

# FRANCE VICHY COSMETICS: BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG?

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## INTRODUCTION

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2005, Delphine, a product manager for Vichy's French subsidiary, had one of the worst days of her career. She had to present public apologies to her clients for the false blog that was created as part of the launch of a new anti-aging cosmetic product.

It quickly became a scandal of mass proportions and appeared in major French newspapers. This is why the top management of Vichy France had plan a response strategy. The question now was whether they should respond using traditional communication methods, respond using new Internet-based methods or simply let some time pass and hope for the problem to be forgotten. Most importantly, what should they do with the blog?

## THE HISTORY OF BLOGS

*Blog* is an abbreviation for *web log*, which is a web site on which one or more authors periodically publish content. It started as an amateur publication method on the Internet and evolved into a huge phenomenon. Millions of people have started to publish various types of content on the Net, everything from their love affairs to reviews of technical products. They comment on current events, offer different thoughts on work, sports, etc. Typically, these entries are ordered chronologically and readers may add comments. The authors are essentially having a conversation with their readers. Vast numbers of people dedicate their time to read them. Nowadays many in the corporate world including CEOs, executives, directors or employees want to start their own blogs to have open conversations with their clients, shareholders and stakeholders.

The "Blogosphere" is a term used to describe all blogs as a whole. One of the paramount characteristics of the blogosphere is transparency. If an author fakes their name when publishing a blog, the blog is known as a flog, or fake blog. It is common for readers to identify such blogs and call attention to their falsehood.

Blog authors frequently read and comment on many other blogs creating a network of information sharing. According to promoters of this phenomenon, it is essential that the corporate community participate. Blogs are becoming a corporate communication tool and are no longer simple personal diaries. A growing number of companies such as Google, Nike and Nokia are using blog formats to promote products, interact with clients and stockholders, carry on marketing research and distribute corporate communications. Blogs do not only offer advantages though. Since authors frequently have other jobs as well, they have to be careful about the material they publish. An employee can put their job in jeopardy by publishing sensitive information.

Even though there are not exact statistics regarding how many companies publish blogs, it is estimated that about 45% of the 1000 largest publicly-traded North American corporations have blogs or are planning to launch them this year. (14/04/2005)

([http://etc.territoriocreativo.es/etc/2005/04/ms\\_blogs\\_corpor.html](http://etc.territoriocreativo.es/etc/2005/04/ms_blogs_corpor.html)).

According to an August 2005 study done by SurveyMonkey.com, 69.9% of surveyed companies considered the possibility of publishing a blog while 51.1% of the surveyed companies considered using a blog as a marketing tool.

([http://www.blogwriteforceos.com/blogwrite/files/Blogging\\_RSS\\_Survey\\_WordBiz\\_Aug2005.pdf](http://www.blogwriteforceos.com/blogwrite/files/Blogging_RSS_Survey_WordBiz_Aug2005.pdf)).

As of October 2005, the blog phenomenon had not yet fully hit Spain, although some businesspeople understood the potential influence of blogs in the development of a brand. BBVA is an example. They started their own blog for their research and development divisions. (*5dias.com* 03/08/05) Sanitas has also entered the 'web' of blogs by publishing a blog that helps parents with toddlers. ([www.bebesymás.com](http://www.bebesymás.com))

## VICHY LABORATORIES HISTORY

During his stay in Vichy, France in 1931, a cosmetologist named Georges Guerin found the virtues of Vichy water for dermatological purposes because of an accident while trying to alleviate his liver problems. Dr Haller at the thermal centre made him go through thermal water immersions, and Guerin was surprised by the healing. Guerin thus decided to use this water for a series of cosmetic treatments. This was how Vichy was born and would later be famed as "*The Secrets of Vichy*".

At the "*des Domes*" thermal centre in Vichy lies the Vichy Laboratories Dermo-cosmetics Centre. This space was created for treatments and aesthetic consultation, an extension of thermalism and the pharmaceutical tradition of the brand.

As of 2005, Vichy Laboratories stands as the number one European derma-cosmetic brand in pharmacies and one of the 10 largest brands of the L'Oréal Group. Vichy offers a wide variety of treatments formulated with great health assets and pharmaceutical research which are based on Vichy thermal water. Vichy products are available in 55 countries and offer affordable health cosmetics to an enormous number of consumers.

## VICHY BLOG HISTORY

In April 2005, Vichy France was ready to launch a new anti-aging product called *Peel Micro-abrasion* (see fig.1). They decided to use a blog called *Diary of My Skin* ("Journal de ma peau")([www.journaldemapeau.fr](http://www.journaldemapeau.fr)) (see fig.3), as part of a marketing program that linked the blog with traditional advertising.

The use of blogs was not new as a product launch tool within Vichy. Vichy Korea had already launched two blogs to promote the *normaderm* series, part of its "Clic & Clinic" campaign. On that occasion it had great results and succeeded in registering some 9,000 members on the blog.

The advertising agency in charge of executing the marketing plan was Euro RSCG 4D, a New York firm created in April 2004. Euro RSCG 4D unites the agency's global disciplines for the marketing of services through an offer segmented in 4 different categories: **Direct** (CRM, TVMD, Direct Marketing), **Digital** (Interactive Marketing), **Drive** (Personal Relations, promotion distribution, design, merchandising, brand management) and **Data** (models and data analysis). They have a client base including companies such as INTEL, Peugeot, Cruce, Diesel, Reckitt Benckiser and Diageo. Its network includes 118 agencies in 42 countries with more than 5,000 employees.

*Journal de ma Peau* was published on April 27th 2005. Prior to this it was decided that the invention of a false character was necessary. This false blogger - "Claire" - was a women with

“some given age” that discussed how hard it was for her to sleep due to the fact that she attended various parties, all with a clearly disingenuous tone. On one hand, Claire was concerned with the effects of aging and on the other she looked more like a professional model than someone worried about her wrinkles. A now-famous picture shows Claire as a wrinkle-free beauty looking mystically at her hand-mirror. Additionally, Claire’s language was very similar to that of the concurrent traditional advertising campaign.

After the launch of *Journal de ma peau*, many bloggers and marketing specialists started to give their opinion on the blog strategy and express doubts about its truthfulness. The comments about the superficial way in which it was written and the possibly fictitious comments used by Claire were rapidly spreading throughout the French blogosphere.

On May 12<sup>th</sup>, Benoit Drouillat, web artistic director and a main contributor to many industrial and financial advertising accounts such as that of Elf or Societe Generale wrote the following in his blog:

(<http://designinteractif.net/index.php?2005/05/12/61-journal-dun-echec-pour-un-blog-marketing-produit>):

This idea of Vichy’s blog comes out with good (faith) intentions. This is to establish a dialogue with (women) consumers. The brand returns marketing thought to them with the figure created, this is clear in this blog. In fact where the blog makes a very big mistake is in the manner it approaches the discourse and the particular way it states it.

The blog writer is “Claire,” a “young women” with “some given age” that wants to talk to people over the Internet that share her same worries about her skin’s freshness. In this blog everything was programmed, done beforehand and a writer-designer wrote the posts in advance.

Hence, the difference between the sophisticated design and the speech creates doubt instantly because supposedly this speech should be spontaneous. In fact it has not fooled woman consumers. The comments on the blog speak for themselves and are devastating for the brand that is accused of having created a “third-rate sitcom”. The honesty of the proposed experiment is put into doubt because of its poor “dialogue” and the artificial characteristic of its “design”.

My question is how is it there? Why didn’t the brand choose to send some sample to real consumers, asking for comments on their experience with the product on a real blog?

Other bloggers like Julien Menichini also mentioned the possible fraud that was being committed by Vichy on his blog on May 11<sup>th</sup>. (<http://julien.menichini.net/post/category/communication>)

“I recognize a designer-writers pen used to create nonsense language. This is all less than authentic.”

These comments were filtered through the French blogosphere, and in little time bloggers started to feel that there was a fake among them. Everything in the Vichy blog sounded as though it were designed, programmed and anticipated. It was considered that Claire’s comments were written by a professional writer. Some bloggers even noted that many negative messages concerning Claire’s behaviour were censored by the *Journal de ma peau* blog.

Even after the negative criticism, there was an article published on May 15<sup>th</sup> in favour of the strategy adopted by Vichy France.

“How to do to share a daily experience with Peel Microabrasion daily? Ha Ha Ha! That’s were all the communications deal or ‘*problematique*’”, Vichy labs explained at *The Journal de ma peau* blog.

This communications strategy has great innovation, at least in the French market and shows that the cosmetics brand is following the latest trends.

We only regret the lack of profoundness of Claire’s personality. It would have been more useful to know about her consumer practices, particularly regarding the use of competing brands, managing to push the blog adventure a bit further.

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, some bloggers started to feel their blogs were being visited by people from L’Oreal and EuroRSCG.

Finally on the May 20<sup>th</sup> (see fig. 5) Delphine, the product manager, made her gentle and innocent blog debut. She apologized and asked for forgiveness to the French blogosphere recognizing that their blog was not really a blog but something created by an advertising agency as part of an advertising campaign. The Vichy team reviewed numerous blogs including that of Loic de Meur, a famous French blogger, as part of a plan to generate a response.

## CONCLUSIONS

Several days after the Vichy confession, the story was published in the news by two important French newspapers, Le Monde and Le Figaro. Le Monde, the best known national paper in France, wrote “*Brands that try to hide as authors do not have great credibility. To read the mended instructions of a product at a blog is ridiculous. Vichy continues making general to specific marketing. Totally against blogger philosophy.*”

Vichy was confused, they thought that their innovation would be celebrated and now they were in the midst of a crisis. In Vichy’s defense some said that the cosmetics company was new to the blogosphere and did not yet understand the rules of this relatively new communication channel.

It appeared that Vichy France learned their lesson, however many sceptical bloggers started to doubt the existence of Delphine. Since they never saw her picture, her last name, or any other identifying information, was it possible that Vichy France once again used a false figure again to elude the blogosphere?

EXHIBITS

FIG. 1 VICHY ANTI-AGING COSMETICS



FIG. 2 VICHY ANTI-AGING COSMETICS ADVERTISEMENT



FIG. 3 JOURNAL DE MA PEAU: VICHY FRANCE BLOG



FIG.4 VICHY FRANCE COMMENTS ON THE STRATEGY OF USING BLOGS



FIG. 5 DELPHINE'S NOTE ON THE VICHY BLOG

*"Bonjour à tous,  
Je m'appelle Delphine, je suis chef de produit chez Vichy et tous les jours, je travaille sur le produit Peel Microabrasion.*

*En faisant ce « blog », on voulait, avec l'équipe Vichy, ouvrir un espace de dialogue pour les utilisatrices parce que nous savions que ce produit est nouveau et qu'il peut soulever des questions.*

*Et j'ai donc pensé à Claire. Un personnage, inspiré de toutes les utilisatrices que j'ai pu rencontrer. Mais, j'ai lu vos commentaires et je comprends que nous avons encore beaucoup à apprendre du monde des blogs. Soyez pas trop dur...*

*Alors voilà, je me tourne vers vous et je vous propose de récolter tous vos commentaires jusqu'à mercredi. Tous les avis sont les bienvenus, les réactions, les conseils, les critiques (qui ont à voir avec le blog ou le produit bien sûr).*

*Et puis, jeudi je répondrai sur ce que nous avons compris et sur le futur blog, qui va naître de cet échange.*

*A jeudi alors !"*

*"Good morning to all. My name is Delphine, product manager at Vichy and I work with our Peel Microabrasion product everyday.*

*While doing this "blog" with the Vichy team we wanted to open a space for dialogue with users because we knew that this product is new and that it can create doubts.*

*I thought in Claire, a character inspired in all users that I could interview. But I read your comments and I could find that we have much to learn on the blog world. Please don't be so tough on us...*

*Therefore I come to say that I will be willing to take any comment until Wednesday. Any comment is welcome, so are reactions, negative criticism or other ideas (that have to do with the blog of course)*

*On Thursday I will respond according to what we have learnt and about the future blog that will be born out of this exchange.*

*See you Thursday then!"*

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