

Media Indifference

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I have a friend who is an authority on 19th Century American iron hand presses and type foundry books. He collects them and knows how to hand-set fonts from California job cases that he keeps in large drawers in his workshop. This fellow is in love with the beauty of nearly forgotten machines and technologies. And, why not? There is a feeling of power just looking at them. But, from a commercial point of view, 19th Century hand presses barely lasted through the 19th Century. Once a practical Linotype machine was introduced around 1886, iron hand presses went to scrapyards and melting pots.

The same is true for early radio technologies. Who would use a crystal set today? We see them in museums as curiosities that we don't know how to turn on, much less tune. Do you remember early wire sound recorders? Do you think you could use one? And from television, who knows how to hand-splice two-inch Ampex videotape with iron filings and a magnifying glass? Few recall the Bach Auricon, the original news film camera with the Mickey-Mouse-ears Mitchell Magazines. Almost no one teaches how to hand-splice magnetic-striped movie film or to spot-erase sound with a magnetic pen. All these media technologies are gone and skills with them.

What remains? Content. This is the lesson in a time when communications technologies are shifting as they are now. PR practitioners should learn to use media tools to package content but never fall in love with them.

What do PR practitioners do? Create content, package content for distribution, or both? The answer is both. From the beginning of rhetoric three thousand years ago, content and media technique have been paired to make persuasive argument. Technique included not only how to order a speech but also how to deliver it. The difference between then and now is that technology has changed whereas many ideas have not.

What media do PR practitioners use? Practitioners have long used a variety of communications technologies to package content. Traditionally, practitioners did not get deeply into paid media, such as advertising, because that is the stronghold of advertising agencies, but PR used many technologies otherwise. The idea that PR depends completely on unpaid media to persuade was never accurate. PR depends largely on unpaid persuasion techniques.

To get an idea of the breadth of media in which PR works, here are a few descriptions from PR agencies:

- Ketchum (www.ketchum.com) has a business called **Concentric Communications**:

Concentric Communications specializes in the creative development and production of meetings, events, videos, environments, digital media and learning programs.

- Along with advertising, the first item on its list of capabilities, Burson Marsteller (www.burson-marsteller.com) details the following under Brand Marketing:

*Grassroots Marketing
Product Publicity/Launches
Educational Programming
Cross Marketing and Promotions
Event and Generational Marketing
Special Events
Retail Marketing
Publicity-driven promotions*

- Weber Shandwick (www.webershandwick.com) lists a broad range of interactive capabilities under Web Relations:

corporate, press, micro-promotional, public affairs and crisis Web sites, as well as online media relations; Web outreach messaging; co-marketing partnerships; affiliate programs; viral and rich media e-mail marketing campaigns; e-newsletters; online advertising creative and media buying; online contests, sweepstakes and promotions; search engine marketing; and other related Internet PR services.

Which media should PR practitioners use? Any medium, or combination of media, that effectively persuade a public at the least cost of communication. This is media indifference. It is not, however, media integration. Media integration refers to harnessing multiple media to the same end. Media indifference comes first because one can integrate the wrong media.

PR practitioners have always been somewhat pragmatic in how they use communications technologies. However, they haven't been free of media bias nor has the industry demonstrated leadership in adapting new media. Too many practitioners are captured by media technologies they know and fail to examine how target individuals consume information.

A communicator who is indifferent starts with the question, "What media work best to reach individuals I am trying to persuade?" The communicator answers the question in a disciplined way and experiments with finding better ways. The indifferent communicator knows that media use changes constantly among target individuals – in some cases rapidly. For example, reliance on print media and broadcast television is dropping. Unfortunately, many PR practitioners still work

primarily with reporters in wire services, newspapers, magazines and TV. They should be asking if reporters should be conduits to reach individuals such as male adolescents who spend free time playing video games? Should reporters be conduits to CEOs who have little time for news beyond headline summaries and get much of their information from meetings, internally generated reports and personal digital assistants, such as Blackberries?

If PR practitioners are not asking these questions, companies are. Ford Motor concluded that a video game is the best way to reach adolescents with a message about its new high-powered street vehicles (http://media.ford.com/newsroom/feature_display.cfm?release=20882). This was a conclusion that Lifesavers reached early on with its site www.candystand.com that was one of the first to offer video games with branded candy imagery. As far as I know, neither of these sites came from a PR department.

PR has been a follower, not an experimenter. It lags, partly because it is a business in which low cost is a principle. Publicity is often called cheap advertising. Marketing and advertising budgets are larger and as a result, have more resources for research, media development and measurement. There aren't R&D dollars to throw around in a typical PR agency or department. Yet, there should be systematic observation of target individuals and experimentation because effective communication often comes from using old and new media tools in new and economical ways. This has been an issue in PR for decades with little to no progress.

Even if the PR industry was active in audience exploration and media experiments, is it possible to be media indifferent? Yes and no. It is a truism that communicators are captured sooner or later by media they use. A TV advertising creative sees everything in TV spots, a print creative sees full-page ads and a PR practitioner sees a press release or event. Rising above a medium is difficult not only because of personal barriers, but also because of institutional barriers that railroad creative thinking into self-interested patterns and solutions. A PR practitioner who would tell a client to use advertising would have a short career in a PR agency, so too an advertising creative who suggests PR rather than a 30-second spot.

This is not a new problem. It is a challenge CEOs of communications conglomerates have been struggling with for years. Some have achieved communications indifference and integration on client accounts: Others are still trying to develop objective client account planners. With disaggregating mass media, the urgency to develop objective communications counselors is acute. Clients understand the need to branch out, even if communications agencies don't. This has been the subject of conferences on new media and measurement technology in which clients ask bluntly what they are getting for money they spend on media. Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) have taken

charge of communications platforms and direct agencies what to do. CMOs fire agencies quickly when companies don't get results from communications campaigns, partly because CMOs themselves are in jeopardy with an average lifespan of just 24 months in American corporations.

It is well documented that public relations practitioners sat back during the internet revolution. Many even today show little or no skills in online technologies such as web page development or even blog writing. Many still depend on brochures and newsletters at a time when e-mail and Adobe Portable Document Format (pdf) have largely supplanted both. They ask why they should care about HTML, XML, jpeg, blog, flash, bookmarking, hyperlinking, ftp, TCP/IP, clickstreams and the hundreds of other terms used in web publishing? When one asks why a practitioner continues to do things in an old way, answers are not convincing. Some say this is what the client wants, but it is unclear whether they counseled the client about media consumption among target individuals and new technology. Others say it is what they prefer, but what they want might not be what target individuals use.

Practitioners who are media indifferent should be as eager to learn online tools as they were to learn how to write and format press releases and put on events. This is an issue I have written about before (<http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/LearningOnlineCrafts.pdf>). But PR practitioners often resist learning technologies they might not use regularly. I have seen this over the years with such basic tools as Microsoft Office. There are practitioners who know how to use Outlook for e-mail and Word for writing, but they have never opened an Excel spreadsheet or Access database or even – would you believe? – PowerPoint. And, before you think it, such practitioners are not older. I have found as much or more resistance among young account executives.

In resisting, practitioners deny themselves use of media tools they should know for their careers. It rarely has been enough for PR practitioners to do one thing. There are specialists in writing, publicity, events, etc. but for the most part, PR practitioners need several media skills. There is no reason for resisting media skills other than it stretches one out of a comfort zone and forces thinking in different patterns. It is hard for practitioners who only want to know a word processor and e-mail to realize they should learn web site building, database programming and electronic document design. They fail to realize tools have uses that one learns only through using them. Communicators learn media by practicing the technologies often enough that the media become part of thinking patterns. Of course, once a technology enters a person's skill set, the individual should never assume it will stay the same or remain popular. Unfortunately, too many do. When I first started working with the internet in the 1990s, web-page builders hand-coded HTML "because it was better." They distrusted new-fangled code-generators that spit out HTML formatting like a word processor because the code was "not optimized." Today, hand-coding HTML is for diehards who might also like 19th Century hand presses. Code generators are quicker and more flexible and one doesn't have to know much HTML to use them.

Media indifference should start at the top of an organization with a sharp focus on target individuals. An organization's first task should be to understand what target individuals prefer in media and how they consume it. This task is without end, and it requires direct observation rather than surveys or Nielsen and Arbitron ratings. The fact is that we have learned from Nielsen and Arbitron that people lie about how they use media – sometimes consciously, but mostly because they forget or they don't have an accurate perception of time. One learns by observing invisibly, if possible, to avoid biasing the subject. For example, one habit I have had for years is to look at media in a company's reception room and offices. This tells me what individuals read and watch and consider important. However, it doesn't tell me if company's media ranking for target individuals is right. For that, I need research that is often missing or never gathered. Communicators are no different than engineers who learn to design cars by watching how people use them. Traditional measures such as circulation, demographic breakdowns and audience lifestyles are not enough when consumption patterns are changing.

Measurement of TV, radio, print, display and billboard advertising has been used for decades, but advertisers assumed people consumed information in these venues. They know now their assumptions are frequently wrong. Technology changes, such as the advent of digital video recorders (DVRs), are clear threats to TV ads. That is why marketers have begun placing products inside TV programming. There are questions whether traditional measurement has become mis-measurement in light of changing media habits.

Changing preferences for media are an opportunity for PR practitioners to work with marketing and to learn where consumption patterns are trending among target individuals. Whether advertising, PR or direct, media packagers need to know how targeted individuals learn about products, services and issues of importance. When they do, it is easier to be objective about how to approach individuals effectively and economically. We are past the days of media tonnage when cost per thousand was used like bombing raids during World War II. "If we drop enough ads, we'll get enough awareness." Media today in the era of online is closer to laser-guided bombs used since Desert Storm. We target individuals who make up target audiences, and we do so with precision. Media indifference is the laser.

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