Moderating Blog Comments

Not long after people launch blogs, they realize that dealing with comments is more trouble than they figured. Why? It's hard to balance a spirit of open dialogue with the need to assert some control over the blog's content, especially when a blog is associated with a station, program or other entity with a brand (and reputation) to protect.

The difficulty: People are more likely to participate in your blog if they can comment freely and see their comments posted immediately. But the easier you make it to post without restriction, the more likely you are to attract spam, off-topic comments, flame wars, and so on.

Your first step is to check to see if your station or company has a policy about users' content on Web sites. Assuming there's little restriction or advice there, consider the following steps. They are offered as broad approaches, not specific solutions.

In some cases, the blogging platform you use will have the features listed below easily available. You can choose them from a dashboard or control panel. If not, you'll need to turn to your webmaster, IT honcho, tech vendor or tweaky intern for assistance.

1. **Block robot spam.** A program called Captcha (known by many names) will install a little box on your comment form. Users will have to type in the letters or numbers in the box before posting a comment. This thwarts auto-spam programs that would otherwise use your blog comments to publish links to various unsavory enterprises. [Accessibility note: Some of these programs have audio versions—they say the numbers or letters out loud—for blind users.]

2. **Use a foul language filter**. These programs are usually preset with a vocabulary of common vulgarities (including phrases used in hate speech). You can tailor the list to your own specifications. Usually these programs will send a comment that uses any of these words to a moderation queue, where you can read it and determine whether to post it or not.

3. **Include input boxes for names and e-mail addresses** (not to be published) on the comment forms. Or, if your site has registration capabilities, you can allow comments only from registered users. Either of these tactics will depress comment volume but (likely) increase quality.

4. **Add a layer of human moderation.** Blog authors and/or editors should be expected to moderate their comments at least daily—to screen any comments captured by a filter, or at least to read (and if necessary remove) any inappropriate post. Be aware that many bloggers enthusiastically agree to moderate and then slack off. Don't let them do this. A

blog is a live forum. It must be moderated. Most blog platforms permit authors to receive a notice by e-mail whenever a comment is posted, making the effort a lot easier.

5. **As a last resort, require moderation before any comment is posted.** This is likely to severely reduce participation in the blog. It's a last-resort move if nothing else is working. Many people are tempted to start with this approach, figuring it's the most effective way to control the content. It is. But it will make it a lot harder to create a forum for two-way communication with your users—which is probably what you wanted to accomplish with your blog in the first place.

   Important Note: Various PBS programs and departments have written policies guiding the use of comments and other user-generated content. Publishing this content raises questions of copyright, libel, privacy, ethics and other matters in addition to brand protection. If you have questions related to these or other legal issues please ask for assistance or more information.