

Luke Murphy, 33 Digital and founder Twespians and Jake Orr, A Younger Theatre

Blogging master class: how to create an effective company blog

Luke Murphy has worked with organisations including the Sydney Opera House, Society of London Theatre, O2, *Financial Times*, Evernote and Microsoft, helping with digital strategy, digital PR and marketing, and community building and management. In his spare time, Luke co-runs Twespians, a London based theatre networking event, writes blogs, runs club nights, plays in a band and occasionally hunts ghosts.

Jake Orr is a Freelance Digital Native, Editor, Blogger and Marketer. In 2009 he set up AYoungerTheatre.com, dedicated to young people having a voice within the arts. This was named About.com's best Theater Blog of 2011. Jake regularly comments on the use of social media within the arts with previous articles featuring on *The Guardian* website. As well as writing on the arts, Jake has contributed to digital projects with The British Council, Royal Opera House and Oval House Theatre. Jake also live blogs events and has previously contributed to the State of the Arts Conference 2012 by Arts Council England, Old Vic New Voice's 24 Hour Plays at the Old Vic Theatre and Edgelands at the Edinburgh Festival.

In this session, Jake and Luke explored what makes an effective company blog, looking at a range of case studies including insights into how A Younger Theatre, a platform for young people to express their views on theatre and performance has gone from one person to a team of seventy. There were also case studies from a range of arts and commercial organisations within the UK and internationally.

The session was made up of presentations from Luke Murphy and then Jake Orr, followed by Q and A and discussion.

Luke Murphy: Blogging, the mission and awesomeness

Before we start – the key thing to remember is that you need to be awesome! So if you have somewhere else to go, you have the essence of this session now.

More seriously, the question I think you need to ask, before you start a company blog is 'why?' Why do you want to do this blog? If you don't have a reason, don't do it, there are already a lot of blogs out there.

So what is your motive? Have a mission statement in mind and stick to it. It will help you as you plan the content, design and marketing. And remember how it fits into the wider company mission. You'll need buy-in from the top because if people within the organisation don't understand why you're doing a blog they won't invest in it. Then you won't have any time to write for it, resources to invest in it and people will start asking 'what exactly do they spend their time on'?

A blog isn't a standalone item. It should exist within a wider plan. It is but one channel so it needs to be part of a 'good bonfire' – a big social media ecosystem should bubble along like a good bonfire and then shoot off occasional fireworks to bring people back to the fire.

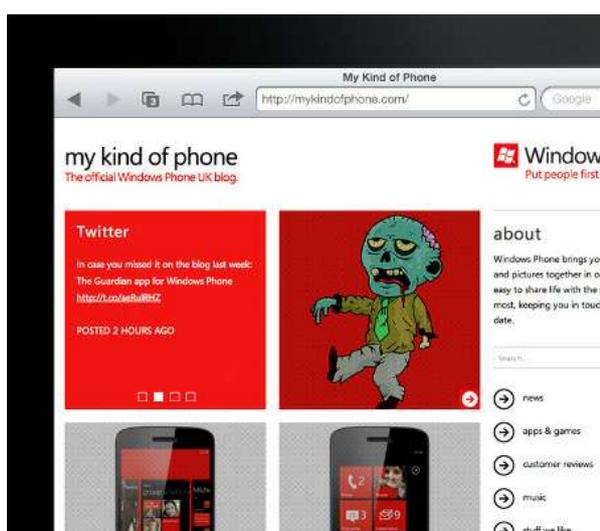
Once we've sorted out the 'why' we need to consider the 'who'. Who is your audience? Many people don't think about this – they only think about the fact that they want to write a blog. But are you focusing on the artists in your company, the wider industry, the general public or the critics and reviewers? Each of these will need a different approach.

The audience and mission statement are the two most important things – so keep going back to check this. Once this is sorted, the blog can be made or broken in three distinct ways: content, design and user experience and then marketing and measurement.

Content

Content is the reason people come to your blog. It's not because they want it as a lovely desktop image. Really, you should have a content strategy which ideally should be part of your overall online content strategy – including the website, social media, e-marketing.

A List Apart (<http://www.alistapart.com/articles/thedisciplineofcontentstrategy>) is a good resource for the way in which you can develop your content strategy. It's high level thinking about design but can easily be used for the arts. Mashable also do a good 7 tips to make your blog sticky (<http://mashable.com/2011/09/16/blog-content-sticky/>).



When you're passionate about what you write, it shows in your writing. In another sense, passion points are a brilliant way to write content when you don't have something to talk about. This is something we used when working on 'My Kind of Phone' for Microsoft as we were tasked to build a community around the phone. So we looked at the three things that were important for the phone: games, photographs and music. We started by doing a little content about how you would

use the phone in gaming, photographs and music – very tenuous links, quite agnostic. Within six months we built up a community of 10,000 people and we had 30,000 unique users. Now we have a community of 150,000 and it is still based around those passion points.

A regular cadence of content is important to keep your readers interested. Whether it's daily, three times a week, weekly or fortnightly doesn't matter, as long as you are consistent and people know what to expect.

Storytelling adds the personal touch to your blog and I know Jake is going to talk more about this. I'm not talking about a fictional 'once upon a time' story. It's the personal touch to your blog, with a beginning, middle and an end.

Jake wrote a great blog along these lines about arts organisations and Twitter after the AMA Tweet Meet (<http://www.ayoungentheatre.com/arts-organisations-and-twitter-telling-the-stories/>) and again 'A List Apart' has a good article (<http://www.alistapart.com/articles/making-up-stories-perception-language-and-the-web/>).

Then when you have all your content bedded down, consider whether it meets your mission statement and if it doesn't, think again.

'I don't have time to write good content' – I hear this a lot in arts organisations. Very often people start blogs and then it doesn't continue because they run out of resources, time or enthusiasm. This is why you need the buy-in from the top.

This is something we found with Ubelly which is a company that works with web designers around the country. We started off with a team of five but we were doing a whole range of work so it was difficult to produce a blogpost a day which is what we wanted to do. Also, although it was Microsoft, we had virtually no budget. Therefore we devised a new writers' programme. We offered five people the opportunity to write in return for free tickets to events and they had the chance to get on a soapbox and say what they wanted to say. It was also something good for them to put on the CV.

Design

Good design is good for business and poor design detracts from your credibility. This is the same with anything – the signs in your foyer need to be well designed – and so does your site. With a blog, the key element is that it needs to be kept as clean and clutter free as possible. I may be speaking from an idealistic point of view here but try and avoid having too much advertising on the page.



The content needs to be the key focus because well-written editorial will always make a better impact than all your advertising. Put that somewhere else on your site if you can.

A List Apart is a commercial website. They have to make money but it doesn't affect the look. They always have a bespoke image created for each topic which shows that they really care and they do everything with great passion.



User experience

User Experience is *'a person's perceptions and responses that result from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service...'*

Really, it's about understanding how your users use your site and making this as frictionless and intuitive as possible. The reason you do this is because *'people ignore design that ignores people'* (Frank Chimero).

The way that we do this is by building customer personas, thinking about how they think and act and study how they travel through your site. It's a valuable way of ensuring that the content on your site makes the biggest impact it can. There are some good resources on this, such as *'Undercover User Experience Design'* by Cennydd Bowles who used to be a designer at Twitter. He writes about doing it with no budget under the radar of your bosses.

It's also important to think about your blog in the context of the whole user experience, thinking about the audience journey: hearing about the show, buying tickets, going to the show and going home. Where does your blog sit within that journey? People don't seem to consider this – and therefore their blogs aren't devised to sit in the right place of the experience.

An interesting example is the National Theatre's Digital Producer blog, which is not written for the audience but for other people within the industry. It's a blog by the

Digital Producer about what she sees day to day, what she works with, links to interesting blogs. It shows that she's passionate and knowledgeable about her job and therefore pushes the ethos of the National Theatre.

The Bush Theatre has great content, nicely written and presented. The tone of voice is just right for the theatre (even though it's a little bit marketingy).

Hoipolloi's *'Stories from an Invisible Town'* about Hugh Hughes, sits in a wider online environment of the production. The blog is about his stories and the site which accompanies this has stories, poems, pictures, videos etc which invites users to explore.

Once you've got your user experience sorted then you should go back to your mission statement and check that you are still on course.

Marketing

About 90% of what you do should be what we've talked about, writing good content and presenting it in a good way. 10% of time should be spent marketing and measuring especially as lots of this can be automated and my advice is 'automate absolutely everything'!

Use services like 'If this then that' so if you post a blog it will automatically post to Twitter, if I start something in Google Reader, it posts to my Tumblr. It means that you can dedicate your time to the blog or deal with the engagement as it develops.

Make sure you have the right keywords in there, especially in the title, but avoid spam like words. Backlinks will help – get other people to link to your site. Listening and responding will help you to do this. I set up searches which will monitor mentions of the brands I look after. If something is spotted then I contact them and ask if they'll put in a link. It opens up the whole conversation.

Tweetdeck and Twitter lists are good ways of keeping track of influencers. If you keep track of the key people, you can jump in and say – 'ah yes that's just like the points we were making about this on our blog'.

Twiangulate is a great way to see how everyone's connected – you might find there are just two people that a set of people follow. Rowfeeder allows people to analyse Twitter and Tagxedo is useful to find out what people are talking about connected to what you are interested in – so people might be talking about the bar down the road as well as The Bush Theatre.

Then there is paid for advertising. We have done this with a couple of clients. Stumble Upon is good if you really need views on your blog. We managed to get about 100,000 hits for £1500 for Ubelly. It sounds like a lot of money but if that is what you want to achieve it might be money well spent.

If you have a budget to spend on Facebook advertising then make sure you spend it on someone who knows what they are doing – don't do it yourself. They will have good relationships with Facebook so will get good rates and they know the system inside out. These are not the big advertising agencies; there are some small specialist companies that will do this for you.

Live events are a great way to get yourself out there and covering the event in interesting ways (starting at blogging and photography, to sketching, writing opinion pieces etc) can get mass amounts of reach.

Hosting your own events is an even better way of reaching audiences and strengthening your position within the community. This can literally be hiring a room in a pub, organising a tweetup before a specific show night (press night for example).

In the end you need to measure what's been happening. First of all you will need to agree the goals with the people that matter. If it's ticket sales that are important you can find ways of tracking that from your blog by putting in place tracking codes on all your links from your site. Or, you could just track sales against the activity you have been doing.

There are established tools such as Google Analytics and Rowfeeder.

Look out for the trends and investigate which parts of your content are working, when your content is working and where people are coming from – where are they being referred from?

Once you've measured all that, then look again at whether it satisfies your mission!

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Jake Orr: A blogging manifesto

Before I give my presentation, I would like to share something with you. Last night at the dinner I began to talk about blogging and the arts with my fellow diners. It's something I feel passionate about because *I am a blogger*. It's also because I care about the way in which we can get the arts thinking about their blogs. Blogs have become a necessity. They have become the given. We frown on people who don't give us insights into their buildings and artistic processes – *'shame on you!*

But you know what? If there's one thing I learnt last night during dinner it's how simple it all is and how much you, the marketers, already know and do it.

So, even though this session is all about blogs and Luke and I are the grand-blogging masters and even though I am going to go through my presentation regardless, you can happily leave after these bullet points.

Here is my complete guide to blogging in ten points. I literally wrote these last night so there are no slides.

1. You already know what a blog is, how to use one and why yours is not as good as it should be
2. None of us have time – time to do marketing and time to do the blog. If it was that easy, none of us would be sitting here now.
3. It's all about common sense. Use your common sense.
4. Keep it simple
5. You don't need a blog for every single project
6. Google is your friend
7. Develop a secret drinking game so that if anyone inside or outside your marketing department says 'let's blog it' you down a shot of whiskey hidden in your desk drawer. It will make your work much more fun.
8. Extend these rules to downing a drink every time you see an arts organisation writing a blog about their rehearsal process.
9. Talk about blogging and blogs. Some people love to write blogs.
10. Remember you know how to blog, you don't have time to blog but you're going to blog anyway so at least try to make it brilliant.

It's really that simple but because I'm meant to give a presentation and I've already prepared this before I had the epiphany, we will continue.

A Younger Theatre

I am a founder of A Younger Theatre (www.ayoungertheatre.com). This is a platform for people under the age of 26 year's old to write about the theatre. It has grown in size and scale and has become bigger than I could have imagined.

In 2009 I graduated from drama school after training as a performer. Instead of slogging away at becoming a performer I took up an internship at a theatre doing what I loved the most. I soon found myself working six days a week in a small fringe theatre behind a desk doing administration. This was a far cry from the performance work I had once dreamed of, but at the same time I needed a creative outlet. So in time I started using Twitter and with a little encouragement I immersed myself in more online activity and I started a blog – A Younger Theatre was born.

It was a personal blog where I could flourish in my career and use my creative skills. Though I admit that at the beginning it was terrible. I wrote reviews, reflection pieces on things that excited me and discussed young people and the arts.



It was a free hosted site with about 40 views a day which I was quite pleased with, but then I started being contacted by other young people wanting to write for the site.

They liked the theme and the strapline: *'theatre through the eyes of a younger generation'*.

So this was how it all started.

It is now a fully fledged website (since April 2010) and we support and encourage voices of young people who are excited about working in the arts.



We now have 100+ writers, 70,000 page views a month, 6000 Twitter followers, 1500 Facebook likes, a content sharing agreement with *The Guardian* and last year we were named About.com's Theatre Blog of the Year. We add four or five new articles a day. We cover features, reviews, resources, and blogs.

No-one is paid, not even me. We are all volunteers. It's put together with a passion for the subject, hard work and lack of sleep.

A Younger Theatre grew with a personal and opinionated approach. We were willing to put our views online and stand by them no matter how 'out there' they were. We spoke with authority demanding respect. We engaged other young people to write and respond, to form a dialogue.

The key point was when I realised that this was a personal blog but there were other people out there and it had to be something more. There were other people who wanted a platform and community and shared space for young people. Once I had established this it was just a matter of inviting others to join us to write. Now we don't even have to do that because people come to us all the time.

Social media empowers us and our voices. We offer an alternative space that encourages a younger voice. We have a USP – that there are no other websites like it – apart from one in France for French speakers, which is not as good. It means that we are very clear about who our audience is and what the mission is and who we are – we're young and proud and we're going to write about it.

A Younger Theatre didn't boom overnight. It has been steady organic growth. It's come very naturally.

The key areas for us are:

- Social Traffic – Twitter and Facebook – these are our key referrers. We filter our content through them
- Search Engines – Google is your friend. 59% of the traffic to the site comes from search engines. The reason for that is the way we published our content – we use keywords in the title. So we always mention the theatre and someone from the creative team. Every single post has all the names tagged in there, so whenever anyone wants to search for an unknown actor – it will pop up. We are a trusted Google search resource and we've gained links from many websites.
- Word of Mouth / Direct – we've tapped into young people who tell their young friends and help spread the word. It also helps that people are typing in the blog title A Younger Theatre.
- Partnerships – we've built partnerships with organisations such as The Guardian or through reviewing clubs or other organisations that share other interests and topics. This helps to build audiences as well as reputation and brand. We also publish content daily. This is really key for us – we must continually publish – if we go quiet for a week then we lose our audience.

In 2012, AYT is much more than a website or blog. It is a community of young people who have a place for their voices. We offered them a platform and now they are using it.

I hope that by giving an insight into AYT you might be able to begin to see the parallels of the work you are doing yourself. Thinking and needing for an online community for your work to try and create platforms for discussion and debate. It is not about broadcasting.

What is an arts blog in 2012?

There was once a time when the 'weblog' contained words and paragraphs of words. Nowadays in our busy world, and our 140 characters of text, our ability to take in a block of text has really shrunk. So we want something smaller – like a scrapbook.

But for me, I'm obsessed with the artistic process. For me, this is important – to be able to see behind the creative process. Does it show a sneak peak behind the artistic practice?

If you want engaging conversation then you must be offering a discussion and debate. Don't act as a broadcast to the world. At AYT we promote and encourage feedback. We leave our comments box open in the hope to engage discussions. If someone really disagrees with us we ask them to write a response. Are there people you can bring into the debate and discussion?

Most of all it is about being a creative outlet. AYT is clearly about young people and the arts. What is your blog about? Does it have a mission statement?

There needs to be someone in charge of the blog and they need to see themselves as a curator. This includes sourcing it, commissioning it and finding the right mix of words and visuals which makes it more than just a set of rehearsal diaries.

Personally, I think one of the things that arts blogs are struggling with is being relevant. We take the easy route of showing behind the scenes work – but does it really show an insight into what you are doing? Are audiences interested?

As an arts venue or organisation we work in creativity. Everything we produce should have this creativity built into it; from our blogs, to our tweets to our shows/exhibitions. We do creativity – that's the biggest thing that we can offer. Creating a blog is a creative force on its own and can complement the creative work you are doing in your building.

It also needs to move away from marketing talk. It should be personal, including stories and anecdotes, showing that you are human. If I write from AYT it comes from a passion – a drive and determination to write about something I truly believe in. It's rare that I will write non-personal material – even if I'm reviewing a show.

I was unfortunate that recently I lost my Grandmother and I wrote about it on AYT, linking a family death to the inability to see theatre because I was worried that it would cloud my judgment. I wrote about needing the right theatre to unlock my emotion, to act as catharsis. The feedback on the blog was amazing and I use it as an example to show that even when you think that something is personal and not relevant to your work it feeds into basic human instinct and interaction. Robots don't have hearts, but we do.

Blogs can be so much more than uploading text and being done with it. There are different formats to blogs which you can take. For example, you can 'live blog'. One of the things we like to do at AYT and we offer to people is to live blog. We partner up with organisations, taking young people in and getting them to report on what is happening, whether it's a festival or a special event. We've done this with the Old Vic with their 24 hour plays or The Junction in Cambridge, documenting the experience for young people.

Sometimes it's not about you creating content but bringing other guys in. This is why people come to us at AYT because they see us as a stepping stone.

Occasionally we also feature just photos – a photo blog. It's about thinking of visuals, not just the written form; or you could do audio blogs or video blogs.

Everyone in your organisation can contribute. What about the people in the box office who talk to people all day?

It's important that when you start engaging with creative teams that everything is laid out and made as easy as possible; including briefing them so that they know what is on the cards. Many creative people will not want other people around – so look for the middle ground. As Luke said, create a schedule and keep to that schedule.

Often I will meet resistance, especially from people not in the marketing department who don't fully comprehend the purpose to the engagement. It's important to brief those involved in blogging and build a level of trust. It's good to try and find the creative potential within people – are they more suited to words or photos?

Think and act small at first. We built AYT gradually. You don't have all the time in the world to think about what is possible and do it slowly over time.

Is there a personal v professional issue that might happen? I'm all about the personal experience but companies don't always like that. Where do you find the middle ground and where do you compromise?

50 words a day beats a blog not used for weeks. It's amazing how simple but powerful those 50 words could be.

Think about the blog as a community. Who else can you tap into? Who is around you who could support you? Who is in the audience that likes your work and wants to send messages as ambassadors?

Finally, have a strategy, research, develop discussions and be a curator of these discussions. Is there anyone else in the industry that might be able to do something with you – as an exchange perhaps?

We can't all blog, we don't have the time to blog but at least we could try.

Questions [taken from the first seminar session]

Some questions had been emailed in in advance and Jonathan Goodacre (chair) (JG) read these out as starting points.

JG: This has already been addressed in both your presentations so I don't know if you want to say any more on this? I'll mention it anyway. The question is this:

Beckie Smith, The Roses Theatre: *how do we find the time to update what we are doing? How do we get other staff to contribute to the blog when they themselves are short of time?*

LM: I suppose I would just re-iterate what I said. Buy-in from the top and then looking outside the organisation.

Lucy Pickering, Curve Theatre: *We launched our Curve young company blog in conjunction with a specific production. It has posts from various of the young people involved and has evolved quite organically. I'm currently thinking about how best to continue the blog once the production has ended. I would appreciate advice on how to generate and manage the posts from young people.*

JO: Do you still need that answering?

LP: *Well yes I got a lot of food for thought from both of you. I need to have a think about the framework for it and make people aware of it because I just started doing it on the side and asked people if they'd like to post. It's just formalising it more and seeing how it can grow.*

JO: I think it's about tapping into those people who are passionate and about recognising that there are those individuals who are not necessarily in your building but on the outside who really do want to engage. That's what we found with AYT. People come to us and that's great, but it's about finding the people within those who want to go the extra mile. No-one at AYT gets paid but there's a core staff of five of us. They were all willing to do more. I asked in a nice way if they were willing to do a bit more. When you do get more involved you really find something from it so you don't mind doing a bit more. Shift it away from being a show blog and into the work of these young people around the rest of your season.

LM: Tying it back to your strategy is important. If you do want to get funding from within the organisation if it aligns with something that the bosses want to go forward with then submit a proposal – off your own back – and you might find there's a little budget that can be assigned to it.

Kirsty Lodge, Leeds Grand Theatre: *How do you deal with any negativity, moaners and complainers and that sort of thing? Or do you not get any negativity?*

JO: We get negativity all the time. When you're young you're naïve, you don't understand what the world is like. True. What we do is do our best. It's an opinion, but the key thing is that we engage in a dialogue with those people. Sometimes as an arts organisation it's difficult to deal with something that can get out of control, but you have to take a calm and measured approach to those things. It's about recognising the comment – or you get someone else to write a response or defend themselves or the issues. Acknowledging them, responding to them and sometimes you have to end it if it goes on.

We had a review that criticised 'Susan Boyle The Musical' and we got the Subo fans attacking us like nothing before. After a while it was just too much and we closed the

comments saying 'this isn't adding to the debate anymore – I'm really sorry but we have to close it'.

LM: With some companies we will have guidelines on the site so that you are clear what will happen with derogatory, discriminatory or marketing comments. And you can say that a comments thread can be closed after a certain number of days. I agree with Jake that you can turn it into more content but if it was really heated take the conversation offline – provide them with an email address for a complaint. We do some work for a hotel chain which can get deluged with comments / complaints so we try and get in contact with them personally to try and rectify the problem individually.

Jane Dodson, aka: *How do you filter the blogs that you get from young people? Do you spend time reading them to check they're suitable to go online?*

JO: We have an editorial team so that every piece of content is moderated and edited before it goes out. In terms of blogs in particular, we have a blogs editor who works with those individuals. We have people submitting blogs saying I'd like to write for you, here's a sample. We look at it and sometimes offer feedback. We mentor them so if they have a really out there opinion and we feel it's not appropriate we will stop them. We have an editorial policy.

Kate McGrath, Fuel: *I want to ask Jake about the personal aspect that he was talking about because it's a debate that we have a lot internally – how much it should be a personal approach and how much it represents Fuel and far we can allow room within the organisation for people to have different points of view and how much it should be representative of Fuel. On the other hand we don't want to be corporate in our approach.*

JO: Really interesting. There are always these hoops you have to jump through when you're working for an organisation. The key is when you open it out and you go – right this blog is open and each post comes from the individual and it's their opinion. It's under the umbrella of, in this case Fuel, but we understand that every person in our organisation is an individual and they have their own opinion and this adds value to what we are doing. It's difficult though and there are some large organisations where this is difficult to do. You can chip away at it but if the top level doesn't want it it's very difficult to do anything.

JG: *The interesting example is the Hugh Hughes blog and website that you mentioned Luke, because Hugh Hughes is not a real person, he's a persona and it's a different approach to a company blog. It goes back to having a creative way of approaching the matter. It's entertaining and has a different sort of authorship.*

LM: It's about owning the tone of voice, setting this out at the beginning. If it's a personal blog you can be personal. In terms of the people at the top not having buy-in, you can get people from outside to come in and talk to them.

KM: *Getting buy-in from the top is not the problem. It's more about the individuals in the organisation being confident enough to write in their own voice.*

LM: In that case what you really need is someone to lead the way. You need to be confident and have the responsibility to put something of yourself in there. You will need to experiment and try different ways. See what works and what doesn't.

JO: I think you can't force it. Some people don't want to do this sort of work and that's allowed. It suits some – it doesn't suit others. Find the ones that it does suit. We have this thing at the moment that everyone has to have a Twitter account and a blog or whatever. No, you don't. But if you want to be a progressive company then that's a different story – that's about moving the whole company forward. It's about instilling trust – throw out the horror stories and also the success stories and write something interesting.

Catriona Mackay, Royal Scottish National Orchestra: *In terms of having these different people writing for your blog when you're a fairly small company. In terms of the tone of voice – what would be the maximum numbers of people contributing to a blog?*

JO: It's something we struggle with a lot at AYT. There are certain writers at the forefront who tend to become a 'voice' of AYT. We do have 100+ writers but they don't all write at once, we edit and curate.

Stacey Coyne, Young Vic: *We're a bit guilty of shutting down the online operation on a Friday and we often don't send out anything out over the weekend. But you guys regularly set up things to go out when you're not in the office.*

JO: You are employed five days a week, but the internet is 24 hours a day. You will be amazed how many people are sitting at home on a Sunday interested in reading something. Our stats tend to drop but if you push out content at the weekend people will respond. However, you need to be clear to people that you might not respond at the weekend. Personally I don't like automation. Obviously LM does!

LM: It comes down to the cadence of the content. When people know to expect content on a Saturday they will look out for it. Also, have a look at your audience patterns and see if you can match that. See if they're active on a Saturday or Sunday – if they are then invest in it. Then see if you can work Tuesday – Saturday!