



Color Laser Printers and  
All-In Ones that give you more.  
Starting around \$399



**Inc.com**

## When Blogs Go Bad

Blogs can be a great marketing tool. But when they bite back, it's all about damage control.

**From:** [Inc. Magazine, November 2005](#) | **By:** Jory Des Jardins

---

Donna Lynes-Miller was looking to create some buzz for GourmetStation, her Web-based retailer of high-end food, and jumping on the blog bandwagon seemed like the perfect way to do it. The medium, after all, thrives on voice and attitude. And GourmetStation--which ships fine food, including four-course meals made from recipes by the world's top chefs--has plenty of both.

The Atlanta-based company's unofficial mascot is a fictional character called T. Alexander, an oh-so-sophisticated epicurean and an expert on everything from the best Bordeaux to serve with rabbit pâté to how to cook for vegans. The character had proved so popular with GourmetStation's customers that Lynes-Miller and her marketing consultant Toby Bloomberg decided that the blog, Delicious Destinations, would be written in T. Alexander's voice. With a disclosure that Alexander was indeed a fictional character, the blog launched last March. But the response was not what the women had hoped for.

Robert French, a communications instructor at Auburn University who blogs about marketing on a site called Blogthenticity, was the first to notice. Delicious Destinations, he wrote, was a prime example of so-called character blogging, something that has become increasingly popular on business blogs. "What value do you find in this tactic?" he asked his readers. "Is it authentic?" The blogosphere responded. Hugh MacLeod, who runs Gapingvoid, a highly regarded and often scathingly critical site for marketing professionals, decided that GourmetStation's new blog merited special recognition--the Beyond Lame Award. Soon, GourmetStation was the talk of all the marketing blogs. "Horrible. Stupid. Insane. Worthless. Ineffective," wrote one person. "The ultimate in false advertising."

Welcome to the blogosphere. Sixteen percent of the U.S. population reads blogs, according to a May 2005 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The blog search engine Technorati estimates that the number of blogs doubles every five and a half months--with many of the new ones started by entrepreneurs. Blogs, after all, are inexpensive and easy to set up. They're heavily viral--one blogger links to another who links to another, and soon enough you've attracted a vast community to your company. A well-trafficked blog also can help generate better results on search engines.

But as Lynes-Miller learned, there's a dark side to the blogosphere. Bloggers, and those who frequent blogs, can be a prickly lot. They live by a code of their own, and you offend them at your peril. Come into the club wearing the wrong thing--something that screams "notice me" but offers little substance, or pretending to be someone you're not--and there's a good chance you'll find yourself, and your brand, publicly ridiculed.

Even those who know the rules can get burned. Bloomberg, who writes a blog called Diva Marketing, knows how sensitive people can be to false representations. That's why she insisted on disclosing the fictional nature

of T. Alexander's identity from the get-go. In an attempt at full transparency, she even blogged herself about the development of the character. But it didn't help much. Indeed, things hit a nadir when the controversy caught the eye of marketing guru Steve Rubel, who blogs at Micro Persuasion, one of the top 250 most trafficked blogs on the Web, according to Technorati. "Here comes another fake blog," Rubel announced.

"I was taken aback," says Lynes-Miller. Her instincts told her to ignore the uproar and forge ahead. But Bloomberg had other ideas. As a marketing pro, she'd seen plenty of PR flare-ups on the Web. Do nothing, and the fire likely will continue to burn on its own. Respond with anger, she knew, and you risk fanning the flames even more. The best way to douse them, Bloomberg says, is to join the conversation.

So Bloomberg began writing to the commentators. She kept the tone cool and respectful, and explained what GourmetStation was trying to accomplish with its blog. That led even some of its most bitter critics to take a second look at the site and even change their minds, says Bloomberg. "I may have overreacted and not understood the entire idea of this particular fictional character," admitted one.

Lynes-Miller, meanwhile, posted a comment on the blog of her greatest detractor, Hugh MacLeod, and tried to explain the strategy behind T. Alexander and Delicious Destinations. "We are a small pioneering food company and we see the blog and its content as a way of adding value to our patron's experience," she wrote. "What T. Alexander has to say about food is not as important as what our patrons have to share about their culinary adventures." MacLeod was impressed with Lynes-Miller's note. "Thanks for stopping by and telling your side of the story," he responded on his blog. Of course, he still professed deep loathing for T. Alexander. "A great food brand or a great food blogger is no different than a great chef," he said. "She needs passion and authority. Methinks your T. Alexander has little of either." Some on the site rose to Lynes-Miller's defense, and, in any case, MacLeod soon directed his ire elsewhere.

Lynes-Miller has no regrets. For one thing, traffic at her site almost doubled as a result of the controversy. Besides, blogging is just one part of the company's marketing plan. In May, for example, GourmetStation was touted on *Good Morning America* as a great place to shop for Mother's Day gifts, which helped send second-quarter sales up 158%.

Meanwhile, T. Alexander's culinary adventures continue uninterrupted. "I didn't expect the negative feedback we initially received," Lynes-Miller says. "Though there was no negative feedback from customers--and that's the feedback I'm most concerned about."

## Resources

Resources There is no end of blogs about business blogging. To get started, go to [thenewpr.com](http://thenewpr.com) and click on "Business Blogging 101." For case studies, best practices, and corporate blogging policies check out [blogwrite.blogs.com](http://blogwrite.blogs.com) and [buzzmarketingwithblogs.com](http://buzzmarketingwithblogs.com).

---

Copyright © 2007 Mansueto Ventures LLC. All rights reserved.  
Inc.com, 7 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007-2195.