogger, either an individual or a business, which is unlike the existing e-commerce sites on which information is platform-centric or content-centric with a result that information is scattered around the platform.

This blogging way of organizing content has at least two advantages : (1) Because information related to an individual or a business is arranged or collected in his or its blog and all the information related to the blogger can be traced back to the blog though it may be displayed here and there on the platform, it makes it much easier for the blogger to maintain his blog and the visitors to find all the information related to the blogger; (2) The blog-centric way of structuring the content makes it possible to conduct different models of e-business, B2B, B2C and C2C. All the platform shall do is make all the transaction tools available for the blogger no matter whether the blogger is a business or a consumer and no matter whom the blogger wish to trade with, a business or a consumer. All is possible workable.

4) Other features

In addition, the proposed model is also featured in the following aspects :

- (1) The DIY way of content contribution by all visitors and bloggers;
- (2) A place to share not only information but also ideas, views and thoughts;
- (3) A platform providing services and tools for interactivity and collaboration.

3. Implementation of the Proposed Model

In order to embody the core ideas while implementing the platform, we need to abide by some basic principles for our work. In the following part we are going to state out the principles and the general layout of the platform made according to the Biz Blogging e-Hub model, and some possible sources of income.

1) Principles of planning

There're four basic principles that should be followed in its implementation :

(1) The openness and transparency

To be open and transparent is one of the basic elements of blogging. Therefore this element will also be reflected on our platform, which will distinguish it greatly from others.

(2) The simplicity and user-friendliness

As all the content is to be contributed by visitors and bloggers themselves, the use of tools and management of content shall be convenient, simple and easy. Human care is needed anytime and anywhere.

(3) The blog-like form

All the content should be arranged and organized in the form of blog and all the information shall be traced back to a certain blog. For instance, an article published by an individual in the forum can also be found in his own blog.

(4) The distinguishableness

Great attention shall be paid to specialties. Features shall be highlighted. The principle of distinguishableness shall be maintained through the whole process of implementation.

2) General layout

The general layout of the platform is displayed in the following figure.



3) Possible sources of income

We believe one of its major result is that the model has greatly increased the means of revenue. Firstly, because the Business Blogging e-Hub will become a best marketing platform for enterprises, advertising and sponsoring will certainly be the most important source of revenue. Secondly, because the platform will become a hub of information, some information-related products can be developed and sold. And thirdly, according to the proposed model, the platform will be a trans-model e-business hub, so all income models with the existing e-commerce models could be applied here.

V. Concluding Remarks

It was said that 2004 was the breakthrough year for blogs in US. But in China, 2005 sees a great development in blogging when the number of bloggers reaches 3 million. Another major event this year in China's e-commerce sector is that Alibaba, China's largest e-commerce site, surprisingly purchased Yahoo China and Yahoo bought a big chunk of Alibaba with \$1 billion. These two events are sure to mean something.

Almost at the same time we are proposing an innovative approach to e-commerce and e-business. And what is coincident is that our model is actually an integration of blogging with business and e-commerce. This seems to tell us that we are on the right way and what we are doing will become a trend for e-commerce and e-business.

Business Blogging e-Hub, a new and practical approach to e-commerce and e-business!

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