

Social tools offer no cure for unearned media

Lloyd Trufelman runs New York City-based Tylon SMR, which focuses on traditional PR and new technology for the media and telecommunications industries. Prior to starting Tylon in 1990, Trufelman held executive PR posts at MTV Networks, the Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau, WNYC, Howard J. Rubenstein Associates and CBS Masterworks. His writing has been featured in national newspapers and journals.

By John O'Dwyer

How do you define social media?

Trufelman: The common understanding of it defaults to channels and platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Social media has its origins in the emergence of blogs around 2002. I pick that date because a former staff member and I wrote a piece for PRSA's *Tactics* publication that year where we talked about the PR opportunities blogs could offer. To the best of my knowledge it was the first published piece of its kind on the new phenomenon.

Social media represents the transition from the traditional one-to-many dynamic to peer-to-peer. A new platform taking hold is foursquare, which combines geographical location with messaging. By "checking-in" to the service, you can tell friends where you are, get recommendations for things to do, and leave your own reviews, such as a tip of what to order at a restaurant. Social media can be described as the creation of new channels of communication.

Is all the hype surrounding social media justified?

Trufelman: In some cases PR firms are overemphasizing social media, not based on considered analysis of effectiveness, but out of fear of being seen as not sufficiently "out of the box" enough by clients.

Our position is that though social media is a useful new tool for PR, it needs to be put in perspective. New communications technologies do not replace previous ones; they augment them and become catalysts for adjusting the media mix.

I don't understand why PR firms have separate social media and digital media practices. With rare exceptions, everyone's media habits are a big mash-up of print, online, video clips, podcasts, messaging and e-mail. There isn't a situation where the walls are distinct.

I was at a media conference at a major university several months ago. In the opening keynote address, the President of the university said, "Now that we have a blog and Twitter, we don't need PR anymore. People don't need to find out about us from the news media, they can hear

from us directly in our own words."

So a university-controlled blog offering officially approved content will have the same credibility and impact with key publics as a carefully vetted newspaper story, independent blog post or thoughtful radio/podcast interview?

Those who think because their company has a Twitter handle or Facebook page, all other existing PR vehicles are now obsolete, brings to mind those who earlier this decade found out the hard way that setting up a blog was not the single magic PR bullet they thought it would be. Social media can be a powerful PR tool, but only when used as part of an integrated approach that builds on the foundation of earned media coverage.

Kind of like a golfer getting a new hi-tech putter but then throwing out the rest of his clubs thinking he has all that he needs to play well. Sorry, but you need all the clubs!

How is social media used to help clients?

Trufelman: The thing you have to do is extend the reach of earned media by using social media platforms. For example, let's say a cable network client produces a new show and receives beneficial coverage in a newspaper. What you have to do now is take that secured coverage and spread it around using Twitter, Facebook, blog postings, etc.

It's key to point out that you are associated with the cable network and you don't want readers to take your word that the show is great. Let them read for themselves.

Companies who insist they can conduct their own media outreach through social media are fooling themselves. Twitter accounts can be set up for clients and you can help them manage them, but it's not nearly as effective as getting third party endorsement in the Twittersphere. People who are constantly blowing their own horn on Twitter are not doing the right thing.

How do you measure the effectiveness of social media?

Trufelman: You have to look at increases in website traffic as measure by unique visitors, volume of transactions, or downloads. Also can track blog postings and responses.

Recently, we were able to get enough of a buzz on Twitter for a client that they were the number one topic for a short period one night.

What's the difference between this and getting a front page placement on a newspaper?

Good results are good results, whether in print or online.

When will we hit the saturation point with social media?

Trufelman: The thing about all these platforms is that you can turn them off if you want. You don't have to be notified every time someone posts to your Facebook page or a friend Tweets. There's just as much technology to keep you from getting info you don't want as there is for getting info you do want.

New technology makes legitimate content even more important.

What's your take on the struggle traditional media like newspapers and magazines are facing?

Trufelman: Their biggest challenge is to stop trying to keep alive out-of-date business models. It reminds me of record companies in the late '90s insisting on selling CDs when clearly the file-sharing/downloading model of sites like Napster was what consumers wanted. ●



Lloyd Trufelman

Media Briefs

Starbucks adds USA Today

Starbucks said in March that it has starting selling copies of *USA Today* in its 6,500 company-operated U.S. stores, ending its run of selling only the *New York Times* and local papers to customers.

The paper has a circulation of about 1.9M compared to the Times' 928K daily and 1.4M on Sunday.

The company cited data showing consumers prefer to get their news from national newspapers as well as "more sources." Starbucks president Cliff Burrows said the move is part of the company's effort to let customers "personalize" their "Starbucks experience."