

Blogging Tips to Grow Your Audience

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Brad McBride: Hi. Thank you for that introduction—whatever it is you said. I’m Brad McBride. I’m pleased to be here. This is my first experience with LDSPMA.

And it’s my first time ever doing a Zoom broadcast, so bear with me. I apologize if it seems a little rinky-dink, but. Hopefully the content will be worth it, because content is king. Also I have to wear my glasses, my readers. So hopefully they won’t reflect in this screen too much because that looks freaky. But, here we are.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. To do that, I’ll show you a couple of things that will . . . help you get to know me. Some of you might know me already. I’ve been blogging for almost a decade now. I started out back in the good old days, about, almost 10 years ago.

And for the first six plus years, I was known as “Middle-aged Mormon Man.” You might have seen some of my stuff bouncing around on LDS Living or on Deseret News, things like that.

But then something happened a few years ago that kind of called my blog name into question. President Nelson asked us to stop using the term “Mormon.” So I did. But “Middle-aged Member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Man” was just a little bit too much of a mouthful. So . . . I decided instead to rename, and I renamed as “Thus We See,” because that was one of Mormon’s favorite phrases. And there’s nothing more “Mormon Man-ish” than Mormon, the man.

So my blog is “Thus We See.” December will be my 10th anniversary. And if you look down below the pictures, you’ll see that the at a Glance says that in that time, I’ve written 1360 posts. 1360 posts. It boggles the mind.

When I look at it, I . . . If I want to do a word count, it would be more than all of the works of Harry Potter and the Harry Potter books lined up. That’s a lot of writing.

I would say about 60 to 70% of those blog posts or essays that run between 1000 and 2000 words. So they're not just little, you know, one paragraph and out. There's a lot of writing in there.

And for me, content has always been pretty easy. That's never been a real struggle for me.

And so, when I put together this presentation about building your blog, it's done with the reminder that the content is what matters most. Before getting hits is ever going to happen, you got to have something that's hittable. You got to have something worthwhile that people want to read.

And that's where a lot of people get stuck. I've got writer friends who are amazing writers, but when it comes time to try and have a blog, they just sink because they can't think of things to write.

And in today's world, having a blog or some kind of presence is important to publishers. It's important to book sales. It's important to just getting your name out there.

And so the hope is that this presentation will help you realize that it's not so hard to find content. It's not so hard to think of things to blog about, especially if you're blogging with a religious attitude.

The . . . I'm not much of a believer in writer's block. I think writer's block is mostly caused by fear of . . . You don't trust the quality of what you're thinking about writing down, and so you'd rather not do it. Or, the other reason is sometimes we're just not observant enough to find things to write about, and I want to address that.

A blister in this regard is worth 1000 words. Might not be a blister, it might be an experience. But what I want to do is work through a little process with you. It will require a little bit of typing on your part or writing, just to . . .

to make it work. And the first thing we want you to do is I want you to look at your hands. Just hold your hands up. Look at them closely.

You know 'em pretty well. Right? There's an expression, you know something like the back of your hand. Well, how will you do you really know the back of your hand? I know that in summertime, I've got a lot of visible scars that show up when my skin gets a little tan. I know

that I've got a couple of freckles. I know that I've got just other things here and there. But I want you to look at your hands to see if you've got a scar or a blister or . . . a missing finger.

And focus on that. Now, if you're looking at your hand and you're not finding . . .

anything on your hands that is odd, or that you can describe, look a little farther. Look at your arms. Look at, look at the room that you're in. Look at the walls. Look at your bookcase. Find something that stands out to you. And then what I want you to do is take just a minute . . .

And write a couple of lines—not a book, not paragraphs—just a couple of lines describing how you got it. For example . . .

Two weeks ago my son and I were digging post holes. He hadn't been using a shovel much lately, and he got a couple of blisters really quick because he's a computer programmer and computer programmers don't have "man hands." So, he got his blisters that way. So I'm just going to pause for a moment while you write down your blister or your scar or your wound or your broken heart. Nah, let's not get in that deep.

All right, that should be enough time for that. That should be pretty easy. If that's hard, this next one is going to be harder. Next . . .

I want you to describe how you got the blister. Was it from digging post holes? Was it from running a marathon? How do you have a blister? We'll just take a minute for this to Okay, let's move on to the next part. Now, step three is to find a meaning. What does that blister mean to you? What does that scar mean to you? What does that missing finger mean to you? What was that hole in the wall mean to you? But wait a second, now it starts getting more tricky because meaning is a little bit trickier.

It's an interesting word. Let me explain it. For example, is a blister good or bad? First, I think, well, it's bad. But there are instances where a blister might not necessarily be bad. For example, say you're training for a marathon.

And you're out running. And you're running 10 miles today, and you get a little bit of a blister. Well, that's okay. That's impressive that you just ran 10 miles, and you got a blister out of it.

Or if any of you've ever played a string instrument like a violin or guitar. When you're first learning how to play the guitar, you're gonna get a blister on your finger. But is that a good thing or a bad thing? Short term, it might seem like a bad thing. But long term . . .

It means that you're training, you're learning, and those blisters will inevitably turn into calluses. And after those calluses have formed, you'll be able to play all day without getting a blister.

So, blisters good? Blisters bad? It depends, right? So, it's really tough when you're evaluating a blister or a scar or a hole in the wall and trying to determine if it's good or bad. It's about the meaning that you assign to it.

Okay? So. And a good example is—I love movies—and you can look at a movie, and you can find a good meaning in it or a bad meaning in it, depending on what you're looking for. For example, What about a movie with cyberstalking, deception, and corporate greed? Sounds pretty scary.

Yes! "You've Got Mail." Cyberstalking? Check. Deception? Check. Corporate greed? Absolutely.

Or, you can watch this same movie and come away with the message of romance, and love, and forgiveness. Let's do another one.

Kidnapping and the Stockholm Syndrome. Yes. "Beauty and the Beast." Or . . . Is it about sacrifice? Is it about looking past physical appearance to find something deeper? The answer is, it's both.

"Groundhog Day" is one of my favorite movies. How would you sum up "Groundhog Day" in a word? Comedy? Humor? Funny? Romantic? Personally, I watch "Groundhog Day," and I see it as a movie about redemption.

It's a man who relives his life over and over again until he honestly learns to understand what is important, and it redeems him from where he was.

So, when you're looking at a blister, you can't assume that it's good. You can't assume that it's bad. You got to decide what you're going to assign to it.

Now, the next section . . . in finding meaning . . . is if you've found some meaning, it's always good to ask these two questions: So what? Or why? Because sometimes assigning meaning . . . the meaning doesn't really matter. Or it doesn't really make sense. So when you're looking for meaning and things, it's always good to ask the questions: Why? Or so what? Now, I'll give you an example.

I was in Mozambique, Africa, and . . . (doing some humanitarian work a few times). And the time zones would just mess with me. I would wake up at five in the morning or four in the morning and not be able to go back to sleep.

So I'd get up, and I'd go walk on the beach, which is a beautiful thing. Some mornings I'd even go out and help the fishermen pull in the shrimp nets, and that was a whole 'nother story.

One day, I was walking up the beach, and I came to this lighthouse. And what's ironic about the lighthouse is—look what's at the base of the lighthouse. It's a shipwreck.

And a man that was with me, that was a local . . . He . . . I asked him, I said, "So, who screwed up?" And he's like, "What do you mean, who screwed up?" I said, "Well, was the lighthouse operator not doing his job? Or was the captain of the ship not doing his job?" And he looked at the boat, and he looked at the lighthouse, and he looked at me, and he said . . . "I've never thought of that before."

So . . . As we look at that, what is the meaning there? There could be several. I've always looked at that picture and thought, "It's about people doing their job." One of them, I assumed, just wasn't doing their job. The lighthouse wasn't doing his job, or the captain wasn't doing his job. However, if you think about, "Well that ship is pretty high up there," maybe it was a real wicked storm, and both of them were doing their job.

There's meaning there too.

Asked my daughter about it, and of course she gave me a response that was completely unexpected. I asked her what she thought it might have been. And her question to me was, "Well when was the lighthouse built?" I thought, "Wow, what a great thought." Maybe the lighthouse was built because of the shipwreck.

We don't know. But there's so many different meanings and so many different perspectives to take from this one picture.

And so, I was using that for an example just to show you that you can look at things from a lot of different directions to find meaning. And when you're trying to write about something, or you're trying to write about your blister or your scar . . .

You can look at it from lots of different perspectives. If you're writing about a blister on your fingers, and it's because you've been learning to play the guitar, that's exciting! If you have blisters on your fingers because you just weren't careful when you burned them in the oven, that's different.

But it could still be a story. So, let's move on.

When we're trying to find meaning, it's good to compare and to contrast. We know about analogies and similes and metaphors. Contrasting, we could call the anti-analogy. Whereas . . . Something is like this," "something is not like this," works as well.

The king of analogies . . . of course, is the Savior. He was so good at similes and teaching with analogies. Some of them are so obvious. He talked about light all the time. He talked about bread, all the time, and actually used bread for one of the greatest metaphors of all time.

He also talked about poppy seeds, little tiny poppy seeds. And this one meant a lot to me because when I was a kid, one time my mom got a poppy seed out of the . . . out of the spice cupboard, and decided she wanted to plant it because she wanted to see what this little poppy seed was going to do. And they are . . . I'm saying poppy seed. Ha! I meant mustard seed. This whole time I meant mustard seed. The reason I was talking about poppy seed is a mustard seed is even smaller than a poppy seed. So, Christ didn't teach about poppy seeds. He'd never had a lemon poppy seed muffin. But he did know about mustard seeds.

And I learned from my mom that if you plant a mustard seed, it'll grow. And grow and grow and grow. When my mom planted it, after it hit about nine feet tall, she took the pot outside to see what would happen.

And then, of course, immediately died because it wasn't prepared for Utah winter, but that's a different story.

So Christ used similes and analogies and metaphors a lot to teach correct principles. Sometimes he would explain the analogy.

Sometimes he would just let it hang and let people sort it out themselves. Aesop, Aesop's Fables, I'm sure you're all familiar with those.

He would just state the moral of the story in a simple line at the end. And that's good. But sometimes we need to take it a little bit further. Sometimes we need to attach the moral of the

story . . . But when it's not enough, sometimes we need to add a little bit more. Sometimes we need to make that meaning become more of a message and not just a . . .

analogy that's sitting there. We can broaden the application. We can find supporting quotes or other stories. We can share what we learned. We can issue challenges to people so that they understand . . . a little bit deeper what messages that we're trying to put across. So we've gone from a blister . . . to a message.

But it took several steps to get there. Now . . . Usually when this happens, you start with . . . you go from narrow to broad. You observe something. You see a lighthouse. Today, here's a strange one. Today I was going into a store, and I saw that somebody had a foil-wrapped sandwich tucked under their windshield wiper of their car. It was 105 degrees outside.

And I thought, "That is a really weird thing." And so now . . . What meaning could I assign to that? I don't know. I'd have to think about it. But the observation came first.

The meaning would have to come later. It's an experience in search of a message. And for that one, I'd have to do some thinking. You've probably already thought of ideas how that would work. I'm not quite there yet.

But . . . One of . . . a thing that we used to do as a family for Home Evening was we would take episodes of the old "Andy Griffith Show" (because they're only like 20 minutes long with no commercials), and we'd give the kids a notebook.

And we would ask them to watch the TV show and to write down any gospel principles they could find in that 20-minute TV show. It was amazing. This episode is called "The Spoiled Child." It's about Opie's friend who's a little brat who tries stealing things, and it's a problem. But my kids pulled out things like . . . how to be a good father, about honesty, about respecting your elders, and about obeying the law, and about forgiveness, and about repentance, and about consequences. All of these different topics just came flooding out of their little brains because of an "Andy Griffith" show.

Now, that's just an example, but it is a fun . . . it is a fun way to spend a Home Evening or a Sunday afternoon. I would highly recommend it.

Now it doesn't always work that way. You don't always see the experience first and then try to find the message in it. Sometimes, you have a message and you need to find the experience.

That's a little trickier, because someone isn't going to call you from the ward and say, "Hey Brother Brad, I'd like you to give a talk on . . . an episode of "Andy Griffith" that we watched." It's more likely they're going to call and say, "Hey, we'd like you to give a talk on the topic of faith . . . or on hope or repentance. And so there, I've got a meaning in search of an observation or an experience. I'm looking for a blister to back up the message. Okay? I can give you an example of this too.

This is where it's backwards. It's, it's the meaning looking for the observation. Here's the example of this. Years ago, if you look at that picture closely, you can see that there's scars. (See if I can get it on the camera.) You can see that there's some pretty good scarring right here on this finger and right here on this finger. (I'm amazed that focused so well.) Let me tell you the story behind that.

One afternoon I was in the backyard with a chainsaw, because that's what real men do. And I was cutting down a tree. And as I was cutting the tree with the chainsaw, all of a sudden, a branch from up above broke off and was falling at my head. And of course, as an idiot, I took my hand off the chainsaw to block . . . the branch from falling on my face. And as it did, the chainsaw hit something and kicked back and came back and went right across my fingers and sliced into them.

My pinky was cut halfway through. And if you look closely at the picture, you can see that the scar on my ring finger stops at my wedding ring.

The reason the chainsaw didn't cut off my fingers is because it hit the ring and kicked back.

Now, one time I was asked if I would talk about sacred clothing. Specifically, the Holy Garment. When that happened, I thought, "I have an analogy for this. I have an analogy that wearing something symbolic protected me." But in this experience . . . I had tucked away this, this experience and was able to retrieve it later to use it . . . to put forth a message.

Now . . . That happens a lot. We have lots of experiences. We're having experiences every single day of our life, and we forget most of them.

Right? One of the tricky things to do, to really help, is to "tag" our life.

Now . . . You're gonna think that sounds really odd, but if you could attach keywords to different things that happened to you . . . it is so much easier to retrieve them when you need them.

For example, whenever I (on my blog) finish writing a post, I'll pull up different words and tag them, so that if somebody comes in and does a search for "missionary work" on the blog, they can pull up everything I've ever written about missionary work.

Prophets, Book of Mormon, conversion, conversion stories. You type those into my blog, and they'll all come up, and there will be so many.

Now, tagging your life also demands that you document your life. If you're having these experiences . . . every day, and you're not writing them down, they're just lost into the aether. Right? So if you have an experience, write it down.

If you keep a journal, or you have a writer's journal, or you use Scrivener, or you have a notebook, or you have a smartphone, or you have stickies, or you can send yourself a text or email folder full of emails that you sent yourself to remember these things.

It's a wonderful thing with technology. I use the notepad feature on my Mac. And I write, I have a whole note full of just experiences that I've had so I don't forget them.

And believe me, as you get older, it's easier and easier to forget them. So once you've got those experiences and you've got them tagged, you've got this vast amount of material that you can draw on.

And it can go either way. If you're having an experience, and you go, "Wow, that was a great experience. I need to attach some meaning to it and write about it." Or you can say, "I've got this topic that I need to write about, that I feel . . . that I need some kind of experience to back it up." So it worked both ways. Right? And that's a wonderful thing, because that helps when you get asked to speak in Sacrament meeting.

Or you are writing a personal history, or you're writing a blog post, or you're writing something that's nonfiction, or even fiction.

If you've got all these experiences when you're trying to write an article for the "Ensign" or for whatever you're writing, you've got this huge vault . . . of personal experiences. It's indexed, essentially. And then you can pull from that index the experiences that you've had in your life.

The sad thing is that we have so many experiences that could be fodder for a blog post that we never write down. And three days later, we forgot we ever had 'em, and it coulda been useful. So the single biggest encouragement is to jot things down. Take notes.

It might just be something in a writer's journal at the end of the day where you take five minutes and just write down a few things that happened. Or if somebody says something funny.

Man, if I had a book of all the funny things my kids said when they were little, I would love it. But I don't. I didn't bother to write 'em down, and now they're gone. They're gone. So, write things down. And once you've got them written down, tag them or assign keywords so that they're indexed, and you can find that topic if you're looking for that topic.

Makes it so much easier. Now remember, this isn't just for bloggers, this is for any writers. Right? And especially for bloggers, content matters. If you have personal experiences that you can attach meaning to and share with other people . . .

then you're going to be able to have readers coming back, because they want to know what you have to say. They like your stories, they like your experiences, but they also like the meaning that you attach to them.

And that's one of the important parts of getting people to come back. You want to build your audience? You've got to have something that has some worth. Right? Maybe the worth is just something that, something funny that happened, and that's okay. But it can also be deeper.

And that's good too. So, blogs, essays, nonfiction, novels, personal history, talks, lessons, conversations. I tell ya, a Sunday School lesson that has some personal experiences is light years better than somebody standing up and reading the "Come Follow Me" manual.

I'm sure you agree. So, as we're getting . . . closer on time, I wanna talk about a couple of other things, especially for you bloggers.

Share your information, but don't waste it. And as you see that lovely pig with a pearl necklace, remember the expression, "Pearls before swine." Sometimes we have experiences that are sacred.

Sometimes we have experiences that are very personal. Or sometimes we have experiences that involve other people. We don't have to share everything. It's okay to hold some stuff back. I've been blogging for 10 years, but there's still swaths of my life that I haven't even touched (on the blog), because . . . it's too valuable or too personal to me, and I don't want to just put it out there for the masses. Other times, I'll share personal things but not every time.

The other thing to be careful of, what you don't want to waste [is], if you have a good experience . . .

or something that could become a nice blog post, or a good article, or something good in a lesson, don't just toss it up on Facebook, or on Twitter, or on Instagram.

Don't waste it. Hold it back. Turn it into something better. Turn it into an article. Turn into an essay, or at least a short blog post. But once you throw it up on Facebook . . . Or you throw a picture up on Instagram in that little description, everybody's already seen it. And you're never going to go back and use it because it's just redundant. So . . . Share, but don't waste. And sometimes we get caught up in social media enough that we just throw stuff out there to get noticed. Or we could use that material for something better. So don't be afraid to do that.

Now, to finish up . . . I want to point out another . . . That's funny, there's two Meg Ryan movies in this presentation. What can I say? It must be my age, and my taste. But Meg Ryan's in another one.

She was in a movie called "Joe Versus the Volcano," which was an okay movie, but my favorite part of that entire movie was a quote by her character that said this: "My father says that almost the whole world is asleep. Everybody you know. Everybody you see. Everybody you talk to. He says that only a few people are awake, and they live in a state of constant, total amazement." Isn't that wonderful? It is. We have to be observant. If we want to find things, and attach meaning to them, and share them with other people, we have to be paying attention.

Now, it's one thing to quote Meg Ryan. It's another thing to quote one of our Apostles. So let's do that. President (oop, sorry) . . . Elder Uchtdorf once said, "We are surrounded by such an astonishing wealth of light and truth that I wonder if we truly appreciate what we have. We tread a path covered with diamonds, but we can scarcely distinguish them from ordinary pebbles." Isn't that lovely? We are surrounded by diamonds. They're all around us.

We're surrounded by gems of every kind. And sometimes those gems look like blisters. Sometimes they look like scars. That depending on what your perspective is and what meaning you're trying to find, those lumps and bumps and scars can become gems . . .

that can help inspire other people . . . and give meaning and purpose to your writing.

So I encourage you to take the challenge of making things more personal and . . . finding lots and lots of material to write about, just by watching and then following these simple steps to assign meaning.

Don't forget, you gotta write 'em down, and you've got to tag 'em. Or they're lost in the aether and they're never coming back.

So do those things. Find the diamonds. Find the gems, even if they're masquerading as blisters. Thanks for your time, and that's end of the presentation. From here, we will go to "Question and Answer." Thank you so much.