

Keeping in Touch

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To do your job well as a PR counselor, you need to keep in touch with your industry, competitors and the economy, but how do you do that?

In the 1970s, practitioners kept up by pushing stacks of magazines and newspapers past their eyes and by subscribing to clip services that sent packets of tagged newspaper articles and misspelled transcripts from radio and TV programs. In the 1980s, this hadn't changed much, but with the rise of business news shows on cable TV, there was more information to monitor. By the 1990s and the maturation of the Web, news migrated to computer networks.

By 2000, information was everywhere and in every medium -- cell phones, beepers, wireless laptops, Blackberries for portable e-mail and Personal Digital Assistants. Most news was the same, but it was hard to edit. Worse, work overwhelmed PR practitioners and took away time they needed to keep up with news. For many, the focus shifted to implementation more than understanding in an environment of "Get it done" that has no time to ask, "Why are we doing this?"

However, PR practitioners understand their value is in what they know, as well as their ability to write press releases, put on press conferences and arrange interviews. You cannot counsel senior management well without knowing what is happening with competitors and customers. You cannot suggest stories effectively to jour-

nalists without knowing who is writing about what. Nor can you frame advice to the CEO without a grasp of the economy. Practitioners know that if they fail to keep up, they are relegated to secondary roles in corporate communication.

Regrettably, there isn't one way to keep up with the daily flood of news and information that crosses our desks, Web pages and in-boxes daily. At most a practitioner gets about two hours a day to keep up. For many practitioners, this is done outside of work hours and might start early in the morning with newspaper and Web site checks then continue in the office before the first meetings.

This essay discusses some ways to handle news flow that might help you keep up. Not all are appropriate, but you should be aware of them.

Electronic Clipping Services

An electronic clipping service is an essential tool for keeping up, even with its disadvantages. The services came to prominence with eWatch (www.eWatch.com), now owned by PR Newswire. There are others as well that do the same thing, such as CyberAlert (www.cyberalert.com). If you are not familiar with electronic clipping services, they are newsgathering machines that use software filters to look through thousands of news sites, bulletin boards and other information sources for keywords you select. That is their strength and weakness. They are dumb systems. If you choose a common key-

word, such as Coca-Cola, you will get hundreds of electronic clips a day with incidental mentions of the soft drink. Someone has to wade through to pick out what is useful, which many companies do. One person provides a daily précis of key stories. Smaller companies cannot afford to dedicate such time, so it rests on the practitioner to find what is worth reading.

A second downside of electronic clipping services is they offer you a lot of the same thing. For example, if you place a press release on PR Newswire, distribution goes automatically to 30 or more Web databases. The clipping service will show you 30 or more hits for the press release the next day. While that is interesting, it tells one little about what the actual distribution of the release was, and whether any news came from it. Moreover, it just adds to the noise that one has to deal with.

Yet a third downside of electronic clipping is that one cannot get a clip until a story has been posted. It is rare now for news media to withhold stories from the Web. (They actually publish on the Web first.) But, there are still trade publications for which the Web is a secondary concern and in which significant articles and information might not show online for weeks after the publication has appeared. A corollary to this is a growing trend of publications to lock off their Web sites and demand that one register. Some electronic clipping defeats login pages, and some do not. When a service doesn't, one has to keep a roster of passwords.

With these caveats, practitioners should use an electronic clipping service. It covers thousands more publications than any PR department could handle. More importantly, a service can tell one quickly how a story is playing.

Our firm once monitored a major country in prolonged decline. There were predictions that something was about to happen. Either the country's economy would snap out of its doldrums through harsh restructuring, or its economy would slide into an abyss, similar to Argentina at its worst. By using a clipping service to watch newspapers globally, we could tell how the media emphasized elements of the crisis and whether journalists were informed of the potential for chaos. We also differentiated journalists who understood the situation from reporters that were captive to the existing state of affairs. Daily reports were grist for a client who was wondering how to respond to events in the country. This could not have been done by subscribing to newspapers, waiting for translations and then, scouring for appropriate stories. Feedback to the client would have been days or weeks late.

Reading Media

Unfortunately, electronic clipping cannot fully substitute for reading, viewing or listening to media. One must still browse newspapers, watch TV, listen to radio and click through Web sites. Why? Because a clip cannot tell one how a story was played in the original medium, where it was placed and its importance. Was it on the front page or did it lead off the TV newscast? Was it buried? Did the news Web site feature the story ahead of others or list it in the hyperlinks?

Secondly, PR practitioners need to understand the look and feel of a medium. You need a sense of publications, TV programs, radio shows and Web sites. As journalists have said for decades to publicists, you can only understand a medium by using it. Practitioners who do not deal with the media directly might think the

need to maintain media awareness is unnecessary, but this is only partly true. Their companies will be in the media - at least trade media - and practitioners need to understand the significance of press coverage.

A third reason for using media is serendipity. Many of a practitioner's best ideas come from news and information the practitioner was not looking for. These might be oddball stories or facts that would never appear in a clipping service because they have nothing to do with keywords being searched. It is not uncommon, for example, to read of a technology breakthrough and to ask how that might be applied to a client. Nor is it rare to read about an unfortunate event that has harmed another company or an unusual opportunity that has benefited it and not wonder how this might be avoided or capitalized on. CEOs welcome this heightened sense of awareness. It provides them with a view they might not get while buried in day-to-day details of running a business.

My own reading habits encompass seven newspapers a day and several magazines a week. I don't read wire service news in publications. I've seen it already on the Web. I search for original stories because these are likely to have information I don't know. I also restrict reading to relevant sections of a publication to avoid wasting time. Using these guidelines, I can skim seven newspapers in little more than 40 minutes a day. I cannot say the same for television. I don't have a TiVo or other system that records and stores programming that I can spin through when I have time. I barely watch business news TV because a colleague of mine does, and I rely on him. He doesn't read as much as I do, so we complement each other.

For PR practitioners without support, keeping up with TV programming is more difficult. One way to handle it is to keep TVs in the office tuned to relevant channels like CNN, CNBC or CNNfn and to leave them on mute until needed. With quick glances throughout the day, one can get a feel for the ebb and flow of programming, who is appearing, issues and personalities. Evening news shows can be taped and checked quickly except for shows such as *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on U.S. Public Broadcasting Stations where interviews and discussions dominate.

All-news radio shows repeat cycles about every 20 minutes. One can keep up during a short car trip in the morning and much information is from wire services anyway. The main exception are programs such as *All Things Considered* on the U.S. National Public Radio where news, opinion and commentary are not repeated.

Web sites can be checked at any time and in any place with access to the Internet. The challenge with Web sites is that there are too many with news and information. The best one can do is to check major sites on a regular basis and less relevant sites sporadically. The choices, however, are not easy. I use my own Web site (www.online-pr.com), to click through sites quickly. The sites are in major groups and I can select what I want rapidly. The site saves me hours in tracking.

With the rise of Blogs – online journals –, reporters and commentators write when they have time or when there is something they want to say. On [online-pr.com](http://www.online-pr.com) alone, there are about 100 blogs that are primarily news

focused, and the list does not begin to cover what is available. It is easy to ignore blogs, but it is risky because reporters monitor blogs for stories they can report in the media. If someone in a credible blog rants about your company or product or service, you can be assured thousands will have read the criticism, including a number of journalists.

When I check online news sources, I scan headlines to determine what might be new, read just these items and go on. I do not attempt to scan all news sources daily. For example, I will look at technology news Web sites about three times a week. Public Affairs and political Web sites I will scan about three or four times a week. PR and marketing news gets a once-a-week peek. The schedule is irregular. Some sites are guilty pleasures that I watch simply because of odd things they surface. These include among others:

- Fark (www.fark.com)
- Memepool (www.memepool.com)
- Mary Laine (www.marylaine.com) for interesting new sites
- ObscureStore (www.obscurestore.com)

Reading media can be tiring, but the goal is to miss little that might impact a client – a job that becomes more difficult, the more clients one has. PR practitioners serving in a company and tracking only that company have an easier task unless the company is a global brand like IBM, Sony, The Home Depot or General Motors. Maintaining awareness of news about these global giants is hard work.

Aggregation

For broad bodies of news, aggregation sites on the Web are invaluable. These are Web pages on which software news scanners place headlines from multiple

sources. They are not the same as electronic clipping because one does not select key words. They are general and/or industry news sources that give you a quick overview of what is happening and can often carry stories you would have missed. News aggregators that I find the most useful focus on an industry. The ones I find least useful focus on wire service news. For example, Newsline (www.newsline.com) is invaluable for daily technology tracking.

Google News Headlines (www.google.com/news/newsheadlines.html) are mostly wire service feeds one can get anywhere. Yahoo!'s news headlines are also aggregated but they too are primarily from Reuters and the Associated Press. Jim Romanesko's daily media news (www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45) is good for keeping up with news about the media.

News aggregators cover many fields and the challenge is to find the best sources to scan to get a good view of what is happening in the least amount of time. This requires searching and the place to start is with online trade publications. Frequently, trade publications aggregate news between issues and offer "one-stop" information resources. On average, I look at two or three news aggregation sites daily based on the client work I am doing.

Bulletin Boards

If keeping up with news were not enough, bulletin boards can require attention. For those who have never looked into online bulletin boards, they are places where one can leave a public message and get a reply from another person, no matter where that person is in the world. Bulletin boards are used for numerous subjects and inter-

ests and are the first instances of virtual communities online.

Often, one learns about a potential problem or opportunity from a bulletin board. In fact, journalists watch bulletin boards to find ideas they can pursue. Some companies monitor bulletin boards to spot situations that could get out of control if not addressed immediately.

Bulletin boards fall under two broad categories in technical terms and two more categories in subject matter. The first well-known bulletin boards were built before the Web overpowered the Internet. These are called the Usenet and there are thousands of bulletin board sites in the Usenet universe. With the growth of the Web, bulletin boards moved to Web pages and a range of different technologies to post messages from users. Usenet bulletin boards are easily monitored through use of the Google search engine, which took over the Usenet database and calls it Google Groups (www.google.com). One types the key word into the Google search engine with a date delimiter and up pops messages that apply. Web-based bulletin boards are not easy to monitor. Their technologies range so widely that a search engine cannot pick up references easily. This means one has to know which sites have bulletin boards that are relevant to your company and industry, and then, run individual searches manually. It is tedious and often not rewarding.

PR practitioners need to be concerned about two major subjects on bulletin boards – comments about products/service and comments about the company as an investment. Both categories can contain damaging information that can harm a company and need response before news radiates from the bulletin

board to more credible media. It is common for unhappy customers to go to bulletin boards to vent their frustrations. During the Bubble period in the late 1990s, it was also common for stock touts to place rumors and other information on investment bulletin boards to drive share prices up or down. While fewer companies today are plagued by investment rumors, many more are charged with bad service and poor product design and maintenance by angry consumers.

For some companies, bulletin boards are not relevant because they are not much discussed, but again, for global brands, bulletin boards are a headache. Thousands of messages mention their brand incidentally, or with purpose, and someone needs to sort the daily load. PR practitioners in companies with a significant presence on bulletin boards should add them to their list of “keeping-up” items.

XML

XML is a Web formatting language that offers hope for practitioners trying to keep up. Essentially, XML is an advanced form of the original Web formatting language, called HTML. The difference is that XML allows one to code news in such a way that it can be automatically swept into one’s e-mail box or Web page where one can quickly review it.

The specific process for doing this has the name “RSS.” There doesn’t seem to be an agreed meaning for “RSS.” It could stand for “Rich Site Summary,” “Really Simple Syndication” or even, “Resource Description Format Site Summary.” Take your pick. RSS is a protocol, a way of encoding information. Bloggers have leapt to the use of RSS because it is a way for them to stay up with news flow and other bloggers without burning themselves out.

Essentially, every time a blogger makes an entry into his/her RSS-enabled online journal, it is posted automatically to all other bloggers who have subscribed to the RSS channel. As you might imagine, this kind of syndication offers great possibilities for corporate communications programs, but that is another issue.

Major news and blogging sites are RSS-enabled today and more are coming online constantly. To get an idea of the hundreds of sites that offer RSS-enabled feeds, visit Syndica8.com (www.syndic8.com/), which maintains a directory of sites.

RSS can greatly reduce the burden on PR practitioners and others who need to keep up, but it isn't a final answer. It is one more tool that one can use.

Summary

If there is one failing young PR practitioners too often exhibit, it is a lack of curiosity. Many are still learning their skills and have not risen to a level in which they are expected to tell senior executives about what is happening and what they should be concerned about. At some point early in their careers, most practitioners realize they will never serve their companies/clients well unless they make an effort to learn the business. It is then they start keeping up, and it is a habit that doesn't end until one leaves PR. The value of heightened awareness is hard to quantify, but in years of client service, it has become apparent that executives don't have the time to keep up even with their own businesses, much less with competitors, their industry and the rest of the world. The PR practitioner provides a valuable window for executives and in bringing that broader view, the practitioner contributes counsel of what to do about

trends and problems that might be of concern. In an era of too-much information, keeping up is as difficult as the time when there was too little. Practitioners need to develop efficient techniques for capturing and digesting information that rely on technology and persistence.

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