

Technophobe or Technophile? What should a PR practitioner be?

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I've had an argument with colleagues for years.

My point: Why don't they learn new computer and online applications? The argument goes, "The more skills you know, the more adaptable you are, the more you can do and the more employable you are." I argue that technophobes run into trouble when there is no need for what they can do. Because of their limited skills, they are at greater risk.

The technophobes' counter-argument is that plenty of them have careers in PR, who know little more than word processing and phoning. They write well. They think creatively. They know client relations. They are exceptional in getting new business.

So, the standoff continues. Most PR practitioners learn new technologies when forced to do so. They are technophobic in the sense that they don't go out of their way to adopt technologies. They use word processing but not its many features. They e-mail but know little about e-mail programs. They may never learn a database program or learn the ins and outs of a Personal Digital Assistant. They learn what they need to know but their discomfort with and lack of interest for technology is real. Technophiles, on the other hand, try every new application. They blog. They twitter. They have web sites. They use photo correction programs and drawing and publishing software and more.

Are technophiles wasting time that should be devoted to client service, or do they know something others don't? The answer is not clear-cut. PR practitioners have been successful as either technophobes or technophiles, and either approach works depending on culture. Culture starts with clients one serves.

The client's point of view

A client wants something done and has an expectation about what and who it will take to get it accomplished. An open-minded client will take a chance. A close-minded client will proceed on general assumptions based on:

- **Prior experience.** The client believes all service providers of a type are the roughly the same in services they offer. Some execute better than others and the key is to determine who executes well. This view holds that skill sets collect by specialty. PR agencies provide publicity. Ad agencies provide print and TV advertising. Online agencies provide search engine optimization. There is little or no overlap among them.

- **Conventional understanding without prior experience.** As far as this client knows, PR practitioners differ from advertising and marketing because PR provides press releases, media kits and traditional and online media contact, media monitoring and communications advice related to the media and internal communications. This view assumes a set of skills based on limited knowledge.

Open-minded clients will listen to what a service provider promises and test a promise of service delivery, especially if a service provider provides proof of the ability to get a job done. Thus, for example, a PR firm might offer to build web sites and show it has in-house skills to deliver a new site on time and on budget. The author had an experience once with a fashion photographer of jewelry and ladies' accessories who asked for an annual report assignment in an industrial plant photographing fans, pumps and ceiling cranes. It was an odd request but the photographer showed he had a completely different approach to making mundane products look beautiful. The annual report was highly successful.

Two drivers inhibit open-mindedness – money and risk. Where there is much money involved, clients will focus on proven service providers whom they have confidence can produce a result. When there is career risk involved, clients tend to be conservative. It is hard to go against either of these tendencies. The story about the fashion photographer is illustrative. The client trusted the author with a radical new approach to photographing the client's products that worked. A year later the client trusted the author again with an approach that didn't work. Unfortunately, the client took away the annual report from the designer with whom the author worked.

Even open-minded clients test service providers on low-level projects before allowing them the opportunity to handle significant work. The key is that an open-minded client is experimental. A close-minded client is not. PR practitioners serving close-minded clients need not have the same skill sets as those serving open-minded clients. They can be technophobes and function successfully.

The PR provider's point of view

The culture of the PR organization in which a practitioner works also affects whether one can be a technophobe or technophilic.

Some communications managers provide only those services clients' request. They follow the principle of parsimony. If a manager works in an agency, the more manhours billed, the more profitable the agency is. Therefore, the fewer individuals to deliver the same level of client service is more desirable and trying new technologies with uncertain rates of return is not justifiable. If a manager leads an internal communications department, the job is to serve internal clients and justify budget. If a client requests services that can be delivered profitably or

within budget, the PR provider will deliver them. Technophobes function well in this kind of environment.

An opposite kind of manager offers services clients haven't requested and attempts to build new businesses. This kind of manager follows the principle of investment and expansion. They work on the premise that the more services one offers a client, the less likely a client will look elsewhere -- the principle of inertia. Secondly, the more services the client uses, the harder it is for a client to leave or to cut budget -- the comfort of experience. Technophiliacs function better under this kind of manager.

The PR practitioner's point of view

A practitioner who demonstrates ability to serve client needs efficiently and competently, who believes service is meeting but not exceeding expectations and who strives to serve a client well can be technophobic. Managing time and budgets within specifications is a goal. Such persons thrive under close-minded clients.

A second practitioner believes service is a step beyond what a client requests. Service should amplify client expectations. This practitioner believes if a client knows one can do more than requested, whether or not the client asks for the service, it builds value within the client's mind. And, if one can counsel a client beyond the limits of the client's expectations, the practitioner becomes more valuable to the client. To this practitioner, service is more than what one sells a client today. It is also what one sells client tomorrow. Specifications and budgets are malleable, if one can produce a better product or service. These practitioners blossom under open-minded clients and tend to technophilia.

Entrepreneurs and administrators

Open-minded clients who look for new avenues to communicate to evolving audiences believe in entrepreneurship. Close-minded clients believe in structured services and closely managed budgets to targeted audiences. So too, PR providers who meet expectations but do not go beyond them are administrators while those who invest tend to be entrepreneurs. Practitioners who strive to delight clients and build an image of competence beyond a client's expectations are entrepreneurial. Those who meet clients' needs without going beyond expectations tend to be managerial. Both administrators and entrepreneurs can be successful, and both can fail. It depends on the environment.

Some executives claim they want entrepreneurship or intrapreneurship but they don't. Anything out of the ordinary is looked down upon. There is too much pressure to execute and too much pressure on budget. Other executives provide leeway for individuals to take on as much as they can handle, but here too there is a distinction. Some executives want one to handle only the type of service

already provided. That is, to do more with less. New skill sets allow one to take on more of the same work with less support. This kind of manager will ask how much time one can save by using templates and tables in word processing.

Other managers let individuals explore new services. They want to do more with more. New skill sets allow one to branch into different areas of service. This kind of manager asks if one learns Microsoft Publisher, could we offer pdf brochures that have heretofore been sent to freelance designers?

Entrepreneurs see communications as a dynamic and evolving process and they push for expanded understanding of new technologies and services.

Administrators see communications as a static process and they seek efficiency within services they know. The hard part is to balance the two views into an efficient but evolving communications practice. Most PR managers and practitioners don't succeed, and many never consider it in the first place.

Managing in the middle

Managers and practitioners who try to balance entrepreneurship with administration commit to three elements that are not always found in PR. The first is a research and development budget based on time and dollars. That is they commit to taking the time and spending the money to track new communications techniques and their usefulness. They experiment with them and if successful, they adopt them. Some do this in a disciplined way and others more haphazardly, but they are on a constant lookout for technology that can make their work easier and more expansive. Secondly, they commit to a training budget. Once they identify a time-saving and/or service-expanding technology, they learn it themselves and teach it to others. Lastly, they commit to being change agents. They understand that once one has learned a new technology and taught it to others, they must ensure practitioners continue to use and develop the technology.

Managers in the middle develop and adapt technologies. For example, based on personal observation, most practitioners I know use less than five percent of the capabilities in Microsoft Office. Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access and the Outlook calendar have hundreds of features. Exploiting these can significantly increase services and efficiency provided to clients. Smart managers and practitioners wring productivity out of technology tools through constant development and adaptation.

It is difficult to manage in the middle for any length of time. When budget cuts come, R&D and training are almost always discretionary, especially if they include attending outside meetings or significant expenditures for technology.

What you should do

Choose culture wisely. Choose a path that best fits your point of view and work in organizations that support it. It is uncomfortable for entrepreneurs to work in

cost-conscious, traditional-service organizations, as it is for efficiency-minded practitioners to work in organizations constantly pressing the bounds of what they can do.

Long ago, I applied for a position as a corporate financial communicator at a major New York bank. This was a time of communications specialization. I had just finished working for a number of years as a generalist investor relations communicator. I wrote earnings releases, produced annual reports, set up analyst meetings, handled all aspects of investor relations and the technologies related to it. The banker who interviewed me asked if I had written annual reports. I said I had. She said that would be my job. I said OK but what else would I do? She looked at me oddly. That is all that I would do, she said. I would spend an entire year writing the bank's annual report, not producing it, just writing it. I had a vision of a drudge trudging from one executive's office to another with notepad in hand to take dictation and changes to copy. While the job paid well, I turned it down. I would have gone out of my mind. Others are exactly the opposite. They want to focus and apply their skill in depth. They are willing to endure the same work day-in and day-out.

So who is the better PR practitioner? Neither. One can be a successful communicator by providing what is expected as much as by providing more than what is expected. PR needs both technophobes and technophiliacs. So, while I argue that communicators should learn new skills constantly, I really mean SOME communicators should learn new skills because they are in positions where they need them. Others who specialize are doing just fine. The key is to know the position one is in and not to get caught out of place.

When I gave the first version of this paper to a colleague, he objected to its conclusions. He could never agree, he said, that one can be technophobic. Professionalism in PR requires continuous education, and familiarity with technology is part of it. I agreed with him but asked how he reacts to practitioners around him who make no effort to learn new technologies nor to apply them. These practitioners do good client service but will never experiment with new programs nor actively survey technologies. Clients don't expect it from them nor do their bosses. He couldn't answer that.

For the record, PR practitioners ought to use new technologies when they enhance client service. But, many don't and PR accommodates them. As for me, I find new technologies fascinating but unless I can adopt them to deliver better, faster and less expensive client service, I won't use them. I dislike "boys with toys" as much as I am frustrated by practitioners who refuse to learn anything new. The secret for me has been co-existence. It is easier to get along than to fight.

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