

PR and Social Media

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Newspapers are withering. Network television has watched audiences decline. Radio is splintered. Magazines are shrinking. Meanwhile, there are millions of bloggers and Facebook users, Twitterers and texters and Linked-in businesspeople. As reporters disappear from traditional media, PR practitioners are forced to consider and to use social media. But, do they know how and are they patient enough to make social media effective communications tools for clients?

Social media present challenges, not the least because they break down traditional categories of audiences – employees, customers, shareholders. The public and universal nature of social media means all audiences can read communications intended for any one audience. One can no longer compartmentalize audiences and messages. Matrices of targets and themes have become a blob with undefined connections and gaps.

However, to make the challenges more difficult, practitioners cannot assume a message in any one social medium will reach everyone. Social media are so fragmented that an individual may or may not see information in a blog, on a Facebook page or in a Tweet. Hence a practitioner is challenged with reaching the majority of an audience through media that a majority theoretically can access but in reality might not view. In one way, this is no different than dispersion of information in traditional media such as newspapers. Just because a story is in a newspaper doesn't mean everyone in an intended audience has read it – or even seen it. However, since there are fewer traditional media, the chance any one individual has seen a story in a newspaper is higher mathematically than seeing the same story in one of a million blogs.

Here, distilled from several sources, are considerations PR practitioners should take into account about social media.

Challenges

Because of fragmentation, social media present a Return-On-Investment problem. One may put in a lot of work reaching influentials for little result. Will a client be happy to know you spent three hours to get a mention in a blog versus the same three hours to get a mention in **The Wall Street Journal**? Effort expended in social media may not work out in cost-per-thousand terms. One has to think in cost-per-influential terms – reaching the right audience, no matter how small it might be. The closest analog to social media are trade media where

readers are self-selected. If there are only 100 readers but they are the right 100, that is success.

A second challenge is influence. How do you know any blog, tweet or Facebook page carries reach and influence with a target audience? There are techniques for learning this, but they are not straightforward. You can follow blogs, tweets and Facebook postings to determine if they are appropriate. You can investigate where the blog might show or be linked in other people's blogs through such services as Technorati (www.technorati.com). You can determine the blog ranking as well in Technorati. You can examine the number and type of friends on a Facebook page. You can check the number of followers of tweets that an individual or organization sends. However, none of these is a guaranteed way to determine the type and influence of audience you might reach. There is no Audit Bureau of Circulation for social media – not yet anyway. On the other hand, it is possible to narrow your focus to a handful of social media that you can then investigate in depth.

The third challenge is time. To use social media effectively requires learning one's way into each medium and building trust with participants. Do campaigns and clients allow one to spend that kind of time? Clients expect practitioners to have established relationships in order to get messages out, but this is not always possible unless one is going to the same audience continuously. For example, if you are a media relations specialist in the auto industry, you can over time discover and cultivate the influentials in that industry. But, what if you leave the auto industry and move to airlines? You will start over. Agency practitioners especially face this challenge because they often work on multiple accounts in different industries. They learn to research quickly and to build lists swiftly but that doesn't mean they have built the relationships needed for social media. For this reason, a general PR practitioner might be handicapped entering the social media environment.

While the challenges may seem onerous for PR practitioners, there are rewards for penetrating social media effectively. Successful bloggers, Twitterers, Facebook users build audiences of like minds and interests. You can reach these self-identified audiences with a laser-like focus to communicate client messages effectively and efficiently. The waste that attends so much of media is largely eliminated if one is able to tap into groups that have a self-identified interest in the topics and messages you send. There is as well a viral component to reaching the right group. They circulate your messages on their own without your prompting thereby reaching a much larger audience than initially planned for.

What are social media?

When one examines definitions of social media, several criteria emerge. They are:

- Internet-based but not totally so. Meetup.com, for example, uses the internet to set up local face-to-face meetings. The internet is the organizing agent but communication is personal.
- User-generated and published information. However, users often republish information they have discovered elsewhere, so user generation is loosely defined.
- Community sharing – posts and comments, file sharing, community of interest. Community interest varies by individual and group. Some blogs, for example, spark hundreds of comments. Others generate none. The community of interest can be active or passive.
- Multimedia – blogs, podcasts, video, photos, forums, internet messaging, texting. The internet subsumes all audiovisual and print media because it can transmit them. Social media, by extension makes use of all media forms. There is even a growing possibility of haptic communication – the mechanical simulation of touch -- across the internet, which social media will adopt once it is fully developed.
- Immediate. It takes less and less time for one to publish on social media. With a service like Twitter or internet messaging, it is a matter of seconds – the time it takes to type or speak. Social media can be – and often are – live.
- Collapsed geographically: There is no distance in social media. One can follow the Tweets of another who is half-way around the world or “friend” another thousands of miles away or blog to anyone on any continent who is interested in what you have to say.
- Incorporate old and new internet technologies. The World Wide Web is 16 years old at the time of writing. The internet is 50 years old. Social media incorporate all of the technologies developed over those time spans from e-mail through forums, instant messaging, file sharing, video transmission and more.

Social media techniques and tactics

The following techniques and tactics come from a number of sources. None is original with me or with social media, for that matter. They are common-sense approaches to handling any new medium.

- Test. Social media campaigns can supplement traditional media campaigns or replace them. You won't know unless you test their effectiveness. You should always reserve time in PR to test and evaluate new technologies. Sad to say, few practitioners do.

- Plan (This is the same as any media campaign.)
 - Develop strategy and objectives
 - Determine audiences and characteristics
 - Develop message(s)
 - List potential media
 - Establish timelines (allowing extra time for approach to social media)
 - Establish metrics

The differences with social media come in the detailed investigation required. The PR practitioner needs to:

- Identify influentials using social media suitable for your campaign. There are few databases, directories or books one can consult. MediaSource Premium (http://us.cision.com/products_services/mediasource/mediasource_overview.asp) lists larger blogs, but you may be largely on your own. There are a number of ways for finding what you need, but it is an ongoing, long-term process that requires continuous searching because it is hard to know what is out there. You can:
 - Determine news and social media sources that target individuals most likely use. This might require survey work and/or asking friends and acquaintances.
 - Scan traditional media for references to likely sites.
 - Conduct Google Blog searches, Technorati searches or Twitter searches to see what surfaces in your area of interest.
 - Use metrics to determine if a medium might be suitable, such as:
 - Unique visitors per month;
 - RSS subscribers;
 - E-mail subscribers;
 - The number of blog or forum comments;
 - The number of times a post is cited on other social media sharing sites;

- The number and frequency of posts;
- Monitor. Look in depth at the social medium to determine if relevant topics are discussed. Review previous posts to get a feel for participants' interests. Track current posts to see if participants continue with relevant discussion.
- Approach respectfully and carefully: Participate in discussion to show you are a member of the community. "Friend" people who share your interests. Ask participants if they are open to news from your client. Respect their answers. If they are not interested, leave them alone.

Launching social media campaigns

Be transparent when launching a social media campaign. Don't try to hide what you are doing. Converse with your audiences and don't pitch. One can certainly take a position and discuss an issue that pertains to a client but there is a point when discussion turns into marketing and hype. That should be avoided even when your marketing department wants you to sell, sell, sell. Campaigns designed to push a message relentlessly turn off social media participants. Marketers especially have to learn how to take a lower key in presentation. There is less room for publicity and more room for chat and serious discussion.

This leads to the next guideline. It is important to maintain social media campaigns. They require commitment and time to accomplish. Don't stop too soon. There is a tendency to do just that. A common example is to put up a web site and to start a blog when a book is about to be published. But neither the author nor publisher keeps the media up to date once the initial publishing cycle has run its course, so the media fall by the wayside. The key to any social media campaign is to build a database of followers and influentials for follow-on communication. It is like building and refining a direct mail list. This requires capturing ongoing trust of participants and taking care not to abuse that trust.

As one builds a social media audience, measure results against desired awareness and action. There will be blind-alleys because audience interests are fragmented and coalitions of interests may be passing. One is likely to find that hard-core supporters are few and occasional supporters many. The challenge is how to motivate the entire group – a task every marketer faces. There should be flexibility in everything one does so one can adjust messages and media based on what is effective. To some degree, initial social media approaches are scattershot. One tries a number of tactics and keeps those that work while dispensing with others. There may never be tried-and-true tactics because of the disparate nature of the media and audiences. However, that should not intimidate PR practitioners. Rather, it should excite their creativity and willingness to try something new.

Summary

In a broader perspective, there is little difference between traditional media relations and social media relations. In traditional media relations, practitioners identify reporters and editors and build relationships with them in order to get client news disseminated. In social media, practitioners identify influential participants and build relationships with them in order to get client news disseminated. It is more difficult in social media because there are more participants and there is less clarity in determining who key players are. If history is a guide, over time influentials will coalesce within social media, and practitioners will have a clearer perspective on where to go. That is happening, but there are still large areas of social media open to investigation.

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