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WHITE PAPER

PR rising

Any organization's communicators who aren't creating and distributing content – in all formats across all channels – are missing a huge opportunity.

Public relations has always played a critical role at enterprises and organizations of all sizes. But for a number of reasons, PR's role, responsibilities and strategic importance are rising to new heights. Certainly, social media is a significant driver of PR's ascendance, as are digital and direct-to-consumer communications. But chief among them is the heightened importance of content – specifically, its creation and dissemination through today's maze of media channels, which public relations professionals have embraced as perhaps the most important part of their jobs.

Of course, public relations professionals have always produced a range of content, whether the stalwart press releases or bylined articles or speeches. Similarly, they have always been responsible for monitoring the media and navigating organizations through within and around it. So now that content plays a more important role in the communications mix than ever before – as social media has added a new, rich layer of complexity to the existing mediascape – who is better qualified to create and position that content than an organization's communications personnel?

“PR people used to have essentially a technician's role. They'd write speeches and put out press releases and photos,” notes Brenda Wrigley, an associate professor and chair of the department of public relations at Syracuse University. “Now there's a management function. A research function. A strategy function. It's a different job.”

This explains why marketing and advertising departments are not only calling on public relations staffers for their expertise, but also using the content created by them in their own efforts. Only through content can organizations engage audiences in the intelligent, nimble way they've come to expect. Content is the currency of communications. It drives demand and it drives opportunity.

To put it simply, if you're a professional communicator and you're not creating content on a regular basis, your brand is not being heard as loudly as it might otherwise be. And ultimately, the more content that public relations professionals can produce, the more robust discussions of issues that can occur.

The new breed of influencers

Before surveying the current state of affairs, it makes sense to examine the confluence of forces that has served to elevate public relations in the marketing mix. Over the course of its life as a marketing discipline, public relations has always been about influencing the so-called influencers on a client's behalf, whether via strategically placed bylined articles or nuts-and-bolts media relations. In the Internet era, however, the number of influencers has increased to an extent that's borderline unmanageable. Audiences, internal and external, are demanding more information and greater authenticity. They're demanding full transparency and as much access as possible to an organization's inner workings. And they want it two hours ago.

At the same time, media influencers are motivated by a far different set of factors than their predecessors. The professional journalists of the pre-Internet era wanted information fast and they wanted it without garnish. Modern-era journalists, whether formally affiliated with a traditional media behemoth or otherwise, tend to personalize their hunt. Owing to the rise of social media, they're driven not only by a desire to convey information quickly and accurately, but also by a desire to impress colleagues, friends and others with the breadth of their knowledge. In other words, welcome to an era in which information is a form of social currency.

The bad news is that, even as communicators versed in the "old ways" of doing business struggle to adapt, change is a near constant. The good news is that those changes play right to the strengths of the public relations profession. "The PR person in an organization is the touchstone for all communications within and outside the organization. Talking to audiences, plural, is our job," says Public Relations Society of America chair-elect Rosanna Fiske.

Not a day goes by that communicators don't monitor every word spoken or written, online or off, about the organizations for which they advocate. As a result, they are most familiar with the workings of the media, business-sector, and possibly even regulatory environments in which those organizations hope to thrive (or, at a bare minimum, exist peaceably), and are best positioned to steer those organizations through the multichannel labyrinth.

"Building and sustaining so many different relationships in so many different places at once – that's pretty much what we do," says Shelley Frost, a regional communications

manager at Allstate Insurance Company. “Our job is to understand the various stakeholder perspectives. We’re in the perfect position to help with this.”

Adds MaryLee Sachs, US chairman of Hill & Knowlton, “We’re the only discipline in marketing services that is two-way. We want to have these conversations. If there’s a better argument for public relations to assume those added responsibilities, I don’t know what it is.”

A content revolution?

The answer to the vexing question of “what’s next?,” then, includes both a little of the old (the relationship-building that backstops trust and authenticity) and a little of the new (an increased focus on content creation). It’s the creation of content that might strike many observers as adventurous, and with good reason.

While public relations professionals have always been content creators, technology only enabled public relations professionals to do so much – that is, prior to the Internet’s tsunami-like assault on established media channels.

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Brenda Wrigley
Associate Professor and Public
Relations Department Chair,
Syracuse University

Today, Allstate’s Frost acknowledges the various ways in which an organization can create and distribute content, “I don’t go to a single meeting without a camera. Even if I’m talking to a radio station, we can put that on our web site or they can put it on theirs.”

One of the major disadvantages of the Internet era is that he who shouts loudest often gets heard most clearly. But better content, Syracuse’s Wrigley believes, will foster more respectful, less strident debates on topics that may be near and dear to the hearts of an organization and its stakeholders.

“Everything has been turned on its head,” she notes. “For PR people, it used to be, ‘Okay, you have control of the organization’s message and it’s your responsibility to deliver it accurately, ethically and in a timely manner.’

Now, everyone has the opportunity to create opinion about a corporation and shape the debate. If you take the lead in creating content, you have a better chance of getting yourself heard.”

Along those lines, smart, lively content is what engages audiences. As much as an artfully executed advertisement may elicit a giggle or a nod, it is dwarfed in impact by a well-reasoned think piece, a smartly placed quote, a social-media push that advances an organization’s goals without hyping them obtrusively.

More than any other content, social media has captured the imagination of the public relations business. Given its rapid-response nature, it has allowed communications

departments to douse brushfires, whether in terms of misleading or erroneously reported information, before they morph into infernos. Social media has also become an invaluable one-on-one, real-time customer-service tool – the new customer service desk, if you will. Organizations once perceived as faceless and indifferent have humanized themselves simply by being responsive to customers’ tweets.

Of course, it’s not as simple as setting up a Facebook page or Twitter feed, and calling it an afternoon. Many such efforts have failed to make an impact because the individuals entrusted with nurturing them didn’t view the project as an ongoing effort. “Most other departments, or digital or ad agencies, when they come to the social-media space, they’re just focused on the gadgets,” Sachs says, arguing for public relations to own these projects. “But I’ve said it before: A puppy isn’t just for Christmas Day and a Facebook page isn’t just for a campaign. It’s a long-term commitment. You have to keep the conversation going.”

Beyond social media

In addition to social-media applications, public relations professionals are well positioned to contribute to comment threads on web sites and post on vertical-market bulletin boards. They can curate a range of seemingly disparate links or ghost-blog for company executives (we’ll refrain from passing judgment on the ethics of such a practice). They can produce audio and video packages to air at events and as side attractions during in-store experiences.

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Communicators entrusted with content production can even offer a new twist on activities that have long fallen under their purview. Take crisis communications. The traditional media alerts during a crisis can be supported with real-time video updates in the form of executive statements and raw footage from the field. Or take research, which used to be plopped in the hands of the media and, for all intents and purposes, abandoned.

“Research used to be a way to open the door to publicity,” says Mark Shadle, head of the corporate affairs practice at Zeno Group, a PR/communications consultancy. “Now what you do is bring it to the marketplace and frame it for your audiences. Then you listen to what people say about it and become a part of the conversation. You’re creating something.” The PRSA’s Fiske recommends taking it a step further: “Why not send some links along with the research, even to studies that say the

opposite of what you’re saying?”

It’s no less crucial for PR professionals to create content for internal audiences, both to keep large workforces apprised of company initiatives and branding efforts and to

make sure higher-ups avail themselves of the public relations team's expertise. "Internal communications have become so much more important. Employees can be a company's best ambassadors," Hill & Knowlton's Sachs stresses. Craig Sender, senior manager, public relations of the Copyright Clearance Center, agrees, but with a twist: "My biggest issue

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Mark Shadle
Head of Corporate Affairs
Practice, Zeno Group

is actually internal – getting the 250 people who work here to let me support what they're doing.” To that end, he recently took matters into his own hands, creating a presentation for a quarterly meeting. “I called it, basically, ‘Why PR Matters.’ I can't imagine I'm the only one who's done something like this.”

Or maybe a push by public relations pros towards being a content provider doesn't represent a change after all. One might argue, as Zeno Group's Shadle does, that he and his fellow communicators have always been in the content business, and that it is the channels and audiences that have evolved. “What's different is first, the technology, and second, the connections we're being asked to make on behalf of clients,” he argues. “The sphere of stakeholders is wider. Now we're reaching out to academics and NGOs. We're connecting the dots in a different way.”

2011 and beyond

Looking ahead, public relations professionals have no way of knowing where technology will lead them. It will fall on them to embrace new technology, whatever it is. But while technology has opened the door for a broader range of content, it has created problems in the form of information overload. Given her PRSA role, Fiske is one of the industry's most visible cheerleaders. But even she warns that public relations professionals run the risk of getting a little too smitten with all the tools now at their disposal. “The overabundance of information does not allow anyone a time to be really focused,” she says. “If you hear from your audience, ‘Don't just give us the new shiny technology or the fly-by-night application of the moment,’ you better listen. You can take it too far.”

Similarly, it will be incumbent on public relations professionals to embrace content creation and the broader range of responsibilities that comes with it – to keep earning that aforementioned “seat at the table.” The content revolution has long since begun at the country's top undergraduate communications programs. Wrigley notes that every student in Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications is required to take a multimedia storytelling course, regardless of major. “Whether you're studying PR or a journalism or filmmaking, it is absolutely essential to be able to tell stories, and to be able to tell them using a variety of tools,” she stresses.

Along those lines, in-house communications departments have embraced the new responsibilities. Take Allstate, which counts numerous individuals solely responsible for



content creation among its public relations team members. Frost describes one such individual's job thusly: "She tweets, runs our Facebook page and develops our e-newsletter. She does video, audio and digital images and is fluent in producing them for the web." The hiring of a content-production specialist has worked so well for Frost's communications unit that she's pushing for a company-wide training program, in which employees in multiple departments are instructed in these and other new-era communications techniques. "You still better be able to write well, though," she adds with a laugh.

Steered by the company's public relations staffers, Allstate's content has had an impact. It has both engaged audiences and driven demand and opportunity for the venerable firm, as similar content has for many others. And given that the Internet era has yet to reach adolescence, the content revolution promises to continue for years to come. It's worth repeating: any organization's communicators who aren't creating and distributing content – in all formats across all channels – are missing a huge opportunity.

About PR Newswire

PR Newswire (www.prnewswire.com) is the premier global provider of multimedia platforms and solutions that enable marketers, corporate communicators, sustainability officers, public affairs and investor relations officers to leverage content to engage with all their key audiences. Having pioneered the commercial news distribution industry 56 years ago, PR Newswire today provides end-to-end solutions to produce, optimize and target content – from rich media to online video to multimedia – and then distribute content and measure results across traditional, digital, social, search and mobile channels. Combining the world's largest multi-channel, multi-cultural content distribution and optimization network with comprehensive workflow tools and platforms, PR Newswire enables the world's enterprises to engage opportunity everywhere it exists. PR Newswire serves tens of thousands of clients from offices in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, and is a United Business Media company.

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