

1 THE 21ST- CENTURY AUDIENCE

- > The business world is faster and less forgiving.
- > The Internet makes PR materials available 24/7.
- > Users' comfort levels with technology still vary.

No one active in public relations since 1995 needs to be reminded how dramatically the profession has been changed. A key question is whether the change has been for the better or for the worse.

It can certainly be argued that the emphasis on speed that has accompanied the spread of the Internet has left us all feeling a little cheated in some ways. Brevity is king. Two-page press releases have been replaced by two-paragraph e-mails aimed at capturing the fleeting attention of overworked journalists, many of whom now serve print and online masters, churning out updates for their Web sites in addition to regular duties for a newspaper, magazine, or broadcast organization. Fewer journalists have time for business lunches, and even phone conversations aimed at uncovering story interests and building relationships seem harder to fit in. The standard question, "Is now a good time to talk?" almost isn't worth asking. "E-mail me" is the new mantra, but breaking through a journalist's e-mail clutter is a challenge unto itself.

The Internet has also fostered a self-serve attitude among journalists, analysts, and other constituents. All of them want immediate access on the Web to the latest information about every aspect of a client—from customer list to the CEO's biography.

This use of the Web helps PR people because our releases and other documents are available 24/7 to journalists around the world who might be interested in our clients, but it afflicts many of us with an unsettling loss of control. In the past, details about upcoming coverage could often be gleaned from journalists who called to request press kits. This interaction often gave us a better chance to influence that coverage in ways beneficial to our clients. Nowadays, we hope that those reading our releases and other materials online will call if they have questions, but we can't be sure that they will, and we end up feeling a little less certain that we know what's coming.

The Internet also has PR people working harder because we're exposed to the public in ways that didn't exist before. Because we're often the only ones whose telephone numbers are listed on a client's Web site, we hear from Internet users about lots of things beyond our control: bad links, unavailable files, or pages that load improperly. Suddenly, public relations is being mistaken for customer service. We're likely to hear from anyone who's had a bad experience with a client—from unhappy customers to disgruntled employees. All of this requires our time in making sure such messages get to the appropriate recipients. We've heard from executives, for example, who have asked their PR agencies to remove their names from the news releases on their company's Web site. One executive, in particular said that listing his contact information on the releases that went out over the wire was fine, but he didn't want any more cell phone calls over the weekend from Web surfers.

We're sure you have many more Internet-inspired headaches that can be added to this list, but none of them can persuade us that the Internet has changed the PR business for the worse. It's been quite an adjustment and an educational process for the PR pros and clients alike. However, we steadfastly

believe that PR professionals are working more efficiently and effectively because of the Internet. It has brought the profession a collection of powerful tools for public relations that promises to become only broader and more useful in the future.

POWERFUL TOOLS

As noted earlier, the simple extension of the business day that the Internet has made possible is an advancement, the impact of which seems impossible to overestimate. Your clients' stories exist on their Web sites, ready for retrieval by anyone who types their name into a search engine. A reporter on a tight deadline who has heard of a client can get a pretty good picture of that company—and possibly include them in his or her copy—regardless of whether he or she is writing in London or Tokyo while the United States sleeps. Similarly, the asynchronous nature of e-mail means that we can communicate about our clients and their brands with people across the street or around the world without wasting hours playing endless games of telephone tag or worrying about timely delivery of press kits.

The Internet is also the most powerful research tool ever invented, offering us the opportunity to quickly assess our clients' positioning in their markets and their competitors. A simple search on Yahoo! Finance can tell us what a competitor has announced and how it's playing in the press. Services like MediaMap, PressAccess, and Bacon's help us keep up with the constantly changing personnel and beat assignments in most newsrooms so that list generation is an easy, accurate, and painless process. Other services like EdCal can tell us of planned stories that might be appropriate for our clients. Innovations like ProfNet have sprung up that enable us to get the top executives of clients listed in databases of experts that reporters often use in their search for sources.

Although many PR professionals still struggle to stock their clients' online pressrooms or to find the right subject line for

an e-mailed release, many have used the tools with great success. One example is the PR and advertising campaign for About (*about.com*) when it changed its name from Mining Company in 1999. A series of mysterious, good-humored e-mail releases helped build suspense among reporters and analysts and attracted attention to the name change. Another effective e-mail campaign was pulled off by Peter Shankman of the Geek Factory on behalf of SportsBrain, a maker of a device that joggers can use to keep track of how far they've run. Shankman's "Do you want to run with me?" subject line had him running more miles than he ever expected with media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Today Show*, and *Entrepreneur* to name a few. PR21, the agency representing Apartments.com (*apartments.com*), an apartment-finding site, also taught us a few lessons about effective online PR with its campaign to identify the messiest college apartment. Video releases and the Apartments.com Web site kept attention on the contest, which offered a \$10,000 prize, and won coverage in 440 print stories, 245 TV stories, and on 47 radio stations.

DOT-COM LESSONS

The online companies About and Apartments.com were both still in business at this writing, but many other dot-coms that helped pioneer Internet tools for PR have passed from the scene. It's enough of a trend to cause more than a few people to wonder if there is any correlation between aggressive online PR and business failure. How much blame should PR people be assessed for the dot-com collapse?

Our answer is little or none. Although some PR folks might have stretched the truth at times in describing the capabilities of a few dot-com startups, the sector rose and fell because of the newness of the Internet and the wild expectations of analysts and investors. Dot-com faith translated into big initial public offerings (IPOs), which drove more investors and entrepreneurs into the market with business plans often less well baked than the ones that had come before them. Writing business plans on napkins should have been a first warning.

One PR veteran who shares this view is Melody Haller, president of Antenna Group, a San Francisco agency that represented many dot-com customers and continues to work with technology companies such as WebEx and NanoMuscle. She compares the dot-com frenzy to earlier stock market giddiness in both the software and hardware industries. “I think everybody was overselling everything,” she recalls. “I had the experience of journalists writing things about our clients that were more breathless than what we promoted to them.”

Haller says the craziness of the dot-com frenzy is easy to understand when she considers her own early involvement in Yahoo! Playing conservatively and selling her pre-IPO shares to Softbank for \$12.50 a share cost her about \$50 million, she estimates, citing Yahoo!’s incredible run-up. Such experiences, she notes, trained her and others like her to be more optimistic about the startups that followed. The market, says Haller, “punished you for having realistic expectations and it punished you very, very painfully.”

An important difference between Yahoo! and the many dot-coms that have since failed, Haller contends, is that it was a solid business when it went public, having attracted 1 million users before the company was even founded. To the extent that public relations played a role in its success, Haller credits an old, tried-and-true strategy of featuring the personal stories of top executives and positioning them as “poster children” for the fast-growing universe of Internet users. In Yahoo!’s case, Jerry Yang and David Filo happened to be graduate students who had started the Web portal on Stanford University’s computers. Haller says she might have sent some e-mails to reporters she thought would be interested in Yang and Filo, but e-mail was just a tool and not central to the overall strategy of making the two young founders accessible to the press. Even as e-mail has become more integral to the business of Antenna Group, Haller says she still takes pains to personalize pitches rather than broadcast them to long lists of reporters. She is also widely recognized for hosting “dinner salons” that bring journalists and her clients together in the flesh.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Such examples from Haller and other practitioners only reinforce our conviction that the key to successful online public relations is to integrate new tools into old-school, back-to-basics strategies. Our goal as PR professionals is to represent clients in the best light regardless of whether it's in print, on television, or on a computer screen. Being proactive starts with knowing your audience and how perceptions change over time. The steps to take to reach these segments still need the same careful consideration used in years past. Public relations is built on relationships. Internet or not, speed of light or Pony Express, you cannot disregard the fact that relationships take nurturing and understanding of needs. As such, communication must be tailored and incredibly specific despite the temptation many feel to go online with mass, untargeted information.

The strategies, therefore, need to be laid down on top of an important groundwork, which includes determining the makeup and interests of a client's audience. Are the reporters and analysts who visit online pressrooms any different from their colleagues who still prefer faxes? What about the members of the general public surfing through a client's Web site? What are they looking for? Are they generally older, younger, or otherwise demographically different from the company's typical customer?

We strongly recommend a close relationship between a company's PR operations and its Web site. If public relations professionals are not in charge of the site, they should be, at the least, members of whatever committees are convened to discuss site design and functionality. Communication professionals and information technology (IT) departments must align. You should argue loudly for easy access to information in place of flashy graphics that often delay Web users from getting the data they want. You should also keep a careful eye on a site's maintenance to make sure that the site represents the company in the best light. Finally, public relations people must be in a position to learn from what people are doing on a client's Web site to improve their interactions with the site. This

means that Web log data showing how people entered a site, what they searched for, the documents they looked at, and the time spent looking at each one, must be shared with PR folks if the sites are to be made more useful to reporters, analysts, prospective customers, or any other cybervisitors.

One important factor to remember in understanding your client's online audience is that people are at very different stages of technology acceptance. Scholars who study the adoption of innovations have created the following labels to describe the spectrum of technology users:¹

- **Innovators.** Often young and mobile, the members of this group embrace technology early on and were right there at the birth of the commercial Internet, jumping on the bandwagon with creative ideas. The innovators might also be classified as the group that immediately bought stock in Yahoo!, seeing the search engine as a valuable and groundbreaking tool in the Internet's future. Innovators want to see Web sites push the envelope in terms of utilizing new technology.
- **Early adopters.** Also young and mobile, but a little less prone to taking risks than are innovators, the early adopters were also on the Internet early, helping to fuel the growth of Amazon.com and eBay and willing to test the waters of online banking. This group is also quick to use e-mail and frowns at the hassle of snail mail. Early adopters are not afraid to complete online registration forms to receive free gifts and promotional offers from their favorite brands.
- **Early majority.** This group enjoys the speed and usefulness of the Internet for research and news and for corresponding with friends and family (often instant messaging with friends and family from the office). The early majority are much more cautious than the early adopters, as they require quite a bit more information and prompting to use the Internet in all of its capacities.

1. Cateora, Philip R., and Graham, John L. *International Marketing* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill, 1996.

- **Late majority.** Altogether different from any of the previous groups, the members of the late majority are generally overly suspicious of new ideas and did not embrace Internet technology until they were convinced of the solid benefits the medium offers, such as savings on long-distance phone charges. The late majority is usually comprised of older audiences (middle-aged to senior citizens) who look to preceding groups (and younger generations) for approval and safety when it comes to use of the medium.
- **Laggards.** A group that clearly does not want to be bothered with the Internet, laggards are typically senior citizens who are content to rely on their traditional means for retrieving information. The telephone book will always be a guiding reference for this group. Although some might lack the economic means to purchase a computer or Internet access, many are also concerned about privacy and they are not eager to have their personal preferences tracked through cyberspace.

While there are exceptions on both sides of the Internet spectrum, it is pretty safe to say that many journalists and analysts fall into the early majority category and are willing to test drive new online features, like applets for graphing financial data, that promise to help them do their jobs better. Some innovations like Webcasts, however, can be problematic because of firewall and bandwidth issues related to the corporate networks of media companies, which are often not on the cutting edge.

Journalists and analysts have also been through the dot-com collapse and taken their share of criticism for helping to feed the investing frenzy before the crash. Regardless of whether such criticism is deserved, it's fair to say that both groups have emerged more skeptical. Reporters are tired of hearing about tiny startups promising to revolutionize some aspect of American business. Their editors, stung by the criticism of dot-com coverage and seeking to fill fewer magazine or newspaper pages in a slow economy, are asking much tougher questions about story ideas than they ever did in the late 1990s.

PR professionals must be capable of providing solid information up front about a company's business plan, financing, and executive leadership just to get a journalist interested in possibly pursuing a story. Providing such information online is only going to help your chances of getting that attention. Archives of press releases that chronicle the company's development and its customer wins can also be assets in swaying a journalist who is doing due diligence of potential story subjects and could very well be doing it long after regular business hours.

When it comes to members of the general public who are visiting a client's Web site, knowing the makeup of your online audience is important because fancy online features intended to impress innovators might turn off the less technologically astute. At the same time, a company positioning itself as a technology leader needs to display some of its prowess and not develop the simplest of sites. Knowing your audience can also tell you how willing your online visitors might be to trade some of their privacy for surfing experiences that are more customized to their interests. Lexis-Nexis, which provides searchable databases for lawyers, government officials, and corporate executives, learned this lesson the hard way during its early days online. The company ignored privacy complaints of one of its users who did not like a new service that disclosed the Social Security numbers of prominent people. After countless efforts to be heard, this woman decided to take her complaints to the Internet and posted negative comments on a message board. The message spread like wildfire as it was picked up by at least 300 other Web sites. With the decision to not squash the negative communication or aggressively respond to it, Lexis-Nexis still received calls from reporters a year after the woman first spoke out.

On the other hand, a good example of how a company displayed sensitivity to the worries of its customers can be found in Ask Jeeves' handling of customers of E-tours, a company it acquired in May 2001. The E-tours site had provided members with points for agreeing to take tours of Web sites that were supposed to fit with their interests. The purchase by Jeeves and a name change to Jeeves' Tours marked the end of the points program and members were offered the opportunity to

become involved with Qool.com, an Internet auction site that is known as “the Internet’s first and only ‘free auction’ site.”² Because the new alliance allowed visitors to transfer points from the old program, Jeeves’ Tours wanted to provide its audience with Qool.com’s privacy policy. An e-mail update went out to all of the Jeeves’ Tours members with a link to view Qool.com’s privacy policy on the Web. Unfortunately, there were some technical difficulties and the information was difficult to access. However, when inquiries were made to Jeeves’ Tours, the brand expeditiously e-mailed the privacy policy to its users. The policy was thorough and complete, with information about children’s data, what type of information is collected, why it is collected, registration and membership services, and security and safeguard measures. This brand was proactive in its efforts, realizing the core membership group (the members of the late majority) was skeptical about Internet privacy issues. Forwarding privacy policies before the customer asked for them qualifies Jeeves’ Tours for our gold star for smart public relations and brand management on the Internet.

Unfortunately, too many dot-coms failed to understand their audiences or care about their technology comfort levels. What’s the use of offering technology if the visitor does not know how to access it, maneuver through it, or distrusts it? Web experiences too often did not match up with the hype surrounding dot-coms and brands were tarnished by that fact that customers were left feeling that promises had been broken. This, indeed, is counterproductive to the PR professional who aims to build the image and protect the brand’s reputation.

PR professionals might not have been the leaders of the dot-com doom, but not taking the time to realize and apply the tried and true strategies that worked so well in the past certainly did not benefit their brands. There are simply no substitutes for research and careful planning as we seek to address the needs of 21st-Century audiences.

In the next chapter, our focus is on what researchers tell us about Internet users as we try to help you lay that groundwork for your clients’ or your own company’s Internet initiatives.

2. E-Tour and Ask Jeeves member update, August 13, 2001.