Product Rep Blogs Done Well: I Dig Hardware
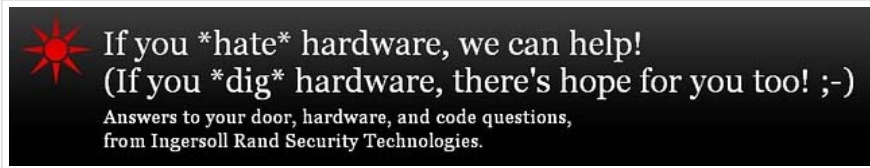
The I Dig Hardware blog wastes no time letting you know what it's about. The top of the first page proudly proclaims:

If you *hate* hardware, we can help!
(If you *dig* hardware, there's hope for you too! ;-)
Answers to your door, hardware, and code questions, from Ingersoll Rand Security Technologies.

Following the tone set by the title, the blog's style is very informal. The layout is simple, using a pre-made template with minimal customization; this keeps focus on the blog's content, instead of high-tech bells and whistles. The language is very personal, like a conversation with a colleague rather than the business or textbook style adopted by many corporate blogs.

Which makes sense because this is not a corporate blog; it's personal.

Lori Greene, AHC/CDC, CCPR started the blog when she was a specification writer for the New England office of Ingersoll Rand. But it was not a company project; she started it on her own as an evening hobby with three stated goals:

1. Keep her name in front of New England architects
2. Gather all the building code information she had collected over the years in a single site
3. Make learning about hardware less painful

A fourth goal has since emerged, increasing awareness of new fire and egress door codes.

The blog has developed a very active community of commentators, and high daily readership. Lori reports that some people have even set it as the home page on their web browsers, and is picked up as a monthly column in Doors & Hardware magazine.

Not bad for a night time hobby.

Why this works

The first key to Lori's success is she started with clearly stated goals in mind. As the blog has grown reoccuring topics have emerged (such as "Wordless Wednesday", when allows pictures of interesting doors to speak for themselves...mostly), but in the early days of a blog deciding what to post can be very intimidating. Having these goals helps you identify good topics, and gives structure to the blog.

The informal, personal style is also a major strength. I still believe that developing relationships with architects is the best way to get spec'ed, and the conversational tone does more to foster that relationship. If the blog felt like a constant sales pitch, or used very dry "professional" communication, it would not make that same personal connection. Especially for this topic. The original title of the blog was "I Hate Hardware", a tongue-

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in-cheek acknowledgement that many architects do not understand, are scared of, and get intimidated by hardware. The informality defuses the subject, making it more accessible.

Which is not to say all blogs need to be this informal; many great blogs benefit from creating an "expert" or "consultant" tone. The key is to decide what tone will resonate most with your audience, and what you will be most comfortable writing.

The blog is also very multimedia. Almost every post has a picture or video; given that many architects are visual learners and thinkers, relying solely on text would be a mistake. Especially given the perceived complexity of the subject. It also makes the page more visually interesting, and provides other avenues for readers to find your site by following links from YouTube or photo-sharing sites.

Navigation around the blog is very clear. At the top of each page are links to helpful pages, including a gallery, collection of building codes, spec information, and - my favorite - a big, red "Help!" button. The domain name is also great: descriptive, easy to remember,

For kicks, I checked the site on my iPhone. There is not a mobile version of the site, but the design is simple enough that I was able to read and navigate around the site.

For product reps

Probably the most fascinating aspect of this blog is that it's the creation of a product rep, not a company. This is a valuable example for other internet-savvy reps out there. Because the blog is not, directly, about the product there is a good degree of freedom. Depending on your agreement with the company, you do not need their permission or support to post updates about building codes or pictures of badly done projects. An individual or small firm can often move more quickly than a big company, so you could have plenty of room to be the pioneer.

A blog like Lori's also does two of the most important things a product rep needs to do: establish yourself as an expert in the field, and become the resource designers turn to when they have a question. I sat in on one of CSI's Product Rep Practice Group webinars recently; several participants were noting that while specifiers used to call reps when they had a question, now they almost always turn to the web instead. This type of blog does much to bridge that gap; specifiers go online to get their information, but they are still getting it from you.

Posted by Aaron Chusid, CSI on Wednesday, April 20, 2011

Labels: Blogs, Sales, Social Media