

# Consumer-generated media – challenges and opportunities for public relations

By Lloyd P. Trufelman, APR

The shift from a centralized news aggregation and distribution model to a more participatory model is changing how people view the world — and the businesses that we are responsible for publicizing. The roles of news providers, media companies, PR professionals and the public are changing rapidly — generating both unprecedented opportunity for those of us who adapt and insurmountable challenges for those who can't or won't.

Examples of consumer-generated media (CGM) abound. Blogs, podcasting, RSS feeds, wikis, collaborative publishing, instant messaging (IM) and smart mobs are some of the latest ways people receive, publish and even make news.

Why are these new information channels exploding? Consumers are changing the way they receive information. With this control over their consumption, they can decide on the merits of one channel over another. For

instance, podcasting is gaining traction because people aren't happy with the quality of the radio programming they can get over the increasingly corporate-consolidated airwaves. Meanwhile, blogs may very well be a reaction to the increasingly bland coverage presented by many local market editions of chain newspapers.

The effects of these new channels are dramatic. Blogs, of course, have been deemed responsible for the chaos surrounding the CBS reports on President Bush's National Guard duty as well as the firing of several key executives and the departure of Dan Rather. While the national broadcast media was scrambling to cover the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka, amateur videographers were posting their feeds directly to the Web — effectively scooping large media organizations.

One effect of this new type of news syndication is that the subjective filters that were supposedly removed from traditional news organizations — “we just

report the news, we don't judge” — are not only present in these new types of journalism, but they are often embraced. People will gravitate toward the media that resonates most closely to their personal views. (Consider the popularity of *The Drudge Report*.)

Both PR professionals and the media need to adapt to the new environment — and quickly. The information revolution is proceeding apace. Unless we keep up, we — and our clients — will be left behind.

## More channels

The opportunity afforded to PR professionals by this revolution is huge. The simple fact that there are more channels through which to publicize our clients is a major boon. Now when we have a story to pitch, we can use our existing media relationships to pitch traditional media, while simultaneously including literally hundreds of new channel arbiters that directly target the relevant industry or subject matter.

Micro-targeting the media will become easier, as more channels will bring increasing focus to industry segments. Reaching the influencers in certain channels has always been a challenge, but now there are publications and outlets that are directly focused on these people — and the influencers are finding them.

Media consumers are exhibiting much more control over the content they receive. A prime example of this is the emergence of RSS feeds. Now a person can determine the content and providers they want to receive their news from and have that content delivered directly to their choice of media tools, whether it's a computer, PDA, cell phone or, soon, their interactive television set. Having a client profiled over this type of channel directly to their core target group can have a greater impact than a national news story.

The challenges we face are similarly daunting. With so many outlets — and with more appearing every day — how

do we manage our contacts and outlets? How do we measure coverage and results? And how will our proposals be accepted? What kind of bias or negative exposure could result from approaching the wrong person — or doing so in the wrong way?

### What lies ahead

Focus and research will become an increasingly important and time-consuming part of the PR process. As news communities develop, we will need to become active participants, offering views, comments and angles on both breaking news and background issues. Contributing to blogs and wikis, researching the new podcasts and aggregators, and simply keeping up with tech-

nology will become more important to PR professionals. Just as it was with traditional media, we will need to cultivate relationships with these new publishers.

The implications for traditional media outlets are just as important. Many of these were discussed in "The State of the News Media 2005," a report recently published by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Once considered the guardian of the truth, "the journalism of verification has ceded ground ... to a new journalism of assertion," the study found.

As participatory journalism expands, it may become more important than ever for traditional media to return to the journalism of verification, becoming the objective third party that people can rely on for an unbiased report.

Media giants can utilize the opportunities presented by these new media outlets to their advantage. More and more video footage of on-the-scene news reports come from amateurs. Fresh ideas for news stories and reports can emerge from popular consumer-generated media reports. Affiliations with local CGM sites (i.e. *The New York Times'* acquisition of About.com) can offer a localized content and channel previously unavailable to national organizations.

The challenges for traditional media organizations are obvious: They are in a fight for consumers' attention. They are seeing erosion in brand value as their luster fades and advertisers try to reach consumers who are switching to alternative media sources. Unless these companies

adapt, they will find themselves continuing to lose market share and value. How closely will they have to emulate their new competitors to retain market share — and how will that hurt them in terms of credibility?

The key for PR professionals is to stay on top of the new technologies, incorporate as much as possible into daily activities, and utilize the new opportunities as they develop. Confront challenges with creativity and you may be able to open up new vistas of visibility for your clients. **T**



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