

New media and the Age of Engage:

How to harness the power of the new
Internet to move your media relations
program forward

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In the good ol' days, companies put their energies into a customized website. It was a static world, where customers, prospects, friends and foes could search for the company site, go there, and read everything the company wanted them to know. That was "being on the Internet" in the not-so-long ago good ol' days.

We're beyond the good ol' days. We're currently in the midst of a major transformation that has turned the Internet from a static place to go and get information to an interactive tool where everyone has a voice. It's a live web that is organically growing. The traditional media giants – whether you define them as the New York Times or MSNBC – no longer own the Web. In fact, traditional daily newspapers are quickly going away. There are 174 fewer daily newspapers today in the United States than there were in 1990, with more failing each year. You heard the recent news that the Seattle Post-Intelligencer will cease publication as a print product by March 2009 unless it finds a buyer (an unlikely scenario). Late last year the Chicago Tribune filed for bankruptcy protection. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Such "mass media" publications no longer hold the publishing key. They are merely morsels in the minestrone soup of publishers large and small – each with the tools available to put his or her message online and contribute to the message of everyone else who is out there. Anyone can comment, add to and join in the discussion. Anyone has the opportunity to take control. Companies that stay on the sidelines will continue to lose ground and will risk letting others shape their image – in a way they probably don't want.

The good news: Companies that want to get their message to the mass market no longer have to rely on the traditional media to do so. Sure, the traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television), still have their role. But increasingly, that role is diminishing as the Internet transforms and younger information seekers get more of their information from the Internet.

A report by the Newspaper Association of America found that from 1972 to 1998, the percentage of people age 30-to-39 who read a paper every day dropped from 73 to 30 percent. And from 1997 to 2000, the percentage of 18-to-24-year-olds who say they read yesterday's newspaper dropped by 14 percent. We're already nine years beyond that study and the numbers are only getting worse.

"The only conclusion to be reached after noting these trends is that no future generation of new consumers will fit earlier profiles since their expectations and their habits have changed forever—and technology is a big part of the reason why," writes media observer Merrill Brown, reporting for Carnegie Corp. of New York in a 2004 report on the future of news.

Editors from publications large and small are urging public relations professionals and publicists to think "web first." And they don't just want words. They want sound and video too.

With traditional media losing ground to the Internet, it's clear that the Internet is the place to get out your corporate message and to shape and control your image. In today's ever-expanding Internet world, it is imperative that companies manage their online presence – their appearance, reputation and the impression they make online, which often will be their customers' first point of contact.

A website is no longer enough. Today's online presentation includes the use of blogs, social and business networks, podcasts and videos.

These so-called "social networks" and blogs are another way to communicate with clients and employees. And it's a way for your customers to communicate about you to each other. It's almost assured that businesses that currently do not use these forms of communication will eventually do so – it's just a matter of time. And the longer a company takes to join these online forums, the more "behind the times" it will appear. This is definitely not the image most companies want to project.

Here is a summary of what the new Internet entails, with definitions of the tools you'll need to play in this space: blogs, social networks and podcasts.

BLOGS

- Blogs are a convenient way to keep potential clients and business partners apprised of what's new with your business. Unlike press releases and other traditional corporate communications, which have a formal style and tone, and are generally heavily vetted, blog entries are more conversational and direct. This allows for what media refer to as "transparency" -- letting people see directly into your business, rather than showing them a carefully staged facade.
- Blogs are "stickier" than traditional communications. Because they are generally updated more frequently, and can be subscribed to (via email notifications and services like RSS - Rich Site Summary – a technology that allows you to notify interested parties when your website has been updated), your clients and partners feel more involved, and are more likely to visit frequently to see what you are up to.
- Blogs allow for a richer overall corporate message. Press releases and other traditional media tend to focus tightly on corporate initiatives. But sometimes the totality of a company's story is better told between the lines. It's easier to stray

from the corporate script in a blog posting. For example, a corporate executive might talk about a favorite hobby in a blog post, and use it as an analogy for a problem being worked on at the office. This richness of message might be much more meaningful to a potential client than a dry, traditional press release discussing the same initiative.

- Blogs are great for raising a business's online profile. Google (and other search engines) indexes blog sites frequently, and tends to credit regularly updated blogs with a higher "page rank," Google's stock in trade. The higher your page rank, the higher up in the search results your site will be. (Imagine customers Googling a specialist for a particular medical condition and the first name that pops up is your organization's physicians. Or, let's say a customer Googles a tax question and the answer is posted on your website. Such results could have a significant impact on your organization's image and level of recognition. See a case study on blogging and search engine impact: <http://entrepreneurs.about.com/cs/marketing/a/blogvisibility.htm>).
- Everybody's doin' it. This might seem a minor consideration, but it's actually quite important. Many consumers, particularly younger ones, have come to expect the content richness and intimacy afforded by blogs, and a business will risk appearing stodgy or guarded if it doesn't have a blog component on its site.
- Most blogs offer feedback mechanisms or discussion boards, offering a great way for businesses to gather real-world feedback from clients and potential clients.
- It's true that you risk having a negative post on your blog. But the poster would be negative anyway. You can't control negative feedback on a blog. A blog allows customers to have freeform conversations. If they're frustrated with you, you need to know that. Make sure people register before they comment on your blog so you have their e-mail address and can respond to them. If negative comments aren't happening on your blog, they're happening on other blogs. This way you can respond to them.
- Blogs are fun, and can be a great outlet for employees, especially those who already live in the blogosphere and perhaps are blogging on their own about something else.
- Nuts & bolts of blogs: It's easy to blog. You can blog for free with companies like Blogger.com and Blogspot.com. You can incorporate a blog on your website or link to it from your website or simply blog separately.
- More info: <http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/blogarticles/f/whyblog.htm>
- More info: <http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/blogarticles/f/blogdownside.htm>

You can hire a blogger or blog editor. You can hire Flash Media Services to do this for you.

A note about Twitter: This is a "microblog" site that has a 140-character limit per post. People are supposed to use it to disclose the minutiae of their day from moment to moment. Twitter is gaining traction among some businesses. But tread carefully; while some businesses love this tool and have found ways to use it to their advantage, others are very put off by it.

SOCIAL AND BUSINESS NETWORKING SITES

These are sites, like Facebook, MySpace, Linked In, and Biznik, among others, that provide online communities for you to join. Facebook and MySpace were originally designed for college students. But they are now open to everybody and are becoming so mainstream that many businesses have a presence there. In fact, those who live in the Facebook and MySpace world may look up a business or business professional there first before searching in the broader Internet. LinkedIn and Biznik are for businesses and business professionals and offer a terrific way to network and get recognized on the Internet.

Face Book:

Allows you to establish a profile and register your company. On this site you can also create events and invite people to participate. Time it takes to establish account: 3 minutes

Some benefits of using Facebook for businesses (excerpted from www.SEO-space.blogspot.com):

- Branding – Facebook can be a great resource for generating brand awareness. Facebook is becoming popular among various age demographics and can be a great interception point for building your relationship with your consumers and prospects.
- Customer Engagement – Using Facebook applications can be a great way to communicate promotions, contest and events.
- Direct Web Traffic - Facebook can act as a portal point for driving traffic to your site and other online properties.
- Reputation Management - can be a useful tool for seeing what users are saying about you and your brand. In addition, Facebook profiles can now be indexed in the search results and can provide another favorable listing in the organic search results of the engines.
- New Customer Acquisition – Facebook provides an opportunity to find consumers you may have not otherwise discovered.
- Client Retention - provides another potential interception point to build the relationship with your consumer.
- Access to the social world and its inherent value - aka the “cool factor.” You never know who is using Facebook. Consider the following scenario: a potential prospect could be doing research on your brand or organization and may use Facebook to see if you have a presence there. Then she sees that you have a Facebook profile and sees several positive posts about your brand. This in turn can shape her sphere of influence and could end up being one of many deciding factors as to why the prospect selects you over another vendor. The perception that Facebook is “IN” and the fact that you are using this tool could help influence her perception of your brand. In fact, many people (generally age 30 and younger) “live” in Facebook and may use it as a first place to find a service or product they are looking for. If you’re there, you’re in. If you’re absent,

you could be out. The fact remains that Facebook continues to gain popularity and it is not going away anytime soon.

- The Viral Effect - Take word of mouth to a whole new level. Nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd... Facebook is attracting quite a crowd.
- Feedback Mechanism - Using Facebook and the various applications available can help you understand consumer behavior based on the sharing of content and commentary on the social networking site.
- Here is an example of how the Mayo Clinic uses Facebook:
<http://tinyurl.com/9megqh>

MySpace:

Similar to FaceBook, MySpace can provide another way for businesses to market themselves. Here's a good summary of MySpace benefits from Ezine Articles "Myspace your business, the benefits of creating a Myspace page for your business":

- Company Overview: Use your MySpace page to provide an overview of your company. List your services and explain in detail how you can benefit your target audience. Also, use your logo as your default portfolio image. This way, when people come to your MySpace page it will be the first thing they see. When adding friends, it will also be the image that is displayed on your friends' MySpace page. This will allow you to specify your own corporate colors so you can truly customize the presence of your MySpace page for your business. By implementing these ideas, you will instantly begin to build brand awareness to a community of more than 100 million registered members and growing.
- Pictures: Depending on your type of business, you can use the picture upload for something that suits yours. For example, if you're a small business you can upload pictures of your employees, add images of coupons for people to download, provide a picture of your office, or perhaps a picture of yourself. Whatever pictures you decide to upload, be creative with it. This is just another great way for users to understand who you are and what you have to offer.
- Companies can also upload videos and post blogs on their MySpace page.

Here's an example of how some companies are using MySpace:

<http://www.allbusiness.com/marketing-advertising/4059959-1.html>

LinkedIn:

LinkedIn was originally created as a networking site for professionals. As this site grows in popularity, it is just a matter of time before clients will be asked by current or former colleagues or other business associates to join in. You, or Flash Media Services, can set up linked in pages for everyone in your business. It would be an asset for you to have their profiles posted sooner rather than later. No one wants to look like they are behind the times; we can help keep their public persona current.

Biznik:

Biznik is an online business networking community for people to build their market share. This is not a place for job seekers but rather a place for businesses and owners to network with others. A range of professionals are represented on this site; marketing and public relations professionals, event planners, dog walkers, real estate brokers, bankers and web designers.

There are three levels of membership; basic (free), active (\$10 per month) and supporting (\$24 per month). The basic level includes a photo, Google Map, member compliments and basic information about your business. You are allowed one url and can send three message a day. With the active membership you have better visibility and higher search results. Your logo can also be included, as well as two urls, on your profile. With the supporting level your profile is placed in the best ranking and you have preferred rotation on the home page. All of your posts include your html signature to drive traffic to your site.

Activity =Visibility. The highest ranking profiles on Biznik are the most active members. If you network with others, send/receive compliments, or post articles, you will receive more clicks.

Flash Media Services can help you write and post articles and how-to tips on Biznik. Articles and tips help to build the reputation of the professional and will increase traffic.

PODCASTS

Podcasts are audio files (MP3 files) that you can post on your website that clients can click on and listen to.

Podcasts can be effective communication tools for businesses and are relatively easy to produce.

Podcasts, like blogs, use RSS (Real Simple Syndication) to syndicate the content. People can subscribe to these Internet "radio" programs and have them automatically downloaded to their computer (and their iPod if they wish) whenever a new program is uploaded.

Why should companies create Podcasts? (from Spinfluence:

<http://spinfluencer.blogspot.com/2006/04/benefits-of-podcasting.html>):

- Allow listeners to time-shift and place-shift media consumption

- 100% efficiency, since episodes are only downloaded by listeners on an opt-in basis
- Easily accessible to a global audience that is not defined by geographic boundaries
- Access to an educated, influential audience with a high disposable income
- Ability to leverage electronic programming without an outside news media filter
- Most cost effective electronic media distribution channel available

Here are some examples of how various businesses could use podcasts:

- A restaurant chef can offer weekly tips or recipes. You don't have to be a celebrity chef with your own television or radio show. You can build your reputation and audience via podcasts.
- A healthcare provider or provider of health insurance can offer health tips, tips for reducing healthcare costs, or healthcare updates. You can have different "channels" relating to various populations or special interest groups. Again, you can build your reputation and audience among interested consumers.
- A bank or financial services firm can offer tips about taxes, finances, saving, or updates on how potential customers and clients can benefit from or position themselves in light of the current economic situation. It's a way for your firm to take the lead and be the expert in this area.

VIDEO

Every day more than 100 million videos are watched on Youtube.com. It's no longer only possible to post words and photos to the Internet, it's now easy to post video. And with more individuals and businesses having access to high-speed Internet, these videos are rivaling television as an information and entertainment medium.

We saw a great example of harnessing the power of video during Barack Obama's presidential campaign. He – and experts he chose to speak on his behalf - used YouTube to explain his positions to audiences at a grassroots level. As president-elect, he's employing the same tactics to tout his economic stimulus package.

The good news is that you don't have to be a professional videographer to shoot and post videos to the Internet. New technology exists to make this relatively easy. Frustrated that the local television station didn't come out to your news conference or your branch opening? No problem. You or Flash Media Services can shoot the video and publish it directly to the Internet. It can reside on your company's website – and on Youtube and other free video hosting sites. Have a new product to demonstrate, but you can't afford a television campaign to show it off? No problem. Simply shoot some

good video and publish it to the Internet yourself. Then start creating the buzz around it with articles, news releases, etc.

The options for video are endless. News clips, speeches or presentations can be edited and posted online. YouTube postings can also be cross-promoted via email, newsletters or company web sites.

In addition, posting video online is a great way to encourage others to pass on your message through viral marketing. Post it to your Facebook page. Send it to friends and colleagues. Grab their attention and let them do the work of passing the word around to their friends and colleagues.

Now what?

There is no doubt, the Internet is changing. The mass media as we've known it in the past is shrinking. But the Internet is booming with publishing opportunities. Now is the time to embrace these changes for your own benefit. How can a public relations/media consulting firm help? These changes don't mean your stories won't be told. It just means that they will be told in different ways through different venues – through self publishing, social networking, podcasting, video posting. It's up to you to take advantage of these changes and not let them pass us by and Flash Media Services can help you do this. Let's continue the conversation to make sure your business stays current and doesn't fall behind in this new media world.