

D i g i t a l A g e

phones to post videos of savage beatings and oppression on the biosphere.

These examples, and the knowledge that we can never control what is posted online by thousands of rational and irrational people, underlines how important it is for PR pros to join every conversation relevant to their clients, campaigns and organizations. Start by making sure you are part of the conversation, every conversation. Then make sure you have the tools to dominate conversations to fulfill your interests – or the integrity needed to realize that your interests were misguided and require change.

It is important to note that online conversations go far beyond assigning staff at the call centre the responsibility of answering emails or responding to angry customers. Online conversations require PR professionals to deploy the latest in wide-ranging monitoring tools to gather and filter relevant data, as well as superbly trained executives to bring across the brand and message values of a PR campaign to a conversation. Those same PR professionals must have the professional knowledge and understanding, as well as the cultural and personable sensitivity required, to handle tough situations in an interactive discussion; that means being able to sensitively handle negative situations and diffuse them



PR professionals should learn how to use data-driven online media in the digital age.

before they become problems, as well as identifying opportunities that can be turned into grass roots advocacy.

Data-Driven Decisions: Measure Success

Another key element to PR in the digital age is the increasingly effective way of using data-driven decision making. This means using information you are gathering from the Internet to help plan and respond effectively. It also involves measuring your campaigns throughout the output-outtake-outcome cycle to make sure you are on the right track and achieving your goals.

Let's start by looking at data-driven output measures: you can specifically track where your media coverage was received, as opposed to traditional media where it is difficult to monitor and capture all coverage. You can also ascertain with a high degree of accuracy how many people viewed your coverage – through simple and affordable measurement data including unique visitor counts, engagement metrics and conversations indices.

You can also identify how people are reacting to your campaigns; unlike traditional media, online media allows your audience to talk back and they will post their opinions and reactions to your outreach.

This wealth of data makes the traditional process of counting coverage and asking for opinions far more effective than before. You can count more precisely and more quickly using tools such as Web Trends, and you can gather perception data with free tools such as Google Analytics or low cost tools like Zoomerang.com and Surveymonkey.com.

A superb example of data-

driven online media can be seen in how Southwest airlines used Search Engine Optimized PR to improve planning and measure results. The airline used web crawling to understand how people were searching for it online and used that data to better craft their press releases for the Internet. This immediately improved the overall reach of their communications efforts.

Southwest also assigned a unique URL to a press release that announced a special fair offer and tied that PR to a ticket ordering page that also had a unique URL. This allowed them to specifically track how many people had viewed their article, clicked on it and followed through to the point of purchase. This simple method allowed them to show how a single press release resulted in \$2.5 million in sales for that offer. The airline now uses the same technique for all of its press releases and reports indicate over \$40 million in sales have been attributed to unique press releases.

These examples should highlight how our industry is changing; they represent a unique opportunity to every PR professional to expand his remit and influence. I strongly believe that PR, not advertising or any other communications practice, is best suited to manage the reputational demands of online media. Using data-driven decisions and best practice as show earlier will lead to a dramatic increase in the influence, reputation and funding for PR around the world.

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P R i n t h e

The advent of online media represents a transformation in human society that is unrivaled in human communications; for the first time people have the power to share their opinions about everything, with everyone and at all times.

If anyone had any doubt that a single person can change the world - or at least their personal world and everything in it - let them be put on notice: humanity is now armed with a voice that can galvanize public opinion in record time, as well as make or break reputations, success and values at viral speed.

The implications of online media on the practice of public relations (PR) is enormous and multi-faceted. Rarely does an industry, such as ours in PR, get presented with a transformation that can help bring the entire practice to glory, or threaten it with extinction.

I believe this transformation is in fact far more of an opportunity than a threat and that the key transformation we will see involves leading PR professionals to the threshold of business decision making and leadership of all communications activity in government, corporates and society.

To understand why online media will have such a transformational effect on PR, let us examine the aspects of change that are already affecting every element of the public relations planning and implementation cycle.

A new fishing net: reaching more people in your specific target audience

PR pros are very aware of terms such as OPS (opportunity to see, or the number of eyeballs potentially reached through media coverage), just as advertising execs rely on GRP (gross ratings points) measures. But never have media

campaigns managed to specifically understand how many people they were really reaching - or whether they were truly part of the desired target audience.

Online media is changing that. For the first time we no longer need to worry about 'spillage' - or the amount of time and effort wasted on hitting target audiences that were not relevant to our campaigns. The Internet allows us to specifically track the number of people visiting particular sites on the world wide web, or using search engines. We also have an increasingly effective way of learning how these people are behaving, what their perceptions are, how they are interacting with our organizations, markets or competitors.

This new understanding of our target audiences will allow PR campaigns to more effectively reach the best target audiences, and to quickly measure the reactions of the audience to any campaign; such power was never available to PR professionals until now.

On a two-way highway: messages are no longer one-directional

An important aspect of every PR effort involves the creation of effective messages that resonate with our target audiences. However, due to the non-interactive nature of traditional media (a newspaper does not allow its reader to talk back and broadcast limits how much audiences can do that), the public simply could not share their opinions about our messages. We did not have an immediate measure of who saw our messages and if they believed them. Thanks to interactive nature of online media, we can not only send our messages to the public - we can also receive messages in return.

This is a fabulous opportunity

for us to take in these messages we are receiving from our audience and to absorb them into our campaigns. What better way to craft a set of PR messages than by sharing them with your target and amending them based on instant and measureable feedback. Not only will ineffective messages be quickly identified and changed - good messages will resonate quickly and lead to faster more measureable success.

Welcome: the age of conversation

So, we now know that we enter an age where PR practitioners have much better understandings of their audiences, and that messages are no longer an one-way exercise. It is this last point that underlines how important it is for PR pros to make sure they rally to a critical skill in new age PR: the art of conversation.

The very nature of online media is interactive. Take a look at any article published on a well-visited web site or the number of people participating in popular blogs and you will see reactions and involvement that surpass anything traditional media can offer: people instantly react to what they see or read. They share articles, opinions, thoughts and most of all, they encourage action.

Does any PR pro want this groundswell of perception and advocacy left without her influence? Of course not. A single negative posting can spread virally and seriously damage a business: just ask Dell how their stock price and market share plummeted in the wake of the sledge-hammer fiasco on YouTube. It can also affect government: again, think about how the government of Myanmar tried to shut off media coverage of Buddhist Monks protesting - only to find the monks themselves used their mobile