



ONLINE PR:

WHEN 'FLUFFY' MET 'TECHIE'

The digital revolution is transforming the role of PR in B2B marketing – long labelled by cynics as the ‘fluffy’ and unmeasurable part of the marketing mix. **Lucy Fisher** examines the role and potential of online PR techniques and looks at how it is fast becoming a critical technique

The PR industry has been much denigrated; characterised by endless quaffing of champagne, shameless schmoozing and ‘spin-doctoring’. But the digital revolution is making the job of your average PR professional increasingly challenging – and it’s a role which is far removed from this caricature.

In this new world of ‘PR 2.0’, those involved in the industry know that, by using even the most rudimentary of web analytics tools, it should be possible to track the success – or otherwise – of a digital campaign – certainly more than has ever been possible with traditional offline media. What’s more, although stories still jostle for coverage and the prime position online, there are infinite possibilities on the worldwide web – and there’s enough space for everyone to join the party.

Everything moves faster too, given that a story can be posted online within minutes. This is undoubtedly a blessing, but will make the life of most public relations professionals busier – as Kate Williams, a director at Headstream PR, knows only too well. “Our lead times have disappeared. We can’t go out and drink champagne and be out of the office all day,” she jokes.

Many experts, however, believe that a precise definition of online or digital PR is hard to pin down. Lisa Myers, director at SEO consultancy Verve Search, puts this down – in part – to the fact that many marketers think “too much in terms of ‘tools’ rather than overall strategy.”

“The big confusion comes from the fact that people often think it’s just using the tools such as Facebook or Twitter,” she says. “That’s just holding the hammer. It doesn’t make you a carpenter.”

New skills

Moreover, digital PR involves a different skill-set to that of traditional PR. “It’s not about distributing press releases online. That’s missing the point,” adds Myers. “That’s just mail distribution.”

Indeed, digital PR is a complex discipline that involves promoting a brand’s message or ‘voice’ using a variety of online vehicles – such as social media and networking sites like LinkedIn or Xing; online versions of magazines or newspapers; special interest sites; widgets or viral elements. Alongside all of this, it’s key to maintain a brand’s position in the search rankings with the use of well-honed

SEO strategies and by monitoring reputation online.

But, like offline PR, online PR is ultimately about sharing content and ideas. Business brands are able to become thought leaders by creating a blog. And this can open doors, since decision-makers in business want as much knowledge as possible.

Myers believes that social media for B2B brands can be particularly powerful, “because they’ve always been perceived as boring.”

And this kind of digital marketing can have a ripple effect. Michael Cooper, online PR business manager at PR consultancy Amaze, uses futures exchange CME Group, as an example of a B2B brand that has used online PR effectively. “It used Twitter feeds to demonstrate its authority on the stock market. It has around 350,000 followers now,” he says.

He’s also been impressed by Maritime-specialist ShipServ, which developed a blog, viral video elements and a community on LinkedIn for the maritime B2B industry. “More than 300 people joined the network,” he says. “They now have a captive audience and can get feedback from these people.”

B2B brands tend to be more hesitant than their B2C cousins, say industry insiders. “Some are stuck in an old-school frame of mind,” explains Melanie Seasons, account manager at Onlinefire, part of the Eulogy Group.

This may be in no small part because the current landscape can be a confusing one for marketers – with digital agencies



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Melanie Seasons, account manager, Onlinefire

ONLINE PR: HINTS AND TIPS

- **Don’t jump on the bandwagon** without truly understanding what you are trying to achieve.
- **Do immerse yourself** in digital developments and don’t be held back by fear.
- **Do locate your audience** and communicate authentically – or you’ll do more harm than good.
- **Do use tools such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook** strategically – don’t just sign up and sit back.
- **Remember concept and content is key:** position your brand as a thought leader.
- **Do measure your reputation online:** drill down using tracking or analytics tools
- **Don’t just talk.** Listen.
- **Do ask questions.** Challenge your agency.

and PR consultancies vying for the same work and each claiming to be better equipped than the other. “SEO agencies are saying, ‘Yes, we do PR!’ And online PR professionals are saying, ‘Yes, we do SEO!’” adds Seasons. Certainly the line between what PR and digital marketing companies do has become very blurred.

“It’s one thing to say you can do something and quite another to pull off a successful campaign,” she warns.

A converged world

But one thing’s for sure: digital PR and social media are not going away. There’s still a place for traditional PR but it’s very much alongside digital PR – which is likely to increase in importance as more and more publications move online.

“We’re now in a converged world – digital and traditional sit alongside each other,” says Sarah Evans-Toyne, vice chairman of industry trade body PRCA’s digital group and director of digital strategy at PR agency, Broadgate. “Integrating both can create massive impact.”

Evans-Toyne describes the state of her profession thus: “We’re tacticians, not technicians – though we’re having to become technicians.” Industry pundits agree that those who don’t hone their skills in the online space are likely to face a difficult future.

As the discipline of digital PR matures, insiders predict that both search and PR



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Michael Cooper, online PR business manager, Amaze

agencies will continue to exist side-by-side, but that more partnerships will form between SEO specialists and communications experts. Gifford Morley-Fletcher, director of strategy & inbound marketing at Base One, is one. “Both sides are contributing. One has a positive effect on the other. But the offline PR industry is going to get smaller – there will be fewer publications,” he says.

Online, however, the proliferation of publishers with digital offerings shows no sign of slowing down – even if their print counterparts are shutting up shop. It’s imperative to have a solid understanding of the various media brands now as Rob Brown, managing director at PR agency Staniforth, points out. “It’s become more complicated. When I started, people could always name their local paper, and they’d know the trade sector – as there would only be about three or four titles.”

The current situation is no longer this straightforward. Online communities and networking sites are on the rise, on a daily basis – and it can be tricky to separate the wheat from the chaff and to keep up with the latest developments.

Former PR professional James Fitzgerald

Case study: Brother

Office technology manufacturer, Brother, is rolling out a strategic online PR programme over the coming months. Sales and marketing director, Phil Jones, says that he’s been exploring online PR techniques as a first step, “before taking the leap as a brand.”

“I’m interested in how our market is dividing itself up into interest and networking groups,” he says. “It’s about reaching out with authenticity. It’s not so much about interruptive techniques anymore.”

He’s been impressed by the effect that a presence on Twitter can have on blog traffic. As a prolific blogger himself, Jones says that he’ll definitely be exploring this interplay for Brother as a brand.

He plans to appear as a guest blogger under his own name. “People don’t want faceless brands,” he says. “Communities are picky. The moment they smell a rat, you’ll be deserted.”

Jones requested that Brother’s PR agency, Citypress, work with the brand to revamp its route to market, taking a step away from the traditional PR model as part of this. “We’re learning together,” he says. As a result of moving work online, he says the fee has reduced by 10 per cent.

Despite being pleased with progress, Jones adds, “It always feels to me that no-one’s grabbed the ‘online PR’ mantle properly. Traditional agencies haven’t jumped in 100 per cent. They regard it as a bit disruptive.”

has set up Social Media Library in order to help brands and agencies navigate the maze. He claims that, within the marketing mix, the PR industry is very well suited to providing the ‘online PR’ element of campaigns – which is often interchangeably termed the ‘social media’ element.

“But the PR industry has been too hesitant and it’s in danger of missing the boat,” he says. “Up until this year it’s been quite slow to pick up the mantle.”

Missing the digital boat

Many experts agree that – despite the obvious opportunities that have presented themselves online – both PR agencies and B2B marketers have generally been reluctant – or at best hesitant – when it comes to embracing the digital possibilities. This is due to nervousness and old-school thinking, they say.

“I think for some PR practitioners there’s a fear factor when it comes to embracing new technologies. Some influential voices from the PR industry have had to raise awareness,” says Cooper.

The main problem the PR industry has is educating clients about online PR and what it delivers versus what digital marketing and

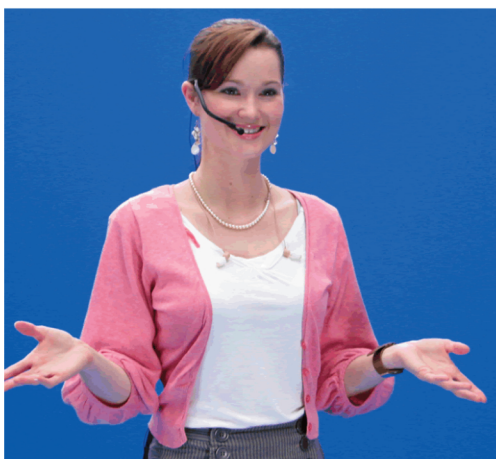


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media agencies say it is, says Lara Leventhal, managing director of Eulogy. “We need to shout louder about the work we are doing, be proud of it and inhabit the space in which we naturally belong.”

Likewise, B2B brands need to ensure they have a noticeable presence online rather than lurk in the shadows. There are some easy wins to be had. If they don’t take them, companies risk being left behind.



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