

## Forums 'n Groups 'n Blogs....Oh My!

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### The Benefits of Blog-Groups

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By Bettie Groenhout

In a world full of people with such diverse interests, sometimes finding friends with whom you share genuine, enthusiastic interests proves difficult. Chances are we've all experienced the dilemma before. Maybe your friends find your constant need to correct the grammar of others irksome, or just don't understand your fascination with the endeavors of liberal politicians in today's society. You absolutely adore Grand-Rapids, but your native New Yorker roommates find the city of your dreams dull. Your girlfriend just doesn't care about the turbocharger you put in your car last weekend, or your boyfriend doesn't appreciate the adorable red cardigan you bought to go with that killer skirt from last summer. Truth is, sometimes you and the people closest to you just don't share the same interests. Sure, your buddies might smile and nod as you rant enthusiastically about something you love, but you just never see that true spark of interest gleam in their eyes. Blog-groups provide the opportunity to expand your social network on-line, and hold many advantages over e-mail subscriptions. These groups exist on many blogging sites, and countless groups exist in which the user can share pictures, advice, and experiences about interests, habits, or beliefs in an informal and personal manner.

*Enter the world of blog-groups. A world that will provide you with opportunities to share experiences, advice, and pictures with people who share your exact same interests.*

**To Blog or not to Blog:** Blog-groups (or blog-rings) possess many benefits that outweigh the drawbacks. The user joins groups according to interests, and thus gains the opportunity to communicate with others who share a genuine interest in the same subject area. Blog-groups provide opportunities to expand one's social network on-line, develop friendships, and discuss issues of interest. Means of communication include forums, messaging through the blog-site or e-mail, or commenting on other people's blogs. Members of blog-groups have the ability to share pictures, advice, discuss issues concerning the subject of interest, and share experiences with one another. Some might say that blog-groups tend to be cliquish, but while some groups might be exclusive, so many groups exist on blogging websites that one would be hard pressed to find themselves unable to find a group to belong to and actively participate in. Myspace.com, for example, has almost one million blog-groups, and new groups are being formed every day. The interaction between members provides an atmosphere of community, as opposed to another method of gaining information about areas of interest: subscribing to a mailing list.

**Blogs vs. Mailing Lists:** Blog-groups hold many advantages over the practice of subscribing to a mailing-list through e-mail. When e-mail goes unattended due to time

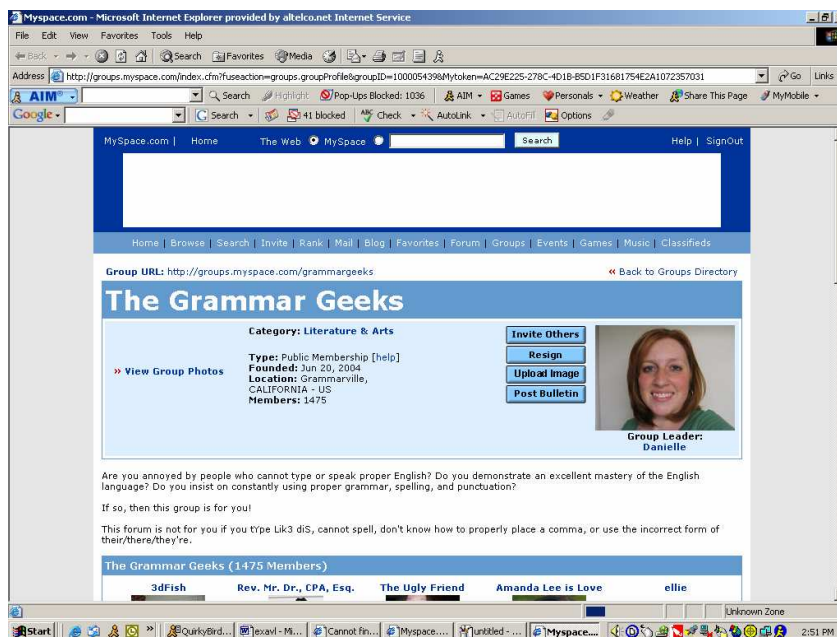
constraints, those mailing-list e-mails often build up, and often don't get read at all. Mailing-lists also do not provide the opportunity to interact with other people who are also on the mailing-lists. These e-mails do not provide you with a list of others that are on the list as well, so no method of communication exists between members, whereas blog-groups have forums, links to other's blogs, and communication information about other members. Therefore, these groups allow members to interact with and support each other. Participation in discussions and communication with other members is completely at the convenience of the user, whereas constant e-mails from the mailing list will leave one weeding out the e-mail inbox after a short period of time. Many blogging sites have the group feature, two of the major ones being Xanga and Myspace.

**Battle of the Blogs: Myspace vs. Xanga** Both major blogging sites have the blog-group feature, but does one site win out over the other? The sites do have different features concerning blog-groups, or blog-rings on Xanga, and the ways in which members communicate within these groups. Xanga divides the categories for blog-groups up into fifteen major categories, provides sub-categories, and then finally lists the actual groups the user participates in. Unlike Myspace.com, Xanga does not provide forums in which to hold discussions, but merely a list of user blogs that also exist in that group. Therefore the only means of communication are commenting on blogs and possibly e-mail. Whereas on Myspace.com, the groups page divides the categories into smaller divisions, and therefore the user only has to click once to get to the actual groups. The blog-groups on Myspace.com are more accessible, and have more of an online-community feel due to the discussions on the forums and interaction between the members. The blog-rings on Xanga.com will appeal to those who enjoy blog-browsing, but communication about areas of interest remains limited, and rarely goes beyond an occasional comment or two on a user's blog. On top of that, the members of the groups on Xanga do not necessarily communicate about the subject of the group to which they belong. Keep in mind that many more blogging sites have the blog-group feature, not just Xanga.com and Myspace.com. Therefore, these two sites are just examples of the types of blog-group features that exist. The ease of joining blog-groups remains fairly constant. The winner of Battle of the Blogs remains Myspace.com. Myspace.com provides far more opportunities to communicate with others and expand one's social network than mailing lists and Xanga.com

	<b>Mailing Lists</b>	<b>Xanga.com</b>	<b>Myspace.com</b>
<b>Will appeal to:</b>	Those who check their e-mail frequently enjoy reading; have a light interest in the topic.	Blog-browsers who like to read blogs and comment on them.	Those who enjoy discussing things they are interested in on forums.
<b>Communication Among Others:</b>	None.	Through commenting on blogs, maybe e-mail.	Forums, messaging through Myspace or e-mail.
<b>Accessibility:</b>	Easy to get on a mailing list, yet accessibility to others on mailing list non-existent.	Site displays major category, subcategory, actual groups (3 clicks) through blog-site.	Site displays smaller categories (but more), actual groups (2 clicks) through blog-site.

**What's Out There?** Or, more accurately, what isn't out there? Almost one million groups exist on Myspace.com, and that number increases each day. Categories range from automotive to fashion and style, from Religion and Beliefs to Gay, Lesbian and Bi.

The sky's the limit when it comes to the topics that these groups pertain to. The groups on these sites are not necessarily hobby or interest related, either. Some groups pertain to habits, such as the "I think I think too much" group on Xanga, or the "Grammar Geeks" group on Myspace for people who are always correcting the grammar of others. Other groups are humorous, such as the "I Suck at Dancing" group and "Procrastinators Anonymous", also on Myspace. Other groups have a more serious tone, such as the groups in the "Religion and Beliefs" category. Discussion topics on the forums of these topics are started by the members of the groups. For example, the discussion forums in the "Grammar Geeks" group cover topics such as "Biggest Grammar Pet Peeve", and "Let's correct the grammar of pop songs!"



**Screenshot of the Grammar Geeks group homepage.**

**Writing in Blog-Groups:** In general, the styles of writing within blog-groups remain conversational, informal, and personal. The members of blog-group communicate as equals, as peers who share mutual, genuine interests. While some swearing and disrespectful language does occur, along with arguments or heated discussions, the tone of the writings among blog-group members remains conversational.

**Example # 1:** *"There's a lot to be said for listening to a rocker that knows how to use proper English in his songwriting (I wouldn't use that as a reason to listen to Karen Carpenter, but Jethro Tull does come to mind when I think of great music and grammar/intelligent lyrics)."-Grammar Geeks Member*

Since the blog-group in which this excerpt occurred is a group committed to grammar, no grammatical or spelling errors occur. The member brings up a point and posts it on the forum for others to respond to, thus making it conversational. Despite the proper grammatical structure and spelling, the writing is still not overwhelmingly formal.

## Top Ten Types of Groups on Myspace.com (and number of members)

- 1) "Other": 444,104
- 2) Music: 103,074
- 3) Fan Clubs 52,163
- 4) Schools and Alumni 51,639
- 5) Entertainment 29,436
- 6) Recreation and Sports 33,838
- 7) Religion and Beliefs 25,424
- 8) Romance and Relationships 23,206
- 9) Cultures and Communities 18,604
- 10) Fashion and Style 17,640

In comparison, other groups use more slang and on-line short-hand often seen in instant messaging conversations. For example, below is an excerpt from a group on Myspace called the “Ghetto Phabulous QT’s.”

***Example #2: Gotz 2 B D hottest people around here... Definitely you gotz 2 B ghetto meaning U DON’T CARE WHAT PEOPLE THINK U DO WUT U DO AND UR PROUD ABOUT IT!!! –Ghetto Phabulous QT’s Member***

Chances are the second group’s writing style would cause those in the first group to cringe in horror. The comparisons between the two excerpts accurately portray how writing styles differ between groups on blogging sites.

As for commenting on blogs in Xanga’s blog-rings, the style remains informal and personal, yet loses the conversational tone since, unlike a forum, replying to a comment is not a normal occurrence.

Blog-groups, or blog-rings, are easily accessible, with an endless variety of groups in which the user can gain interaction with others with the same interests in the blogging community. The ability to interact with others makes blog-groups far more personal than mailing lists. Means of communication in blog-groups vary between the different sites. Discussion forums take the cake as an ideal medium of informal, conversational communication (as on Myspace.com), as opposed to communicating with members of blog-rings through their blogs exclusively (as on Xanga.) So you can bid that exasperated sigh or eye-roll that you receive from your friends when they feel you’re talking too much goodbye, tell that mailing list you won’t be needing their e-mails any longer, and take advantage of the opportunity to expand your online social network through the blogging technology today!

