

Have I got news for you

B2B marketers need to know how to manage brand reputation online, with or without the use of social media platforms or PR agencies.

Lucy Fisher reveals six golden rules of online PR

With marketers jumping on the social media bandwagon in their droves, it can be easy to dive in, unthinking, and forget what the point of it all is.

There's no point in getting involved purely for the sake of it or because everyone else is. Taking the time to put in place an integrated, overarching online PR strategy can formalise your approach and help to tie all of your digital communications together.

People are spending more time online so it pays to ensure your digital footprint is as good as it can be. First and foremost, it must be consistent, whether it includes your website and a basic email strategy, or a regular presence on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites, online publications and forums.

'But all that is a PR's job,' you might say. Not so. As the Internet continues to blur the boundaries between communications channels, and audiences move fluidly from one platform to the next, B2B marketers need to understand at least the basics of online PR.

PR meets marketing

Alongside TV or radio, your PR colleagues will no longer be concentrating all their efforts on the broadsheets or relevant trade publications – they'll be getting involved in what were traditionally your areas too – email marketing, search, viral marketing, etc. Who does what varies, with something of a turf war having broken out between PR and marketing. Marketing opportunities are there for the taking, but key to success is effective collaboration.

"Everybody needs to be working towards the same objectives," says Leigh Turnbull, director of operations at PR agency Franklin Rae. "So it's vital to have a good understanding of the principles."

Fortunately, there's at least one big draw to investing in online PR and to ensuring you understand it and can contribute to it – if not manage it – as a B2B marketer. Like most forms of digital marketing, it has been widely touted as more accountable than traditional offline PR activity, which arguably relies on crude measurements such as advertising value equivalent (AVE).

"RSS readers are incredibly helpful to monitor not only target online media sites but also competitor's sites and relevant blogs"



TIM GIBBON
DIRECTOR
ELEMENTAL

Six golden rules of online PR

Before you get totally overwhelmed in the ins and outs of online PR, trying to interpret a mass of data including numbers of fans and recommendations, page views and dwell time, here are six key steps to implementing an effective online PR strategy.

1. Define your objectives

Clarify exactly what it is that you want to achieve; everything else should then fall into place more easily.

"Think about what success will actually look like after six to 12 months," advises Sam Dorney, director of public relations at marketing agency IAS B2B. Business brands frequently appeal to niche audiences so thorough research really pays off. Identify where your audience is,

what you want to say to them and what you want them to do. Don't target the whole of the worldwide web if your potential customers only congregate on a handful of sites.

2. Listen carefully

Before you dive in and start tweeting about your latest product offers, take the time to respond to what is going on in the digital arena already. There are almost certainly going to be communities in existence on the web that are relevant to your business and that you can get involved in.

"It's amazing how many B2B brands haven't monitored where they are being talked about," adds Dorney. Bear in mind, too, that online audiences will prefer being communicated with, rather than marketed to, especially on social media platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook.

3. Scrutinise your capabilities

Work out whether you have the necessary resources to implement a robust online PR strategy inhouse. If you are managing a global brand, you may need to employ an agency. If you want a fresh perspective on creativity a third-party can help. But don't bite off more than you can chew.

"Too many brands have grand ideas that they can't follow through," warns Dan Sands, head of digital services at Bite Communications. "Don't build channels if you can't properly manage or engage with them. Unused Twitter or Facebook accounts can be worse than none at all."

There are also benefits to keeping these skills inhouse, especially when we consider that managing company reputation online is not campaign-specific. It is a long term goal. What's more, as a business you know your products best and have a passion for them. There is also value in your staff having relationships with key online influencers and in employing someone to maintain consistency of approach.

Online PR toolkit

Your website: This might be the first place a potential customer looks. Does it accurately reflect your brand's personality? If you have a news section, is it active? Websites can be incredibly powerful marketing tools.

Your search strategy: Every company should pay attention to its SEO strategy, or it's like having a shop down an alleyway that nobody can find. But positioning your brand at the top of the search results is only half the battle. Your approach to SEO must also link back to creative and relevant content.

Online publications: The online comments sections of trade journals can be a great way of getting your company's voice heard. Understand the online presence of the offline publications that you target.

Blogs and forums: Bloggers may choose to evangelise about your products and services, and their claims can carry more weight than what you might say yourself. Know who the influencers are, and what type of content is driving them. Blogs can be a convenient vehicle for your own thought leadership material too.

Social networks: Many experts agree that LinkedIn is currently the number one community for B2B purposes, but there are numerous others that can be leveraged effectively. Twitter can be used in a number of ways: to offer expertise or market special offers, and as a customer service tool. "Social media sites link in heavy volumes so perform really well in search too," notes Graham Lee, chief executive of Social Media Library.

Email marketing: More traditionally within the marketing department's remit, email is also likely to form a central part of your online PR strategy –

but remember that your overall approach needs to be built around how your audience prefers to receive information and to communicate.

Newswires and online distribution services: Tim Gibbon, director at media consultancy Elemental, points out that online distribution services such as www.sourcewire.com and www.prweb.com can extend the reach of press releases to search engines, news sites, RSS and news readers. While writing press releases tends still to remain in the PR department's domain, it's important to know what is being said. "RSS readers are incredibly helpful to monitor not only targeting online media sites, but also competitor's sites and relevant blogs," he says.

Video and photosharing sites: Video can bring dry B2B topics to life, so YouTube – the second biggest search engine after Google – can be very useful for B2B brands. Photosharing sites like Flickr can also be used for marketing purposes, and sites like SlideShare enable you to upload powerpoint presentations for public consumption. The only limit is your own creativity.

Measurement and monitoring tools: Free and paid-for social media monitoring tools, such as TweetDeck, Seismic Desktop, HootSuite, Radian6 and SM2 can make your life easier. However, a word of warning from Franklin Rae's Turnbull, "I've never found a tool that is as effective as the human brain in feeding back qualitative analysis."

Information portals: Every company should have an entry on Wikipedia. Such sites represent basic building blocks for online PR.

4. Engage with your audience

Ensure the content you produce is appropriate for the channels you are targeting. And remember the fact that you work for a B2B brand does not mean that any collateral that you produce for online PR purposes needs to be dry or 'worthy'. This is something that Adrian Brady, CEO at PR agency Eulogy feels strongly about. "Just because you're appealing to an audience of business travellers, you don't have to be staid and serious and talk about trouser presses," he says.

5. Measure impact

Monitoring tools that are designed to help analyse company reputation online continue to proliferate. Some of these are free, and for many organisations these will be sufficient. Google Analytics and Google Alerts, for example, are a really good start if you want to benchmark perceptions and what people are saying about your brand. There are also benefits to products with added sophistication – the paid-for social media monitoring tools such as Radian6.

Whether or not you choose to part with any of your marketing budget is likely to depend on how extensive your online PR efforts are.

6. Reassess and renew

Update your online PR strategy regularly. Nothing stays the same for long in the digital arena. As Matt McKay, chair of the Chartered Institute of PR's marketing communications group and head of public relations at publisher BioMed Central, points out, "You can't keep doing the same thing forever. One advantage of online methods is that they allow you to adapt your approach."

The PR space has been transformed already, but in 10 years it will no doubt look very different. We're by no means at the final destination yet, and the longer you wait to get involved, the further behind you will be.