BlogMutt Writer's App UX Review

Introduction

This document presents the findings of a UX Review of the BlogMutt Writer's application conducted by John Phillips of Moonsault Software in August 2017. John is a UX practitioner with over 15 years experience. He is also a writer for BlogMutt. At the time of this review, John has been using the BlogMutt Writer's App for about a month.

The review is based on John's experience using the app, research in the BlogMutt forums and industry best practices.

Classification of Issues

The issues detailed in this document are classified according to the following scheme:

- **Critical**: Issues in this category are the most serious, they result in lost work, application crashes or the like.

- **Serious**: Issues that affect the day-to-day use of the tool, but don't result in lost work.

- **Standard**: These issues either do not affect users daily or the effect is not as serious.

These classifications are somewhat subjective, but give an idea of how big a problem an issue represents.

Some of the feedback in this document is pretty blunt. Please don't take this as an accusation. Usability is hard. Our aim is to be clear about the issues and discuss them directly.

Issue 1: Unable to Send to Customer
Critical Issue

When working on a one-time topic, if the customer posts an article from another writer, you can be left in a state where you can't submit the article. This is "how it works" or a designed feature of the system.

However, the application should do more to warn the user when this might occur. I had this happen twice, both times while actively revising an article. My workflow is to review the article, read it in the review state, click 'edit' to make changes and repeat as necessary.

The first time this happened, I believe it was caused by an out of date page. I had done a search the previous day and opened several tabs with posts I was considering writing. I had checked that there were no **draft, active** or **posted** versions in the system. The next day, without refreshing the page, I proceeded to write a post. I was able to save a draft and review the article multiple times over the course of about half an hour. But just as I was finishing up, I got this message:

> This topic is no longer available because the topic was either deleted or fulfilled by another writer.

This was frustrating, but I chalked it up to a learning experience. What I learned was to make sure I refreshed the page before writing. To make sure I verified that there weren't any competing posts in progress.

The second time it happened, I'm not sure what caused it. I checked that weren't any draft or active versions. I refreshed the page before starting to make sure I was seeing up to date information. Again I was able to revise and edit the post several times, before eventually being unable to submit it.

Possible Fixes

The system should warn users when someone else is working on the same article. The page could update to show that another writer has a version in progress. The idea is to warn before the last minute, before it is too late.

Alternatively, the system could use a 'check out' metaphor. Once a version of a one-time topic is saved or reviewed, other writers working in the topic would see a warning that they have competition for the article. The user would have to click a button to acknowledge that they have seen the warning, possibly something like:

Another writer is already working on this one-time topic.

Do you want to write continue writing this post?

[Cancel] **[Write Post]**

Another option would be to focus on the customer's side. If the system knows that several writers are working on a single post, it could encourage the customer to wait and review all the versions. My guess is that the review, edit cycle I described is pretty common. The system could infer that a version is in progress and possibly even estimate a time to completion. Then the customer could review any versions in progress regardless of whether they have been submitted. So even if a writer isn't finished, the customer could have a peek and make a decision.

Issue 2: Cancelled Customer - No Topics Left

Critical Issue

eCommQuest, Inc.	-	0 (0)

This customer is visible in search and if you click through has topics available. But they aren't going to buy any more posts. This is a critical issue because it invites writing a post that won't be bought.

The top of the customer's page looks like this:

New Post

Make sure you have the correct company selected.
Click the green ✚ symbol to select a set of topics or click the blue 🔎 symbol to pop up a google news search.

Company (Expires on 09/04/2017 - 0 posts needed now.)

eCommQuest, Inc.

Suggested Fix

Remove the customer from search results shown to writers.

Related Fixes

Even for customers that have posts remaining but have cancelled, the UI is much too subtle.

1. The info shown in search results is not intuitive. Without reading the tool tip for the "Req" column, writers have no idea what the red numbers mean. The general principle is that a tool tip should not be used to display important information. **Important information should be highlighted, not hidden.**

2. On the customer's page the tiny orange text is easy to miss and not clear. The page should display this information in a more visible and clear manner.

Issue 3: Search Speed / Checkboxes

Serious Issue

Search in the app is pretty slow. Slow enough that checking and unchecking either of the checkboxes at the top of the page ("Only display my customers" and "Only display customers who have preferred me") appears not to work. On my machine, unchecking either takes between 6 and 7 seconds. Unchecking is slower because it is selects a larger set. This makes it appear that the checkboxes don't work because they remain checked until the page updates. The natural reaction is to click on the checkbox again, triggering another search. If you do this, multiple searches occur, but the UI gives no feedback and the results don't change.

Text searches are also pretty slow. Here are some numbers measured using the network tab in a browser:

- "design" - 2.5 seconds

- "web" - 3 seconds

- "an" - 2.5 seconds - returns 0 results

- "post" - 4 seconds

- clicking the reset button takes between 6.75 and 8 seconds

Quick Fix

Update the checkboxes instantly using javascript. Add a spinner to the page to show that it is "working" or "loading" until the search finishes. This would make it feel faster and the checkboxes feel like they work.
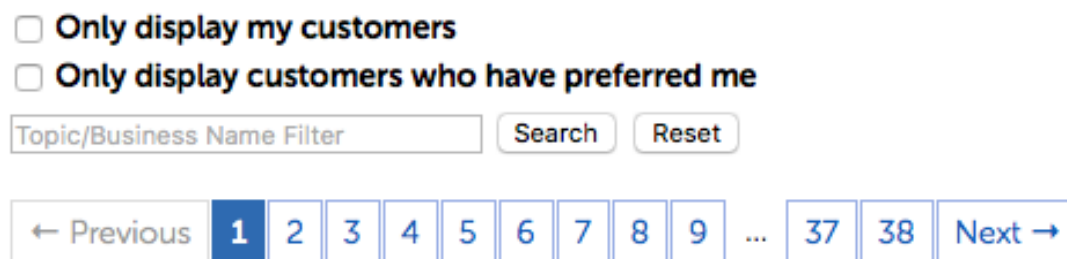
Preferred Fix

Make the searches quicker, less than one second should be the goal.

Issue 4: Search Options / Search UI

Serious Issue

The interface lacks controls to usefully narrow the search. There is no way to limit the results to just topics of a certain length. Similarly, there is no way to omit customers whose "Next Post In" is "N/A". *Typically called NA in the forum.* Better search options are frequently discussed in the forum.

Because post length is tied to price, it's natural to search for longer topics. Sorting by post length is inferior to searching (or filtering) by post length. Ideally, you'd be able search for posts of given length and sort them queue length.

☐ **Only display my customers**
☐ **Only display customers who have preferred me**

| Topic/Business Name Filter | | Search | Reset |

| ← Previous | **1** | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | … | 37 | 38 | Next → |

Current Search UI

Note: no need to have the paging control at the top of the page. Until you have looked at the results on the current page, how do you know you need the next page? This is only helpful when you need to page through a large set of results. Better to make search and filtering work better, to make the result set smaller. See page 11, for filtering controls.

Suggested Fix – Option A

Add filters to the search and/or use a menu to for post length.

[ ] 🔍	New Search	

▼ Advanced Search

[ ] 🔍	New Search	

▲ Advanced Search

Post Length: ● Any Length   Show: ☐ Customers I have written for
           ○ 1200 Words   ☐ Customers who prefer me
           ○ 900 Words   ☐ Customers with scheduled posts
           ○ 600 Words
           ○ 250 Words

Notes:

- The example above shows two states of the UI. In the initial state advanced search is closed. Clicking it opens the advanced search UI.

- The "New Search" link has the same function as the current "Reset" button. *Reset buttons should be avoided. People click them by mistake.*

- This approach makes the search control pretty small and minimal in the default state. However, some number of users won't open advanced search. Some users just don't explore a UI much.

Suggested Fix – Option B

Any Length ⇕   [   ] 🔍   <u>New Search</u>

Show Customers: ☐ I have written for   ☐ Who prefer me   ☐ With scheduled posts

Notes:

- The menu allows you to search for posts of a specific length. It has the following options: Any Length, 1200 Words, 900 Words, 600 words, 250 words.

- All the options are visible in this approach, but applying a change in a menu takes more clicks than a radio button.

- **John prefers this approach**. It scans better. And it is more discoverable. New posts lengths can be accommodated easily. Might want to combine this with left column filtering shown in the next section.

Issue 5: Search for Customers or Topics

Serious Issue

The current search is for customers. When you hover over a customer you can see topics. This is fairly awkward, because writers are looking for topics to write about. Writers care about some things at the customer level: how many posts are in their queue are they on a schedule. Writers want to find interesting topics from customers who are likely to buy them. It's a bit of an open question whether the search should be for a customer or a topic.

Potential Fix

One way to address this would be to offer a choice of which to search for, like this:

Customers ⬍		🔍	New Search

Topics ⬍		🔍	New Search

Showing both states of the control here. The menu allows you to choose what to searching for. This is more or less exactly how Amazon's search works, where a menu allows you pick the type of thing you are searching for, to search a different collection of things.
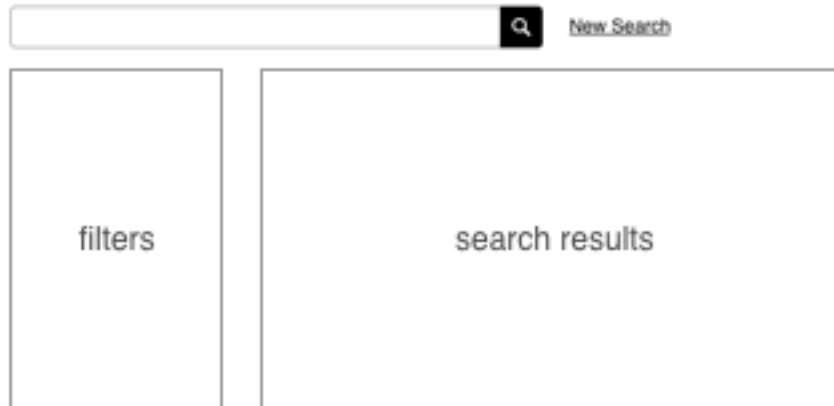
This 'collides' with the idea of using the menu to control what post length you want. These concepts could be combined, like so…

Topics ⬍	Any Length ⬍		🔍	New Search

…but this a bit awkward.

Related Fix

With a menu used to switch between searching for customers or topics, it probably makes sense to move the filtering controls to a left column, and keep the results in the right.

Again, Amazon is a pretty good model here. You'd present the filtering options as checkboxes to the left of the search results.

You have one of these sections for each set of related properties that you allow uses to filter by.

Left column filtering works better on desktop than mobile devices, but I doubt many writers are using their phones…

Issue 6: Table Layout of Results / Sorting

Standard Issue

If you layout your search results in a table, its natural to have each column be sortable. *This is the 'Excel' module of sorting.* Except when you want to sort by something that is not a column. This is the problem you guys faced with sorting by "Need." Adding a column that always has a just a dash so you can sort by the column header is an awkward solution.

Also, some of the current sorts don't work. Sorting by "Next Post In" does not present them in any logical order.

Suggested Fix

Use a drop-down menu for sorting. The menu should list any sorting options you want. Again Amazon is a good model here. If you want to allow sorting in ascending and descending order, you have a menu item for each, like "Post Length: Shortest to Longest" and "Post Length: Longest to Shortest."

Related Improvement

Using a different sorting UI would allow you to move away from presenting search results in a table. The biggest problem with using a table is that you can't use typography to emphasize any elements.

Newman Roofing   Canceled customer
13 posts required   queue 5 posts   600 words
show posts

AIBS, Inc
8 posts required   queue 1 post   250 words
show posts

Jeremy Electrical, Heating & Cooling
20 posts required   queue 18 post   250 words   2 posts needed in next 3 days
show posts

Any option that can be filtered by, you need to show in the results. This is how you can tell the filters are working.

Clicking 'show posts' would open a section, like this:

Jeremy Electrical, Heating & Cooling

20 posts required   queue 18 post   250 words   2 posts needed in next 3 days

hide posts

Comparison of Holiday Lights
Medium Priority   0 Draft   0 Active

Safety Tips for Holidays
Medium Priority   0 Draft   0 Active

Fall Homeowner Prep Tips - Ceiling Fan - switch direction
High Priority   1 Draft   0 Active

How Does Your Electrical Panel Work?
High Priority   0 Draft   0 Active

Favorite Money-Saving Electrical Products
Medium Priority   0 Draft   0 Active

Issue 7: New Post / Customer Page

Serious Issue

This page is a bit of a mess. It has a lot of information and it's not well organized. **This is the main page writers use.** The page holds the following content:

1. The list of available One-time Topics, including: partial instructions for the post; the number of drafts, active, and posted versions of it; and its priority.

2. The same information for Ongoing Topics.

3. Information about the customer, their status, their URLs, their preferred writing style and additional info. **This information is spread all over the page**, some at the top, some in the middle.

4. Recent comments.

5. The controls for writing a post, **which don't make any sense without a post selected**. Shown in this state, the controls invite error.

6. A tab control showing the queue of posts, posted topics, and declined topics.

7. When a topic is selected by clicking on the green +, more info is shown. **Often this info is critical to deciding if you want to write on the topic.** For example, the topic link is often key and it is hidden.

Suggested Fix

There too much information for a single page. Create a page for each customer that has items 3, 1, 2, 4 and 6, from the list above. Show the comments in the context of the topics they refer to, in the tab control. Show key info about topics in the list.

Create a separate page for each topic, that has relevant customer info at the top and a link back to the customer's page.

The list of topics on the customer page would link to these topic pages.

Jeremy Electrical, Heating & Cooling
20 posts needed now and 4 additional posts needed every 22nd of the month.

Topical ——————▼—————— Promotional
Light-hearted ——————▼—————— Corporate
Bullet points ——————▼—————— Narrative
Newsy ————————————▼—— Evergreen
B2B/Niche ————————————▼—— General Audience

The tone of these blogs should be informational, but don't be afraid to have a little bit of fun.
Focus on the electrical side of the business and the safety aspects.

WEBSITE
https://www.jeremykc.com/
BLOG
https://www.jeremykc.com/blog/
TWITTER
https://twitter.com/JeremyServices

TITLE
Comparison of Holiday Lights

250 Words Minimum

| **B** *I* ☰ ☰ 66 <> 🔗 ✂ ⤢ | 🔗 Add Contact Link |

p   Words: 0

Review   Save Draft

TOPIC INSTRUCTIONS

Show the instructions here, list everything you need to know, all the links and etc.

Show the instructions here, list everything you need to know, all the links and etc.Show the instructions here, list everything you need to know, all the links and etc.

Show the instructions here, list everything you need to know, all the links and etc.

https://twitter.com/JeremyServices
https://twitter.com/JeremyServices
https://twitter.com/JeremyServices

Topic page, the bit above the gray line would be repeated on customer page

Issue 8: Browser Tabs / Page Titles

Serious Issue

Here is an image of my browser window when looking for post to write:
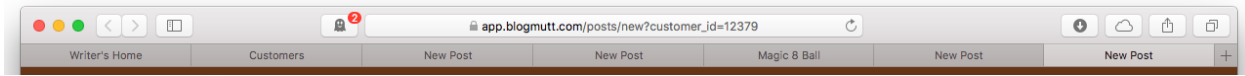
The only tabs that are identifiable are Writer's Home, Customers (search) and Magic 8 Ball. All the other tabs have the unhelpful title "New Post."

Anyone using multiple tabs in their browser has to deal with this issue.

Suggested Fix

Use the customer's name as the title for the page. *This will break when you switch customers using the menu, unless the app does a full a page refresh.* Still, having it occasionally be wrong would be better than the current state.

Issue 9: Problems in the Review State

Serious Issue / Missed opportunity

There is at <u>least one thread in the forum</u> discussing the weaknesses of the Review tool. The criticism essentially comes down to "Well, how good can software be at critiquing writing." There is some truth to this view, but the review tool is somewhat helpful and could be made more so.

The review tool suffers from two main problems:

- A "boy who cried wolf" problem, where it finds the same spelling problem over and over.

- Bugs with regard to punctuation and special characters.

Spelling suggestions:

Stox	Styx, Stow, Stoa
Stox	Styx, Stow, Stoa
Stox	Styx, Stow, Stoa
Ethereum	Etherege
blockchain	
Ethereum	Etherege
blockchain	
blockchain	
blockchain	
Stox	Styx, Stow, Stoa

This is from a post about a blockchain technology called "Stox"

Because it routinely finds and lists the same misspelling so many times, you stop trusting it. You start to ignore it.

The spellcheck flags the word "won't" as misspelled and displays it as "wont". This is due to the curly quote, if the word is spelled "won't" it is not flagged. But typographically, the curly quote is correct. Similarly, internet address get flagged, "invest.com" get reported as "investcom". My guess is that special characters are getting dropped by the algorithm.

Suggested Fix

If each misspelling were flagged a single time, if the list were de-duplicated before being displayed, it would be more useful. If it were displayed in alphabetical order, rather than document order it would also be better. The link between the word in the post and the list of misspelled words is tenuous at best.

Preferred Fix

Copy the approach used by word processors. Underline misspelled words with a red dotted line. Make each misspelling a link that shows a tool tip describing the problem and showing the correct spelling. This approach keeps the focus on the text, rather then tables below the text.

Similarly, use a green dashed underline to show errors in grammar, and use a tool tip to explain the problem.

For grammar problems, you may want to underline problems and also show them in a table. If you do this, make the text in the table an anchor link, using the `<a href= "#anchor"`… style of link, pointing to the offending part of the post. This would make it easier to find the problem text.

Note: word processors use red and green underlines to flag these problems. Ordinarily, you want to avoid using color alone to differentiate between things, because of color-blindness. Red-green color-blindness is the most common form, about 8% of men are red-green color-blind. The red underline is so familiar for spelling errors, that it makes sense to keep using it. However, showing grammar problems with a blue underline, and using a different pattern would make sense. Use a **red dotted** line for spelling and **blue dashed** line for grammar.

Issue 10: No Results

Standard Issue

If you search for an uncommon word, or apparently a 'stop' word, you can get no results back from a search.

The current page shown for no results

Note: the search term in this case was "an". You get the same results with "the". These are commonly ignored words in search, called stop words. Probably in this case, you should allow stop words as search terms.

Suggested Fix

When a search finds no results, use a special page for this case. The "no results" page should contain:

• The search field and button.

• A large headline explaining: **The search for "lorem ipsum" found no results**.

• Pretty much nothing else.

The idea is to show the current search term and say it didn't find any matches.

Issue 11: Recycling Posts

Serious Issue

This is the most discussed usability problem on the forum. It appears that the majority of writers ask for help when trying to recycle a post.

The large warning displayed when you click the recycle icon acknowledges this difficulty.

> NOTICE: The customer below was selected randomly. Please select the customer for whom you wish to reuse this post.

Suggested Fix

Instead of taking the user to randomly selected customer page and relying on a drop-down menu to look for a customer and topic, it would be better to take the user to the search page with some guidance about finding a topic, like: "Enter a keyword that describes the post…" This would be the path in from the writer's home when you click the recycle icon.

Probably also want to provide an interface for recycling from the customer / topic page. If the user has posts that can be recycled, show a button or link "use a recycled post for this topic" near the UI for writing a post. Clicking the link (or button) would display a menu of posts that can be recycled. Choosing one would fill in the title and post body.

Issue 12: Deleting Posts

Standard Issue

A common request in the forum is a way to remove a post completely from the BlogMutt system. Many writers work for other sites where they sell their writing. They want to delete a post to remove it from their list. Also they have some concerns that they might forget they had sold the post and recycle it. You'd want a warning that it would be deleted and

unrecoverable. Most writers seem to write in a word processor, so they have an "offline" version of the post on their computer already.

Issue 13: Post Titles

Serious Issue

Another common complaint on the forum: The interface is misleading about the requirements for a post title.

Title   Search Google News   Get Blog Idea
(must contain: How is Google Optimize better as compared to earlier A/B testing done in Google Analytics?)

How is Google Optimize better as compared to earlier A/B testing done in Google Analytics?

Apparently (I have not tested this) you can enter a title that does not contain that exact string referenced by the help/error text. I think you have to change the title somewhat to get the post to save. *(To date, I have been taking the error at face value. I have typically added some extra text to the end of the original title.)*

Suggested Fix

Eliminate the text in red.

First, it looks like an error. You should have different styles for help and error text. Second, you should display an error only when submitting the form or when the field is changed.

You might want to show the customer's topic title near the field, but not pre-fill the field with it.

Title   Search Google News   Get Blog Idea

Customer's Title: How is Google Optimize better as compared to earlier A/B testing done in Google Analytics?