

**FASHION
BAZAAR**
Colours
of the Fall



**PASSING
THROUGH**
Taken for
a ride!



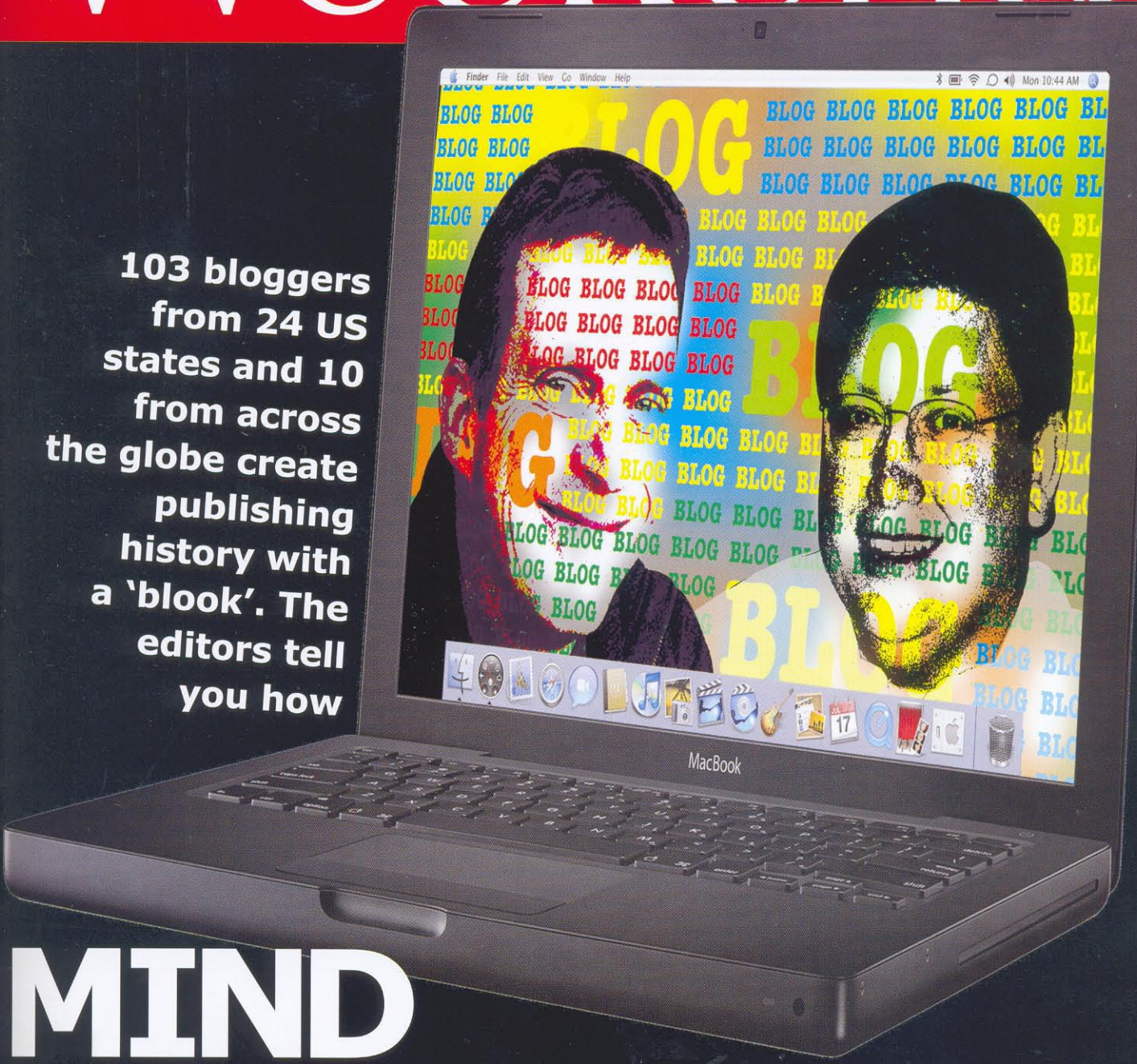
**KIRAN'S
CORNER**
My two
loves



Weekend

Khaleej Times September 28 - October 4, 2007

**103 bloggers
from 24 US
states and 10
from across
the globe create
publishing
history with
a 'blook'. The
editors tell
you how**



MIND BLOGGING!

THE NEW 'BLOOK' ON THE BLOCK



Can there be a book where the co-authors have never met? Welcome to *The Age of Conversation*, authored by 103 marketing bloggers from 24 U.S. states and 10 other countries. The 'blook' — a book written by bloggers — is a publishing phenomenon. The editors speak exclusively to *Weekend* on its interesting implications.



BY PRATIBHA UMASHANKAR

THE TRADITIONAL marketing communications mantra was, "I talk, you listen." Today, social media and marketing have changed that into, "I engage, you talk."

Using this as the basic tenet and deploying the blogosphere as the launching pad, Drew McLellan and Gavin Heaton managed to get together between the covers of a book contributors from around the world. The result? *The Age of Conversation*.

Drew McLellan is from Des Moines, Iowa, US and Gavin Heaton is from Sydney, Australia. No, the two men have never met. But they met in each other's blogs and the concept of a collaborative "blook" began with a casual exchange of ideas between them.

Here's how it all happened. Drew posted an idea about a project called "We Are Smarter Than Me" which gives people a chance to help author a guest book. Gavin responded by saying, "Great concept! And it sounds like it could be fun ... but you know what, Drew? I reckon between a few of us we could knock out a short book.... All we need is a theme and a charity...."

To which Drew said, "You are very right. Let's do it. Watch for an e-mail from me!"

And out of this germ of an idea, blog conversations and exchange of e-mails, the two men

brewed an e-book about the present new era of communications that humanity has just ushered in.

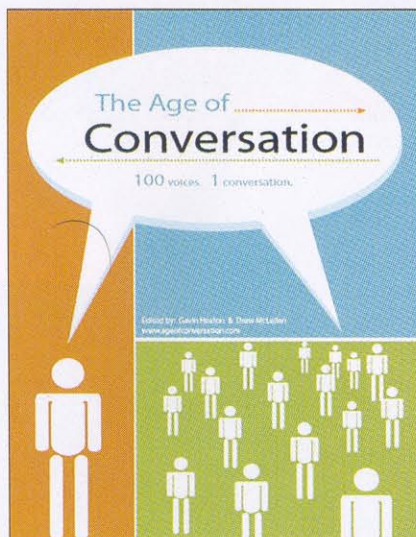
But then, speed and time were of essence for the project. It had to be

quick, exciting, sharp and inclusive. As Drew says, "It had to be a book about community and conversation that came from that community and spoke the same vernacular."

Drew and Gavin through their blogs invited other marketing professionals and bloggers to write an essay about conversation.

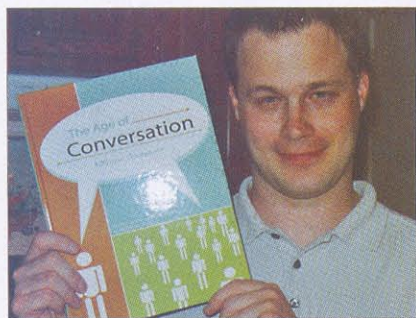
They set themselves an impossible goal — 100 bloggers, one topic — each author contributing a one-page chapter worth their marketing-communications expertise to help create better conversation among brands, marketers and consumers. The entire project — in what may be a first-of-its-kind collaboration via the Internet — took just three months from conception to publication. The initial posting was on March 22, 2007. The post calling for authors was on April 6 and the book was launched on July 16.

"To our great relief (and joy) we received more submissions than we

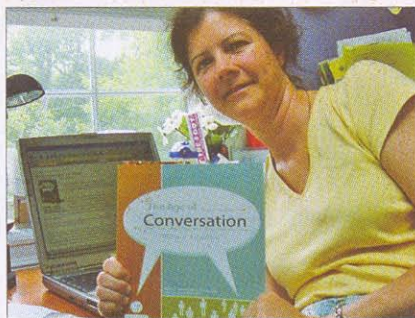


THEY STARTED IT ALL: Blogoberties Drew McLellan (left) and Gavin Heaton.

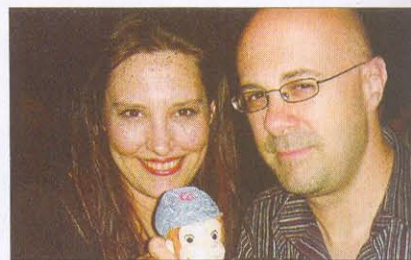
CONTRIBUTORS



Cam Beck



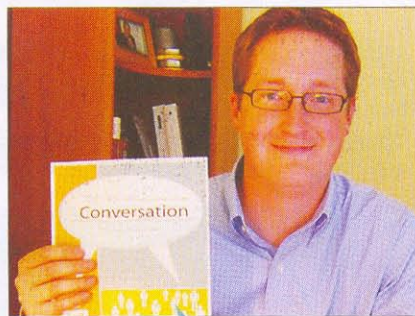
CB Whittemore



Christina Kerley and Greg Verdino with Curious George who is virtually visiting all the authors.



David Berkowitz



Matt Dickman



Greg Verdino and Steve Roesler

expected ... and then it hit us — there was serious work to be done to bring this project to fruition”, says the Editors’ Notes summing up rather succinctly the story behind the book.

What makes *The Age of Conversation* unique is its global profile. The contributors make an interesting mix — from marketing gurus to social media experts and from advertising professionals to T-shirt freaks. Art enthusiasts, storytellers and philosophers too have offered their nuggets of wisdom in the book.

“We really just plunged into the project once we committed to do it. In the end, it worked out that I managed the authors and their questions/chapters for the most part, and Gavin did all the layout and design. We both edited the work,” says Drew.

“We were lucky in that we established an immediate working rhythm and were both very open to collaboration,” adds Gavin.

Now that the book is a reality what does it mean for the concept of blogging itself? With two most-read among the top 25 marketing blogs in the world, what advantages do the two see in

NOW WHAT?

NOW THAT the book is out, the task is to make sure it is accessible to a large number of people. “As each of the authors have a knowledge of and expertise in their own markets, we are happy for each to take on the challenge of promoting the book,” says Gavin. “There is a strong online and social media focus within the book and we are actively using social media applications to communicate with the authors and with interested readers. We have a blog at www.ageofconversation.com and a Facebook group. We have changed our personal photos on Facebook and on Twitter....” The proceeds from the book will go to Variety, a worldwide charity that helps children in need. The proceeds will be divided among the 10 countries represented by the authors. It is hoped that the authors will publicise the book as well, to help generate sales.

creating blogs?

“Wow, that’s a big question,” says Drew. “I think the advantage varies for each company and/or blogger.”

Drew goes on to list the advantages that work for him:

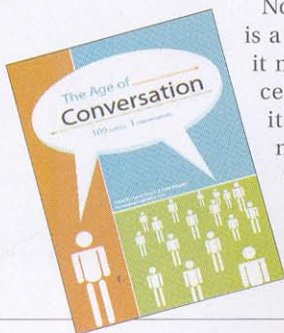
- “It demonstrates my company’s expertise.
- It allows me to connect and form potential strategic alliances with other marketing professionals.
- It gives our clients and prospects a chance to engage in a marketing conversation and/or ask questions.
- It becomes a living resumé of our work and our thinking.”

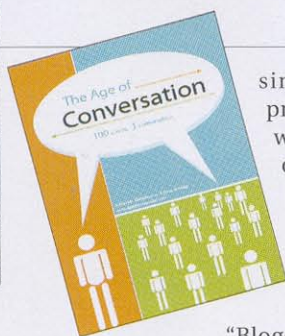
Drew realises that he has a responsibility as a marketing professional to stay on top of all the new media so that he can determine what is appropriate to recommend for them.

“And that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” he says. “I am hard-pressed to think of any company in the world that should not be at the least, reading blogs, and in many cases, having one.”

For Gavin, his blog is more of a scrapbook of ideas and a way of engaging with other likeminded and passionate people all over the world.

“I agree that it is also a living resumé of our work and thinking — and it





simultaneously provides me with a method of testing and learning about social media," he says.

"Blogging's participative nature is highly attractive for individuals, brands and corporations and for non-bloggers, it is hard to comprehend the rewards without experiencing it first-hand."

The reach of the book is tremendous. With its publication blogging takes on a new avatar as a tool for dissemination of information. So what are the implications of this pioneering venture both commercially and from the readership point of view?

"I think many of the implications are

yet to be discovered," admits Drew, who is only beginning to realise what has been achieved.

"I believe what we've demonstrated is that the old rules of what you can and cannot do are quickly changing. It used to be that you'd need a full force of agents, editors and publishers behind you to create a book or garner the world's media attention. It's also proof that a group of professionals can work collaboratively without knowing each other or being in the same space/country."

The message is loud and clear — any company that chooses to ignore the blogosphere is telling its customers that they don't really care to listen.

"Companies will either embrace the blogosphere or be bitten by it, eventually," is Drew's verdict on the matter.

Does *The Age of Conversation* herald the end of books, publishing and read-

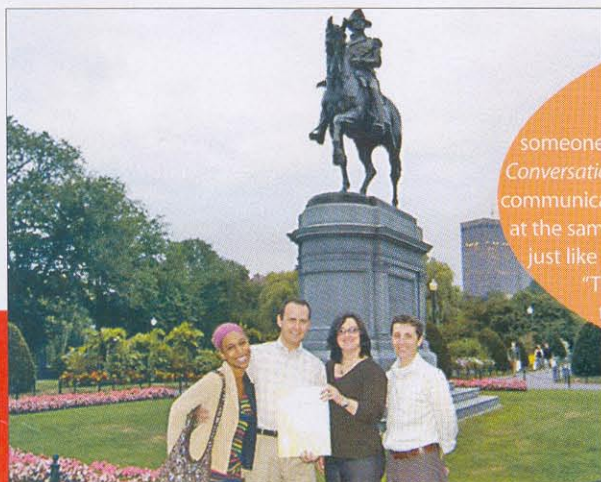
ing habits, as we know it? Will it take over conventional publishing?

"Oh, gosh, I don't think so," replies Drew. "I think it simply proves there are more ways than there used to be to get a book published."

It removes a very large barrier to entry," adds Gavin. "Basically anyone with Internet access can now reach an audience. And the approach we have taken shows that you can bring a quality piece of work to market very rapidly. Publishing no longer takes months; it can take weeks, or through a blog, minutes."

Given that blogging has obliterated constraints of time and space, if the concept is taken to its logical conclusion, what are the marketing implications?

"I'm not sure what the logical conclusion is," admits Drew. "I know that this has already taken more twists and turns than I could have anticipated, and so far,



Ryan Barrett, Scott Monty, Lori Magno and Brian Reich.

VIRTUAL FRIENDSHIP

AS THE way we communicate changes and evolves, so does the nature of human relationships. Virtual friendship is now the norm rather than an exception. But then, can you really claim to know someone you have not really met? Maybe yes. Since the discussion on *The Age of Conversation* began, Drew and Gavin have exchanged literally thousands of e-mails and have communicated via video conferencing. "Despite the fact that we haven't been in the same place at the same time, Gavin and I are friends. We talk about our families, our careers and our lives just like friends who live in the same city do," says Drew.

"This is true," admits Gavin. "In many ways, we share our thoughts and express them perhaps more forcefully and intimately through the sort of deliberate written language that rarely occurs in spoken conversation."

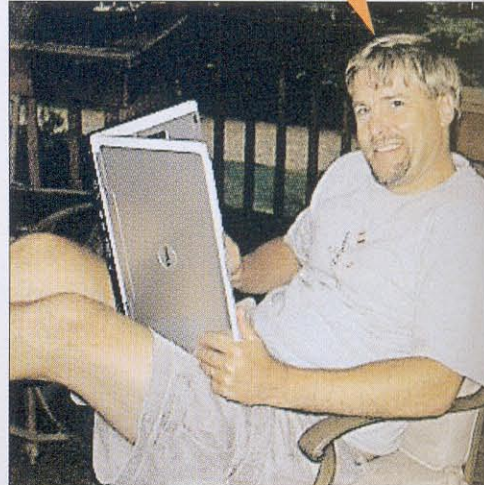
CONTRIBUTORS



Robert Hruzek



Sandra Renshaw



Steve Woodruff

all of them have been really remarkable."

"There are still real challenges around Internet publishing business models," cautions Gavin. "Thus far, we are used to content being free — or subsidised by advertising. The challenge would come with scale and audience demand."

What next?

"I think we are in the infancy of blogging. Only a small percentage of people are familiar with or interacting with blogs," says Drew. "I think over the next few years, we'll see the blogosphere become more mainstream."

Gavin agrees with Drew's assessment and adds, "I am interested in the potential of realtime translation that will open up many non-Western blogs to Westerners — and vice versa. The potential to interact, stimulate and engage across cultures thrills me."

In the same vein, does citizen journalism and reporting threaten to take over conventional modes of expression? Oppressive regimes have already realised that in the absence of media freedom, blogging takes over.

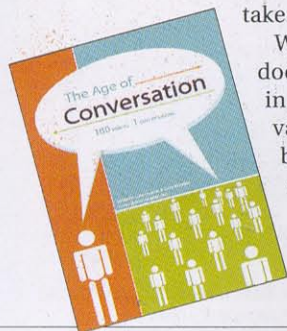
When asked about his take on this, Drew prefers to tread carefully on this sensitive turf. He doesn't feel qualified to comment on the issue, as the kind of blogging he deals with is about the marketplace, companies, their consumers, and information-based or marketing discussion type of blogs, rather than news-focused ones.

"I would hope that everyone in the world would carefully consider the sources of all their news — whether it comes from a blog, a newspaper or any other media source," he concedes.

"Each of us is responsible for examining what we hear or read and making a determination of its validity and bias. But I don't think that's new or specifically tied to blogging."

"Blogging is a form of self publishing. The views of bloggers, just like the views of any writer, must be read in context," is Gavin's take on the issue.

What implications does blogging have in terms of news value? With the blogosphere disseminating news and views in real time and with a lack of any monitoring or



BLOGGERS OF THE WORLD UNITE: The map shows the areas the contributors represent.

WHAT'S THERE IN IT FOR YOU?

THE AGE OF CONVERSATION is a book about conversations that are transforming the marketing landscape. It is about how various marketing disciplines such as advertising, digital, PR and journalism have to change the way they talk to their consumers to be heard. It emphasises that the most important part in a conversation is listening.

It also offers insights into how to use social media and networking tools to transform the way we converse.

A modern marketer and communications professional who wants to be a part of this exciting conversation would find it useful, as community-oriented marketing professionals-cum-bloggers who want to share their unique insights have contributed to the book.

"This book really explores the art of conversation and how that is changing the face of marketing from virtually every angle possible," says Gavin Heaton.

regulatory body, and with amateurs very often playing the field, will it lead to sensationalising and even trivialising of news and information? Will it lead to a parallel media at work?

"I hope not," says Drew. "But that's up to us, the citizens. We will either tolerate it or not accept it. In this new era of citizen communication, I would hope that we'd demand a level of quality and ethics that doesn't allow sensationalisation or trivialisation of our news."

Gavin tends to agree with Drew. "It is about quality and readership," he says. "Where there is a demand for a certain type of information, someone will move to service that need. If an audience demands trivia, it will find it."

But he believes that there is a great hunger for authentic discussion — not just one-way communication, but as something that will trigger a robust debate.

"This doesn't have to be emotional or sensationalised (though it can be)," says Gavin. "But the strength and opportunity in social media is in openly and maturely discussing and debating real issues that affect us all as human beings."

But are we up to it? Are we mature

enough to handle this marvellous new tool that we have wrought? The ball is in our court. Meanwhile, whether *The Age of Conversation* has opened a veritable can of worms or a cornucopia is yet to be seen.

THE EDS

Drew McLellan has a Masters Degree in Journalism and Marketing from the University of Minnesota, and owns a small marketing communications agency. Gavin Heaton has a Masters Degree in Theatre and Film Studies from the University of New South Wales and is the Director of a global marketing and promotions agency based in Sydney. They are authors of two of the top-25 marketing blogs in the world. <http://drewsmarketingminute.com/> and <http://servantofchaos.typepad.com/>. Drew launched his blog in September 2006 and Gavin in October 2006. As of today, 1,234 copies of the book have been sold for a profit of \$9,695.11 for the children's charity Variety.

"We encourage you to visit our website: www.ageofconversation.com and purchase a copy," appeal the editors as the proceeds will go towards a worthy cause.

WHIZ-KID:
Arun Rajagopal.

THE BLOGGER IN OUR BACKYARD

ARUN RAJAGOPAL, 24, an Oman-based blogger is one of the 103 co-authors of *The Age of Conversation*. He also happens to be the only author from the Middle East and among three Indians to be a part of this global venture.

His chapter, *The Rules of the Garage For Digital Media Conversationalists*, is inspired by HP's renowned "Rules of the Garage" management philosophy.

"They are a set of 11 tenets that was crafted by erstwhile HP CEO Carly Fiorina and her team to revitalise the sinking digital giant," explains Arun.

"I selected these rules because they are so wonderfully generalised — you can apply them to almost any aspect of life. I plugged them to digital conversations because that is my line of work, and then interpreted them for people who are interested in creating exciting online conversations."

Describing his experience of being part of the phenomenon as "Awesome!" Arun says that the book is about engaging consumers through conversations in a world being shaped by citizen marketers.

As the book was being put together, Arun also did a mini-project of profiling all the authors so that readers would get to know the people behind the book better once it was published. The profiles of all 103 authors can be found at <http://arunrajagopal.com/age-of-conversation/>.

"This brought me really closer to the

community; I've some close pals in there now," says Arun.

How is he promoting the book?

"I will be gifting three copies of the book to three CMOs of active digital brands in the Middle East. They will mostly be brands in the travel industry because online conversations in the travel arena fascinate me," he says.

"I also have private book reading sessions with my friends. Steve Bannister's chapter, "How to be Happy", is an eternal favourite with them. And I'm available to answer any queries you may have if you e-mail me at rajagopalarun@gmail.com."

Living in the Sultanate of Oman since 1992, Arun went to Indian School, Muscat, and had a three-year stint at medical school before joining advertising. Presently, a content strategist at UMS Interactive, Oman's leading digital agency, his work involves developing strategy and content for online brands as well as making presentations. He helped create the first corporate blog in Oman in May 2007. His digital work has been recognised by industry awards in Oman (Eight Oman Web Awards in 2007). Armed with a background in advertising and copywriting, social media and blogging are his interests, apart from travel writing and photography.

"Train-spotting is my greatest passion and I find great pleasure in exploring India through rail journeys," says Arun.

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