

Engagement

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Heard about the blogger who became angry with a company and attacked it in his blog? It's a common occurrence. Did you hear as well about the satisfied customer who crowed in a blog about service he or she received? That happens too, and it builds brand reputation, as much as attacks tear it down. Final question: Have you heard that your company is engaging with bloggers and bulletin board posters to solve their problems and thank them for comments? Bet you haven't. Few companies do it. They may monitor, but they don't do much more. Yet, blogs and bulletin boards have fostered a different way of thinking about public relations and marketing in which PR has a role. That role is building relationships with bloggers and posters online.

Marketers discuss "engagement marketing" or the "conversation economy." Engagement means getting involved, and there are several views and approaches for how to do it. There are:

- Invitations to customers to "participate in the evolution of a brand" through cooperative production and creation of marketing programs. This is a bottom-up, listening approach rather than top-down marketing.
- Involving customers with a brand whether there is conversation or not. This includes company-sponsored "widgets" on screens that allow individuals to get live feeds of news, weather, stock market reports and to engage customers in ways to personalize use of the web. See www.Netvibes.com for an example of this software gadgetry.
- Use of blogs, online games and promotions, special interest group meetings and live events. The entertainment industry and politicians have been leaders here.
- Participation in online discussions whether or not one identifies oneself.
- Redefinitions of how to reach audiences, including "One to One, One to Some and One to Most" messaging and media.

PR practitioners are or should be familiar with the tools of online engagement. There is nothing new about blogging and bulletin board posting. The difference comes in responding to bloggers and posters. Practitioners trained in unidirectional marketing heuristics such as AIDA (Attention or awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) might not be ready for interactive chat with customers

and critics alike. But the chattering classes, like all word of mouth, influence reputation and brands. Ignoring them is perilous. Some companies are skilled in reaching out online, but for the most part, there is little activity beyond monitoring and measuring. The idea that PR practitioners should proactively respond to bloggers and posters is foreign and in many cases frowned upon. However, with the tremendous rise in online participation with millions of blogs (More than 70 million at the time of writing) and tens of thousands of bulletin boards on numerous topics, taking a hands-off approach makes little sense. Bloggers and posters are customers or influentials expressing themselves. Ignoring them would be the same as ignoring protestors at the front door of a company. It can harm the reputation of a firm, especially if bloggers and posters have a point.

It is easy to determine whether company, brand or issue is discussed frequently. Use a blog search site like Google or Technorati (www.technorati.com) to check for the incidence of a brand name, names of products and services or keywords for issues. Track mentions for a few days to see how often they occur. One may find a community of bloggers or posters who have coalesced around a topic or unconnected comments. Even if one finds little, there is need to monitor regularly simply because of the size of the “blogosphere.” Blogging (and bulletin boards) are among the largest personal/public expression media ever created, providing a reservoir of personal experience and opinion into which one can tap.

A PR engagement model

The following is a model of engagement based on experience. It provides a way of thinking that might be useful when PR practitioners deal with engagement. The model is the reverse of AIDA because it starts with those who are interested or involved in a brand and/or issue and works backward. The model has four levels (See illustration 1):

- **The Engaged.** PR practitioners should regularly “engage” with the Engaged because they communicate about direct experience with a brand or issue, rehash conventional wisdom about it or relay personal opinion. The Engaged form the smallest circle in the illustration because even though they are tens of millions in size, they are still proportionately the smallest group in terms of overall population. Although most consumers are not vocal, they pay attention to the Engaged who are.
- **Information seekers.** These are individuals who monitor information but do not communicate in blogs or bulletin boards about it. Some

Engagement

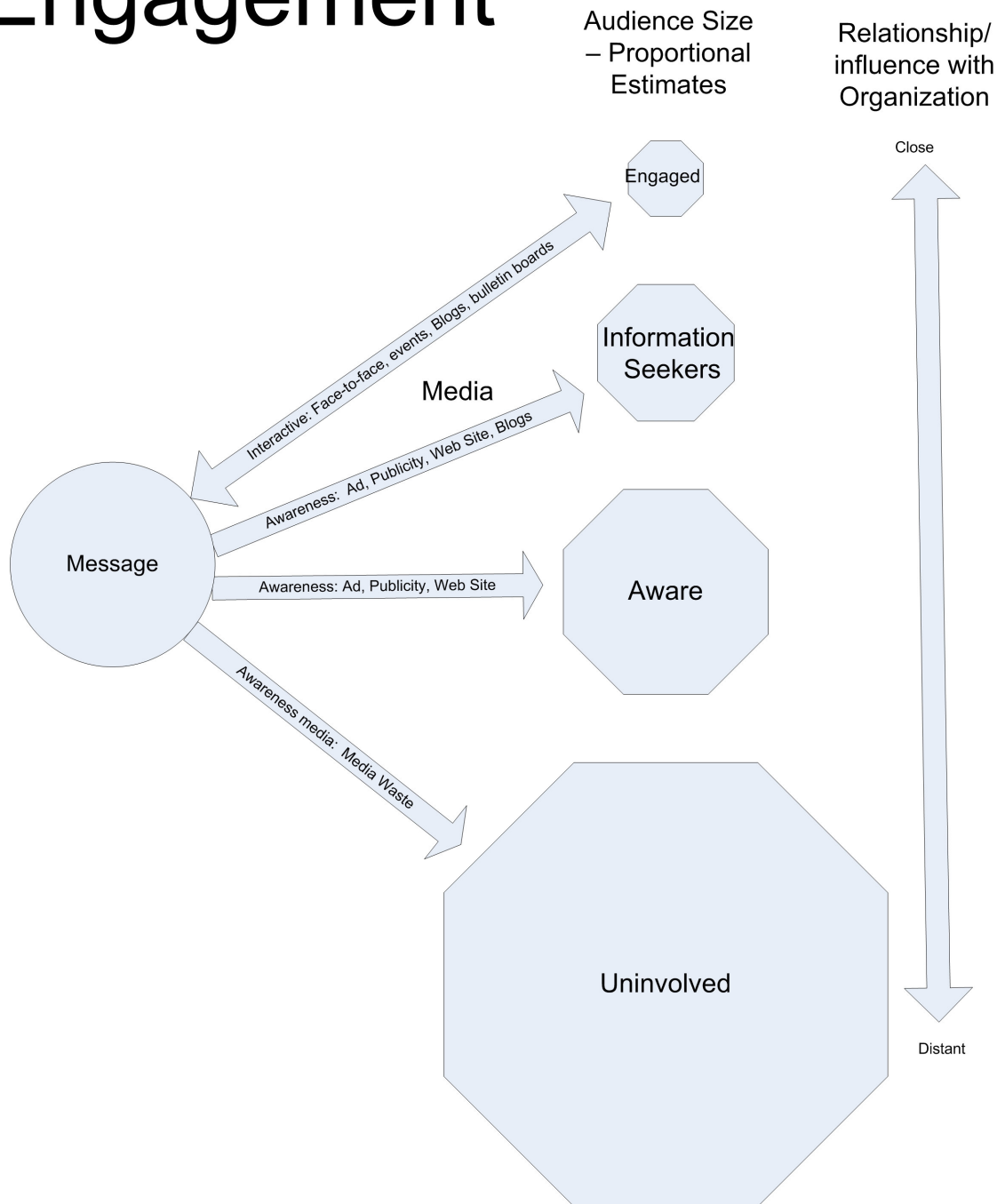


Illustration 1.

An Engagement Model for PR



Illustration 2.

might become engaged, but most won't. A typical Information Seeker is the "news junkie" who keeps up on issues but doesn't write a blog. Information Seekers pay attention to the Engaged, and they may form opinions pro or con about an issue or brand based on what the Engaged are saying.

- **The Aware:** They know of a brand or issue through unaided or aided recall but they know little about it, and they may not care to know more. What little they know might have come from the Engaged.
- **The Uninvolved.** This is the largest audience of all. They don't know the brand or issue, and they may not want to know. Media directed at this group is largely waste. (See illustration 2.)

The relationship and/or identification between a brand and/or issue and an individual is closest with the Engaged and nonexistent with the Uninvolved.

Positive and negative.

The Engaged include three types: 1. Supporters of a brand and/or issue, 2. Detractors and 3. Questioners who interact to understand better what a brand and/or issue is about but have no defined opinion. PR should:

- Reinforce supporters directly to keep their support.
- Engage actively with questioners to supply answers and build credibility with the objective of making them supporters.
- Communicate facts transparently to combat distortions from Detractors, but otherwise spend little time with them because PR can rarely change their minds.

There is no way to determine the percentage of engaged that fall into the three categories. It varies by circumstance. There is also no way to determine precisely in advance the ability or desire of Supporters to publicly defend a brand and/or issue against Detractors. Questioners engage in civil discourse. They can be critical, but they are also open-minded and listen to both sides. Some make up their minds quickly. Others never do. The PR practitioner should deal with Questioners using patience, clarity and speed.

Information seekers are not all one kind either. They are on a continuum from those leaning toward engagement (a smaller group), to the undecided and finally, those who lean away from any kind of engagement.

Information Seekers want to stay up to date, and they are valuable because they are knowledgeable. Information Seekers keep up with the Engaged and may be a majority that support and/or oppose a brand and/or issue but choose not to be vocal. Their silence is by preference. Information Seekers are important because some will become engaged supporters or detractors based on what the Engaged say and how an organization responds. Because they are knowledgeable, their word of mouth in daily life has an impact.

The Aware may be satisfied to stay at a minimal recognition level, if it is a brand or issue that doesn't concern them, their lifestyle or needs. They may have a positive or negative feeling about a brand and/or issue that can come from the Engaged. However, it is a waste of time and effort to try to move this group to the level of Information Seekers, if there is little chance of appealing to their self-interest. This is where audience segmentation is important to PR practitioners. Segmentation comes in determining the most likely candidates to become Information Seekers and to appeal to them. This is important because the Aware can still have positive or negative perceptions of the brand and/or issue based on passing perceptions.

The Uninvolved are a mélange from those who could be involved but haven't been exposed to a brand and/or issue to those who never will be involved no matter how much exposure they have. This group needs segmentation before one spends any time directing media to it in order to avoid media waste. Most broad-based publicity reaches the Uninvolved and as a result, is waste. However, the reason why companies engage in shotgun publicity is that it is inexpensive by comparison to advertising. There is a chance through broad-based media to expose individuals who will become Information Seekers and Engaged. There is an equal chance an uninvolved individual could turn into a supporter or critic. The key is to identify those who are likely to be supporters but today have no recognition or opinions about a brand or issue. That is hard and expensive to do. (It is odd that some companies spend more time on undifferentiated publicity than in talking to the Engaged who have more influence.)

Working with the Engaged.

The Engaged are vocal participants for good and ill who influence others. They can be insiders who talk to others or themselves on blogs and bulletin boards. They can be outsiders who know little but write blogs and post opinions. They can through persuasive skills support or detract strongly from a brand and/or issue, whether or not they have the facts. They can be cranks, or "flamers" to whom few listen after awhile. They are still "word-of-mouth" influencers, the most powerful communication medium.

The challenge for any brand or issue campaigner is to boost positive recommendations from Supporters among the Engaged, to counter negative criticism from Detractors and to answer queries of Questioners promptly and accurately. Here, for example, are a series of entries (masked for client protection) about a common service.

- *BRAND (from experience) is not the best establishment for SERVICE. They have jacke- up prices and very poor service.*
- *To save time and effort, I took the vehicle in to BRAND for SERVICE. After you resist all their other sales pitches for maintenance that you need but don't have the money for, you pay ... and get out as soon as you can. Car nuts will tell you that going to BRAND, and other type places is a disaster waiting to happen to your vehicle.*
- *Today's beat down occurred at my local BRAND. The stupid begins with my not remembering that the same rip-off occurs every single time I go there. I don't know where this blind spot comes from, but somehow it manages to block out any memory of my getting ripped off at said location until it happens again. As in, my credit card has already been swiped and I am walking to my car looking over a bewildering list of services and wondering to myself.*
- *BRAND did a lousy job on SERVICE for me. Use at your own risk!*
- *My mother is almost 80 years old. ...The other day she needed SERVICE So she drove to BRAND. Well , guess what , BRAND doesn't except (sic) checks. And that's how my mother pays. So she said the man behind the counter was so very sweet he said "Why not go to the bank across the street and get out cash." ...So she collects her purse and heads out side to walk across the street to the bank. When he runs out after her and says , "No way Ma'am , let me drive you across the street."*

Continuous criticism can harm a brand in a short time, even if few people read any one blog or bulletin board. Criticism becomes part of conventional wisdom, a shared belief difficult to change, even over a prolonged period. So too, positive stories about engagement with a brand can become part of lore and support.

PR practitioners should monitor the Engaged for their use of facts and personal experiences and intervene when necessary. It is dangerous to let them rely on incorrect facts or to be soured by a bad brand experience. Lack of accuracy opens the brand to incorrect perceptions, and a bad brand experience that is not redressed becomes evidence of how uncaring a company is.

It is best to treat the Engaged in two ways -- like reporters who need facts and like high-value customers. One makes sure they get the facts right whether or not one agrees with their opinions. Secondly, one makes sure their service needs are met whether large or small. (Yes, they are squeaky wheels that get the grease.)

PR should remain as objective as possible – unlike marketing. PR is not selling a product or issue directly. It is maintaining a relationship and credibility that allows selling to occur. This is a critical distinction that marketers often forget in their pressure to move merchandise. The PR person is a factual contributor to blog and bulletin board discussion -- not a salesperson. The PR person should be an authority and dependable and should inject issues and considerations when appropriate but not force them. This means adopting a low-key style and eschewing hype.

PR practitioners should understand that the Engaged may or may not reflect a majority. As politics have proven time and again, “chattering classes” frequently talk to themselves and misunderstand what is happening outside of a milieu they have created. On the other hand, one dare not ignore them until there is evidence they are disconnected from the majority. In addition, the Engaged can assume too much in terms of what others grasp about a brand and/or issue. They use jargon that cuts them off from information seekers, or in the case of the brand above, they may be quick to blame a brand for something they don’t understand. A role of PR is to simplify discussions so information seekers who chance on the blogs or posts can understand arguments. This might be in the form of an argument summation along the line of “If I understand you correctly, you are saying...” followed by a clear statement of what one perceives to be the line of thought the blogger or bulleting poster is taking. This allows the blogger or poster to affirm the argument or to disagree and in so doing clarify the opinion.

The Engaged may resist a company representative in their discussions or responding to blog entries. This requires delicate handling, civility and use of phrases such as , “I work for COMPANY. May I make a comment?” Threats or prohibitions are useless when there is something a company dislikes. Bloggers and posters are covered by the First Amendment in the US and are entitled to their opinions (although governments like China do not respect that entitlement.)

The PR person also should maintain transparency at all times, so the blogger or poster never feels he or she has been used. This a mistake online marketers and PR agencies have made for several years by posing as a member of a group or by producing phony blogs. It is a mistake Edelman, the independent PR agency, will have to live down after it created a phony blog in support of Wal-Mart. PR works well only when it is upfront and accurate.

The Engagement Specialist

PR engagement calls for a new role – the Engagement Specialist. The Engagement Specialist monitors and responds to blogs and posted comments. The Engagement Specialist learns who influential bloggers and posters are through blog searching and experience, where they are online and how to reach them. The Engagement Specialist knows when to comment and when to let comments stand on their own rather than giving them recognition they don't deserve.

The Engagement Specialist is a personality with whom a blogger or poster can identify and his or her own person without the heavy hand of the company in responses. The Specialist knows that blog and bulletin board responses should not be semi-anonymous statements from a distant company but a specific individual speaking on behalf of the company. In addition, the Specialist is savvy and mature enough to write a blog and comment without getting oneself or company into trouble.

The Engagement Specialist knows the facts of a company or where to find them promptly. The Engagement Specialist is a good writer who brings clarity to what can become disjointed conversation. The Specialist responds quickly (Preferably within 24 to 48 hours) and knows when to get customer service involved and when to be an advocate for customers. The Engagement Specialist regularly digests reports of blogger and poster comments for senior management to read in order to give them feedback on what customers are saying about the brand. The Engagement Specialist is measured by how well he or she keeps lines of communications open with the company in terms of response time, quality of response and blogger/poster satisfaction indices.

It should be clear from this description that the Engagement Specialist is not a junior position but a job for a middle manager who can remain in the role for two to three years. Because of the delicate nature of responding proactively, the Engagement Specialist should be a structured job, not a task handed around. The position calls for a well-balanced personality who knows the limits of what he or she might do and works well within those limits to maintain credibility internally as well as externally with bloggers and posters. Over time, the position is an important voice of the company to customers and should reflect the company's concern for customer satisfaction in everything it does.

Summary

Only companies with a significant presence in blogs and online bulletin boards should consider using an Engagement Specialist in order to make

them cost effective. If there is a high frequency, a company needs an Engagement Specialist whether or not comments are positive. If a full-time position is not warranted, one person should still monitor and respond. This insures consistency of voice and presence.

Because it is a new position, companies that engage in blogging and posting response should expect a stumble or two on the way to getting the position working well. The key, however, is sticking to facts and through the facts building credibility over time with bloggers and posters. It is little different than one does with traditional media except in this instance, there is potentially a vast audience of bloggers and posters to influence.

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