

ZEST Digital interview with Simon Baker, CEO, Realestate.com.au

Steven Lewis:

Hello, I'm Steven Lewis from [Zest Digital](#), and you're listening to a social media case study podcast. The reason for this podcast series is because we, Zest Digital, work in a social media space as an agency and consultancy. Our clients are always asking us for good examples of other people using social media. How do they use it, to what effect, what works for them, what have they learned.

And I know that we're always looking for that good material, and that other people are looking for the material. So we decided to start a podcast where we're going to go out and talk to people who are using social media. They don't have to be our clients, and in this case, and our first podcast, I was lucky enough to speak to Simon Baker, CEO of [Realestate.com.au](#) who are not a client of ours.

Realestate.com.au is a listed Australian company and they own 15 real estate websites operating in 8 countries. The websites attract 7.4 million monthly unique visitors.

Simon himself has been blogging for 12 months now, and his is still one of the few corporate blogs in Australia. We talked about his blog, but you'll also hear about the other social media used within the REA group for internal comms. And Simon also hints at the company's plans to allow for user-generated content on its sites, but he wasn't saying too much about that. We met for coffee in Darlinghurst in Sydney and I started by asking Simon what led him to start blogging back in March 2006.

Simon Baker:

Blogging for me is a way in which we can communicate in a friendly, conversational tone with customers, readers and our staff internally, and we're able to put across key interesting issues that it's not worthy of a press release and we don't really have any other sort of editorial capabilities on the site as such. And so the blog was seen to be the best way to address those issues, and engage them in conversation.

Steven Lewis:

And you write it yourself?

Simon Baker:

Most of the time, yeah. We've also got a group editor who occasionally chips in with various stories. And you know, she will of course write under her own name.

Steven Lewis:

So there's no ghost blogging?

Simon Baker:

Oh Christ, no. I'm more than happy, if I've got a good idea, I'll bang something out and excuse the spelling. In fact, it's so funny, my dad reads it and he will actually send me an email saying your spelling is shocking, and don't let your mother see it, because she was an English teacher.

Steven Lewis:

And what sort of reaction have you had to it?

Simon Baker:

It's good actually, because what we find is there's some other guys doing some blogging in our industry, corporate blogs but commentators, on what's happening out there, and I always see when I put up an article that's relatively interesting, that they'll pick it up. So it's a way in which you can disseminate information at a, not at the 'here's a press release' and give them to the AFR, it's 'here's an interesting thing for the people to communicate' and they'll pick up and they'll run with it, and that's great, and then we start to have a bit of a conversation backwards and forwards.

Steven Lewis:

How much do you look at the blogging stats?

Simon Baker:

Probably not enough. The only ones that I tend to look at how many subscribers there are. I think there's 300-400.

Steven Lewis:

So a lot of people hearing that would think oh, you know, only 300 subscribers, that's not a lot of people.

Simon Baker:

Well, it depends who the 300 are. The 300 are, you know, we know they're a combination of journalists, competitors. You know, I don't really mind if there's like 5 people listening to it, if those 5 people happen to be incredibly connected, or important or whatever, and that's great. I know we got some journalists listen, I know definitely some competitors, not listen sorry, read. The competitors read, internal staff and so on. But if these are people who then hear it and then communicate it, then who cares? It's about messages and getting it out there and engaging in conversation.

Steven Lewis:

So you don't mind your competitors having access to your thinking?

Simon Baker:

No, no. Because the thing is, like what did Einstein say, 1% inspiration, and 99% perspiration. We just sweat a lot.

Steven Lewis:

Yet a lot of big companies that I talk to are worried, oh, you know, if the CEO speaks, he could say something ridiculous, it could blow up in our faces.

Simon Baker:

(Laughs) Oh I probably put my foot in my mouth from time to time, but so what? If you can't engage people in a conversation around something, or take them on, and I participate as a, there's a blog there called [Business2](#) which is really about the real estate industry

and there's some very parochial and opinionated folk in there. And I, from time to time, will wade in on debates, and are more than happy to take them on, challenge them. And I write as me of course, there's no use hiding stuff.

Steven Lewis:

And have you had your blog post challenged in your comments section, for instance? Have you had negative comments?

Simon Baker:

Yes. You get negative comments. You also get, and I always put my email address out there, because sometimes people don't want to, they would like to just sort of contact directly. So often you get that, but that's ok, you just take it on, you know. I'd rather know what someone is thinking and so I can address it, and you know, if they're right, then we've got to fix it, and if they're not right, then you know, I'll have a crack at them back. If they're competitors under pseudonyms trying to have a crack at me, then that's fine. If they're so worried about me, that's fantastic, because trust me, I'm not reading theirs.

Steven Lewis:

So you would support having comments, which again, that's another concern that I hear a lot about all the comments, you know, the wild west of people posting profanity.

Simon Baker:

You know, if someone's in there sort of swearing whatever, we'll just delete the comment because it doesn't add to it. I mean, as long as it's legitimate, thought through and a reason, I don't mind if someone's got a negative comment.

Steven Lewis:

Do you have a published blogging comment policy or common sense is to prevail?

Simon Baker:

Common sense. I think you've got to be common sense, because otherwise then I start to look like some very large traditional media organisation and then your blog becomes a bit self-serving and then before you know it, it's useless.

Steven Lewis:

Have you ever had your customers debate each other in a comment section, or your readers, rather.

Simon Baker:

Not really, not really, no. They haven't sort of become that engaged in it. I think a lot of people take it more as an information dissemination activity rather than a 'let's sort of hoe in and have a big debate'. That's probably because of how we phrase the topics on what we talk about. It says we have views on something, or it's more of a factual type. We've done this or done that, and we sometimes use the blog as a way to enhance what we've done, so we've bought a company in Italy, well, let's talk more around why we did that, rather than what am I going to squeeze into a one-page press-release, that's been sanitised by every man and his dog.

Steven Lewis:

And they say often about blogging that people really respond to that authenticity. Has that been your experience?

Simon Baker:

Yes, yeah. I think it's the, having a casual tone, don't get so hung up on the grammar and re-writing a sentence 5 times, you know, if I spend more than 15 minutes on it, I've probably over-invested my time in what's there. It's like a stream of consciousness thought. If you, you know, as long as you don't say things totally stupid, you're not libelous or whatever, just get on with it and do it. Rather than being too hung up on my god, did I use you know, a certain word or how could it be interpreted. And I think that's where people get too precious. I know that you know, there's analysts out there who are not an audience that I worry about, they read it, it gives them more information. I think there are number of journalists because I can tell by the, you know, when you look at the email addresses who look at it. I tend to point people in that direction, if you want to keep in touch with it, just subscribe to it, just you know, then you'll hear more about what's happening.

Steven Lewis:

What does your PR manager think of the blog?

Simon Baker:

Oh he loves it.

Steven Lewis:

And your lawyer?

Simon Baker:

Oh, our general counsel, I do say don't worry, I won't put my foot in it.

Steven Lewis:

What would you say were the challenges of starting the blog, and the ongoing challenges?

Simon Baker:

I think the challenge of starting is finding a voice. And you know, the simplest trap to fall into is this becomes press releases, which are boring at best, and sanitised. And to just saying it's being a stream of thought. The second challenge is actually having something intelligent or interesting to say, and not just blogging for the sake of blogging. Because then it becomes a bit mundane, you know, 'hi, I woke up this morning, I've got a cat' who cares. What's more interesting is you know, I saw this ad from a competitor, what were they thinking, or hey that was actually an interesting ad. So you just want to talk about something that's interesting, that's relevant to what you're doing and your audience is going to actually engage in. And another challenge is time, is actually finding the time each day, and it's a discipline thing. And my problem is I'll tend to go through fits and spurts. So once you know, I'm doing budgeting at the moment, but once I'm through that, I'll probably get back into it. I find time on planes, so I actually just open, I've got my laptop on the plane, I'll just sit there and open notepad and just bang out a paragraph or two, store it on the desk top and I might have actually three or four of them sitting there, and then I'll just release them over a few days. So it's just about having the time to engage around it.

Steven Lewis:

You don't feel that it's necessary to post on a daily basis or a target of three times a week?

Simon Baker:

No, I think my PR guy should probably beat me up a bit more about that.

Steven Lewis:

If someone's made a negative comment about you, not necessarily a rubbish, you know, a defamatory comment, how would you feel about linking to it from your blog?

Simon Baker:

I haven't got a problem. A) I'll write on the blog that it was written, as myself. My sort of rule of thumb is if someone says something that's factually incorrect, I'll go straight in and say such and such said this on this day, this is factually incorrect, here's the truth. Now if someone says, they might come out and say bullshit, and I'll say well, if you think it's bullshit, feel free to take it up with ASIC or ASX right, because we're a listed company, we're not noted for making rubbish bullshit comments. If someone's making some assertions or comments or feelings around what they think about it, you know, your customer service is whatever, if I think it is, it's either a red herring, then you leave it, or if it's something that could get momentum, then you just sort of go well, ok, fair point, or not fair point, or I'll challenge them. I'll say look I'll tell you what, I'll give you a phone number, give me a call. And I often publish my phone number and my email address. I encourage people just to contact me directly, if they've really got an issue.

Steven Lewis:

And do they?

Simon Baker:

Some do, some do. Some, because you know, sometimes there are those in the world who blog as themselves, and are quite happy to blog as themselves, and some people would rather be anonymous. Those who are anonymous, we believe, tend to be either competitors who are just being you know, shit-stirring. Or, no, actually I think they're probably competitors shit stirring, right. And that's fine, you know, if they want to have a crack at it. But then, don't be afraid if we then come back, we won't be anonymous and well will tell them what we think.

Steven Lewis:

And are you monitoring the blogosphere, do you see what's being said about you?

Simon Baker:

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I get my Google alerts every day. The ones in the media and the ones in the, you know, they scan the blogs for what's said.

Steven Lewis:

And what lessons would you say you've learnt?

Simon Baker:

On the positive side, it's a fun way to communicate to people that didn't exist before, to engage in an audience. You've got to be relaxed about being criticised. On the negative side is you know, once you start, you've got to have the motivation to keep going so as you build an audience, you've got to be there each day. You've got to actually be prepared to be edgy, controversial, you can't be sanitised, press-release all the time. Got to be aware that you don't know who exactly is going to read this. So it will be competitors, or it could be customers, or it could be, so you're not doing anything stupid. You certainly don't want to openly attack someone. Unless of course they are just making false and misleading, then that's fair game. So there's a heck of a lot that you learn, but overall it's a lot of fun.

Steven Lewis:

And do you attempt to measure the return on investment for blogging?

Simon Baker:

No.

Steven Lewis:

Do you think it would be possible to measure the return on investment?

Simon Baker:

No.

Steven Lewis:

And what advice would you have for somebody looking to blog, you know, a CEO looking to blog?

Simon Baker:

Just do it. You know, it's simple as that, do it. And then if you, you know, set it up, have something smart to say, you've run the business right, so I assume you've got something smart to say about your business, or about the industry, and then let everyone know that you exist, and don't be afraid. Or don't do it. Don't sort of half do it.

Steven Lewis:

And your most recent blog entry is the [YouTube upload](#) of your new TV advert. Who's idea was it to put the ad on YouTube?

Simon Baker:

Me. I just said send me the MPEG file, I shoved it up there, and away we go.

Steven Lewis:

So it wasn't the advertising agency's idea?

Simon Baker:

Nope. But we tend to move pretty quickly, but we've got sections on YouTube where I've got interviews with all our team and we use YouTube as a distribution vehicle for video. I've got 500 employees across 10 countries. For example, we've got an office Bucharest in Romania, of all bloody places. I've never been there, but my head of HR went there and she took some video. I like to have a bit of an amateur play around, right, so she gave me, we downloaded clips, gave it to me, I then stitched it into 2 minutes of footage about what, but then we just put it up there and then I sent an email around to everyone in the business saying hey guys you want out to check out the Romanian office, click here, went to the YouTube, YouTube pays for all my distribution costs thanks very much, and then we had like 500 people, you know, some people viewed it twice, some people sent it off to their friends, I actually don't care, right. It's just introducing people to the fact that we have a Romanian office. And so to me, the technology's there, use it. We've got people that use Flickr for sharing photographs of

themselves internally. There's a whole range of you know, we're very open to use it all. It doesn't matter.

Steven Lewis:

So those are your people using social media, incredibly comprehensively, and the impression I'm getting from what we're saying, it's sort of organically? Somebody slaps something up on Flickr and suddenly you're using Flickr?

Simon Baker:

Yeah, I don't mind, as long as it's, they won't do anything stupid, you've got to trust your people. You know, if they do something stupid, I'll have a word with them about it, like, what the hell are you doing, but you trust people. And 99% of people are not malicious, they don't care, you know, they won't try stuff.

Steven Lewis:

Do you have any plans to get your audience to user-generator contact?

Simon Baker:

Sure, sure, yeah, I mean, a part of what we're in the throes of developing, and wanting to roll out are allowing people to comment around suburbs and what they think about living in Richmond or wherever, right. You know, again, the comment on everything from the kindergartens to the high street and the café's to I don't really care, as long as they're engaged in a conversation and they're about their community. So yeah, of course, why not?

Steven Lewis:

So how advanced are these plans?

Simon Baker:

Advanced enough.

Steven Lewis:

More than a twinkle in the eye of the CEO?

Simon Baker:

Oh, christ, yeah. But these are obvious things, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that social networking's here to stay

and the days of hierarchical approach to you know, media's concentrated and you will you know, you're told, and you can't debate it, they're gone. The question is how do we all use it amongst our customers, amongst our readers, amongst our employees to gain the most. We're in the throes of developing out an internal intranet site that will have a high level of social networking around a range of issues. Everything from social to you know, work related, to just general interest, don't care.

Steven Lewis:

You can find Simon's blog through blogs.real.estate.com.au/CEO corner. You can find out more about Zest Digital at zestdigital.com.au. At our website you'll find out how you can subscribe to this podcast for free, that way, you'll get all future installments and you don't have to give us any of your contact details and you can subscribe any time you want to. If you'd like to contact me, you can reach me at <mailto:steven.lewis@zestdigital.com.au> or you can leave a comment on [our blog](#) at the website. I'd love to know what you think of what Simon said and your views on social media and corporate Australia. Thank you for listening to the first Zest Digital social media case study.

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