

# Learning Online Crafts

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

And there is the challenge. Because online is a tool, one must learn to use it. And that is a challenge many PR practitioners avoid. There are reasons why:

- Most PR practitioners fear technology. Old and young practitioners have time and again demonstrated 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. They click a button, and if it doesn't work, they call "Hank" who knows about this stuff.
- PR practitioners fear technology beyond writing and presentation tools. They use a word processor more or less well, and they 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. What is disturbing is how little most PR practitioners know about word processors.
- 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. By then, other communications fields are using communications technology in new and creative ways. For example, databases are at the heart of list management, and PR practitioners make 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.

- PR practitioners can't get past "so what?" The "so-what" objection goes something like this, "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 its parameters. For example, 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. Online is a complex and growing suite of tools. To use online well, one needs to learn its techniques and to study new applications as they arise. In other words, online is lifelong learning.

## Theory and Craft

Online PR is craft, not theory. PR theory remains the same whether one uses

online, newsprint, TV, radio, events or another technique. Craft means one can do something, or not. 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. PR practitioners are hired to do and not to theorize about doing. This does not mean that practitioners disdain theory – far from it. Theory underlies everything practitioners do, but paychecks come from getting things done.

Doing online is useful: Reading about online is useless. That's an overstatement, but not by much. Few read manuals, no matter how well written or indexed. This is true for all levels of society and all ages, and it is true for online. In 20 years of teaching technology formally and informally, I have concluded that 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.

That is why learning 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.

## **Content and Flash**

And what is it that one builds? In fact, what is online? There are two answers. Online is content OR online is flash, pizzazz or whatever you wish to call it.

Adherents to the Content school believe content matters, and flash doesn't because:

- 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 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.
- Personal experience supports content. 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 because:

- When on the web, do as the web allows. The Web allows multimedia interactivity, so exploit multimedia interactivity. If it can be done, do it.
- Some users 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 for games, for animation and entertainment of all kinds.

- Sometimes there isn't much content to put on a site. If one is promoting inconsequential products, services and ideas, use eye candy to make the point. It can carry the day when reasonable persuasion cannot.
- Flash is part of us. Much American life depends on surface appearance – the latest movies, fashion, fads and other aspects of transient culture.

PR is split between content and flash. There are those who hew to all-out promotional, press agency 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.

PR practitioners should learn both content and flash while taking care not to mix them. But, if one does not have energy for both, practitioners should stick with content. More people use the Web for content than for entertainment.

## Content Delivery

Adherents to the Content school subordinate design to information. Design does not distract readers from content. Design serves readers finding content and helps explain content.

Content generation relies on tested communications principles. For example, web writing is really an 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 an 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 will 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 connecting dots is noise. Dumping information online is futile. Content on paper and content online must be useful to readers, or they leave. When one learns online, one learns about content usability and not just writing.

Usability includes everything from navigation bars to hyperlinking strategy. 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 and none are the last word in Web design and information presentation.

One can grasp usability before building a web site, but no one learns usability except by coding. One exercise I had online students perform when I was

teaching was to critique Web sites for usability. This required teams of students to go through large sites, section by section and page by page to assess whether the site delivered content efficiently and effectively. The next task was to build their own web sites using insights they gained. They mastered usability when they could do what they grasped intellectually.

Another 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 television or radio that demands new information daily. Online editors feed a machine just like broadcast news editors do. Online is a worldwide medium that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It is not a place to build pretty presentations 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 "brochureware." It isn't and never was.

Online is interactive. One talks to users and users talk back one at a time. Letters to the editor in a newspaper are a simulacrum of what online can do in relating to readers. PR practitioners should 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. One can make content delivery enticing, but no one can 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.

Yet another 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. Collaborative communication is not unusual. Newspaper and magazine journalists depend on graphic designers, photographers and printers. Film producers depend on writers, cameramen, directors, editors, actors, set designers, stunt men and more. Online depends on writers, designers, technologists, musicians and others. The key to collaboration is familiarity with the process and knowledge of the language. Collaborative technologists and artists develop verbal shorthand to work together. PR practitioners should know what each person does online and be able to converse intelligently with the individual.

One does this by going to the technicians who often discount practitioners until they show that they understand what technicians do. One learns quickly that online is negotiation. Each technical department has its say and needs. One must learn to meld divergent interests into a whole. This is especially true in large organizations where integrating e-mail and Web site communications is an onerous task that involves more than technical skill. The politics of every department, division and operating unit get thrown into the mix and achieving coordination is difficult.

There is one traditional communications concept that practitioners must forget when learning online. This is the idea of mass media. Online is an individual 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. A monopoly of three TV networks and a newspaper is irrelevant. Practitioners trained in

concepts and crafts of mass media have a difficult re-education.

Online is a direct medium. The goal is to tailor a web page, e-mail or other communication exactly to the needs of a 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 information in the way that he or she wishes to do. For example, online allows one to build a personal web page. It allows one to customize what he or she wishes to see. It is about choice – the reader’s choice, not the practitioners choice.

This is not easy to understand or to implement. Content generation and presentation are craft skills. Just as one learns to write press releases by writing them, one learns how to write and present online content by writing it and formatting it online where others judge it. Practitioners can get ideas by looking at others’ solutions but they learn by imitating them. Surfing is useful, but surfing is not enough. One understands what to do online by experimenting online, by keeping good solutions and throwing out bad ones.

The Internet was invented in 1969 in the engineering department of UCLA. Tim Berners-Lee wrote the rules for the World Wide Web in 1991 at CERN, the huge physics accelerator in Europe. 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. PR practitioners cannot ignore online. They should integrate online into everything they do. But to do so, they must commit themselves to learning online crafts.

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