

# Cyber Anthropology: Why Blogs Matter

What we can learn by mining thriving online fragrance communities

Michelle Krell Kydd\*



Human beings are social creatures that bond intensely when sharing ideas, opinions and passions. Blogging provides a virtual outlet for expression that increases the chances of like minds meeting one another. Blogging is as much a technological phenomenon as a social one. People are driven by the desire to connect to something authentic when they read and run blogs. The virtual medium for these communications smashes limits of space and time. This is what causes so much confusion for marketers, many of whom do not have “real time” to read blogs in their respective verticals, let alone run a blog.

I realized that blogging was more than a cultural phenomenon when chef Bill Yosses and I created the “Scentuality” event for The James Beard Foundation and New York University. I e-mailed Victoria Frolova, editor of Bois de Jasmin (*boisdejasmin.typepad.com*), so she could share the details of the event with her readers. Two days after she posted the information, we were completely booked and had a waiting list of more than 40 people. This occurred before Yosses was recruited as executive pastry chef at the White House. After the event, I agreed to contribute a few articles to Bois de Jasmin. A few months later I decided to start my own blog, Glass Petal Smoke (*glasspetalSmoke.blogspot.com*).<sup>\*\*</sup> I was hooked before I started because writing is like breathing to me; if I don’t write I don’t feel alive.

The experience of reading blogs made me extremely curious regarding their social power. The more I read, the more apparent it became that blogs were fulfilling the consumer’s need for authentic dialogue in the fragrance vertical. Perfumers were being worshipped like rock stars and the contents of their potions had readers and bloggers revealing intimate details of their lives. As a professional, the only time I experience these kinds of revelations are

<sup>\*\*</sup>Glass Petal Smoke was created out of personal passion for things gustatory and olfactive. The back-story regarding a raw material or finished product is often rich with history, myth and folklore. When all of these aspects are brought together, they tell a story of our common humanity, as expressed through the senses.

Because Glass Petal Smoke is a blog, an element of cyber anthropology infuses the space in which it exists. Culture is about human nature, and people who love food and fragrance are acutely aware of the connection between the senses and memory. Glass Petal Smoke appeals to readers who possess such awareness and those who aspire to it.

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in well-run focus groups or in dialogues with industry colleagues. This was the tipping point for me.

**Cyber anthropology:** Technology scares people who don’t understand it. I didn’t pay heed to naysayers who were quick to point a finger at the issue of fabricated virtual personas. People are prone to say what they truly think when they are posting under an alias online. This doesn’t mean that the virtual world is free of falsehood, but if you look at the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, it is very clear that all of us present a social mask in public. We want people to see us a certain way and this is perfectly normal (and it is why we use fragrance and cosmetics!). The virtual medium makes this plain to see.

Blogs that are focused on singular topics form virtual followings based on a targeted area of interest. The readership grows in a very organic fashion, much like the formation of cloth by the addition of thread. The sign of a shift in culture begins in the vocabulary. Marketing and communications are what I do for a living so I am extremely sensitive to etymological changes.

Look at the word “thread.” The dictionary definition of thread is two or more pieces of fiber twisted together. If you Google the word thread you will discover that the top three entries define a computer science term (which refers to the way a program splits itself into two or more tasks upon execution). Online, the term thread refers to a series of comments posted on a blog in response to a

## Feedback

We want to hear your thoughts about the value of blogs and other online communities. Do you see value in using these tools? If so, what insights have you gained from accessing them? What are some of your favorite blogs, communities and sites? Send us your feedback at [jallured@allured.com](mailto:jallured@allured.com).

question or statement of facts. There is an anthropological force running through technology that marketers need to pay attention to. When the meaning of a word changes or expands it is a sign that the culture is changing, which in turn affects the marketplace.

Cyber anthropology is something the industry will hear a lot about in the next decade. Humans in virtual communities, though unseen, are still humans. The rules of cultural anthropology don't always apply because geography no longer defines ethnography. Future MBAs have to become more proficient in understanding Internet culture in order to market their message authentically. This is critical when sensory or emotional branding is applied, which is the case with flavors and fragrance.

**Maintaining authenticity:** One can stay in touch with what is important to the fragrance consumer by walking in their virtual shoes. Perfume of Life ([perfumeoflife.org](http://perfumeoflife.org)) is a fragrance community that is thread-rich. In the site's Talk about Perfume section ([perfumeoflife.org/index.php?showforum=6](http://perfumeoflife.org/index.php?showforum=6)), an end-user can gauge the importance of a particular topic by the number of replies it receives and read the culture in real-time. Daily immersion in fragrance blogs, communities and Web sites allows marketers to keep their finger on the pulse of what is important to the consumer based on content and content response.

With the Internet, consumers have the ability to access product information before companies have had a chance to establish a relationship with them. Fragrance is an emotional product, so it should come as no surprise that consumers rely on word of mouth before making a purchase. Running a regularly updated Web site for your offerings is not enough. Marketers must inform and engage consumers beyond traditional means.

Don't underestimate the consumer. They aren't impressed with mystical stories and claims of exoticism with regard to perfume ingredients. True fragrance lovers want products that are authentic. James Dotson, a Now Smell This ([nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com](http://nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com)) reader, proved this when he won a prize in a mock copywriting contest on the blog, called Le Prix Eau Faux ([nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com/blog/\\_archives/2008/3/17/3585307.html](http://nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com/blog/_archives/2008/3/17/3585307.html)). The secret ingredient in his well-written and boldly concocted *Leopard Blossom* formula was yak excrement. Dotson and the readers of Now Smell This sent a direct message to the industry that is worth listening to.

**Keeping in touch:** Can virtual diligence on the part of marketers keep them in tune with the culture? Absolutely. Trendcasters are highly in tune with shifts in the culture and this is why companies spend a lot of money on their services. These professionals take the time to key into things that

are critical to professionals who are constantly under pressure to release new products. If you are a marketer, perform due diligence and read the top 10 blogs that are relevant to your business. It will help shape your intuition regarding the present, not to mention the future.

A nice side-effect of reading blogs is reinvigoration of passion for the vertical and the customer. Marketers don't like to admit when they are losing faith because of overwork or competition. In today's "needed it yesterday" economy, morale loss is highly prevalent. A blog aggregator solves the problem of having to go from site to site in order to gather intelligence. You can put all the blogs you want to read in one place, using a tool like Bloglines ([bloglines.com](http://bloglines.com)) or Google Reader ([google.com/reader](http://google.com/reader)), and read them at your leisure.

In closing, I'd like to recommend a great video on YouTube called "The Machine is Us/ing Us" ([youtube.com/watch?v=NLlGopyXT\\_g](http://youtube.com/watch?v=NLlGopyXT_g)) that was created by Michael Welsch, an anthropologist at Kansas State University who runs [mediatedcultures.net](http://mediatedcultures.net). The clip visually illustrates the Internet's evolution and impact brilliantly, touching on a fact that makes every marketer uneasy; when it comes to brands, the consumer controls the message. As a marketer, you can remain on the sidelines or you can enter the fray and get to know what is important to the consumer. The choice is yours.

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