

The Best Approach to PR Is an Integrated One

By Eileen P. Monesson

The Internet has changed the role of public relations (PR). Traditionally, the job of the PR professional in an accounting firm was to pitch articles to the media, with the goal of influencing the opinion of a firm's stakeholders (*i.e.*, clients, shareholders, employees, the community, or anyone else with a vested interest). The PR executive, either an internal staff member or outside agency, used his or her media connections to relate a well-crafted story in the press from the firm's point of view. PR was primarily a one-way street. The firm would develop the message, send out a press release, hold a press conference, or initiate a direct media-outreach program to announce a new service, company, partner initiative, or news of the firm's charitable efforts.

Value of social media

The emergence of social media has changed how firm information is provided and disseminated. Anyone—clients, employees, competitors, or the media now has the ability to tell a firm's story.

This is why the PR function is more important today than ever before. The explosion of consumer engagement, the collapse of trust in major institutions, and the evolving needs and concerns of corporate America, as well as consumers, have contributed to making PR vital to every firm. According to Deirdre Breakenridge, Chief Executive Officer of Pure Performance Communications and the author of *PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK IN PUBLIC RELATIONS, PR 2.0: NEW MEDIA, NEW TOOLS, NEW AUDIENCES, THE NEW PR TOOLKIT, and CYBERBRANDING: BRAND BUILDING IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY*:

PR professionals realized, in order for their brands to capture attention, they had to create much more compelling and relevant stories, develop content to spark passion and emotion, and share information that would solve an issue or help someone make a decision. Consumers are no longer willing to accept "spammy" messages from their brands, but demand valuable information from people (the humans behind the corporate walls).

A firm can use the power of social media and PR to drive its brand. Social media, if used correctly, can enhance a firm's position as a thought leader, which is incredibly important to any professional service provider. Clients purchase a firm's expertise and want assurance that its partners and staff are thoroughly knowledgeable in a particular area. The Internet allows prospective clients to research and validate a firm's knowledge base and reputation before scheduling a meeting with its staff. Presenting information of value on a firm website, LinkedIn and Facebook profiles, and blog can help convert a prospect into a client before a first meeting.

The importance of effective communications is more significant in today's integrated media environment. A firm must be strategic about its participation in social media. Blogs need to have a centralized theme, tweets should express a valid point of view, and posts on LinkedIn or Facebook should present information of value to the reader. In the social universe, the message is more important than the number of followers or "likes." If a firm is not communicating its key message, then the social media effort is a waste of time. Readers are interested in obtaining useful, valuable information that will assist them in problem-solving and reaching their goals. Firms should post information that assists readers in overcoming challenges, saving money on taxes, and increasing their revenue.

Value of traditional media

Even with all of the hype around social media, there is still a valuable role for traditional media in PR for the following reasons:

1. *Traditional media is a recognizable brand.* Everyone is familiar with well-respected media brands, such as ACCOUNTING TODAY, the WALL STREET JOURNAL, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW, and CNN news. However, people may not be as familiar with a blog to which you contributed information or posted a comment.
2. *Traditional media gives you credibility and celebrity status.* Having an article published in any of the above publi-

cations or being on CNN makes you a subject-matter expert and authority. “Blogs and bloggers have become a trusted source of news and information for many. Some bloggers have the same authority and clout as a NEW YORK TIMES writer or a WALL STREET JOURNAL reporter where others do not,” adds Breakenridge.

3. *Social media feeds on traditional media.* Bloggers frequently comment on stories featured in traditional media. If you land an interview on a newscast, you also are likely to catch the attention of social media. Furthermore, you can use the newscast or story to post on your blog, YouTube channel, website, and social networks. In addition, you can tweet about the newscast or issue a press release to drive traffic to your website.
4. *Traditional media is also online.* Newscasts are streamed on their websites and articles are included in email news briefs, blogs, and social networking profiles. This increases the size of the audience and the reach of the piece, and will also increase your amount of exposure.

Social and traditional media: An integrated approach

To be successful with any PR or marketing campaign, a firm needs to take an integrated approach. It is not enough to focus solely on traditional or social media. A forward-thinking firm will develop a program that embraces both. For example, a firm might develop a package of services called On Point Audit⁺. The package could include:

- audit;
- financial benchmarks;
- vital signs comparing the client’s financials to similar companies in the same geographic market;
- industry trends;
- economic forecasts;
- recommendations on market opportunities;
- current valuation; and
- CEO/CFO briefing.

The firm could develop a PR and marketing campaign to engage prospects in the value of the package. This would include all of the traditional marketing collateral, as well as a press release announcing the new service issued directly to media contacts, as well as through online channels (e.g., PRWeb, PRZoom, PR-Log, or PitchEngine). A Web page could then feature the service’s benefits to clients that includes a video and case study on how a client expanded its business and

increased profits as a result of learning valuable information from the On Point Audit⁺, and an email blast could be sent to prospects and clients inviting them to download the case study and view the video. In addition, the firm could do the following:

- write a by-line article on how clients are benefiting from the new service;
- have a three-minute spot on a business news program that is also streamed online;
- tweet about the value clients received as a result of the service;
- develop a blog and invite clients to comment on their experience; and
- deliver a seminar to a trade association on how the On Point Audit⁺ helped a client grow its business in today’s depressed economy.

Using a combination of traditional and social media will greatly enhance the amount of exposure the firm will receive, while establishing its unique selling position.

It is a buyer’s market

RainToday.com published the results of its survey: “How Clients Buy: 2009 Benchmark Report on Professional Services Marketing & Selling from the Client Perspective.” In the report, *RainToday.com* identifies the following four main factors in a buyer’s decision to hire a service provider:

1. *90 percent:* The overall value the provider can deliver;
2. *88 percent:* The company’s experience in specific areas where the prospect has needs;
3. *86 percent:* The overall costs or fees; and
4. *83 percent:* The company’s experience in the prospect’s industry/business.

The bottom line is that it is a buyer’s market, and the Internet has empowered clients to become educated about what a firm can offer and its areas of expertise before engaging a professional. Firms that are proactive and embrace everything that technology can provide will be better positioned to win new business opportunities.

Strong PR professionals and marketers know the importance of demonstrating a high level of knowledge in a specific industry niche or service area. They will invest the time to ensure that the firm communicates its knowledge in seminars, articles, whitepapers, and case studies, as well as on social media channels. These

tools showcase the value that the firm can bring to a relationship. PR is the most cost-effective way to communicate that message to a broad audience.

The goal of social media is to achieve earned influence. PR professionals know when, where, and how to communicate the firm's message, as well as how to position the firm as a thought leader. According to Breakenridge:

A firm's communications team must always remember that brand communications will go through different channels to reach people where they congregate and the way they want to receive information. If you have clients, for example, who rely on your monthly e-newsletter for tax updates, and they have provided you with positive feedback about your communications approach, then why would you stop sending information to them this way? You wouldn't stop. The key to social media is to understand where your clients and stakeholders enjoy interacting with you, and how they want you to communicate with them. As a part of your strategy and planning, you need to uncover which channels provide clients with the most meaningful engagement and overall best experience with your firm.

Measuring success of brand visibility

The end result of a PR campaign is determined by the return on the investment (ROI) and value it brings to the firm. ROI is often difficult, but not impossible, to determine. Firms should define benchmarks, such as the number of new clients, increase in client retention, percentage of satisfied clients, increase in website traffic, and number of comments on a blog post, and measure these benchmarks over time. The rise of social media and search engine optimization (SEO) metrics have convinced some partners that brand visibility is measured solely by the numbers. Although the numbers are a good tool to measure the success of a PR or marketing campaign, proper positioning and the quality and targeting of the message is of paramount importance. PR builds on the firm's goodwill, and public confidence in a brand is a measure of goodwill. Quantifying public confidence

can be better accomplished through surveys, media tone analysis, market penetration, and brand buzz.

Management should track the number of hours contributed to the PR campaign by the partners, managers, and staff, as well as the hours invested by the PR and/or marketing team. PR professionals can add more value to the firm by developing strong value-based messages, ghost-writing articles or blogs under the guidance of partners, and tweeting for the professional team. This will reduce the cost of developing these materials and allow accountants to spend more time on billable work.

Online and mobile applications provide many new opportunities for firms to communicate with the public. Blogs, tweets, byline articles, and webinars all serve to enrich a firm's reputation. Quality content builds a firm's brand. A PR professional with expertise in social media can be valuable to a firm, as the professional can develop a strategic online communications plan to manage and enhance the firm's brand and reputation. In addition, he or she will find the right avenues for the firm's partners to demonstrate the value and knowledge they can bring to a relationship. Value drives business. Communicating value through traditional and social media channels will increase the number of business opportunities presented to the firm. Managing the process and communicating the right message through the best media channels is essential.

Of note

Deirdre Breakenridge's new book *SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: EIGHT NEW PRACTICES FOR THE PR PROFESSIONAL* is expected to be published in February/March 2012. Breakenridge can be contacted at 201-321-6394 or deirdre@pureperformancecomm.com.

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