

RACHNA BURMAN'S VIEWS ON THE VALUE OF NEWER MEDIA

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With the advent of new media we will witness a paradigm shift – we will see new ways of looking at news – it may not be the usual press release or event driven communications. The focus will be the actual consumer and news will be (re) defined to understand what the customer is interested in. Is it going to be the regular politics, business or follow-up on lead stories or is it going to be more specific? With the advent of on-line, the customer has the opportunity to tell us what kind of niche information he or she is looking for. That is where public relations will also have to re-define and customise itself.

The challenge will be to look at not only different genre of news but also different web sites and the many, many ways in which these are going to be giving the product (news) to its customers.

...we are not breaking mega stories.

Over several months that I have been dealing with on-line news for Times of India (TOI), I can't say that one sees a great new leap in on-line journalism. It is not that we are breaking mega stories and splashy headlines. However the fact is that the modes of getting through is beginning to get very interesting. Many people who have access to camera footage or to audio bytes can put it on the web directly. The difference here is that earlier when a CEO of a company was interviewed and the interview was recorded, we spent hours trying to edit and make a story. Now, the same audio can be put on-line. In fact, we have begun telling journalists at Times of India to carry their tape recorders when going for an interview and then give us the taped interview for use on-line.

Important for the customer to know that on-line news has been through checks and balances.

It is important for the customer to know that on-line news has been through the usual traditional checks and balances. One criticism faced in the West is that on-line journalism is basically a bunch of young kids who have not been through the grind and do not have seniors seeing the kind of news on the web. This is different here in India. Most media houses that have on-line news sites have taken resources from their print editions.

Let us focus on three sections:

1. Kind of cyber news that one sees today
2. Details of Times group web sites – 13 in all; 4 print related i.e., TOI online, ET online, Filmfare and Femina)
3. With the setting up of web bureaus and desks, how communication practitioners should interact with us to

ensure that the messages are effective, short and snappy.

News web sites by newspapers, magazines or broadcast companies cover different events in different ways.

Different web sites cover mega events and news in different ways. Wire agencies on-line, for example, will score on having extremely fast, reliable and credible headlines that are often in ticker tape format at the top of the home page. Lot of on-line sites of newspapers will have hourly updates. (We at Times of India are not updating hourly as yet, but update five times a day.)

On-line media score on storing photographs, graphics and interactive maps. Magazines that have on-line sites contain well-researched and well-packaged archival material. Other web sites are those by broadcast companies such as BBC or CNN that can cover an event (like the recent Turkish earthquake) in great detail.

Interactive tour of the Turkish earthquake.

The recent unfortunate Turkish earthquake opens our eyes to the different ways in which different sites are handling the same news. One site gave you an interactive tour of one of the completely devastated towns. To give an idea of how the city looked like before the earthquake, the site had superimposed camera footage of some of the residential buildings and areas with maps of what the city had looked earlier. Further, this site took advantage of the fact that it had a broadcasting company as its parent. Camera footage and sound bytes of the current situation were loaded on-line and one could see and hear the rescue operations on the screen – you could hear the sniffer dogs barking and people shouting in the background. 800 million people around the world could see the drama unfold before their eyes.

...will soon happen in Indian reporting too.

In India, however, we are a long way from something like this. We have problems to do with hardware, matching software and the integration of multimedia options to get a similar effect. However, these are possibilities that will happen eventually.

Portals give you different information at one place.

The last category is of portal sites like Yahoo! or Excite or Infoseek. Yahoo! for example will give you access to probably six or seven wires. If you are looking for information on any particular event, then at one particular place you could have five or six different headlines flashing. These sites, which have different parentage, whether independent or those maintained by media houses – wires, magazines, newspapers or broadcast companies – have depth, content, are speedy and are accessible 24 hours a day.

Challenge for the

The challenge for the communication professional is that

communication professional...

whatever news is being given out will have to be customised and tailor-made to the needs of that particular web site. We at Times of India for example, would be looking for depth, but would not like to be inundated with graphics or photographs, however great that may be to use as some archival material for some researcher. Also, each reporter at each of these on-line sites has a clear brief on what the focus is and the way the copy will be written and presented.

TOI has 13 web sites...shovel ware is changing.

The Times of India group has 13 web sites and four of these are print led – TOI, ET, Femina and Filmfare. Till some time back this was what is basically known as shovel ware, i.e. whatever stories are appearing in the print edition are shoveled on to on-line editions. Commands given at the desk would automatically upload stories to the on-line editions. That is changing. Times of India has a fifth site indiatimes.com that is a portal site that contains India specific information. The site offers interactivity through chat rooms, opinion polls, etc. The other sites are very niche sites to do with property, education, careers and music. Much of it is likely to expand when we have better bandwidth and other technical problems are taken care of.

165 million hits a month...60 per cent to TOI on-line.

Aggregate reach of Times group web sites for a month which have been averaged out for the last three months stand at: 165 million hits a month; 28 million page impressions and 6 million user sessions. 60 per cent of the hits are going to Times of India on-line. A certain percentage is going to ET on-line but much of the balance is going to indiatimes.com. The numbers for that are likely to grow. Another interesting factor is that we have a 60:40 ratio between people accessing our sites outside of India and those in India. For indiatimes.com the 60:40 ratio is very quickly becoming a 50:50 ratio. This obviously showed that we in India lacked some portal interface – they needed something customised and Indian.

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Lot of space in cyber space...not true!

Less is more.

The data we load onto our sites is fairly heavy. If we look at all our web sites then we are talking about 430 GB. There is a myth that there is a lot of space in cyber space – which is not really true. When it comes to TOI on-line, we load about 2.5MB of matter every night, though it should not exceed about 2MB. The critical point here is that if we were to receive 2-3 pages of press release with the assumption that it may get on-line in toto, then that is not true. It has to be short and punchy – we have to look at our limit of 2-2.5MB that we would be loading. There is a basic truth in the cliché “less is more”, especially when it comes to on-line bureaus.

The news sent to web bureaus must be prioritised and relevant...

We are at the beginning of setting up web bureaus and desks. Therefore, it is important to prioritise and send relevant information only. The attitude should not be that of it's easier to get it on-line – that's not true.

On-line journalism in India is in its infancy.

On-line journalism is in its infancy. However, the perception that it is not being monitored within the journalistic establishments is incorrect. Compared to the US where the fear often is that on-line journalism will not have the traditional 'media gatekeepers', the situation in India will not be like that.

Media gatekeepers in India will be there.

This is a media that has enormous possibilities and is interactive, which no other media is. We are looking at an interactive form of information gathering and dissemination. Cyber news is going to be customer driven. If I have 20 million hits on indiatimes.com, they are also going to be sending me feedback saying that they are not interested in the lead and second lead that we are pasting on right now. People will be asking for more and more niche information. The customer may not be interested in what we think is news! This will open up a lot of questions for companies and corporate communicators who will be instrumental in supplying this information.

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QUESTION AND ANSWER

On the content of online publications

Ms. Burman: One has to also watch out for 'news you can use' opportunities with customers of the web. For example when the last date for filing tax returns was approaching, indiatimes.com had started the ET Tax Centre. We had tax experts online to answer queries related to the topic.

Demographics of the 4 lac Indian Internet subscribers

Ms. Burman replied and said that the TOI was currently involved in the process of understanding the demographics. However, one obvious factor is that access to Internet requires hardware and software, which classifies these people automatically into the sec A category. What was also found was that larger numbers of people were accessing the Internet from their offices than from their homes. During live chats, at least 300-350 people were chatting during office hours. The moment the chat took place after 7.30 p.m. this number dropped almost by 30 per cent. Also, within those offices, a lot many people happened to be in the infotech

industry. An increasing number of web sites, especially cyber news based web sites are going to be having home pages dedicated to the infotech industry. You have a very well informed captive audience that is ever so hungry for news and current information. Also, the IT industry trade publications are mostly monthly, which is not fast enough for this industry.

Web sites where corporates can advertise

Ms. Burman: In TOI we have broken up into niche segments and will be breaking them further. For example, we have teentimes that is a site dedicated to the teenager, then we have something on property, careers, employment etc. These are not channels on a home page but are different sites. We already have different kinds of advertising on each of these web sites.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Rachna Burman, Chief of Business News, Times of India, at PR Pundit's workshop – Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)