

Using Technology to Enhance Public Relations

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How--and how well--has technology improved the realm of public relations? To find out, I interviewed several colleagues who deal with the challenges and opportunities of technology as it relates to public relations. The jury is still out, to some degree, on the ultimate impact of electronic media on public relations. And the only constant is change.

Case in point: brand new services

With Chaindrugstore.net, the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS), Alexandria, Virginia, was trying to leverage its strong position into newer commercial ventures, specifically affinity programs and a Web portal startup. The challenge was to translate a strong, well-functioning PR program (experienced in securing coverage for advocacy, health care initiatives, and high-profile consumer-oriented programs) into more exposure for mundane business-to-business retail-oriented programs.

While reasonably successful at getting trade publication editors to run mentions alongside other industry news, coverage often included a mix of short notes and longer profile pieces, most of it earned "the old fashioned way" through relationships with specific publications and reporters, facilitated by e-mails and telephone calls. Rarely did experiments with electronic *push media*--distribution through press release services or broadcast faxes to NACDS press contacts--generate increased coverage.

And it probably shouldn't have. Much of what the organization did was not newsworthy on a par with the constant flow of bankruptcies, mergers, monthly sales, earnings surprises, personnel changes, and new products that comprises an industry's news.

The longer-term cure was very simple. While continuing to place stories through traditional means, we also launched a direct news channel. *Industry News at a Glance*, a twice-weekly e-newsletter, includes summaries of news and research and, of course, plugs for Chaindrugstore.net services. It is distributed through the same syndicated news service used daily to feed our online news section.

With an intentionally generic name and very little NACDS-related coverage, the organization branded itself a distinct entity, which proved an asset. Growing to a circulation of more than 16,000 decision makers in a relatively concentrated industry, NACDS quickly accomplished many of its public relations goals, including partnering with publishers, achieving name recognition, and becoming an authoritative information provider to the industry--by largely bypassing traditional methods of media relations.

Case in point: managing online expectations

According to Michael Dodd, director of marketing, American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), Bethesda, Maryland, "There's an expectation that everything should be immediate, especially with this medium. I know now if I respond via e-mail and someone doesn't get back to me within two hours, I call."

ASHP implemented ASHP NewsLink, a weekly e-mail news service that delivers to subscribers the latest headlines from the pharmacy and health care industry and keeps them up to date on the ASHP Web site. "The old way of doing things made it difficult to deliver news in a timely fashion," says Dodd. "By the time you've collected the information and processed it for print, it's often no longer really news."

ASHP uses other electronic vehicles to broaden its regulatory efforts. For example, when the Federal Drug Administration issued a proposal with only 20 days' notice for a first call for comments, ASHP sent a communique to the directors of 5,500 institutions, generating several hundred responses.

Case in point: same effects, lower cost

According to Bob Gatty, vice president of communications and marketing, Food Distributors International (FDI), Falls Church, Virginia, "We still rely on paper for our press releases, and we have a traditional mailing list. However, we do more electronically now. We get an increasing number of publications that ask us to use e-mail only. Our newsroom is one of the most popular features on our Web site, and we can tell that publications are going there."

The switch to online has also helped FDI cut costs. For example, its Thomas Jefferson Award program is now conducted with considerably less staff effort--and paper. The program, held every three years, recognizes members of Congress whose voting records support issues of concern to FDI. Each recipient's office is expected to provide FDI with a list of 8 to 10 priority media outlets covering its district. In lieu of continuing to push massive amounts of paper, FDI decided to post the award information on its Web site and converted to e-mail its communication with newspapers and radio and television stations.

As Gatty says, "There is no reason to continue the whole exercise. It used to take more than a week; now it's practically instantaneous. Instead of taking all that time to handle film-processed prints, we have photo discs made and then attach the photo for each congressman's media outlets along with the press kit's contents. There are no publications this doesn't work for. Who today doesn't do almost everything by computer?"

Case in point: smaller associations

Most associations face other challenges in particular resource constraints. According to ASAE's *Policies and Procedures in Association Management*, only 34 percent of associations have full-time PR staff, and only 42 percent outsource PR activities to outside firms. Only in associations with 30 or more staff does the majority have one or more dedicated staff and an agency relationship fulfilling the function.

According to one trade association PR director, methods have changed slightly, but the association's overall role has changed more drastically. "We e-mail a copy of our releases--nothing groundbreaking, just fast and easy, not too advanced. Many of our stories and contacts come from the listservers that we manage, which feature industry-wide discussions."

"Members know that the trade press is also reading. We tried a newsroom on our Web site, the idea being that we would administer it, but manufacturers could post materials with links. It didn't fly, not because there wasn't a demand to post, but rather because our members were apathetic."

Other examples

NACDS also uses a weekly e-newsletter, *Monday.morning@nacds.org*, to raise its profile with the press and other constituencies, and has found that it often provides better control for outbound messages than working directly with trade press. The technique generates results, although it is not always easily measured. According to John Covert, vice president of communications, "We can't precisely measure these things, but we certainly see the trends in our site traffic. Every Monday it peaks--sharply."

There has been relatively little negative reaction. Offered originally as an automatic enrollment, the newsletter has prompted few unsubscribe requests or complaints. "Far more of our response has been additional questions via e-mail than we ever would have received otherwise," notes Covert. NACDS is now adding a similar service, *Quick Clicks*, primarily aimed at associate members.

The American Industrial Hygiene Association, Fairfax, Virginia, achieved greater reach and lower costs (savings: \$20,000) by taking its annual report online. AIHA also uses [PR Newswire](#) for press releases, which "has not expanded our profession and industry coverage, but has easily and cost-effectively allowed us to target and hit other tangential markets we would like to hit more," says AIHA's Peter O'Neil.

There are several ways that you can leverage technology for lower costs and, at the very least, an incremental gain in coverage. *Push* techniques work for e-newsletters and broader circulation of releases and media kits, while *pull* techniques work with online newsrooms. Both serve to cut costs and make

associations more accessible to writers and editors. However, the need for personal relationships and phone work will always be there.