



As the doors open to Baselworld, a strange race takes place. Not to discover the latest horological phenomenon but to post press releases online via blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. *QP* looks at where value is to be found in the instant tsunami of show reports.

Tracey Llewellyn

Social networking has snowballed over the past few years, emerging in parallel with blogging to become a main way to communicate. A bit like a two-way online diary, blogging allows new products to be launched, trends discussed and advice dispensed. According to Alastair Laidlaw of Jura Watches, the internet provides an essential and natural extension to in-store customer communications. He sees the key point with social networking sites such as Twitter as being the fact that genuine watch enthusiasts can post and receive messages that they have opted to receive.

"It would be impossible and undesirable for us to email customers and potential watch buyers up to five times per day," says Laidlaw. "But with the benefit of user

generated content and over 1,000 people following our business, it is incredible how quickly relevant information can be disseminated and acted upon. The key to the success of social networking is to show respect and ensure that you are posting and following relevant content, people or organisations."

And when it comes to events like Baselworld, where the main aim of manufacturers is to show their wares to retailers, journalists, industry leaders and collectors who cannot wait for the commercial launches, blogging allows information to be transmitted around the world in almost real time. A Google search for 'Baselworld' brings up 469,000 results. The first three direct you to the official Baselworld



site (www.baselworld.com). After that comes myriad blog sites interspersed with magazine websites - I stopped looking after page seven, but wish I'd had both the energy and time to go on to page 217,000 to see where the final results directed me.

But, at the end of the day, can all the Tweets in cyberspace - even if fairly well informed - ever communicate the excitement of seeing and touching the latest and greatest that horology is bringing to market? And can the most enthusiastic watch lover ever deliver a subjective and informed summary of a new product as well as a dedicated horology writer? At the end of the day, which is more important to buyers and brands - the style in which information is reported or the speed of getting it out there?

Doris Scholl from Baselworld's media relations department comments: "Our general feeling is that the significance of social networking sites is probably overrated. Just as with print publications, in the end there's only a small number of blogs or networking pages that really matter. The information they provide is not usually very detailed and we don't see a direct link between blogs and business at Baselworld - although they do definitely have the power to stimulate interest in the fair and the exhibiting brands."

To blog or not to blog

On the plus side, blogs are flexible - messages are short and punchy, so interchanges are more like chat than a debate and those in the know suggest that social networking drives people to official websites and improves the all-important Google page ranking. And when Twitter was launched in 2006 social networking took another upward turn. As Tweets are restricted to 140 characters, they can be received on mobile phones as well as computers, making the service even more powerful. Finally, but importantly, social networking sites are almost all free to use - although it should be remembered that this could be a double-edged sword when it comes to the accuracy of information. The majority of sites are free to browse because most (although certainly not all) are run by unpaid, albeit enthusiastic, amateurs who have neither the budget or, in many cases,

Baselworld 2010

The World Watch and Jewellery Show

Date: 18 March - 25 March 2010

Place: Exhibition Centre Basel (Messe Basel)

Opening Hours: 9am - 6pm

9am - 4pm on the last day

Admission: 1 Day Pass SFr.60

8 Day Pass SFr.150

No. of visitors (2009): 93,900

No. of exhibitors (2009): 1,952



the inclination, to leave their computer screens and put in the necessary groundwork to ensure an objective, first-hand report.

But getting down to the basics, do all the blogs actually increase footfall for Baselworld? For Laidlaw, straight up figures mean little. "The key issue with exhibitions is not simply about footfall but more about getting the right feet," he says. "The huge number of increasingly specialist electronic media provides an ideal opportunity to cost effectively target and engage with the 'right' people. When it comes to stock turnover, it is virtually impossible to measure the direct sales benefit of networking sites. It is, however, very simple to post comments and follow what other are saying."

When it comes to the accuracy of information on social networking sites, Nick Wiseman of jeweller Ogdens of Harrogate says: "I find the sites put the power back with the consumer allowing more credible and varied information rather than the one-dimensional corporate speak that comes from company marketing machines. The freedom of speech across blogs and forums allows discussions and debates and the truth at some stage will come out."

Laidlaw agrees: "There is still a huge amount of education required in the UK about the complexity of watchmaking. Whilst major international brands continue to deliver exceptional timepieces, there is no doubt that some of the most interesting watches and innovations are currently being developed by lesser-known brands. Without the amplification afforded by blogs, social networking sites and specialist websites, many of these market-leading propositions would sadly remain a secret." And Laidlaw doesn't see a lack of professionalism as a big problem: "Occasionally some posts expose a degree of naivety but on the whole there is a huge depth of knowledge. In the most part forum members tend to be very well informed and join and participate in groups that match their level of experience. Sometimes we discover information first from social networking sites."

The one area where he does find the rapid spread of information an issue, however, is with the buzz surrounding prototypes and forthcoming releases. As Baselworld is a showcase for the year ahead, too much public interest in models not due to be launched for several months can be frustrating. However, there has been a definite trend in the past couple of years for brands to focus on marketing fewer products at Baselworld with more acceptable times to market and it has to be asked whether this is a direct result of the power of the web.

So it seems that, love them or hate them, Baselworld blogs are here to stay - sites that encourage informal chat as opposed to hard-hitting PR. "Blogs add a different aspect to what is said by horological journalists and this is very useful for readers and potential buyers. The internet is growing in importance year on year, but I don't think we will ever see it replace traditional publications," says Scholl. The good news for Baselworld and other trade fairs is that these sites seem to encourage more serious visitors rather than take away from visitor numbers. And the good news for professional writers is that the general consensus is that blogs will run in harmony with specialist watch magazines but never be able to replace them.

As Wiseman puts it: "Journalists are provided with a professional insight into the watchmaking business from so many angles that their expertise is imperative in dispelling myths and projecting reality. Besides, watch enthusiasts are a tactile bunch - they like to touch watches, to see them and to hear them and, similarly, they like to see and feel real books and magazines." And Laidlaw agrees: "There are few things more enjoyable than reading, at leisure a high quality, well written feature with glorious photography about a subject that is close to your heart. The internet should provide a vehicle for delivering immediate news and interactivity but the quality and relevance of the specialist press will win in the long run." 🕒



Further Information: www.baselworld.com
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