

REVOLUTION IN PR TECHNOLOGY:

PR Practitioner's Field Guide to New Media Solutions

Blogging

Podcasting

Corporate Web Video

RSS and SEO

Social Media

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PR Case Studies in New Media

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The Revolutionary Impact of New Media on Public Relations—And Why You Can't Miss the Boat

The explosive emergence of Internet tools such as Weblogs (blogs), podcasts, vodcasts, video blogs (vlogs), Web video, and other new media has revolutionized the consumer experience in an unprecedented way. Not since the halcyon days of media, when Woodward and Bernstein catapulted the importance of journalism to an unprecedented level—and inspired a politically and socially concerned new generation to foray into the suddenly glamorous profession—has the voice of the people been so resounding. With more than 50 million people actively using these tools for business and pleasure, the full impact of digital media on the communications industry is yet to be fully known. But thanks to a wealth of undeniable benefits—with immediacy, visibility, and, for better or worse, credibility topping a virtually endless list—nowhere will this impact be felt more than in the PR profession.

The public relations industry has a huge opportunity to become the champion of this new communications channel. In fact, PR pros have to take the plunge and become crusaders for this endeavor. “In many ways, we missed the boat on Web site businesses and a whole industry grew up around us. We’ve adapted to it, but we missed out on our chance to take the lead,” says Makovsky & Company president Ken Makovsky, who also authors the “My Three Cents” blog (<http://three-cents.blogspot.com/>). “But now we have a content-focused communications channel that we really need to become crusaders for. We have an opportunity to be in the vanguard.”

“It’s the true fulfillment of public relations,” he adds. “And being an advocate and a champion of this approach is going to be extremely fulfilling—both for companies and the audiences they’re trying to engage with.”

But this golden opportunity does not come without a price. Namely, PR pros must do what was previously unthinkable: relinquish control of their craft—especially when engaging in the explosive blog community, which has morphed into a communications universe all its own: the blogosphere.

Opportunity: PR is poised to take the lead in integrated marketing

Luckily for the public relations industry—which has been built on the foundation of credibility that new media embrace—this consumer-fueled communications channel provides a picture-perfect opportunity for traditional PR to expand into a messaging force far more powerful and influential than advertising.

“Corporations have to realize that customers are already talking about them in blogs,” offers Peppercom managing partner Steve Cody. “They’re already talking about the company, the service and the products. When they’re done right, blogs enable a company to join the discussion. But based upon what we’ve found and

who we've surveyed, a lot of companies aren't doing it right—they're putting out what is little more than brochureware. The big risk is rushing headlong into blogging and podcasting and other new media without thinking through the image and reputation implications."

The ad industry is inherently hamstrung by its inability to impact reputation and image, thanks in part to the ingratiating reluctance with which consumers now respond to that group's one-way delivery vehicle.

Nevertheless, there's often competition, to an extent, between the marketing side of the house and the PR side. But PR professionals are in an excellent position because they have always been great storytellers who educate people. PR pros are telling, not selling. That is a key component on the Web—especially given the user's control over the medium.

"Public relation does have a tremendous opportunity to really lead the discussion in the digital area because of our reputation and image credentials," adds Cody.

But don't get the wrong idea—traditional marketing is not going away by any means. If you think about the traditional marketing channels that you use today—whether it's advertising, direct marketing, promotions or publicity—they are as much a part of an integrated marketing mix, versus solely what this new medium offers. Traditional marketing offers awareness. Blogging provides you with credibility—and you should look across the whole spectrum before you launch and make sure that one lines up with the other.

Takeaways: How are new media altering consumers' dissemination of news?

This changing landscape is having an incalculable impact on PR in particular because media consumers—the targets of most PR campaigns—are becoming more sophisticated. Regardless of the form your media outreach takes, consider the following points:

1. News consumers have become more cynical and distrusting of spin

"A key fundamental shift is how audiences are expecting to be communicated to, and that's what's most important to understand when you're getting into blogging and podcasting," offers IBM blogger-in-chief Christopher Barger (<http://www-03.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/>). "The traditional broadcasting messages—the traditional means of doing PR—aren't necessarily as trusted anymore. Consumers don't necessarily buy corporate spin, and they don't want to hear corporate messaging. People want to hear conversations involving real people, talking like real people talk," he asserts.

That's best accomplished in a medium built around new media such as blogging and podcasting. But you shouldn't engage in new media because they're the hot new thing, or because technology now exists to allow anybody to have a voice. Those are just details. The bigger point, or the bigger thing to keep an eye on, is the shift in audience expectations and how they want to be communicated to.

2. Message control has shifted to consumers—and away from PR

“If we ever did have control of the message, we certainly don’t now,” says Holtz Communication & Technology principal Shel Holtz, who also pens the “a shel of my former self” blog (<http://blog.holtz.com/>). “The audience is in control of the message—and the only way we are going to wield influence through communications is by participating and engaging in the conversation. That is one of the most fundamental notions of blogging. A blog is not just another channel through which you can talk down to an audience from the summit—it’s a channel that allows you to participate in the conversation,” he says.

“Tied to that, you have to be monitoring the blogosphere and engaging in blogs where your organization is mentioned,” Holtz adds. “It doesn’t have to be your own corporate blog—you can participate in other blogs. For example, since Dell announced its recent battery recall, we’ve had Dell representatives participating in blogs that have been discussing it—very effectively, too.”

Although it’s true that blogs are largely a personal medium so far, this is changing quickly. It’s certainly a heartier B-to-C medium today. The B-to-B marketplace is developing much more slowly, but it’s developing—and any company that chooses to not get involved does so at its own peril.

3. Content is still king—but accessibility is media’s new emperor

User-generated content is only as good as the information you relay and how easily you make it available to your audience. So this paradigm shift is more about making the information available to the audience in a very concise, easy-to-use and digestible way—and blogging, podcasting and video casting meet that criterion.

4. New media call for relationship-driven outreach and sharpened reactions

“We’re no longer in the luxurious world where a story breaks and it becomes tomorrow morning’s news,” offers Communicano, Inc. founder Andy Abramson, who authors the “VOIPWatch” blog (<http://andyabramson.blogs.com/voipwatch/>). “Consider what I call the five Cs: community, content, commerce, communication and continuity. Blogging, podcasting and video casting all provide you with the ability to be more intimate with—and more responsive to—your audience,” he says.

“We’re now in a world of what I like to call FedEx journalism, and in order to be responsive to the needs of the community, meaning your audience, you have to be able to provide that information before or immediately during the time the news breaks,” adds Abramson. “Sometimes these stories break without anybody on the PR team or even management knowing, and they’re forced to respond after the fact. But in order to respond appropriately, you have to have the tools, the tactics and the techniques available to you.”

“The old-school paradigm was likely price, place, product, and promotion, which are the four Ps of marketing,” Abramson continues. “Everything always fell into the promotional mix—but that has changed radically. New media tools change the whole paradigm of relying on other people to tell your story. They allow you to tell your story better, and to be a part of the whole citizen journalism or populist

journalism movement going on out there.”

Therein lies the importance for PR—message marketing to audiences of all kinds is on the verge of a revolutionary sea change.

In many cases, people don't even know they're reading blogs—they just want information.

So far, the impact has been tremendous yet subtle. “There are a lot of surveys about who reads blogs, and I would maintain that most people don’t know they’re necessarily reading blogs,” asserts Shel Israel, who writes the “ItSeemsToMe” blog (<http://seems2shel.typepad.com/>). “They go to Google searching for something and, because of how search works, blogs get more prominence on any topic before a traditional static website does. People go there, they get the information they want, and they might even keep coming back to it. They may have no clue that they’re on a blog.”

Nevertheless, a new breed of information consumer has emerged. There’s no doubt that certain industries and cultural niches are experiencing much of the overall effects of blogs as of 2007. If your client works in technology, either personal or enterprise computing, blogs are important. If your customer is in politics, it’s obviously extremely important. If your customer is a use market, blogs are extremely important. If your customers are middle-aged and you’re not talking about something that’s particularly connected to politics or technology, blogs are something you want to keep your eye on, but they may not be your biggest priority—at least not yet.

Embracing the blogosphere: Key benefits for your company

Recognize all that blogs can do for your company or client by considering these benefits:

1. Blogging allows you to engage your clients and customers in a two-way dialogue

The dialogue that new media allow between messenger and audience represents both the virtually unlimited opportunity and the most harrowing challenge for PR pros, because it necessitates keen brand awareness—of the good and the not-so-good.

“We’re transitioning from a way of thinking that was traditionally one-way storytelling—packaging a message and getting it out in a one-way manner,” says Paul Torrey, president of sales and new-product development for On The Scene Holdings. “All of these newer emerging technology opportunities are distinct opportunities to facilitate a dialogue, versus the old way of thinking, which is one-