

William De Vijlder's Blog: Interactive Comment On The Investment Environment

BPM's Daniela DiStefano had the opportunity to speak with William De Vijlder, CIO of Strategy and Partners, at BNP Paribas Investment Partners. Based in Belgium, he joined BNP Paribas when it merged with Fortis Investments in 2010. He has a Ph.D. in economics and has been a senior lecturer in finance and economics at the University of Ghent (Belgium) since 1991. In addition to frequently making guest appearances at conferences and on live TV to comment on the investment environment, he maintains a blog, 'Williams World' (<http://williamdevijlder.bnpparibas-ip.com/english/>), where he regularly shares information and comments on market outlooks and economic and finance issues.



Q: What made you decide to start blogging?

I started back in 2008 and had been running with the idea for quite a while. The trigger was the kind of thoughts I sometimes had when reading news items, and thinking about having a means of communication where I could say what I thought. I discussed it with a couple of colleagues and we decided to give it a dry run for two to three months to see if I had enough inspiration to do a piece every other week.

What is interesting is that it actually turned out to be a pretty good means of communicating, and I sometimes get attention from people such as journalists while travelling somewhere who tell me they have read the blog. The audience is mixed. There are also professionals in government financial markets and investing and institutional clients or clients of distributors. I have a list of journalists in several countries and they get sent a teaser before a new post goes on the blog. The address is also on my business card and at every presentation the finishing slide always includes the address so that the audience can go take a look.

The blog is available in three languages [English, French, and Dutch] and it will soon be translated into Czech and Russian as well.

Q: How often do you write something?

The reality and the frustration is that in starting I was worried that I would not have enough inspiration and what it turned out to be is not so much a lack of inspiration, it's more lack of time writing it. When the frequency slips a bit, it means I'm traveling too much or have too many meetings. What I try to do is on average have one about every other week, but that is sometimes difficult to do, even though there are many things I can write about. I try to make the posts substantial and long enough to form a proper discussion.

Q: Do you know how many people read the blog?

It varies. Sometimes you have several hundred views a month, sometimes fewer. I'm actually positioning this as a product with a means of communication. It is not something that is destined to have commercial banners or advertising like on other sites because that is something totally different. People know it's there and so do clients from the bank in Belgium, and they can look at it when they log-on to the bank website. The fact that journalists of the world say that they have read it and found posts interesting is the point.

Q: Do any of your colleagues at BNP Paribas have their own blog?

I'm the only one. I think we would want to avoid a situation where we would have, for example, 10 people doing it because that would be almost an inflation.

Q: What advice would you give for other industry professionals who might be inspired to do something similar at their organizations?

I would say have a go at it and I would recommend that you have a dry run because we have to avoid starting something only to stop three months afterwards. Depending on what you are doing at your organization also will decide how you start. For example, if your role is very much client focused, it would be very attractive to have a blog. You can also target media for instance, which I must say has been a bit of a discovery because when I started I really had in mind clients as the readers, and then we gradually started staying in touch with journalists which has become more important. Now it happens that I'm sometimes quoted in a news story from something I wrote on my blog, or I'll be called by someone who wants to discuss what I wrote in more detail.

Q: Seeing as you are representing BNP Paribas through this, do your posts have to be vetted by other departments before they can go live?

Part of my job requires me to constantly make presentations, so I'm used to being the face to the outside world, and that takes away the need to have it proof-read by other people. What is important is to make sure that it is consistent with what is being done. For instance, if we in our portfolio are saying we are lowering our equity position, I should not write on the blog this is the time to buy.

Q: Are you planning on branching out into other forms of social media in the future?

The next big question is when should I start Tweeting. I think it's an interesting means, but on the other hand I want to avoid having to be compelled to come up with enough items to tweet each day. I really want to produce something when it's relevant and when there is nothing relevant I just won't produce it.

The thing that attracts me is that it's more like a signalling device. I have a view on an issue and it's like an invitation if you want to know more ask me a question give me a call or something. ■