



Scott McNulty

The Unofficial Apple Weblog

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“Don’t write anything in a blog that you wouldn’t say to someone face-to-face.”

—Scott McNulty

The typical blogger has been a computer enthusiast for at least a decade or two. Some were hobbyists before they could legally drive, and more than a few trace their roots back to the days of the first TRS-80, IBM, and Apple computers—when they were called *personal* computers and their owners “home computerists.”

From that perspective, Scott McNulty is a somewhat atypical blogger. For that matter, he is an atypical computer owner. He didn’t buy his first computer



until six months *after* he graduated from college in 1999. And, despite not having owned any sort of personal computer, he ended up working as a systems administrator for Windows computers.

Blogging at TUAW

The computer McNulty selected as his first happened to be an iMac, and it was the first step on his journey to becoming a professional blogger and editor at The Unofficial Apple Weblog (TUAW, pronounced too-ow, with an emphasis on the first syllable).

How long have you been the lead editor at TUAW, and how did you come to the position?

I've been the lead for about a year and a half. I was a regular reader, and one day I found an advertisement—a blog posting, actually—on the Weblogs, Inc. blog, looking for Apple bloggers. I applied, and completely forgot about it. Then a couple months later, I got an e-mail asking, “Do you want to blog for us?” I replied, “Sure!”

Had you done any blogging—or writing—before that?

I have an undergraduate degree in English. And I've been writing all my life—short stories, fiction. That kind of fit with blogging. I've been blogging since 2000, when I started with a personal blog that I still maintain. Since then I've contributed to a number of other blogs.

Is blogging a part-time proposition for you?

Yes. My full-time job is as systems administrator for Windows machines. In my personal life it's all Apple, of course.

Do you anticipate going full time with blogging?

It is a thought. But I work for a university and the environment is nice—really laid back, [with] great benefits. I get paid well, so it makes it hard to want to leave that. And a freelancer's life is not as stable. It's nice to get that regular paycheck.

Some full-time bloggers I've talked with put astounding amounts of time on their blogs. How about you?

It takes a lot of time to manage TUAW. Fortunately I have a good team behind me who are passionate about Apple. Looking for material to write

about, and then writing and editing, I spend probably 30 to 35 hours a week.

I don't have to spend a lot of time telling people what to write, because they are passionate. I write less than I used to, and nowadays I edit more than I write. I read and edit every post, including our longer posts, which we call features. If I were editing and still blogging as much as I used to, well, I wouldn't have time.

What's editing for a blog like? Are most bloggers writing at a publishable level?

There is little bit of tweaking to be done, but not too much. A lot of it is just making sure they're following our tone. We try to have, not necessarily a definitive artificial Weblogs, Inc. voice, but more of a tone. Bloggers have their own voice, but as long as that meshes with the overall tone of the blog, that's fine.

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How would you define that tone?

The tone we're going for is that of a kind of friendly, slightly sarcastic friend who knows probably way too much about Apple.

Do you do anything actively to bring in readers?

No, we don't advertise. In all my years of blogging, I must say I've learned that consistency is the best way to grow an audience, so we try to post 20 quality posts every weekday. That way, people know that we always have something new waiting for them. And this really has drawn some traffic.

We have a few competitors out there, but most people who are interested in Apple do not get their news from just one site. We know they like to subscribe to a number of Mac-related sites. So we link to other blogs that cover the same stuff we do. We cross-link and promote everyone, and everybody wins. Also, there's an unspoken agreement that if someone is first with a news item, everyone else attributes it to them.

There are other ways, of course, to bring in readers. There is the sensationalistic way to do it, where you try to manufacture or find juicy rumors that

will attract lots of readers. But it's far more effective and simpler to just consistently deliver solid content. It may not be sexy, but it is what people really want.

What do you find difficult about running a blog?

Well, I think it's assuring the quality. When you're paying per-post, there is a temptation for some writers to try to get two or three posts out of one. And as lead, you kind of have to say, "No, we're looking for quality over quantity. We're paying you per post, and we want each post to be good." We have to maintain a level of content that brings people back.

So I try to say no to people as little as possible. But you do have to rein them in from time to time, and say, "No, we can't call Bill Gates a jackass in the title of this post. It would be fun, but we just can't do it."

Making the decision and telling somebody who's very excited about their post that it can't go on our site is difficult.

Looking at the other end of things, what do you find rewarding?

The pattern of immediate gratification when you write something. You write something, and it's immediately available for people to see and comment on.

"We have to maintain a level of content that brings people back."

I meet a lot of really great people through blogging, and that's really what makes me do it day in and day out—all the great people I blog with, people on the other Mac websites,

developers, and such. There's an amazing community around Apple and blogging in general.

Do you take vacations from blogging?

At my job, we get a fair amount of vacation time—one of the great benefits of working for a university. But every vacation I have taken for the last two years has been so that I can go cover something for the blog. I've taken time off from my real job, but only to do my other job.

Blogging has become part of my life. It's my everyday routine to read through all the blogs that I read, and line up some posts. Then I go in and clear out all the waiting posts from the other bloggers. And so it goes. I haven't really had any desire to take any time off.

I could take time off of the Apple blog, but I can never stop blogging completely. It's just such a big part of my life—both professionally and socially. And creatively—it's my creative outlet. Being assistant systems administrator doesn't give too much room for creativity. I would be blogging about Apple stuff even if they didn't pay me.

Although there are days when I just don't even want to read anything about Apple, let alone write anything about them.

With TUAW being so successful, have you thought about spinning off any topical blogs?

There has always been talk of spinning off an iPod blog, or an iPhone blog. But I resist that because I think covering Apple is a good strategy for us, because the whole Apple experience is what readers want. And that's what we are covering—that's where we add our value.

If we were to splinter TUAW into an iPhone-only blog, we would end up just linking to each other all the time. So why not just keep doing the same thing? That's my feeling.

I don't know if the higher-ups have given any thought to it. We have Engadget to do that kind of gadgety coverage. We're much more focused, and we're not afraid to admit right up front that, yes, we all use Mac, we love Apple, we're fanboys, and we love it. So this is our perspective on the news. And underneath all our criticism, we're hoping to make Apple a better company.

I would say 95 percent of the people who read TUAW are not as interested in the doings of Apple as we are. So we have to keep that in mind. We're avoiding the whole snarky, computer-guy attitude. We go for a nicer tone. So I spend most of the time making sure that we're getting that talent right, and that whatever is being written about is understandable in context. When you're writing about your passion, it's easy to just assume people know X, Y, and Z. But they may not know these things. We [TUAW bloggers] just know these things because we read about Apple 24 hours a day, and it's too easy to assume, "Oh, yeah—of course the readers will know this!"

But our readers constantly remind us they're out there. So a while ago, we started a series called Mac 101. We realize a lot of people new to the Mac are reading our blog, so we just slip them some very simple tips and tricks in Mac 101.

Someone who's had a Mac for over a year will know about these things, but a large percentage of our readers have not had a Mac for a year. They maybe bought an iPod and liked it so much that they say, "Let me get a Mac and see what that's all about," or, "I'm thinking about getting a Mac." These people come to TUAW.

So we put some very simple tips and tricks out there for these readers. Get a few comments that are like, "Well, anyone who's ever used computers should know this!" and we have to explain that not everyone knows.

Negative comments can discourage other bloggers from commenting.

You are certainly not lacking in passion for Apple, Scott.

"If you're as interested as I am in any particular subject, you'll just do it for the love of the subject; the success will usually follow."

The nice thing about the Apple culture is that there are a lot of small third-party developers out there who are building great applications. I cover them, and I want to help support their efforts. The best way to do that is to buy what they're making—to which, as Weblogs Inc. bloggers, we are beholden.

It takes away your credibility to have free stuff given to you. Even if we love a product, we still pay for it. I pay for all my software and all my hardware.

We review things, and if the manufacturer says, "Give them away to a reader or give it back," we do that. If it's something I'm going to use on a daily basis, and I want it myself, I pay for it.

Are you are happy working with Weblogs, Inc. under AOL?

I do like AOL and Weblogs, Inc. The upper levels have never told us what to write about. They are very hands-off, and that's very nice. They let me guide the editorial direction of the site. Of course, I talk with my writers about what we want, and what we think the blog should be covering. But at the end of the day, the blog's goal is my goal, and I get a lot of support from AOL.

What's your advice to other bloggers?

A lot of people put up a few posts and wonder, “Why isn’t anyone commenting on my blog? Why am I not on the front page of Digg? Why is not everyone in the world recognizing my brilliance?” It’s just not going to happen overnight. It’s the same as everything else: If you work hard and stick to it, eventually you’ll grow your audience. People will start commenting, a little community will grow, and from there, [you] just keep it going.

Of course, if you are as interested as I am in any particular subject, you’ll just do it for the love of the subject, and success will usually follow.

It’s also good to remember that blogging is a public discourse, and that it is Google-able. Apropos of that, here’s my golden rule for blogging: Don’t write anything that you wouldn’t say to someone face-to-face.

So, take accountability for your actions and never be ashamed of anything you write. The best way to accomplish that is to think about it before you write.

Points to Review

Scott McNulty’s approach to blogging is a carefully balanced blend of enthusiasm and honesty. There are several ways he achieves that balance. Here are a few pointers to help you do the same:

- If you do something for the love of a subject, success usually follows.
- Success doesn’t happen overnight.
- Don’t assume all readers will understand everything you post. Write so that subject-specific terminology can be understood in context, or post a primer about your subject.
- Create a tone for your blog, and be consistent in using it.
- Consistency is important in growing an audience.
- You must be passionate about your blog’s subject.
- Cross-linking and reciprocal promotion with competing blogs can be positive.
- Produce a large amount of quality content, and readers will come.
- Don’t write anything in a blog that you wouldn’t say to someone face-to-face.

