
NEWER MEDIA TOOLS

The Power of the Net

In 1997, somebody posted a message to several Usenet newsgroups that criticised fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger. The post claimed that Hilfiger had appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, where he had used racially charged language and said that, had he known members of certain racial groups would like his clothing so much, he would not have made them so nice. The message went on to report that Winfrey subsequently threw Hilfiger off her show.

Outraged participants in the newsgroups copied the message, cross-posting it to other groups and e-mailing it to lists of friends. In short order, the story became accepted as a fact. The only problem was that it was not true. Not only had Hilfiger not used the offensive words, he had never even appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

But it was too late: The damage was done as soon as the story became part of the lore of the Net. Months after Hilfiger's organisation undertook efforts to disabuse the public of the story, it could be found on Web sites, which exhorted visitors to boycott Hilfiger products.

Introduction

The press is not only one of the most important groups with which an organisation must communicate, it is also one of the easiest groups to apply to the Internet. Is an effort to target media on the Net worthwhile? After all, how many reporters actually use the Internet, and to what extent? Results from a recently conducted study called "Media in Cyberspace," quantifying the print media's growing reliance on the Internet to do its job showed that the most important thing to know about newspaper reporters is that they are online. The second most important thing to know is that the Internet while dramatically affecting the way reporters go about doing their job has not altered the principles of good reporting. While there is little doubt that the immediacy of the web threatens to make any other form of communication seem almost obsolete, the

Different types of audiences must address a wide variety of constituent audiences, but they share the press in common

penetration of Internet services has been relatively slow amongst media in India. Many corporations have begun to include web sites and other new media vehicles in their outreach programs. However, in their rush to go on-line, they may not have paid adequate attention as to how the media and other key audiences are utilising these vehicles.

The Internet and PR – Communicating in the Information Economy

The Internet represents one of the most important tools ever employed in the practice of public relations. Using it to its best advantage, however, requires strategic thinking about how to apply the Net to communication efforts. Communication professionals need to understand what the medium does best and what it doesn't do so well, then integrate it into comprehensive efforts that capitalize on the spectrum of possibilities it presents.

Much of the Net's potential remains to be established, but so far, the Internet has proven itself adept at a number of applications - applications with which the more traditional tools of public relations cannot compete. Unfortunately, we haven't seen many of these capabilities applied to online public relations so far. Rather, the Net has served as little more than an additional publishing vehicle. If someone justifies it as a communications tool, it's usually because it represents a cheap way to get your message out via broadcast channels.

This is not a huge surprise, considering the technology-adoption curve. This curve suggests that the first uses to which any new technology are put duplicate the functions of existing technology. Only after we grow accustomed to using the new technology for these old uses, do we begin to think outside the box and develop new applications that break through our previous limitations. The Internet is experiencing the same phenomenon. A number of conditions need to be met before the Net becomes a tool for more than publishing and broadcasting - the two existing applications that have been applied to the Internet so far. Among these conditions are:

- **More people online.** Right now, only about 20 percent of the U.S. population is online, and significantly less of the worldwide community. Only 0.2 per cent of India's population is online. As per a research conducted by IMA in 1999, Internet usage among journalists was as follows:
 - 62 per cent of the journalists believe that the Internet has already had a major impact; while 38 per cent of the journalists believe it has had some impact now.
 - In two years, Internet will transform the way journalists access information, say 66 per cent of the respondents. 34 per cent believe that it will have a major impact in times to come.

In discussing how the Internet is transforming journalism, one respondent said, *"One frequently gets onto the net to get background information on a company or retrieve some archival data. Also, to some extent, Internet has helped eliminate hoarding heaps of paper and documents- all you need is a*

precise address, and the inclination. As for the future, the time will come when we will realise how best to use Internet, and then all other communication tools will become redundant.”

- **Ease of use.** You might think the point-and-click nature of the World Wide Web is simple enough, but it's still confusing for a lot of people. Besides, just getting onto the Web can present the average person with a technological challenge.
- **Speed.** The critics don't call it the World Wide Wait for nothing. Forget the fact that people used to wait until 6 P.M. for the evening news and an entire day for the newspaper to show up. The two or three minutes it takes for some Web pages to appear is more than many people can stand. Download times of several hours for files are intolerable.
- **Convergence.** OK, so you're on the Web. You find something interesting. You want to act on it. But before the Net can be fully utilized, all the media need to be available on a common interface with the degree of quality to which we have become accustomed on the separate channels.

These factors are not science fiction or even distant possibilities. They all are in development now and will most likely be taken for granted in the next few years. As they are happening, and more and more distinct and definable audiences take to the Net, organisations have the opportunity to begin applying the best strategic practices to communicating with strategic audiences online – these include:

- Consumers
- Employees
- The investment community
- The media
- Communities in which organisations do business
- Government
- Activist groups
- Academia

Each of these audiences can be divided into sub-audiences. Included in the investment community, for example, are shareholders, investment analysts, and brokers. The sub-audiences can be further broken down. Among shareholders, there are institutional owners (such as large pension funds) and large individual shareholders. Each audience has different interests and issues - and consequently, different information needs and different reasons for engaging in a dialogue and interacting with the organisation. The same subdivisions can be applied to any audience. Within the media segment, there are print and electronic media; consumer and trade media; daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly publications; general and niche vehicles.

It is almost impossible just to identify every one of those audiences, no less establish and maintain channels of communication with them that meet their needs, and address their continually evolving issues. And what kind of tools

are there that satisfy the demand for two-way, interactive, balanced communications?

The Internet and many of its associated technologies offer a solution to these challenges. Internet for public relations is in its infancy. In fact, the profession's use of the Internet can be better described as embryonic. There are however, some advanced thinkers within the profession who are using the Internet for crisis communications, issues identification & management, and interactive communications. Others are developing electronic newsletters, customizing the delivery of information to target audiences, and applying the Internet and the Web to one-to-one marketing and communication. Still, only a handful of practitioners have advanced to this stage, and even today's leading edge applications barely scratch the surface of the Net's potential.

Most public relations activities online currently are not strategic (that is, they are not aligned with the company's bottom-line strategies). They are not measurable (that is, there is no mechanism for assessing their effectiveness). They are not targetted toward specific audiences or constituencies.

Public relations activities usually are restricted to an archive of press releases, accessible by clicking on a link typically called something like "In the News." Some organisations include speeches. There is virtually nothing on the site that would draw a member of a specific defined constituency to a particular release, speech, etc. And there is even less that help a representative of a constituent audience meet his specific needs. Of course, some organisations are beginning to adopt next-generation approaches to the Internet. They are, for example, using the company's home page to communicate its current most important message or to address an emerging crisis. They are adding position papers to the archives of press releases and speeches. They are providing resources useful to specific audiences. But these companies remain a tiny minority.

Given time, public relations professionals – and those who communicate on behalf of their companies - will embrace the Internet strategically. We have no choice. The Net will become an integrated part of our culture, a routine element of the landscape, and we will incorporate it into our thinking as easily as we do television and video, desktop publishing and audio teleconferencing.

The Internet has changed communication forever.

We are now in a new economy – the '*information economy*' - the successor to the '*industrial economy*'. The first economy of significance in human history was the agricultural economy, whose key production elements were land and labour. When machines began replacing the work of humans a few hundred years ago, the industrial economy was born and capital was added to land and labour. Today, however, all the three primary elements of production – land, labour and capital have been supplanted by information.

The chart given below indicates the characteristics of the industrial economy and the information economy.

Industrial Economy

- Top-down
- Based on quantity
- Batch-processed
- Producer-driven

Information Economy

- Networked
- Based on quality
- Customised
- Customer-driven

A lot of public relations professionals who are firmly grounded in the principles of one-to-many, top-down communication don't want to hear it, but there's no hiding from it: The principles that have guided communication no longer work. They have been replaced by a new set of principles that must be clearly understood before we can begin to take real advantage of the best tool for communicating in this new age.

Web-Based Receiver-Driven Communications

Far too many companies employ the "shovelware" principle, tossing whatever information they already have in other formats onto a Web site and claiming they have established a presence in cyberspace. If you are going to achieve measurable results, you need to plan the kind of material that will satisfy the needs of your audience. The following steps can be used to ensure success:

1. *Identify the target.* Who is the audience?
2. *State your objectives.* Why is your organisation communicating with this audience? What do you want to achieve? How will you know that you have achieved it?
3. *Determine the key messages that must be pushed to the audience.* Clarify top-down messages and identify distribution methods for delivering them (e.g., advertising, direct mail).
4. *Figure out what information audience members are likely to want.* Based on your key messages, and factoring in your knowledge about the audience's interests, list the questions individuals may ask or additional information they may want.
5. *Determine how audience members are likely to seek additional information.* What path could individuals follow to get to the information they want?
6. *Integrate your communications.* Make sure that your initial top down communication includes information about how to obtain additional information and how to engage the organisation and/or other audience members in providing feedback or discussing the issue.

The message and the vehicle used

This is a difficult concept for public relations practitioners to accept, since part of communications training - and one of the most fun parts of doing the job - is selecting media. Of course, the traditional approach to media

If someone wants what she wants when she wants it, the institution had better make sure

selection has not been entirely arbitrary. Each medium selected must be appropriate to both the audience and the message. In earlier days when you were pushing the message to the audience, the range of options was greater. You could send a printed brochure or a videotape with your message imprinted on it, produce billboards, stage a media event that results in television and newspaper coverage, place an article in a magazine, sponsor a promotion, or buy advertising. As long as the audience tuned into the news, opened a newspaper, read the magazine the demographics suggest they read, or got their mail, they saw your message.

better make sure she has access to the vehicle used to make what she wants available. After all, making the information available through means to which she does not have access won't do her any good!

When individuals pull the information they want, they are discarding the bulk of the communications tools thrust at them so that they can dispense with the extra data that constitute overload. Today, you need to make the information available specifically in the media they are most likely to use when they pull information.

Today, the World Wide Web is fast becoming the tool of choice for individuals seeking to retrieve specific information. Accessibility is getting to be less and less of a problem, as Web and e-mail kiosks pop up in airport terminals and hotel lobbies, to say nothing of Internet cafes. In addition, the Web is now a resource common to both business and the public at large.

Case Study: The Pediatric Crohn's and Colitis Association

Michael Thatcher, a graduate student at Brown University's School of Communications had an assignment to create a public relations programme for the Pediatric Crohn's and Colitis Association (PCCA), a six-year-old non-profit organisation for children suffering from bowel and colon diseases. Creating the campaign was not the problem; the problem was the PCCA's limited budget, which prohibited any expenditure for publicity.

The PCCA had never before engaged in any publicity. Nevertheless, as the only organisation dedicated to helping these children and their families, the group wanted to create greater awareness and increase membership. Its member base was predominantly local, and the organisation aspired to become a national resource for its target audience. "Nobody knew who they are or what they do," Thatcher says. Changing that was his assignment.

One of Thatcher's other activities was his work at the Boston University Macintosh Lab, where he noodled around on the Internet. "I picked up on the idea of using the Internet to let people know the PCCA exists," he says. He first probed the World Web using search tools to find sites that featured the words "Crohn's" and "Colitis." He found one page dedicated to the topic that provided links to other resources. Thatcher spoke with the keeper of that page, who agreed to include information about the PCCA among the resources he shared with the world through his site. Thatcher also found four Usenet newsgroups that discussed his topic, along with a listserv mailing list and discussion forums on CompuServe, Prodigy, and America Online.

A strategy developed around Thatcher's discoveries. "By communicating with these various online groups, we get free exposure to a pretargeted audience," he says. "We communicate directly with the individuals we're interested in." Posting consistent message about the PCCA to each of these groups, and participating actively as an association in the discussions, would create a lot of nationwide and even global publicity in very short order.

What about budget? How could the PCCA establish all those connections? Simple. Thatcher started phoning existing members and asking what kind of online services they used. His first success was a member with a Prodigy account who volunteered to feed PCCA communications to the Prodigy discussion group. More phone calls led to more volunteers.

How does a market sample of one work? Using the PCCA's experience, let's imagine a scenario with a woman - let's call her Sally - whose two-year-old daughter was just diagnosed with one of the potentially terminal illnesses the

PCCA addresses. Sally is frightened and confused. But she has access to the Internet through an account with a local Internet Service Provider.

Sally searches the World Wide Web and does some research on her daughter's illness. The Web sites not only refer to the PCCA but also link to Usenet discussion groups where the illnesses are discussed - groups like alt.support.crohns-colitis. She visits that group and posts a message explaining her situation and her fears. Checking back the next day, she finds several responses, including one that reads, "Hi, Sally, My name is Dave. My heart goes out to you. My son suffered from exactly the same illness as your daughter. Thank God I found the PCCA. Here's how they were able to help me,"

In contrast, how would a public relations effort find Sally using traditional methods? You could try to place an article in parenting magazines, then hope that the infinitesimally small percentage of parents who read the magazine *and* have children who contract one of the illnesses actually *remember* reading the article when the illness occurs. You could undertake a direct mail campaign, using mailing list of new patients given by hospitals. You could target pediatricians, heightening their awareness. All of these options are expensive and offer uncertain results.

The method described above - having the information waiting when Sally came looking for it - did not try to identify the target audience, because fundamentally there was no target audience. There was only Sally and here quest for information.

Is this approach effective? Consider that the PCCA, using only the Internet and other online services as a means of attracting a market sample of one, quadrupled its membership in a matter of only a few months.

The Principles of Influencing Audiences Online

Public relations, is all about influence. Why would a company or client pay good money to communicate if it didn't expect to obtain some sort of return on the investment? Organisations are not like the public media; they cannot communicate out of a sense of altruism, then profit by selling space in their communications vehicles to advertisers who want to reach the same audience.

Organisations communicate because they want something from the audience. What they want depends on the audience. They want consumers to buy their products, they want activist groups to leave them alone, they want voters to elect candidates who endorse the company's point of view. They want community members to support the construction of a new plant in their backyard. It all comes down to the same thing: Organisations want to influence the opinions, attitudes, or behaviours of their audiences.

Case Study: Star-Kist

Star-Kist—the world’s largest tuna canner—was among the tuna companies targetted by environmentalists because of the practices of tuna fishermen that resulted in the inadvertent death of dolphins. Environmentalist publicity had increased public awareness of the needless suffering of the dolphins, and a boycott loomed.

The company finally agreed with the PR agency that it should be the first tuna-canning community to announce a dolphin-safe policy—that it would buy tuna only from fishermen who adhered to standards that minimised the risk to dolphins. Star-Kist and the agency met with representatives of key environmental groups, as well as government leaders, before making the announcement. The actual press conference featured not only Star-Kist but also environmental group representatives who lauded the company’s announcement.

The resulting publicity generated nearly a billion impressions in a one-week period. Sales increased proportionate to the outpouring of customer support. The company was able to leverage its leadership on the issue through a variety of efforts, including the development of an in-school educational programme. The approach by Star-Kist helped turn a controversial issue threatening sales and image into a highly positive demonstration of corporate responsibility and leadership that led to improved business and overwhelming customer support.

Corporate Communicators can reach other targetted audiences using the following tools:

E-mail lists: People subscribe to mailing lists when they are so interested in a topic that they are willing to receive a flood of e-mail about it from others who share their passion.

Discussion groups: Also known as forums, newsgroups or bulletin boards are very important to organisations seeking to communicate with and influence audiences in the long run. In newsgroups, individuals seek information from one another, bypassing the mass media they are growing to

distrust more and more. As a result, newsgroups can be an excellent source for identifying and monitoring issues as a sort of ongoing focus group. It is also possible to target messages to members of discussion groups in order to influence them.

Case Study: Slocan Forest Products

Slocan was the target of a hostile takeover bid by Canfor, a larger Canadian forestry company. Slocan opted to fight the takeover and took its campaign to the Internet. The company's chairman, working with a public relations agency, posted messages on discussion groups that dealt with business as well as those that focussed on Canadian political and environmental issues. The chairman gave out his e-mail address and included it on every takeover-related document the company issued.

The company received a flood of responses from each of the company's constituent publics. Shareholders commented that they appreciated the company's presence on the Internet and that information was available directly from the company rather than through the filter of the news media or other sources. Members of the community at large noted that the company's Internet presence suggested that Slocan was a progressive company – more so than Canfor. The discussions heightened awareness of Slocan and its products and the chairman's involvement with the Internet earned some additional publicity in print publications. Employees found their lines of communication opened wider as a result of the publication of the chairman's e-address.

But nowhere was the impact felt more greatly than in the company's government relations efforts. In British Columbia, provincial government approval is required for one forest company to take over another. By stating its position in governmental and environmental discussion groups, Slocan was able to convince many readers that the takeover would be detrimental to public interest. The message spread, in time, influencing the provincial regulatory authorities and the cabinet minister responsible for making the decision. Ultimately, they produced a position paper on corporate concentration and takeovers that helped end the takeover threat.

The Internet consists of tactical tools that allow us to do things like send e-mail, surf the Web, and participate in discussions with anybody who shares our interests. So, what does the Web offer to organisations needing to communicate with their constituent audiences:

It is fast – as soon as you have new information to share, it can be posted. There is no lag in the time it takes to distribute the information. Instead, it is waiting for those who come looking for it the instant you post it.

It is not constrained by space limitations – when you print something, you need to limit the size for a variety of reasons (the expense of printing and distributing the material, measured against the likelihood that the individual members of your various audiences will read a lot of detail that might not be pertinent to them). On the Web, you can provide the basic information up front, then provide links to all manner of related details, allowing those who visit the site to select the information they want to see and discard the rest. Since the space required to store these volumes of information is very cheap, you can archive as much information as you want. The more information you store, the more likely your audiences will be able to find what they are looking for.

Excellent communications and public relations are those that serve to facilitate the relationship between an organisation and its strategic publics. The Internet can play a significant role in this kind of public relations, but generally it has not yet been used to that end. It is important to remember that each of the virtual communities out there in cyberspace – on Usenet, on proprietary services like CompuServe, or on Web sites – represents a potential strategic constituency for your organisation. These audiences can be current customers or prospective customers, critics, members of activist groups, representatives of the media, or members of just about any other strategic audience. Thus the principles of public relations apply to these new communities and each needs to be assessed in terms of its potential impact on the company's relationship with the group.

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