

Online Public Relations: What we should be teaching from a practitioner's point of view

for

*Digitally Conscious: Effectively Integrating
Technology into Today's Classroom*

James L. Horton
Robert Marston And Associates, Inc.
New York
Founder: www.online-pr.com

I have worked in public relations since 1978. I owned my first personal computer before the IBM PC existed. I co-authored the first published paper on the use of personal computers in PR in the early 1980s and wrote several papers subsequently. I have trained PR practitioners formally and informally in the use of computers for nearly 20 years. (I even did a stint as a UNIX system administrator while working as a vice president of a public relations firm.) In 1995, I went on record saying that the Internet was the CB radio fad of the year. Some fad.

All this proves that I am **too old** to handle the topic assigned to me – “Online Public Relations: What we should be teaching from a practitioner's point of view.”

Online is for the young, the techno-wizards who used PCs in grade schools, built web pages by age eight and did their first venture capital deal by 12. They entered college with laptops and PDAs for taking classroom notes and getting Instant Messages. They set up WiFi wireless connections in their bedrooms to augment campus-wide LANs. They share files from music, to episodes of the Simpsons, and they play marathon games of Diablo II.

Old fogey practitioners like myself are supposed to be battling Microsoft Word and cursing the day typewriters disappeared. We don't know much. We never did. We rue the good old days before PR was ruined by silicon and circuits.

But there was and is a core of aging PR practitioners who are passionately concerned about technology. And, this is what we believe.

Online is the present and future of PR. It is not the end of PR as we know it. It is not the beginning of a new discipline. Online is a media tool with powerful features that PR practitioners should exploit.

And there is the challenge. Online is a tool and like all tools, one must learn how to use it. But early on, PR practitioners avoided online because they saw little use for it and they didn't want to learn a new tool.

Here I digress to make four points:

First, most PR practitioners whom I know fear technology. Old and young practitioners have time and again demonstrated a deep-seated reluctance to learn technology well. They use the Internet, e-mail and Web pages. But, they memorize rules: They don't understand reasons for doing things. You know the kind of individual I am referring to. In order to do X, I go to the drop-down menu marked "formatting." I click on it and I go down three to the line marked "fonts." I click on it, and if it doesn't work, I panic and call "Hank" who knows about this stuff.

Secondly, PR practitioners fear technology beyond writing and presentation tools. They use a word processor more or less well, and they almost use PowerPoint. Few use an electronic spreadsheet like Excel or know what to do with it. Fewer use a relational database like Access or have any idea of how to apply it.

This might not be so bad, but what is disturbing is how little most PR practitioners even know about word processors. They use word processors as sophisticated typewriters when word processors are a publishing tool for print and online. For example, I have worked for years trying to get colleagues to use tables in word processing, and I have failed. Tables are fundamental to Web-page construction. Many features packed into word processors are mysteries to PR practitioners.

Third, because PR practitioners fear technology, they do not think technologically. They follow and do not lead in developing technology for client service. But the outcome of following is that client service in PR suffers until technology becomes an integral part of a practitioner's understanding. And this may take a long time. By then, other communications fields are well down the path in using communications technology in new and creative ways.

Let me use three examples:

E-mail has overtaken PR service. We rarely send paper-based letters to the media. We deluge them with e-mails to the point where they complain of "spam." On the other hand, we are poor at using e-mail creatively. Enhanced versions of e-mail have come from vendors but not from PR. Our defense is that journalists don't want e-mail that incorporates pictures or interactive media, but I suspect the real reason is that we don't understand it and are not willing to learn how to use it.

The second example is the database. Databases are at the heart of list management, and if there is one thing that PR practitioners do, it is making lists, especially media lists. However, few practitioners know how or why databases work. They buy lists from vendors like MediaMap, which builds and runs the database. If they had learned something about databases, they might find they are useful in client service, especially, for example, for online bulletin board monitoring where you want to keep a record of who said what to whom and when.

The third example comes from the Sept. 17 Wall Street Journal. An article in the Journal told of the use of Virtual Personalities or “veepers” on Web pages who provide real faces and voices for promotional purposes, such as selling Bud Light or taking people through guided tours of homes for sale. Veepers are an excellent tool for PR practitioners to use, but so far, all Veepers are coming from marketing companies.

Now to the fourth point. Some of you are thinking right now, “So what? We don’t need to know anything about online. We just use it.” The problem is that one cannot use technology creatively without understanding the parameters of technology. Let me offer a simple example. I am an amateur woodworker (Some say naive woodworker.). If all you know about a hammer is that it drives nails, you don’t know that a hammer pulls nails; that a hammer is crucial in aligning wood to be nailed; that a hammer is a quick lever when boosting things into place; that a hammer is perfect for making dimples in sheetrock before compounding it to cover nail heads; that a hammer has many other uses besides driving nails. A hammer is a simple tool, and hammers have been around for thousands of years.

Online is a complex and growing suite of tools that have been around for little more than 10 years. To use online well, you need to learn its techniques and to study new applications as they arise. In other words, online is lifelong learning for everyone in this room – young and old.

So how do you teach reluctant individuals to understand online and ignite a desire to apply it to client service? Before we address that question, we must raise a point about theory and craft.

Online PR is craft, not theory. PR theory remains the same whether one uses online or newsprint. Craft means you can do something, or you can’t. PR practitioners are communications craftpersons, no different from journalists or camerapersons or editors. We must get rid of the notion that PR is a profession. It isn’t and never will be. PR practitioners can write well or not, can pitch media successfully or not, can set up events or not, can handle crises or not and know how to use online – or not. In PR, we are hired to do and not to theorize about doing. This does not mean that we disdain theory – far from it. Theory underlies everything we do, but our paychecks come from getting things done. And, when theory is ignored,

you have travesties like the Tuesday Oct. 1 Los Angeles Times describes. In that article, the newspaper reports on the efforts of movie studios to place fictitious comments on movie fan sites, such as aintitcoolnews.com. The comments, of course, promote upcoming movies, which is unethical in public relations theory because we build credibility through openness. Secondly, the writers were ham-handed in how they wrote their “fan” messages so the Webmasters caught on quickly. Third, the writers were so technically inept that they did not realize that Webmasters could trace their addresses back to Universal Pictures and Paramount Studios from which they came. And, of course, the Webmasters did that. It set off a firestorm with the movie studios claiming innocence and the Webmasters citing the Internet addresses.

Doing online is useful. Reading about online is useless. That’s an overstatement, but not by much. In 20 years of teaching technology, I learned that few read manuals, no matter how well written or indexed. This is true for all levels of society and all ages.

PR practitioners are pragmatic. They learn techniques as required. They don’t read about techniques. They forget formal training when they leave a classroom, and they are not given to self-learning. For several years, I told subordinates to engage in “creative play” once a week on their computers. For example, I asked them to go through the menus of their word processors and to find out what every button did. Few were interested in “creative play.”

That is why teaching online is doing online. One can discuss online theory or one can do. Doing is better. One can talk about the segments of an e-mail message, or one can write e-mail. Writing is better. One can discuss what is in a Web page, or build a Web page. Building a Web page is better. While building, one learns the craft of Web pages and in the process, the theory.

And what is it that we build? In fact, what is online? There are two answers. Online is content OR online is flash, eye candy, pizzazz, whatever you wish to call it.

Adherents to the Content school believe that content matters, and flash doesn’t. Their reasoning is as follows:

- Most online users want information quickly. They don’t want to wade through cutesy, animated pages to get data, and they can’t stand ads, especially those that hover over copy you are trying read or distract you by floating around the screen to music.
- The second reason that the content school gives is that the highest use sites are content sites – including search engines, e-commerce, news and corporate web sites. Google, the search engine, has a presentation so simple that one might call it

simplistic. Google hides machinery to help users, and users prefer it that way.

- The final reason that the Content School gives for avoiding flash is an appeal to personal experience. They suggest that you surf the Web and see for yourself. Simple and usable presentation that delivers content intuitively and quickly is king while flashy presentation is annoying.

The Flash school disagrees with the content school – sometimes vehemently. To the Flash school, excitement matters. Their reasoning is as follows:

- When on the web, do as the web allows. Use web tools. The Web allows multimedia interactivity, so exploit multimedia interactivity. If it can be done, do it.
- The second reason is that some, if not most, viewers want excitement, so give it to them. Sites can be an end to themselves and not just a means of conveying information. Plenty of sites are popular for games, for motion picture promotion, for animation and entertainment of all kinds.
- The third reason that the Flash school gives is that sometimes there isn't much content to put on a site. When that happens, online is NOT content because you have little or nothing to say. If you are promoting inconsequential products, services and ideas, call on eye candy to make your point. It can carry the day when reasonable persuasion cannot.
- The final reason that the Flash school gives is that Flash is part of us. Much American life depends on surface appearance – the latest movies, fashion, fads and other aspects of transient culture. America is not a land of culture dictators who tell us how to build Web pages and are as serious as German philosophers. While this is an aside, it is important to note that most awards presentations for communications products, such as advertising, honor flash and not substance. Often substance is lost in the creative.

The PR school is split between content and flash. There are those who hew to all-out promotional, press-agentry techniques of marketing PR and those who hew to Arthur-Page principles of building long-term trust with audiences. The two sides talk past each other without understanding. In a recent paper, I traced the historical origins of press agentry and relationship building in the 20th Century. For the record, press agents were there first.

Educators should teach both sides of the equation to PR students – content and flash -- while taking care not to mix them. But, if one does not have the resources to teach both, stick with content. In the end, more people use the Web for content than for entertainment.

Those who emphasize content subordinate design to information -- and not the other way around. Design is essential, but it serves readers finding content and it explains content. It does not distract readers from content.

Those who teach content rely on traditional and tested communications principles. For example, web writing is really the inverted pyramid with hyperlinking. If you know how to write a press release with news in the lead, you know how to write for online. An online user wants you to get to the point. If there is more, give me a hyperlink that takes me to a page with more -- if I choose to go there. Tell me what I need to know quickly.

E-mail content is the inverted pyramid. Reporters and clients want news in a short two or three sentences with a place to go to get more, if they choose to go there.

None of this should surprise anyone who has written news stories or laid out a newspaper. Page design, news sections, indices, jump lines, story formatting are all designed to deliver news without confusing or losing readers. Newspapers entice readers to read news while delivering content efficiently and intuitively. The same basic principles apply to the Content school's approach to online.

As any editor will tell you, content alone is not knowledge. Dumping facts onto paper without organization and failing to connect dots is noise. Dumping information online is similarly futile. Content on paper and content online must be useful to readers, or they leave. It's that simple. When you teach online, teach content usability and not just writing.

Usability includes everything from knowledge of the topic to navigation bars and hyperlinking strategy. Knowledge comes first and presentation second. If there is one deep failure that PR and journalism courses fail to address, it is that they turn out students who are adept in some forms of communication craft but ignorant of the topics they are to communicate. All of you are aware, I am sure, of the battle at Columbia University's Journalism school over appointing a new Dean because the president of Columbia wants to get away from craft and go into deeper understanding of content. You are also aware of commentary from working journalists who say repeatedly that those who do best in communications know a field like history or economics or physics first and learn to write second. It is no different in public relations. Usability starts with fundamental understanding of content. Craft comes second. PR training should start with a well-rounded and deep four-year education that is completed with courses in craft. Online is one element of craft that students should learn.

The second part of usability is presentation and presentation includes many elements.

Usability includes animation that illustrates content. For example, rather than writing about how a machine works, show how it works.

Usability includes page framing and layout. Where does the eye go first? How quickly can the user spot what to do? How many clicks does it take the user to get to content?

Principles of usability are known but evolving as online matures. There are at least 20 online style guides that I know of. Go to online-pr.com and you will find them listed under Web references and resources.

Once again, usability does not preclude flash but it subordinates flash to the purpose of transmitting content effectively to users. This is not particularly new. If you think of church design, Baroque and Rococo Cathedrals were extravaganzas of plaster putti and cherubs but they reinforced one point – raising earthly minds to heavenly themes.

Students can grasp usability before building a web site, but they do not learn usability except by coding. The first exercise I had online students perform was a critique of Web sites in order to tell me their success and failures in usability. This required teams of students to go through large sites, section by section and page by page to assess whether the site overall delivered content efficiently and effectively to users. The students reported to the class as a whole. We found wonderful successes and amusing failures. Some of the best and some of the worst Web sites belonged to universities. The next task that I gave them was to build their own web sites using the insights they gained. They mastered the topic when they could do what they grasped intellectually.

The next time-tested principle that applies to online is freshness. Content is continuous online. Old content goes stale. New content attracts readers. Online is not a book or brochure. It is a newspaper, television or radio that demands new information daily. Online editors feed a machine just like news editors do.

Teach online for what it is -- a world-wide medium that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Do not teach online as a place to build a pretty presentation that won't change for months at a time. There is a term for this error – “brochureware.” Many companies continue to err by thinking about online as a static medium. It isn't and it never was.

Online is interactive. You talk to users and users talk to you one at a time. Letters to the editor in a newspaper are a simulacrum of what online can do in relating to readers. Teach online that way. Give users a chance to talk back and to express preference. Online is about choice, the reader's choice, not your choice. Users control the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How much of learning. You can make content delivery enticing,

but you cannot force-feed the user. With one click, the user is gone. It is easier to leave a Web site than to throw away a newspaper.

One more time-tested principle that applies to online is the nature of its production. Online is collaborative. There are so many elements to online that one must depend on technologists throughout the process. Collaborative communication is not unusual. Newspaper and magazine journalists depend on printers. Film producers depend on writers, cameramen, directors, editors, actors, set designers, stunt men and more. Online depends on writers, designers, technologists, musicians and more. The key to collaboration is familiarity with the process and knowing how to talk the language. Collaborative technologists and artists develop a verbal shorthand in order to work together. Collaboration should be an integral part of teaching and learning by doing.

Let your students solve technical problems by going to the technicians. Webmasters will discount them. Software engineers will ignore them. IT departments will look the other way until your students show they understand what technicians do and where technical work fits into the communications process. Your students will learn that online is negotiation. Each department has its say and needs. One must learn to meld divergent interests into a cohesive whole. This can be taught through practical exercises and team projects. For example, many not-for-profit organizations have poor Web sites. Why not let PR students work with Webmasters and ISPs to make them effective and useful?

Lastly, there is one traditional and time-tested communications principle that you need to forget when teaching online. This is the concept of mass media. Online is an individual medium and not a mass medium. Even though web-based advertising counts on attracting eyeballs, the fact is that each pair of eyeballs chooses individually to use a Web site, or not. There are millions of Web sites and millions of choices each time a user goes onto the Web. A monopoly of three TV networks and a newspaper is irrelevant. Those of you trained in concepts and crafts of mass media have a difficult re-education facing you. Online is a direct medium in the marketing sense of direct. The goal is to tailor a web page, an e-mail or other communication exactly to the needs of the user. The goal is not to develop a site that is all things to all users. Each user should be able to access a site quickly in the way that he or she wants to use it. This means that unlike newspapers, magazines, newsletters, television programs or radio shows, online structure is adaptive. Every Web site has structure but the structure allows a user to find intuitively information that he or she is looking for and exploit that information in the way that he or she wishes to do. Online allows one to build a personal web page. (See Yahoo! for example). It allows one to customize what he or she wishes to see. It is, as we have said, about choice – the reader's choice, not your choice.

This is not easy to understand or to implement. Content generation and presentation are craft skills. Just as you teach students how to write press releases by writing them, you teach students how to write and present online content by writing it and formatting it online where others can judge it. You get ideas by looking at Web solutions but you learn by imitating them. Surfing is learning time, not a waste of time, but surfing is not enough. You understand what you can do online by experimenting online. You keep good solutions and throw out bad ones. There isn't a fixed set of generation and usability rules for online. There are many sets, and there are rules not yet written. The fun of teaching online is that you can push students into new solutions, and you can find out what works and what doesn't.

The Internet was invented in 1969 in the engineering department of UCLA while I was there getting my first masters degree in English literature. I walked past the engineering building daily: I had no idea what anyone did inside. And for years, no one else did either except university science departments. Tim Berners-Lee wrote the rules for the World Wide Web in 1991 at CERN, the huge physics accelerator in Europe. Lee thought he was developing a way to show math equations easily on the Internet. Lee's invention took off when Marc Andreessen led the development of the Mosaic browser in 1993 at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, University of Illinois in Urbana. The Web roared into existence and has never stopped growing. Today it is billions of pages and no one, not even Google, knows how large it is. Online has moved from a toy to a tool. Online is the first worldwide, individualized medium, and it is a force that has seized the attention of newspaper publishers, television and cable network executives, radio station owners, corporate CEOs, not-for-profits administrators and millions of individuals. You cannot ignore online. You must not put online into a box as an elective. You cannot teach online out of a book. You should integrate online into every course you teach and every project you assign.

Now it is your turn. For the rest of the hour, I will take your questions, critiques and comments.

Thank you.