Strategically Incorporating the Internet into Public Relations Programmes

Introduction

PR consultants should use the internet to contribute to the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its various publics.

The objectives of this research are to:

- Summarise the characteristics of the Internet and their importance for public relations (PR) practice
- Investigate the impact of the internet on the development of PR strategies
- Suggest how PR officers can incorporate the internet into PR planning to establish a strategic role for electronic communications

Definition of Terms

The "electronic communications" included in this report's scope relate to the current elements of the internet available to PR consultants. The IPR/PRCA e-Commission stated "…the internet provides hundreds of different channels for communication. Most people are aware of email, websites, newsgroups and chat. Add to that: streamed news and ticker, streamed news casts, streamed sound casts, WAP messaging, kiosks, public announcement screens, TV e-mail, games and dozens of variants of each…"[1] All of these elements have relevance to this report's definition of electronic communications.

The title sees relevance in "incorporating" the internet into existing elements of PR programmes, not separating it from current work, whether media relations, public affairs, community relations or any other common PR practice.

The internet has had an impact on each and every area of public relations practice. For media relations, this is proven by the types of crises Intel (in 1995) and Emulex (in 1999) endured when their respective share prices plummeted due to information – both accurate and inaccurate – that was first made available on the internet and which resulted in a mass of offline media coverage. For public affairs the use of the internet for campaigning groups and activists has become very prevalent. By citing just a few areas, one can see the internet's rapid and ever increasing impact on PR practice. As the joint IPR/PRCA e-Commission report said, "Because the internet is pervasive, and

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soon will be virtually all pervasive, the application of e-PR is essential for every organisation."[2]

Strategy is defined by Gregory as "…the overall approach that you will take to move from where you are now to where you want to be."[3]

Tactics, on the other hand, are defined by Cutlip et al. as: "…the decisions or actions taken to make the strategy fit the reality and contingencies of the field."[4]

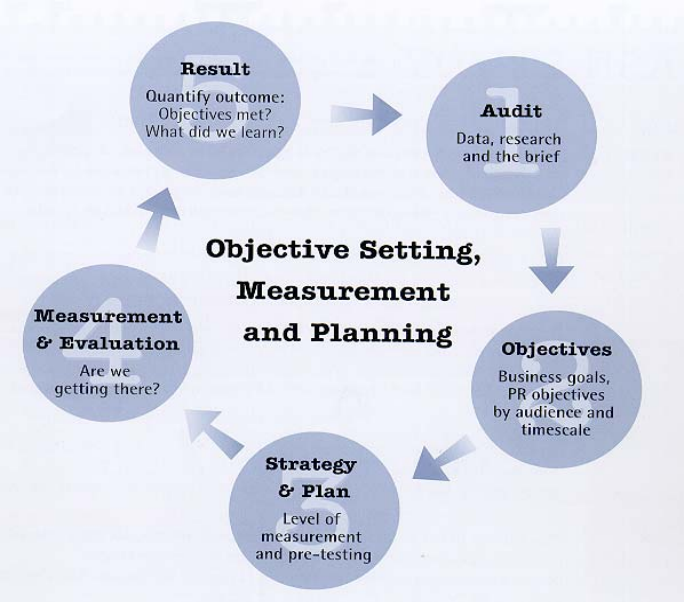
Particular tactics might include sending out press releases, creating a website or disseminating a "viral" email.[5]

The status of PR on the Internet

One might accuse the publicists who first dominated what became the public relations industry of being "cuttlefish squirting ink."[6] Information was pushed out with little planning, strategic management or evaluation as to who saw the information, when it was disseminated, and even whether the activity was truly aligned with the goals of the organisation. PR has developed to a point where it should be strategic, so that origins and motivations for the activity are of paramount importance to the PR consultant.

Certain writers believe that PR on the internet is highly undeveloped, possibly reminiscent of the early publicists. Holtz writes, "Most public relations activities online…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 targeted toward specific audiences or constituencies."[7] Michael Tchong's Iconocast (8.5.98) reported that "…the current state of PR on the Web consists of little more than emailing press releases."[8]

How then can online PR become strategic? There are many models for strategic management, but the qualities that occur most frequently are seen in the model below. This model forms the basis of our quest for strategic online PR. [9]



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Important Characteristics of the Internet for PR Consultants

Prior to any sort of online PR activity and in order to incorporate the internet into PR programmes strategically, a PR consultant needs to understand certain characteristics of the internet.

What is the internet?[10]

Hotlz provides the most important lesson, "It is dangerous to think of the internet as a technology…all that technology without people using it would represent a huge global network of nothing. The internet is people connecting with people."[11]

Treating the internet as a channel, or even a multiplicity of channels, does not suffice. Rather the internet has societal characteristics, making it more than a simple medium. Phillips heralds the emergence of the 'Internet Society'. "It has unique characteristics. Is about information, knowledge and communication. Is global, encourages activity and exchange and involvement round the clock…As in all societies, everyone is different…[The society] reaches hundreds of millions of people each with a range of interests each with unprecedented connectivity."[12]

What has emerged is a hybrid that merges our previous concept of 'channel' or 'medium' with our concept of 'society'. The internet has even been described as having "agency", the ability to transform, alter, correct, attack or support messages.[13] The Web offers interactivity and customisation of information never before available to a large-scale audience or public.[14]

Moreover, as Pavlik and Dozier point out, properly used the Web represents the ultimate communication tool for building relationships between an organization and its publics, both internal and external.[15]

The tools available via the internet provide an opportunity to achieve Grunig's aspirational two-way symmetrical communications model, opening lines of communication between an organisation and its various publics to a point where they enter the 'win-win zone' of game theory. The relationships created become mutually influential.[16]

Virtual communities

If one accepts that the internet represents a hybrid between a channel and a society, one should expect to find publics within it. There are definable publics on the internet. Traditionally members of publics could be spread over a wide area and never meet one another. The internet has allowed

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members of an organisation's various publics the opportunity to communicate with one another and frequent similar "places" in cyberspace. The publics that the PR industry has traditionally targeted have become *communities* with their own conventions.

This phenomenon has also been identified by Holtz: "As more and more people populate discussion groups, they get to know one another and rely on each other for information based on their areas of expertise…The informal groups grow into full-blown communities, with all the properties that are inherent in community structures… As these structures grow, so do the communities' influence."[17]

The community nature of the 'net is not limited to discussion groups. Good websites also provide a community function. They attract people of a like interest, provide information and news about subject matters the members are interested in, but also allow members of that community to participate in the site.

For example, consider the book review feature on Amazon.co.uk. People can add to the site to provide a service for other users and the result is a virtual book club. (See below.)

rate it and improve your recommendations,

Not Rated

Rate it

AMAZON.CO.UK DELIVERS

Receive e-mail recommendations from our expert editors--sign up to Amazon.co.uk Delivers.

Average Customer Rating:
Number of Reviews: 2

Disappointment 8 June, 2001
Reviewer: suavegeezer@excite.com from UK
This book is really centred on dotcoms. Whilst there's a couple of good points in here for the dotcom entrepreneur, I can't say there is much in here that I found useful as a PR consultant, and the stuff that was useful I really needed to dig for.

The biggest failing of this book is it's lack of structure. In addition, Don Middleberg achieves a limited scope of application (ie mostly for dotcoms) whilst discussing PR really rather generally.

The chapter on the new stakeholders concentrated on internet-centric research firms, venture capitalists and analysts, but said nothing or at least very little of the way consumers behave online, how to define stakeholders and the like.

This book may be useful to the odd dotcom start-up entrepreneur, but they seem to be a dying breed at the moment. This book was a disappointment for me.

It gives the Public Relations path for the digital world. 15 March, 2001
Reviewer: Filipe Mendes (nunofilipe@operamail.com) from Leeds, United Kindom
The digital Revolution has forever transformed the communications landscape, altering now and in the near future the practice of public relations, and of course, due to the magnitude of the audience, it magnifies its power. It is what Don Middleberg shows us in this book. It has case studies and success or failure of high-profile PR strategies, including Amazon.com, General Motors and Nike. Winning PR in the Wired World, until now shows to be the best book for a future PR practitioner in the new technologies world. I is a must read, for starting addressing a new era with some new and undiscovered rules. Don Middleberg and his knowledge expressed in this book are simply on the edge, so this makes a most valuable source of information.

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Here we broach another trait of the internet – its interactivity.

Interactivity

The internet considered as a hybrid of channel and society has reached a stage where members of the communities "…expect communication to be interactive; they want to be able to establish a line of communication with the company and find out answers to questions quickly, if not immediately."[18] A website which is merely a corporate brochure no longer cuts the mustard. In the information economy, communication must be two-way, with the company engaging in discussions in which the agenda can be set as easily by either the website user or the publisher of the website.[19] The static website which provides no particular function has no interactivity and is not updated becomes plain dull. People will not return to the site, limiting the opportunity any organisation has to communicate its messages. In addition, the PR consultant is missing an opportunity to glean information from target publics, to discover their needs, their concerns, their objections and their interests.

This interactivity has another quality, also recognised by Carol Wallace, programme manager of communications for Prodigy: "You are never going to get more attention from any customer than when they are online. Both their hands are on the keyboard and both their eyes are on the monitor. You are interacting with them. They have pre-selected you. They want to see you. This is a very intimate selling situation."[20]

Identifying Publics

David Weinberger, in The Cluetrain Manifesto states, "Markets consist of human beings, not demographic sectors."[21]

Demographics, a traditional tool to identify members of publics for marketers and PR consultants, have less significance online. The nature of the technology means that online publics are defined much more by the issues that interest them. To reach them requires some insight into the nature of internet communities.[22] As Leveson points out, "Communities are not divided into socio-economic groups on the web."[23]

Online publics are issue based, not least because individuals may have many agendas at the same or at differing times. A PR consultant is skilled when (s)he can identify what issues abound and where.[24]

'Landscaping' – identifying where members of online publics (identified by

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particular issues) visit and "tracking" should be in every public relations consultant's skill set. One would no more attempt internet PR activity without going through the process of landscaping than one would begin a media relations campaign without a target media list.

Phillips outlines the process: "At present, one may look in web sites, news groups, discussion lists, chat and public voice mail. These places are informative because they reveal where the communities exist and what issues affect them."[25]

The Opportunities Offered to Publics by the Internet

Grunig developed the situational theory of publics in which he outlined three characteristics that affect how publics react to issues. People could recognise an issue (and then become a member of a public), judge the constraints or obstacles that limit their involvement in the issue, and then consider their personal level of involvement in that issue or how the issue affects them. Once members of publics recognise a problem or issue, Grunig believes they will actively seek information about it.[26]

The wealth of information and opinion available via the internet seems to have generally increased people's problem recognition. For example the trend in the development of activist emails – often asking people to forward on the information they contain to draw attention to an issue – facilitated people's level of problem recognition. In addition, creating a presence on the World Wide Web is very easy, as seen by the number of activist websites and even the development of dotcoms created in people's bedrooms. One might say that constraint recognition for many is very low. The cliché is that the internet has created a 'level playing field' where "the global manager has no greater voice in a chatroom than a school child."[27] Such a high potential for problem recognition and a low level of constraint recognition may have an impact on the perceived level of involvement of the publics.

Push and Pull

To dispel a common myth, many believe that the primary use of the internet amongst the internet population is to download pornography. PR consultants should not disregard the fact that the single greatest use of the internet is for research, according to a PricewaterhouseCoopers study.[28]

The internet is an unfathomable mass of information. However to get noticed, information must be of a high standard and presented in the right way. Information presentation is a traditional skill now inherent

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in the PR industry and one that should be applied to the internet.

Furthermore, the PR industry has previously focused on pushing out information to their target publics. One of the most notable ramifications of the internet is that the target stakeholder has become more empowered to resist such push tactics. The internet is a demand or 'pull' channel, where the stakeholder demands or retrieves information from a source. It is therefore more important than ever for the PR consultant to provide information that the stakeholder wants to know.

Unilever claims that whilst in consultation with stakeholders, they discovered a desire to know the organisation's position on various issues. The microsite below allows a user access to policy statements from the company by clicking on the issues to the left of the screen.

Holtz suggests, “Quality communications are those that meet the requirements – the *expectations* – of the audience for which they are intended.”[29] This could be discovered through extensive consultation with stakeholders, but Holtz continues, “Public relations practitioners can achieve quality with a single well-placed message in an internet discussion group, a powerful dialogue in an email discussion list, or a meticulously researched position statement on a targeted website.”[30]

What’s more, the internet has lead to a requirement for transparency among companies. Phillips writes, “Prior to the internet, most companies would not disclose who their suppliers are, where they are, the working conditions and rates of pay for suppliers’ workers.

Faced with a boycott drummed up by internet activists, this is exactly what Nike had to do in order that it could be seen to be a responsible and acceptable retailer to be able to recover its market lead.”[31]

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An activist email relating to Nike was circulated around the internet community in 2001 alleging that the company operated sweatshops. If an internet user goes to the US section of the Nike website and types in a word relating to the theme of the email - in this case "sweatshop"- a wealth of information regarding working conditions and Nike factories is retrieved, communicating Nike's relevant messages to the user.

A PR consultant needs to make sure his/her clients' site contains material that would interest the target market. Knowing your target stakeholders, and establishing objectives for those stakeholders, means your site can be configured to address their needs.[32]

Holtz uses the example of the Clinton Presidency in crisis over Monica Lewinski. He writes: "The public hungered for information about the issues, so much so that visits to news related websites reportedly surged to historic levels." Although he admits this is an extreme example, he makes the point that "…those who have an interest in a particular topic gravitate to those sites where there is related valuable information. And they tell others who share the same interests about the site, resulting in even more visits."[33] It is a process that Holtz terms "narrowcasting", providing content to members of a niche audience.

This does not mean the end of the PR consultant's skills of pushing information. Holtz suggests that once PR consultants accept the stakeholders' "I-want-what-I-want-when-I-want-it" mentality, the consultant can make the much easier judgement of which messages should be "pushed" at publics because of their importance and those that are just made available to satisfy the information needs of individual members of publics.[34]

E-mail is the most effective form of 'push' communications on the internet.[35] Whether disseminating press releases, or sending out an electronic newsletter to a subscriber base, a PR consultant can disseminate information very effectively. However, the conventions of the internet (now commonly termed 'netiquette') require that such information methods be only on request, so the internet is still based on stakeholder demand.

Humanization

Whilst providing the right content for the right stakeholder is important, so too is the way the content is packaged, or maybe more appropriately *not* packaged. Organisations used to use the internet to display their company reports and

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brochures, couched in what Phillips calls 'brochure speak'. The internet is going through a period of 'humanization', exemplified most by the likes of Ask.com which allows users to ask questions of the search engine much as they would ask another human being and hosted by a character, Jeeves, who displays human attributes. "'Brochure speak' is not highly regarded [on the internet] and neither is equivocation."[36]

Phillips cites 'The Cluetrain Manifesto' whose authors plea for a form of contact that is human in its approach. They write: "Learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about 'listening to customers.' …most companies ignore their ability to deliver genuine knowledge, opting instead to crank out sterile happytalk that insults the intelligence of markets literally too smart to buy it."[37] It is a sentiment echoed by Janal: "The successful online marketer has a better chance to succeed if he offers information and rich content instead of self-serving materials."[38]

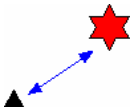
'Multilogue'

The manner and effects of communication on the internet has implications for the PR consultant. Middleberg claims, "…the internet is an environment of dialogue, not monologue."[39] However, a better description for online communication could be *multilogue* as, at times, there are more than two participants communicating in a particular area of the 'net, and on one or more subjects at a time.

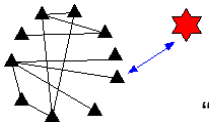
Phillips details the communication models of the internet well:

"The nature of e-mail transmission can be described as follows: [40]

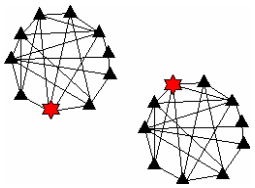
"The message is transmitted from one person to another.



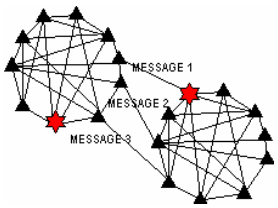
However, in most circumstances such message delivery does not stop there and the nature of such messages is that they are transmitted into a network: [41]



"Messages, once entering a network can now flow to other people. This process can be very immediate or can take days, weeks, months or even years. The message is now beyond the control of the sender:



"Furthermore, because the internet is a network of networks, information can and does flow between networks."



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What is apparent from these models is that the internet allows some one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication. At times, the 'net also allows many-to-one communication when websites or particular people may receive an influx of emails for example if they've caused offence. These models also help to explain the internet's 'viral' qualities.

The many-to-many model, says Phillips, will cause "…global communication bringing with it loss of 'ownership' of language, culture and knowledge. There will be breakdown in intellectual property rights, copyright and much plagiarism…The new many-to-many technologies are very powerful as both Intel and Shell can attest when their reputations were influenced through third party use of the Internet."[42]

The issues of corporate transparency and internet agency raise their heads again. Phillips writes: "The nature of the Internet is that information, once available to the Internet, passes from the control of the sender and becomes transparently available to multiple publics."[43] Middleberg concurs: "Consumers can be reached one to one, but the same message may also inadvertently reach journalists, competitors, investors and others who need to hear a different message."[44]

On the positive side, the many-to-many communication model allows "viral" marketing. Although cautious, Middleberg sees the benefits: "Online publicity is very niche-oriented. It's very viral, moving from person to person. If something is good, funny, sick, helpful, or silly, inevitably humans will want to share it with others.[45]

A Strategic Role for Online Public Relations

If the PR consultant wants to incorporate the internet into his or her work, they need to get access to the client's presence on the web. Pavlik and Dozier's investigation into "…issues facing communication professionals using the technologies of the information super-highway" revealed the primary problem as a "culture war" between the Management Information Systems (MIS) department and the communications department. At times they found two or more departments with joint responsibility for internet communications, but the lead was taken by marketing which did not use the internet as an interactive communication medium.[46] This not only limits using the internet to its full potential, but also denies organisations the opportunity to use people from an industry which is

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based upon two-way communication, developing relationships and creating content – all important skills to be applied to the internet. The most appropriate industry for managing these tools is public relations.

At the very least, say Pavlik and Dozier, PR should be involved at the policy level of online communication, particularly with regard to content and interactive services. Whilst exact configurations depend on the nature, tradition and situation of each organization, they suggest a useful model from Chevron.

"It includes these four parts:

1. Corporate Public Affairs coordinates content;
2. Each individual Chevron company is responsible for its own Web presence;
3. Chevron IT is responsible for site security and day-to-day operations;
4. Employees may use the Web for business purposes only, with supervisor's permission."[47]

Integrating the internet with current PR activity

Tari Hibbitt, the chief executive of Edelman London, stated in a PR Week article: "A new media strategy has to be integral to PR. Public relations can't survive unless it makes full use of new media and the internet." The article continued, "So PR needs to look beyond web sites to web strategy, in other words treating the internet as integral to a public relations programme."[48] Well, almost right.

All PR activity must now have an online aspect. A company employing a PR consultant with the remit "online relations" would be a nonsense. All PR consultants operating in any practice area, whether media relations, public affairs, internal communications or whatever should have online PR skills. PR on the internet must not only be integrated with offline activity, but must also be cohesive with all aspects of the communications mix.

The pervasive nature of the internet into all PR practice areas requires an integrated approach, incorporating electronic communications into all offline activity. Developing a web strategy is a step in the right direction, and possibly a first step towards integration, but the internet should be incorporated into an organisation's *overall* communications strategy. This sentiment is confirmed by Leveson and Mendes: "In order for a PR practitioner to manage reputation well, an integrated approach between on and offline activity needs to be adopted. It is essential that the PR practitioner has a

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centrally agreed and signed off communications strategy, which incorporates all activity."[49]

Before continuing, attention must be given to Middleberg's claim that in the 'Wired World', "Strategic planning is dead." [50]

He believes, due to the speed of the internet, "Any response that isn't immediate and focused gives opponents – real and imagined – an advantage that can damage a company's image."[51] As far as he is concerned, if companies 'indulge' in strategic planning "…they're going to find themselves thoughtfully planning how they'll spend their retirement."[52]

This is downright dangerous. An unplanned approach to an issue or crisis may involve addressing the wrong audience, with the wrong information, in the wrong place and in the wrong way. This may extend the crisis or leading to even more problems for PR consultants and their clients. On the contrary, even more emphasis should be put on planning to anticipate such crises and issues, providing more effective solutions and most likely a faster way of dealing with them than only addressing them when they emerge.

Research and planning: The building blocks of strategy

As outlined above and by the IPR/PRCA/Fairchild model, the building blocks towards a dynamic strategy are research, planning and evaluation (PRE).

Cutlip et al. state why strategic planning is so important: "Skimping on the strategic planning step…results in programmes that may reinforce controversy rather than resolve it, waste money on audiences that are not there or cause misunderstanding and confusion instead of understanding and clarification."[53]

"Strategic planning in PR involves making decisions about programme goals and objectives, identifying key publics, setting policies or rules to guide selection of strategies and determining strategies…The key point is that strategies are selected to achieve a particular outcome (as stated in a goal or objective)."[54] Good strategies are based on research.

PR consultants generally undertake a situation analysis as part of their research. This will generally involve an investigation into an organisation's offline environment, but makes little reference to the online environment.

Conducting a situation analysis with reference to an

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organisation's online environment is now important as considering the offline environment. It should incorporate an online competitor analysis, industry analysis, stakeholder analysis and issues analysis prior to setting goals and objectives for the PR programme.

Equally offline intelligence, such as market research and focus groups, are as pertinent to online planning as they are to offline planning.

Any communications audit undertaken in the research phase of a PR programme should include an audit of the organisation's current website and online communications to discover whether it is making effective use of the internet.

Wilson recommends performing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis for companies that have an internet presence.[55] This has become a common tool for PR consultants when planning any PR programme, and it makes sense to apply it to the client organisation's total online environment. Consideration should be given to the content of news groups and discussion boards, online media, blogs, hostile and competitor websites.

Taking RESPITE from PEST

In the research phase of the planning process, PR consultants often use the PEST analysis tool which identifies the Political, Economic, Social and Technological forces that impact on an organisation.

The PEST tool has spawned a few derivatives. A "Legal" category was added, so the acronym SLEPT was developed. Others added an "Environmental" category, so allowing STEEP. Adding both created PESTLE.[56] However, a more complete tool needs to include the internet. In addition, one might suggest the category "Legal" is not broad enough as it does not take into consideration the development of ombudsmen, self-regulatory policies, trade association rules and the like. One might therefore suggest the term "Regulatory" would be more applicable.

Therefore, the tool suggested (in no hierarchy of importance) is RESPITE:

- **R**egulatory
- **E**conomic
- **S**ocial
- **P**olitical
- **I**nternet / **I**nteractive
- **T**echnological
- **E**nvironmental

This tool should not only highlight the importance of the internet for PR programmes, it should draw attention to the need to incorporate it into the PR consultant's remit and the crossovers inherent in the model should illustrate where issues for the client merge with the internet.

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To summarise, in the research phase of the planning process, the PR consultant should:

- Gather intelligence of the client's online competitors
- Assess particular aspects of the client's industry online
- Evaluate the client's use of the internet for communications
- Develop an understanding of the client's online landscape by identifying the client's online publics and assessing the salience of issues on the internet
- Establish the client's online strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
- Understand how the internet relates to the other forces impacting on the client

With this information the PR consultant can set objectives and plan a course of action.

Objective setting

Gregory states: "Setting realistic objectives is absolutely vital if the programme or campaign that is being planned is to have direction and to achieve something."[57]

In practice, objectives do the following:

- Give focus and direction for developing programme strategies and tactics
- Provide guidance and motivation to those implementing the programme
- Spell out the criteria for monitoring progress and for assessing impact.[58]

To aid strategic management and evaluation, PR consultants should set SMART objectives. This means they should be Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-bound.[59] Being specific means objectives should state exactly what the PR function wants to achieve. Including measurable qualities means the PR consultant and the client organisation can evaluate progress and success with reference to a target. The client and PR consultant should agree objectives so that both are working towards the same ends. Setting unachievable objectives and over-promising results to clients is not appreciated. Therefore the objectives must be realistic. Finally, the PR consultant should attain results by a particular time, therefore the objectives must be time-bound.

The following could be deemed an example of a SMART objective:

"Increase the level of subscription to the client's electronic newsletter on plastics by 30 per cent amongst chemical engineers by June 2002."

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The strategy which derives from this particular objective could be:

"Develop an online newsletter which appeals to chemical engineers and publicise the client's online presence to chemical engineers."

Not rocket science, but the objective should have resulted from the research which identified the problem. In this instance, either chemical engineers in particular were unaware of or were not attracted to the client's electronic newsletter on plastics. Therefore action had to be taken. The simple strategy, guided by the objective, will influence the tactics and the messages used to encourage chemical engineers to read the client's newsletter.[60]

Evaluation

Evaluation methods are somewhat contingent on the measurable qualities of the PR consultant's objectives. Evaluation should be used to inform the strategy of any ongoing PR programme just as research does. The internet allows the PR consultant to evaluate the output, the out-take and the outcome of their activities.

Output[61]

The internet gives PR consultants the opportunity to effectively measure the quality of the content they provide. Whereas the quality of a press release could be described as fairly subjective, the tools of the internet allow PR consultants to analyse how much demand and interest there is in the information they provide. Holtz makes the point that, "Measuring the effectiveness of an online effort by counting visits is like limiting the assessment of how well a print campaign worked by counting the number of people who received the printed material."[62] However, an interview with Bernie Mulford and Mike Rigby of Countrywide Porter Novelli revealed the following:

"Once we agree with the client what is to be measured, by using our database to collect information we can provide statistics on the use of our online PR activity. More importantly, we can provide the analysis to give the statistics meaning. Whilst the number of hits [the number of times a particular page or file on a website is accessed] gives a rough guide, more telling statistics are visitor sessions. These tell us how "sticky" a website is and we can judge the quality of the relationship with our stakeholders; the time spent by our stakeholders in a site gives us a guide as to how interesting or relevant the content provided is; which area of the site is the most and least visited can tell us whether we need to sign-post the site better or whether information needs to be re-jigged to make it more appealing; the top entry page,

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indicates whether the stakeholder typed the URL in straight-away or whether they followed a link through a search engine and the like; the top exit page - hopefully not the home page – can tell us when the user gets bored or has received enough information; the most frequent users tells us who we are reaching and we can judge whether we are reaching our target audience; for our international campaigns the country of origin lets us know if we need to step up our work in particular geographic areas or languages, and so on."[63]

Out-take[64]

Simply asking users for feedback is a much less technical but nevertheless very relevant way to evaluate the online elements of a PR programme. It offers more emotional qualitative analysis data. Burgess-Webb advises clients to "Pay attention to feedback. Feedback on-line…is the fastest way to learn and improve. Internet users are (despite the many horror stories) a practical and largely helpful lot who can be sampled, researched, panelled and focus-grouped online to provide valuable insights. This interaction can be extended to create genuine one-to-one consumer and third party relationships."[65] These facilities are easily placed on to websites and much more cost effective than conducting offline focus groups and market research so both PR consultants and clients can receive information direct from stakeholders.

Outcome[66]

There are many ways to measure the online PR effort's impact on a business's bottom line. One such example from Holtz includes sales representatives simply asking customers at the point of purchase "Where did you discover our services/product?" If the reply is, "Your company website" and the PR consultant is managing the website, the PR effort can be directly measured to sale of product.[67] Simple enough. There are many other examples, however the process of setting measurable objectives and developing methods of measuring outcome pertinent to each client are the important processes.

Monitoring

The internet provides the PR consultant with an opportunity to constantly monitor what stakeholders are saying about clients, offering constant, cost-effective and accessible intelligence. This can be provided through the feedback functions mentioned above, but there is also a role for monitoring websites and online public forums. Such activity may suggest tweaking tactics and messages and even strategies if there is a change

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in the client's target publics / online communities.

As Leveson and Mendes point out: "Via feedback mechanisms, the internet and websites provide organisations with the opportunity to answer enquiries. The benefits of monitoring public opinion can be massive to productivity, and with such anonymity, the internet offers total freedom of expression, which may cause problems. This includes those related to dissatisfied customers, and activists, all of whom are able to express their opinions liberally on the internet…Maintaining customer loyalty and building a reputation on-line will depend on detecting and managing issues as well as interactive e-skills with consumers."[68]

Holtz agrees: "Being vigilant about what is said about you on the internet is most likely your single most important internet-based activity…Once you know what is being said about you and where, it becomes easier to implement the strategies to communicate with your various strategic audiences using the internet."[69]

Conclusion

For PR consultants to strategically incorporate the Internet into PR programmes, they must:

- Understand the internet and its relevance to PR practice
- Gain influence over the client's online presence
- Conduct research into the internet's impact on the client
- Identify online publics and environments relevant to the client
- Set a strategy that is informed by research and objectives
- Evaluate and monitor the internet to measure success and continuously inform the PR strategy, tactics and messages.

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APPENDIX I
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APPENDIX II

Planning the content of your on-line communication
Rob Gray, from an article in PR Week, Feb 2000

- Have clear and measurable objectives.
- Know who your audience is and how to reach them. The internet is not just another medium, it is entertainment, it is information, it is shopping, it is a means of communication - so deciding what you want it to be for your brand/product/company/service is key.
- Is your internet strategy extending your off-line communication on-line? Or is on-line communication your lead vehicle?
- What are your objectives: attracting new customers, building loyalty with existing customers, branding, making your URL famous, communicating with on-line media?
- What will success look like? How will you measure this success? Is it about counting clicks, like press clips, or do you need to have a more sophisticated analysis given that no readership equivalent information exists for the web?
- What systems will you put in place for monitoring traffic? Will you rely on monitoring software via the host server or will you design your site that you can data capture names and e-mail addresses of visitors?
- How will you know if word of mouth has taken place?
- What is your targeting strategy? Are you targeting existing or new customers? The worldwide web is not a community of millions of homogenous users worldwide. The on-line audience cannot be defined by traditional demographics; it is an audience that is characterised by community of interest. Establishing what those interest areas are is key. Think about your target audience, and overlay this with an understanding of your potential on-line audience. For what purpose are people using the internet (to surf or to shop?), where are they using it (work or home?) and how (type of operating system?). Understand your different audiences (women tend to use the web differently to men, net newbies behave differently from net veterans).
- The next consideration is what type of on-line programme will be most appropriate.
- How are you going to decide how to best reach the audience: via ISPs or portals, web-sites, chat rooms, newsgroups, and e-mails.
- What tactics will you employ - banner ads, blipverts, sponsorship of portals etc? And having decided this, how are you going to test the content of your site, promotion, sponsorship, ad or e-mail?
- Will it attract the audience, if it is a site have you got a compelling URL? What pages of your site will they access? Does it communicate your brand values and your communications messages? Research Manning Selvage and Lee has conducted shows that site appeal depends on both aesthetic and technical factors.
- Finally you need to consider traffic-driving tools: how are you going to attract visitors to your site or draw attention to your promotion, sponsorship, ad or e-mail? Will you rely on traditional off-line PR routes to achieve this or will you promote only on-line? If word of mouth is key to this, how will you achieve referral? Research shows that site loyalty is not determined by a single factor but a combination: search engine, traditional off-line publicity - paid for and editorial - referral, word of mouth and general surfing.

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Endnotes

[1] The Public Relations e-Commission, The Death of Spin, (IPR, 2000) pp. 7
[2] ibid. pp. 13
[3] Gregory. A., Planning and Managing a Public Relations Campaign (Kogan Page, 1999)
[4] Cutlip, S.M, Center, A.H. and Broom, G.M., Effective Public Relations (Prentice Hall, 1999) pp. 377 Much has been written about PR tactics for the internet, and this area - whilst important and alluded to - is not detailed in this report.
[5] The term "viral email" relates to emails which due to particular qualities integral to them are sent (forwarded) by readers to other potential readers. The messages spread like a virus.
[6] Cutlip, S.M, Center, A.H. and Broom, G.M., Effective Public Relations (Prentice Hall, 1999) pp. 370
[7] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 11
[8] Stein, L., "Is PR having trouble finding the web?" on www.channelseven.com (downloaded 27/05/01)
[9] Fairchild, M., The Public Relations Research and Evaluation Toolkit, (Fairchild, IPR & PRCA, 1999) pp. 17
[10] The question of "What is the internet?" could be answered by detailing the chips and processors, the cables and servers, the World Wide Web and the physical capabilities of the internet, but many PR consultants would find that about as much fun as a fly in their champagne. Whilst a background knowledge is useful for PR consultants, it is not a necessity, just as a PR consultant does not need to know the internal workings of a television camera, a radio mixing board or a printing press.
[11] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 73
[12] *The Growing Universe*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[13] The Public Relations e-Commission, The Death of Spin, (IPR, 2000) pp.6
[14] Pavlik, J.V. and Dozier, D.M., "Managing the Info Super Highway" on www.instituteforpr.com (downloaded 10/0601)
[15] ibid.
[16] see Grunig, J.E., Grunig. L.A., and Dozier, D.M., Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995)
[17] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 83
[18] Janal, D., Dan Janal's guide to marketing on the internet, (J. Wiley, 2000) pp. 19
[19] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 21
[20] Janal, D., Dan Janal's guide to marketing on the internet, (J. Wiley, 2000) pp. 15
[21] Leveson, L., and Mendes, F., "E-PR" on www.specialistepr.co.uk (downloaded 27/05/01)
[22] Gray, R., PR and the Internet (PRWeek, 11/02/00)
[23] Leveson, L., and Mendes, F., "E-PR" on www.specialistepr.co.uk (downloaded 27/05/01)
[24] *Who do I know at the party?*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[25] ibid.
[26] see Grunig, J.E., Grunig. L.A., and Dozier, D.M., Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995)
[27] The Public Relations e-Commission, The Death of Spin, (IPR, 2000) pp. 23
However, some publics may be more equal than others. Research by Roper Starch Worldwide and Burson-Marsteller entitled, 'The E-Fluentials' suggest there may be some members of publics who are more influential than others. "E-fluentials" are individuals who "…are much more active than other Internet users in terms of their online influence, using e-mail, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and other online vehicles to convey their messages." They are described as opinion leaders, marketing multipliers (the opinions of these e-fluentials being "far-reaching, radiating to a level of influence disproportionate to their actual size…") avid communicators, technologically savvy and new product innovators. [27] It is claimed these e-fluentials have the potential to facilitate the much sought after "viral" marketing. However, Graham expresses caution in "Who is your e-fluential?" (www.clickz.com downloaded 27/05/01): "No segment of people, whether they are opinion leaders offline or e-fluentials on the Net, is generic and monolithic…Like all good marketing, this requires a deep understanding of your customer and prospects, garnered through qualitative and quantitative research."
[28] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 13

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[29] ibid. pp. 19
[30] ibid.
[31] *The Party Frock*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[32] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 65
[33] ibid. pp. 30
[34] ibid. pp. 29
[35] ibid. pp. 78
[36] *Talking Cyberspeak*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[37] ibid.
[38] Janal, D., Dan Janal's guide to marketing on the internet, (J. Wiley, 2000) pp. 25
[39] Middleberg, D., Winning PR in the Wired World (McGraw-Hill, 2001) pp. 183
[40] *Messages in Cyberspace*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[41] ibid.
[42] Phillips, D., *New PR*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[43] *Messages in Cyberspace*, in Phillips, D. et al., "NetReputation" www.fsvo.com/netreputation/, (downloaded 06/06/01)
[44] Middleberg, D., Winning PR in the Wired World (McGraw-Hill, 2001) pp. 183
[45] ibid. pp. 186
[46] Pavlik, J.V. and Dozier, D.M., "Managing the Info Super Highway" on www.instituteforpr.com (downloaded 10/0601)
[47] ibid. The last point of Chevron's model deals with issues of internet porosity (sensitive information can be easily disseminated) and the transparency issues outlined above.
[48] Gray, R., PR and the Internet (PRWeek, 11/02/00)
[49] Leveson, L., and Mendes, F., "E-PR" on www.specialistepr.co.uk (downloaded 27/05/01)
[50] Middleberg, D., Winning PR in the Wired World (McGraw-Hill, 2001) pp. 18
[51] ibid. pp. 17
[52] ibid. pp. 18
[53] Cutlip, S.M, Center, A.H. and Broom, G.M., Effective Public Relations (Prentice Hall, 1999) pp. 370
[54] ibid. pp. 373
[55] Wilson, R.F., "Developing an Internet Marketing Plan" on www.wilsonweb.com (downloaded 27/05/01)
[56] see Ahearne, B., IPR Diploma Public Relations Planning Assignment (2000/1)
[57] Gregory. A., Planning and Managing a Public Relations Campaign (Kogan Page, 1999) pp. 77
[58] Cutlip, S.M, Center, A.H. and Broom, G.M., Effective Public Relations (Prentice Hall, 1999) pp. 376
[59] Brazier et al., Planetarium (Countrywide Porter Novelli, 2000)
[60] Planning tactics and messages for the internet somewhat goes beyond the remit of this research. Suffice to say that the important planning of tactics and messages will be guided by the PR consultant's strategy, objective and research, and should be heavily influenced by an understanding of the characteristics of the internet society as outlined above. (For a useful checklist see the extract from PR Week, February 11 2000 in the appendix.)
[61] Brazier et al. refer to output as the quality of, success of and interest in the PR materials generated by the PR activity. See Brazier et al., Planetarium (Countrywide Porter Novelli, 2000)
[62] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 12
[63] Interview with Bernie Mulford and Mike Rigby, Countrywide Porter Novelli Internal Communications Group
[64] Brazier et al. refer to out-take as the effect the PR activity has had on audiences. See Brazier et al., Planetarium (Countrywide Porter Novelli, 2000)
[65] Burgess-Webb, A., "Projecting and protecting your internet brand on the internet" on www.hillandknowlton.com (downloaded 02/06/01)
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[67] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 239
[68] Leveson, L., and Mendes, F., "E-PR" on www.specialistepr.co.uk (downloaded 27/05/01)
[69] Holtz S., Public Relations on the Net (AMACOM, 1999) pp. 112

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