

grit and glamour

Style. Shoes. Food. Not necessarily in that order.

Survey Says: Original Content Really is Queen

OCTOBER 12, 2010 [EDIT]

Reading options:

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A couple months ago, I asked my blog readers to participate in a short survey about Grit and Glamour. I created the survey for several reasons:

1. To get feedback on my blog.
2. To test theories I have about blogging and usability.
3. To establish a proper foundation from which to preach this: *If you're a serious blogger, no matter your topic, there are some universal truths and best practices that when applied, make your blog better. Period.*

It's taken me a little while to finally craft this post, because even after the survey was completed and I found that the results supported what I have been practicing and preaching, I wanted to take a closer look at my blog comments and stats to truly connect it all. And so I have.

Background on Me and G&G

For those of you who don't know me or are new to G&G, I think it's important to share a little about me so you understand why I can make the proclamations that I do in this post. I've been working as a Web content writer/editor/developer for more than a decade. To put this into perspective, I've been working on Web copy and dev since it hit mainstream, before SEO and Web 2.0, back when we were still using frames, Netscape and Yahoo were *the* search engines, and Google was still in R&D.

Early in my career, I transitioned from writing print copy to Web copy, and learned the Web from the outside-in through on-the-job training and experience. I honed my Web writing and usability chops in the headquarters of one of the largest U.S. financial institutions, where I worked with a treasure trove of talent that included some of the nation's best information architects, designers, and developers. We even had an in-house usability lab and a non-sighted user on payroll to test our sites not just visually, but for [ADA](#) compliance as well. Suffice it to say I learned a LOT about what makes a Web site successful.



•• SEARCH ••

To search, type and hit enter

•• RECENT POSTS ••

[Survey Says: Original Content Really is Queen](#)

[Worker V: 1.2](#)

[Sunday Coffee: Bella's Bloomin' Brilliance, Anna's Masked Magnificence + 10,000 Other Things](#)

[Friend Friday: Sticks, Stones, Comments, Criticism, and Kindness](#)

[WVW: Recycled and Remixed*](#)

[WVW: Purple Reign*](#)

[Sunday Coffee: Etro, Art, and Appearex](#)

[Friend Friday: Negativity in Blogging](#)

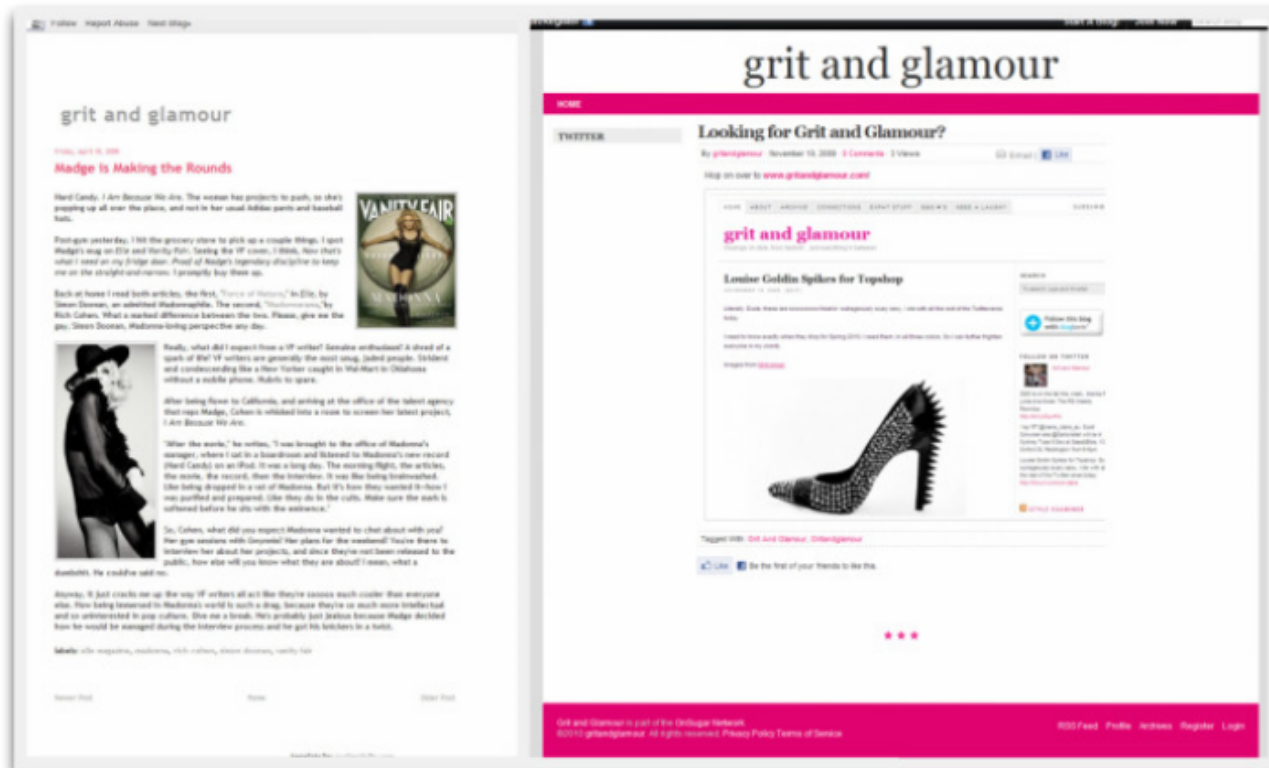
[WVW: Brass...Boots*](#)

[My Moo Mini \(Business\) Cards](#)

[Sunday Coffee: Business Cards, Bracelets, and Blog Love](#)

[WVW: Gaga Edition*](#)

During during those years, I went from dealing only with words and writing, to copying-and-pasting site code in corporate content management systems. I jumped into [WYSIWYG](#) Web development, dabbling on my own in Microsoft FrontPage until blogging software hit the scene and saved us all from DIY site hell. Back in 2006, I started Grit and Glamour on Blogger and cut my teeth on widgets and plugins there for quite some time. Along the way, I applied what I learned in my days at my “real job” to the work I was doing after-hours on my blog. But the more I worked within Blogger, the more I began to feel that my wings were clipped. I began seriously contemplating my blog identity, and craved better templates and usability, so I briefly (and fruitlessly) moved to freebie blog hosting through OnSugar, only to experience the same frustrations (albeit with a better-looking interface and access to Getty Images). Finally, last year I decided it was time to get serious, so I bought a template, registered my domain name, and moved to a self-hosted blog on WordPress.org.



Having finally found a permanent home and template that works for me, I've spent the last year learning the nuts-and-bolts of modern blogging—how social networking factors in, promotion, commenting, etc. My numbers still remain modest, but they absolutely reflect the progress I've made. I've gone from 14,727 page loads in 2009 to 83,975 page loads so far this year—and that's without significant press coverage and only moderate blog exposure. That's nearly *six times* more traffic than I had last year.

About the Survey

Before I delve into what I learned, here are details about the survey:

•• Y'ALL REALLY LIKED ••

- WW: A Clear Cut* (127)
- WW: Gaga Edition* (110)
- WW: Leopard, Take 2* (109)
- Worker V: 1.1 (+ My Office Wear Strategy) (108)
- WW: Fall Preview* (108)
- WW: GwenAudreyJean* (90)
- WW: Purple Reign* (89)
- Friend Friday: Sizing Up Size in Fashion (87)
- WW: Brass...Boots* (87)
- WW: Wedges and Lace* (83)
- You have a Q? I have an A. (82)
- WW: Cheap Sunglasses* (77)

•• ALLIANCES ••



Indie Style Media

- 37 respondents completed the survey between August 19 and August 23, 2010.
- The survey was conducted and summarized via Google Documents.
- There were 15 questions that were either multiple-choice or a rating, plus one open-ended question.
- None of the questions were required, and some allowed more than one selection, thus responses do not necessarily add up to 37 or 100% for each question.

voice of the blog/blogger...me. I wanted to understand how important 100% original content was, and what people thought about my voice and views, essentially.

To view results in their entirety, see [G&G Reader Survey Results](#).

What Feedback (and Constructive Criticism) Reaffirmed

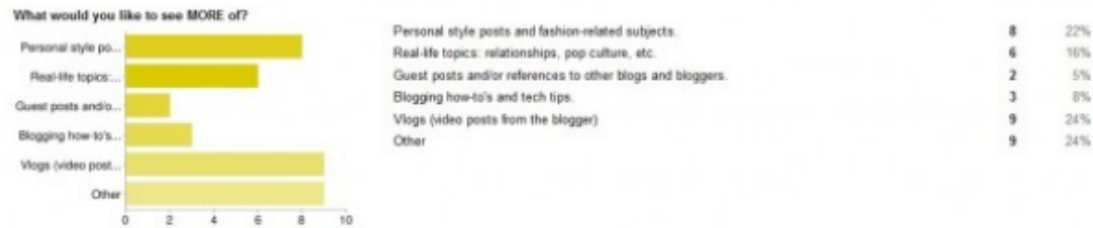
Content Findings

Is 100% original content as important as everyone keeps saying it is? The resounding answer is yes! Make that a double yes! A big, emphatic, exaggerated YES! First, I know this to be true from my own experience as an avid blog reader—I *rarely* click though from Bloglovin' to posts that are already-done rehashes of fashion shows, purely "inspirational" images, or otherwise ubiquitous content. I just don't have time, and frankly, it's not that interesting.

The survey found the same results. You, too, are also uninterested and uninspired by regurgitated content. I asked what readers thought of some theme-based posts on G&G; some include original, personally-authored content, others do not. The results speak volumes about the value readers place on compelling, original content:

- [Friend Friday Vlogs](#)—personally-shot videos in which I respond to Friend Friday questions.
73%, or the majority, said I love this!
- [WWW: What I Wore](#)—outfit posts featuring me, original content and photography.
62%, or the majority, said I love this!
- [Guest Posts](#)—original content, but written by other bloggers and posted only on G&G.
43%, or the majority, said It's cool.
- [Sunday Coffee](#)—original content that is my summary of the best of blogs/the Web in the last week.
38%, or the majority, said I love this!
- [StyleShot](#)—celebrity style spotlights, non-original content.
24%, or the majority, said Not a huge fan.

Of the five major post types evaluated in the survey, only one—StyleShot posts—includes mostly non-original content. And it's the *only* post type I was offering on G&G that the majority of respondents clearly disliked. The most personal posts, like my vlogs and outfit posts, were everyone's favorites. And when I asked what readers would like to see more of, respondents again preferred to see more highly-personal posts that feature me:



The “other” responses yielded these verbatims: “I already enjoy the variety of all that you already offer,” and “It’s just right.” Needless to say, I’ve steered clear of StyleShot posts ever since, preferring not to post rather than to feature non-original content

The bottom line on content is that **original, personal content really is queen. People are coming to *your* blog to see and experience *you*.** It’s that simple.

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Post Frequency

In addition to the type of content bloggers post, the frequency of posts also heavily affects not only your blog traffic, but comments as well. The majority of my survey respondents, or **41%**, noted that the frequency of my posts—about four times per week—is **ideal**. I tend to post on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday, because those days happen to work for my schedule and content strategy. The next highest response only reiterated this frequency: **24% of respondents thought 4-6 times a week is plenty.**



[Bloglovin'](#) lists my post frequency as eight posts per week, however, as this is an average over time it is no longer accurate. It wasn't until this year that I learned that the best frequency for posting is about every other day. I noticed that I get a chunk of regular commenters on the first day, then another chunk on the second, then the occasional straggler thereafter. Every-other-day posting gives people time to catch up and absorb.

Avid blog readers may have dozens of posts to check out daily. You're just one on the list. If you have nothing compelling and original to offer on a particular day, don't! You will *not* lose your readers by not posting everyday. In fact, it's more likely to have a positive effect on your blog. Cutting back on non-original content and posts-for-the-sake-of-posting means that when you do post, it will be meaningful, your readers will notice, and you are likely to garner more comments as a result. Plus, you know what they say about absence—a little bit really does make the heart grow fonder.

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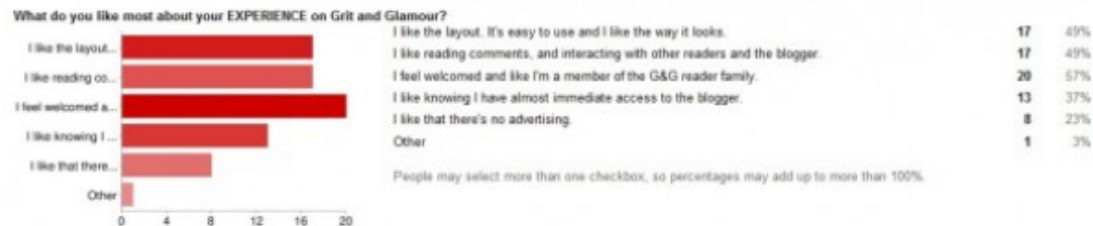
User Experience

Usability is a huge deal to me, mostly because designing content within a usable, aesthetically pleasing experience is what I do for a living, and what we *all* crave online. When a site is usable and well-structured, this fact is seamless and unnoticeable to users. But when it's not, *oy vey*. We experience frustration and often just bail. That is the user of today. Even in the blogosphere, you have to make it interesting, easy, and fast, or your users really will not come back.

In terms of the user experience on G&G, **49% noted that the clean layout of my blog appealed to them.** My blog is minimalist; I admit I've done little to customize my template, because I am not a coder and also because I like its simplicity. I also employ several Web/usability best-practices that aid in ease-of-use:

- Sans-serif body text/font
- Search capability
- Intuitive, clearly-labeled navigation
- Black type on a white background
- Generous but balanced use of white space
- Few extraneous graphics and imagery

Part of my readers' experience on G&G also has to do with my level of interaction with them. **57% of respondents most liked that they "feel welcomed" on my blog.** **49% noted their experience is enhanced by reading comments and interacting with other readers and me, the blogger.**



I won't belabor the point except to say that I believe strongly in interacting with my readers, and allowing comments on my blog makes me accessible to them. Of course, I comment on their blogs as well; it's a dialogue. Commenting is part of what keeps readers engaged and turns them into regular visitors. We all know the majority of our daily traffic is users coming by to read the latest post. But **50% of my survey respondents also noted that they go back to see if I replied to their comments.** That's huge! It shows that at least half of the respondents are looking for this *interaction*, even if it isn't in real-time. It also demonstrates, again, that readers are looking for a personal touch, for some sort of acknowledgment of their comments.



If you're going to allow comments on your blog, to develop a meaningful and loyal connection with your readers, you *must* respond. Especially if you are a new blogger trying to build an audience. You don't have to respond to every comment, but you should acknowledge your regular commenters on a frequent basis (on your blog and theirs, if possible) because that's what keeps them coming back.

In closing out this subject, I leave you with this survey verbatim:

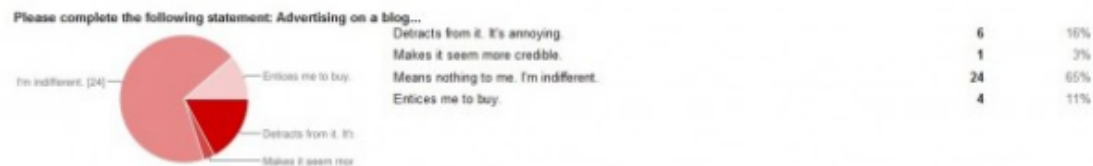
You seriously got a good, er GREAT thing going already, but it says a lot about you to inquire about readers opinions and to listen to what they have to say. Above all, your attentiveness to the audience and straight-forward/real personality and supported original content really make this blog very enjoyable. Kudos V.

What about advertising?

Advertising. Monetization. Getting paid to run your blog.

That's another thing I really wanted to learn more about. Because other than the free Indie Style Media blog ad/exchange at the bottom of the right rail on G&G, I am ad-free. I have no paying sponsors or ads, and while I'd entertain the right partnership, this is by design. I don't pursue ads because I really hate when blogs are so riddled with ads, I can barely see the content. Sure, ads pay the blogger, but they have to be managed lest they completely overtake the aesthetics of the blog.

My survey results reveal the truth about ads on blogs: most of us, on blogs and elsewhere on the Web, have [banner blindness](#)—65% of survey respondents acknowledged that they are indifferent to advertising. They're not really paying attention to it, and that is because blog readers are coming to your blog for your *content*, not your *ads*. Web users are conditioned to look in the middle for the "meat" of the page, so everything else is basically ignored, hence the concept of banner blindness. We've become immune to a degree.



Sure, there is money to be made in blog advertising, but most of it is going to the company, not you. That said, if you are contemplating blog monetization, I am not advocating against it. But before you start peppering your blog with ads based on monetary value alone, you should think very carefully about placement on your blog, as well as the relevance to you and your content. **Blog advertising should be secondary to your original content;** meaning, unless an advertiser is paying you serious money, the product is extremely reputable, and the ad is high-resolution, no ad should occupy your primary real estate: the top center portion of your template, well above the fold or scroll line. Remember, it's the *content* that feeds your traffic, which feeds your advertising and sponsorships. Making two posts of every five a giveaway, or over-commercializing your blog kills your readership. People. Want. Original. Content. Front and center.

But don't just take my word for it. This survey verbatim succinctly expresses the considerations you should make when putting advertising on your blog:

Advertising works if its curated. The ads need to be of brands/products that align with Grit and Glamour not just random google adsense/banners. The ads also need to look great but not get confused with the main real estate of the blog. I really like the way Glamourai uses her sponsors and in turn I view there products in a new way. I love ads that lead to the discovery of new independent makers/designers or brands that sell online.

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Voice of the Blogger

If there were ever an argument to really be yourself, this is it. When asked what people like best about G&G, **80% of respondents most liked my voice/writing and personality, and 57% liked the variety of my topics/posts.** Interestingly, actual outfit posts were not nearly as important as my voice and perspective of fashion, pop culture, life, and blogging tips. This continues to support the theory that original content is best: it showcases *you*.



Similarly, if you're an arrogant, pompous braggart, even if you have the most brilliant outfit posts and content, people are less likely to be interested because they don't like the personality behind the blog. Your readers are attracted to *you*. They can get pretty pictures anywhere, but they can't get *you* anywhere else. About G&G, one survey respondent wrote:

G&G rapidly shot to the top of my list of fave blogs and the V-ster up there with my favorite bloggers. Why? Quality of content, quality of writer and the irresistible charm of Vahni. I actually have to keep myself from blurting "i love you!!!" in the comments. Oh I should mention integrity. The quality AND the integrity of the voice really cinch the deal for me. I trust V.

I trust V. Let's repeat that.

I trust V.

That, my friends, is one of the biggest compliments one can be paid as a blogger. When you establish trust, when your voice is trustworthy and you have integrity, you not only grow a loyal audience, you grow your reputation and brand. As I've noted before, I blog as a hobby. But even if I had dreams of being the next big blog star, I'd want to be known for my integrity, and comments like this are exactly the kind of testimonial I'd use to establish lucrative partnerships with advertisers.

All You Need to Remember

I've thrown a lot of numbers and details your way today. It seems like a lot to absorb. But really, it isn't.

Ultimately, blog readers will tolerate average templates, the occasional grammatical mistake, and a plethora of other Web publishing offenses. All you need to know to develop a better blog and loyal following is this:

- Be you, be true to your voice.
- Offer compelling, original content when possible—your own perspective, photos, and/or video.
- If you have nothing compelling and unique to offer, or your photos are awful, or if you're burned out, DON'T POST. Just take a break. Your readers will still be there.
- If you allow comments, show your readers the same respect and courtesy they show you by responding to them.
- Support readers by visiting their blogs and commenting, and by following them through Bloglovin' and/or Twitter.
- Make sure advertising aligns with your philosophy, products are relevant, and ads are high-resolution and not occupying your prime real estate.
- Ensure your blog is RSS-enabled so readers can subscribe or follow via Bloglovin'.
- Use Twitter to promote new posts and connect and converse with your readers and other bloggers.
- Don't be afraid to try new templates or blog hosting sites. The more you try new things, the more new things you will learn.

If any of you have questions about the survey, feel free to email me at gritandglamour@gmail.com.

Happy blogging, y'all!

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