PR IN A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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In an increasingly connected, web-based world we need a new mindset. Many commentators have spoken about the basic model for media and marketing being broken. While media fragmentation is seen as a challenge, an expanding range of media options is also an opportunity.

Over 20 years since the world wide web started to connect us digitally, the media landscape has changed and PR practice has had to change with it. Cisco Systems estimated last year that, after increasing eightfold in the past five years, global web traffic will increase by a further fourfold during the next five years. It's something that all organisations will have to embrace and within the B2B sphere it will be easier for some than others.

More choice of channels and more immediacy are two key changes in how we need to work in this new media landscape. With the declining power of traditional channels (that's not to say they don't still have a role) and the ever more technically empowered customer, the divide between marketing disciplines is blurring.

Coupled with changes to the way customers perceive and absorb marketing messages, this is also forcing a shift in how spending is allocated and how campaigns are organised.

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More interaction

This shift has had a direct effect on the PR discipline and has resulted in two core themes emerging:

- the even greater need for integrated thinking at planning and execution stages ie from the outset; and
- the increasingly important role of content development and tone of voice in all our communications.

New ways to connect with customers are transforming traditional relationship management and require organisations to:

a) interact more with customers or stakeholders;

b) interact through multiple forms of media; and

c) interact in increasing personalised ways.

Planning how we approach this interaction is therefore, as ever was, about gaining an understanding of and knowing your audience. But layered on top of this is an understanding of executions, co-ordination, speed and of course performance, through a range of disciplines.

Picking the channels you wish to communicate your messages through is today more than ever about sharing content with those you wish to engage with, and listening to their responses.

Whilst PR practitioners have always used face to face methods of communication to engage and inform, social media channels and digital communications are also now invaluable for bringing messages to life too. They also importantly allow for interaction and can be useful for gauging awareness levels, which could be affecting product or service uptake.

Nicola Green, O2's director of communications, was quoted in the Financial Times last year** as saying social media technologies have become the best way of "walking the store… We find out about issues via Twitter before we find them out from the organisation."

Strategic frameworks

A useful shorthand framework for approaching this new universe is for an organisation to look at options in terms of 'owned', 'earned' and 'paid for' media. While we are familiar with paid for media (which can extend into paid for search), it is worth doing a quick asset check of your 'owned' media universe, and its potential for PR purposes.



Owned media includes signage around your site(s), staff uniforms and your vehicle fleet which will have significance for branding and of course the image of the organisation. Similarly brand values and content that can you control and own will include:

Company and brand websites

Twitter feed (s)

Facebook Company pages

LinkedIn Company pages

Apps

YouTube channel (s)

Pinterest boards

Email lists and e-newsletters.

Organisations circumventing the traditional media filters and using these channels to talk directly to their audiences is fast growing because here is the opportunity to produce targeted content, and interact with customers in a more personal manner.

Done well, in an engaging, involving and interesting way, content disseminated through these channels will be powerful. In the B2B environment there is the opportunity to create dialogue cost effectively with relatively small but significant customer groups or stakeholders in this way.

But is it argued that 'earned' media is still where the real power lies.

Why - because as customers we like to understand what we see as the truth from the claims. Whilst many publishing companies for example are partnering with companies and organisations to jointly produce richer interactions, it is the essential nature of a 'word of mouth' perspective that an editorial comment offers that retains a resonance.

While earned media would have traditionally covered press coverage and technical analyst papers, in today's world it extends to blogger relations, social sharing and social listening.

It's these latter items that are cause for current discussion as the dialogue model evolves. First and foremost we have to listen – tune into what our customers or other stakeholders are saying.

And while it is great to be able to monitor mentions in the earned media sphere it can also be hard: "Our current and prospective customers are conducting billions of social conversations, and in those conversations lie the insights and information that we marketers need to create reasoned, targeted campaigns, regardless of medium," comments Leslie Nuccio, having attended the recent interactive conference, South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas In March.***

Feedback mechanisms therefore need to be introduced internally alongside the proactive use of social media channels in order to garn these insights, and pre-warn of potential issues.

Evolving and growing

But even this framework may need to be updated even further. In an article for the McKinsey Quarterly report in November 2010, "Beyond paid media: Marketing's new vocabulary" the authors draw attention to two new media types that could be added: "sold" and "hijacked." Sold media invites other marketers to place paid for content on your owned media, and is a familiar perhaps from the days of partnership marketing online.

In terms of PR and brand reputation the idea of hijacked media is also worth noting. We have seen many instances where companies such as MacDonalds have had to deal with critics who are active and vociferous online. In this scenario your campaign can be taken hostage, with opposition on Facebook or Twitter and negative versions of your advertising disseminated.

The need to be able to deal with this appropriately has become a focus for many PR practitioners – not just in large corporates or working with well-known brands. The potential for deliberate or accidental sabotage of a company's reputation in the online world has meant that monitoring these mentions and the introduction of social media policies is now a necessity.

The real test in this brave new world is therefore how you interact, what you say and not just how you deliver your message. It's about listening and engaging and responding. It's about how you might deal with critics or lobbyists.

In PR terms then not much has actually changed in what we need to do. That the media landscape now has a proliferation of channels, with a potential global audience 24/7 who may be watching, means that good public relations practice should brings with it a way of understanding and rising to these challenges.

* http://www.cisco.com/cisco/web/UK/tomorrow-starts-here/files/global_index_whitepages.pdf
**The Financial Times November 14, 2012 "Business tweets need to find the right tone" by Amie Tsang
***http://www.meltwater.com/social-media-blog/social-listening-for-big-data/