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MEDIA SOLUTIONS

How PR Professionals Can Participate in New Media

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Public relations professionals definitely see the value in new media, but that doesn't necessarily translate into their own participation. To be respected as an online communicator, one must be online and engage. Proper use of these tools has been defined by the online community. They dictate how one must engage. You can choose to ignore the user established protocols and be ignored, or worse, ridiculed. If you're a PR professional recommending new media to your clients, then you should be a new media participant yourself. The question is how then should you participate?

Below is real world advice on how PR professionals can participate in the new media world. It was originally produced for a public relations event and includes advice provided by:

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Losing control over the conversation

In the past couple of years, all of marketing has been turned on its head. Marketing organizations, public relations, advertising agencies, and any business that's happily controlled their messaging has lost control. The marketing conversation is now in the hands of consumers turning to trusted networks of friends, family, and even complete strangers who have built up reputations, often online.

Here's how you do it:

Don't rely on traditional marketing communications - Traditional methods of marketing communications, like press releases, are no longer relevant. Journalists used to have to rely on these devices to know about or launch a story. Today, online influencers, who are not necessarily journalists, are not moved by press

releases. They're interested in conversations. Communications must be conversational.

Shift from messages to content-based communications - Singular messaging especially for "considered purchases" is not enough to make a sale. Instead of getting people to stay on message, shoot more for stories. Stories are more impactful.

Fueling conversations with content

Traditional PR is often about media relations and delivering a story that is "on message." Now marketing, including PR, has to get more in the business of creating content that may be informational and/or entertaining. That content can fuel conversations and purchase behavior. Similar to advertisers creating content when television started, today, marketers have to be in the business of content development.

Here's how you do it:

Find the stories - Where are the stories of your product or service. The story is not how one could use your product. The story is how someone actually has used their product. Success with some failure adds to the humanity of the story.

Follow social bookmarking and news recommendation sites - Sites like Digg (<http://www.digg.com/>), del.icio.us

(<http://del.icio.us/>), and Newsvine (<http://www.newsvine.com/>) offer social bookmarking services where the community of users can recommend stories and Web sites they find interesting. Those stories and sites that are of the greatest interest get more recommendations a.k.a. "Diggs," "votes," or "links." Keep an eye on these sites as they're very telling as to what people find most interesting. Although note that the site Digg, which is the most popular, is heavily skewed towards the politically minded geek set.

Fuel the conversation - Once you have stories and know what peaks your public's interest, you must tailor that content in a way that fuels discussions. For that to work, the content must be authentic, credible, and compelling. At this point, you need to completely forget about forcing messages. Your goal here is about getting people to talk about your goods and services from the heart.

Become a participant yourself

If you want online respect you'll need a significant and honest presence online. The easiest and simplest way to do this is to start a blog. One reason to have a blog is because when you start communicating with someone, they're going to want to know who you are and what you do. Writing an introductory email won't cut it. They'll want to see your public profile and what you write about.

Here's how you do it:

Create a blog - Wordpress

(<http://www.wordpress.com/>) is easy to use and set up. It's free. But most importantly it has the largest developer community around it so if you want to add elements to your blog, you can. Blogger and TypePad are also easy to use but they don't have the flexibility to grow and customize like Wordpress.

Who's talking about you?

If you or your company are out there in the public eye, you're going to want to know who's talking about you.

Here's how you do it:

Search the blogs - Use Technorati

(<http://www.technorati.com/>) to search your name/company or if your name/company is common, search on your blog URL (i.e. just search "sparkminute.com" instead of "David Spark"). By using linkbacks (a.k.a. trackbacks or permalinks that specify a specific blog post), Technorati should be able to find sites that are linking to your site. Check out the Technorati Tools section (<http://www.technorati.com/tools/>) for widgets and links to scan the Web for discussions.

Write an about page - Explain who you are and what the blog is about. Maybe add a list of your clients. Include contact information (email and if you want, your phone number) as well.

Make a few blog entries - You've got to fill it up with something. Start off with three entries. Speak personally about your business. Keep this in mind as you're writing: You want to be seen as a voice in your industry. What do you have to say that would be of value to your colleagues?

Tell all your friends about it - This is not a situation of "If you build it, they will come." You have to let people know you're out there.

Search podcasts - Podzinger

(<http://www.podzinger.com/>) is a great search engine for podcasts. It actually searches the transcribed discussions of a podcast. Type in your name or business and see if anyone has been talking about you.

Know WHEN people are talking about you and your clients

You can't always be proactive. Can someone let you know when you're being talked about?

Here's how you do it:

Keep a pulse on the blogs - Create a single page that lets you know where, what, and when people are talking about your clients. Install a series of blog search widgets on a personalized homepage like Netvibes (<http://www.netvibes.com>), iGoogle (<http://www.google.com/ig>), MyYahoo (<http://my.yahoo.com/>), or PageFlakes (<http://www.pageflakes.com>) for each of your clients to see who's talking about them.

Keep a pulse on the mainstream media - Sign up for alerts on Google News (<http://www.google.com/alerts>). You'll be emailed whenever your search term (your client's name) appears in print. There's also an option to send you emails when it appears in blogs, newsgroups, or anywhere else on the Web. Unfortunately news alerts delivered via email tend to be slower than if you were to manually search for news using specific terms or phrases. So during hot news times, be proactive about searching via search news aggregators like Google News.

Who are the top influencers in your space?

You can use a combination of tools here and it requires some basic searches in your category to determine who are the influencers in the blogosphere.

Here's how you do it:

Search Technorati and filter by "a lot of authority" - Use keywords in your industry to search Technorati to see who are the top people talking. Results are sorted by most recent posts, but look to the green bold indicator that tells you the authority level which in essence tells you how many other sites link to this blog. Those with the highest number are good indicators of industry influencers. Similarly, you can try using BlogPulse (<http://www.blogpulse.com/>) which compares the relative traffic and influence of bloggers and Web sites.

Take a closer look - If they're a top influencer, meaning they're in the top 100,000 of all blogs, then use Alexa (<http://www.alexa.com>) to see their Web traffic and how their influence moves up and down given blog posts.

Spend some money - The above suggestions are manual methods of tracking online influence. But for a really full blown analysis of what's going on out there, you can drop tens of thousands of dollars with Nielsen BuzzMetrics (owners of BlogPulse) or its competitor, BuzzLogic. Both services have far more sophisticated tracking tools that can follow online conversations and pinpoint the greatest influencers on any conversation. That information will help you target particular bloggers, blogs, and discussion groups. Only large clients with huge buzz (positive and negative) will require this kind of tracking. Smaller clients can be handled through the more manual methods.

Dealing with bad publicity online

Working in PR you're trained to deal with bad publicity. But how much of that education translates to the online world where news can travel fast and often rumors and opinions can spin out of control. There are many avenues of attack in the online world.

Here's how you do it:

Post a public statement that blogs can link to - Be honest and open and try not to post a press release. Blogs are traditionally very conversational. When a very polished press release is posted as a public defense for something red flags go up and warning lights start flashing. Instead, have the top person (CEO) write a first person account. Even if he/she doesn't have a blog, you can post it on your blog or any other employee's blog.

Post contact information of the CEO - I know this is something most of you will shy away from. But given a bad situation, nothing says "I'm willing to talk and I'm not hiding anything" better than

making your CEO's personal contact information (email and phone) very visible and available.

Say nothing - Sometimes offering a completely honest response to an issue just adds fuel to the fire and gives them more reason to argue. It's often good to let a sour issue die off due to lack of ongoing interest. This is all about judgment calls, and you know how to do that.

Don't get someone to respond for you as an "objective" voice - Bloggers are not stupid. They know when somebody is asked to post on your blog to be seen as an impartial independent voice. It just sticks out and it's so obvious. Approach the blogger yourself. Contact him/her first via email or phone. Asked why he posted that negative comment. Let him know that there's another point of view and point him to it. Or ideally point him to the CEO's response. If it's a really influential blogger, have the CEO contact the blogger directly. The blogger will probably amend his/her comment if it shines some light on the issue. You don't even have to ask.

So you want bloggers to talk about you and your clients

How do you approach bloggers?

Here's how you do it:

Feed them stories - Bloggers are all about raising their street credibility. Their street credibility rises with inside, valuable, and breaking information. So feed them stories. But not necessarily ones from your clients. To gain some level of trust, feed them stories that have nothing to do with your client.

Post/Link to their blog - You can always post comments to their blog, but you can also make comments on your own blog and use trackback links to refer to specific blog posts. You don't even need to email them. Once you link to their blog

they'll see it and know you pinged them. It's a good subtle way to let them know you're reading their content.

Meet them in the real world - Invite them to a party, introduce them around. They want to meet other influencers.

Be truly excited about something - Bloggers blog because of passion. They like hanging out with others with passion. Passionless writing and pitches are very transparent. If you're excited about something, even if it has nothing to do with your business, let the blogger know. They appreciate passion in others as well.

Just because you've got an influencer's ear, doesn't mean they're going to talk positively about you

Remember, bloggers and podcasters are not beholden to another higher authority. You can't go complain to their editor if they did something unprofessional, incorrect, or unethical. They're not required to publish a retraction even if they are wrong.

Here's how you do it:

Be wary of establishing relationships with important bloggers - Some bloggers don't necessarily respond like journalists. Some will be like reporters in their ethics and professionalism and some are not. The "not" category is pretty wide so it's impossible to categorize, but just understand that they may respond in a way that's foreign to you. Keep that in mind in how you choose to treat them and how they'll treat you. Depending on their history you'll need to make a determination of who you can trust and who you can't trust. For example,

who can you trust them with embargoed releases and sensitive information. Regardless, you should reach out to and treat important bloggers with the same respect you would journalists.

Be prepared with answers - If you're pitching an influencer, and you're not loaded with answers, get ready for some trouble. Some bloggers simply won't have patience to wait to hear from your CEO or your official spokesperson. If you don't have answers to your questions and/or can't promise it to them in a satisfactory period of time they'll blog about you without complete information. Gawker Media, publishers of popular blogs like Gizmodo, Wonkette, and Valleywag admit that speed of information is more important to their readership than accuracy. The way they see it is they want to be the first to break a story to draw traffic. After that, the story and its accuracy will play itself out over time.

PR and advertising convergence

When working with social media, the strategy and tactics of PR and advertising start to converge. No longer are PR and advertising on two different planets. PR has been in the business of stories in earned media. Advertising is now in the business of placing stories in paid media. The strategy—to fuel purchases with content and conversations—is the same.

Here's how you do it:

PR professionals need to lead the way - There's now a point of intersection between the goals of an advertising agency and a public relations firm. The execution of content overlaps. PR professionals are better positioned and seasoned to develop content

than many advertising professionals. Open the communications lines with the media, creative, and account divisions of your partnering ad agency. The agency can be an amazing tool to feed attention towards your content development goals.