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## Automakers blog to build loyalty, beat back criticism

David Shepardson / Detroit News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- When Al Gore III was arrested last month on drug charges after being stopped for speeding in his blue Prius, one of the blogs buzzing about the topic came from an unexpected source: Toyota Motor Corp.

Despite the negative headlines, the occasion offered the normally buttoned-down Japanese automaker an unprecedented opportunity to plug its best-selling hybrid and rev up the vehicle's reputation.

"For those who thought buying a Prius meant giving up a chance to hit the open road and let it all hang out, it seems Al Gore III has proven you wrong," company official Bruce Ertmann wrote in a Toyota blog. "We don't advocate traveling 100 mph on our nation's highways, or anywhere for that matter, but we've heard from some of our Prius owners that say it's kind of nice to know the car is not a slug."

Increasingly, automakers are taking to company blogs to put their spin on news stories or reviews, tout their products and tweak the boastful claims of their competitors. General Motors Corp. has been blogging for about three years; Toyota and Chrysler only recently joined the online community.

"It's car talk that's very inexpensive," said Michael Bernacchi, a professor of marketing at the University of Detroit Mercy.

While business blogs initially began as a forum for consumers to criticize corporate America, automakers and other companies have discovered that blogging is a good way to interact with customers and improve brand loyalty, he said.

"Now, companies are using them to counter some of the stuff on the Internet, get ahead of the curve," Bernacchi said. "It's a way to change

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the conversation."

### GM pulling ahead online

GM is the most aggressive automaker in blogging, with four blogs.

Senior executives, including Vice Chairman Bob Lutz, regularly meet with auto bloggers, who are often invited to news events. Like other automakers, GM uses the forum to talk about product plans and encourage customers to brag about their vehicles.

GM launched its "FastLane" blog so Lutz could respond to criticism about Saturn before the 2005 Detroit auto show. More recently, Lutz used the blog to unleash the strongest criticism yet of proposed fuel economy standards from any American auto executive.

He has become such a frequent blogger that his absences have become noticeable, forcing the executive to reassure his audience.

"While I wish I could blog more frequently, I must admit I find it a little disconcerting that some of you seem to need me to reassure you that I still care," Lutz wrote after a brief absence in May.

### Toyota blog takes on critics

Toyota's blog, run by Toyota Motor Sales USA, has been busy promoting the Tundra and the carmaker's green vehicles.

Unafraid to tackle controversy, Toyota has taken pot shots at news accounts and studies the company has deemed unfair.

Earlier this month, Toyota countered stories in the Wall Street Journal that suggested the automaker was delaying its next-generation hybrids because of battery technology problems.

"We've not shared much information about a next-generation Prius, since -- like most companies operating in a highly competitive market -- we don't talk explicitly about future product. And we've not discussed the type of battery that any hypothetical next-generation version of Hybrid Synergy Drive might use," Toyota responded in its blog.

Toyota spokesman Irv Miller said the blog is a chance to "be proactive and set the record straight when we see an issue that clearly needs some attention."

But, he added: "You can't take yourself too seriously when you get into blogging."

### Ford execs remain above the fray

Ford Motor Co. appears to be least active among the automakers.

The company has a blog at [autoshow.ford.com](http://autoshow.ford.com), where enthusiasts weigh in on topics related to auto shows. Ford primarily uses the blog as a bulletin board for consumers to comment; its executives do not interact with them.

A visit to [blog.ford.com](http://blog.ford.com) turns up a long-ago blog post about the then-new Ford Mustang. The blog was last updated in August 2004.

### Some Web missteps at Chrysler

Chrysler unveiled a new blog on Aug. 5 and unwittingly scooped its official press release announcing management changes.

At 11:29 p.m., the blog posted a statement about the "New Chrysler" from Chrysler Vice Chairman and President Tom LaSorda -- though it didn't explain why he was no longer CEO. His demotion was announced the next day.

Chrysler spokesman Jason Vines hasn't been afraid to blog to tackle thorny issues. Last week, he chastised the founder of automaker blogs -- GM's Lutz -- for pooh-poohing the new special edition of the P.T. Cruiser.

"To hear (Bob's) nervous chatter, you'd think WE'RE the one that is about to pass GM in total sales," Vines wrote as part of a lengthy diatribe.


The normally talkative Lutz declined to comment.

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But for the most part, Chrysler's blog is an effort to have an "open and honest dialogue with our customers, potential customers and employees," Vines said.

"You need them now," he said. "It's a great way to listen to the customers."

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