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TRENDS, INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS FOR PR FIRMS

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The Online Rush to Fill an Ever-Widening News Hole *By Lloyd P. Trufelman, President & CEO, Trylon SMR*

From a new media perspective, there is little difference from the way the industry was five years ago. It's more a question of how information dissemination has evolved.

Things are moving faster and the news hole is larger. The old days of sending press releases to fax machines are long gone. Now it's all about the Internet and e-mail. The challenge with fax machines was always "the last 10-feet" — how would the paper make it from the machine to a reporter's desk. That problem has disappeared. Now it's all done by e-mail and even instant messenger.

With a bigger news hole, everyone is in competition with each other. Everybody is more or less in the 24/7 multimedia newsgathering and dissemination business.

However, with all the layoffs at major newspapers and magazines, there is a real danger of a drop-off in editorial quality. The old model of reporters carefully vetting their own stories, which are then vetted by editors, raises a question of current accuracy and credibility because of the cutbacks.

The newspapers' sole advantage in this new media world is that they can cover things more comprehensively than other media. Ironically then, they seem to be shooting themselves in the foot with all the cutbacks.

Nevertheless, while reporters are being laid off in the daily newspapers and hiring in journalism is slowing down, some hiring in PR and marketing is going up. While that might be good for the PR industry, it has wider societal implications if the trend continues. It means less coverage of real news, and more coverage of manufactured news and corporate spin.

In an effort to fill that ever-increasing news hole, bloggers have become an essential part of the information dissemination process.

If you take the word "blogger" or "blog" and change it to "pamphlet" or "newsletter," from an editorial point of view, it's pretty much the same.

A PR practitioner's dealings with a blogger need to be straightforward, focused, and targeted. In addition, the criteria for approaching a blogger isn't much different from approaching a regular reporter.

For some reason though, the PR industry has put up a kind of artificial wall. As a result, a lot of the outreach that PR firms should be conducting towards bloggers has been taken away by so-called viral marketing and buzz marketing firms which are in essence pitching bloggers but usually in the worst way possible from a PR point of view.

The small difference between pitching bloggers and pitching traditional reporters and editors is mainly the result of hyper-specialization. Many bloggers maintain legitimate, well-researched, well-executed blogs. The only difference is the lack of a major infrastructure behind the blog, with regards editing and vetting.

There is going to be a merge between bloggers and traditional news organizations. Bloggers realize that any connection to a larger mainstream media organization helps them in terms of research, standards, and the possibility for increased ads sales.

For the media organizations, the more they get active in the blogosphere, the more they move away from the print model, which for all intents and purposes, in terms of demographic trends, is dead.

In one respect then, newspapers, the print media, and the mainstream media, are becoming more like bloggers in that they have to move faster.

Sometimes there is material that a print newspaper, or even an online version of a newspaper, would be reluctant to have in their news columns. So they use the blog as a sort of overflow, putting in material that's not completely checked out, or not 100 percent "newsworthy."

At the end of the day though, the first thing you need is good content. If you have good content then you're going to have an audience. And if you're going to have an audience, then you're going to be able to sell ads. Unless you're running a dot org site, you're going to be interested in the largest audience possible.

While print media and online are merging, the move by radio and television online is not as fast. However, that's basically due to bandwidth. Increased bandwidth to business and the home is the next major trend.

Radio and TV stations now realize that they need to run an online component as robust as their on-air component.

Often, radio stations will give a report and then recommend listeners download a specific podcast from the radio station's web site for more details. That, in turn, drives traffic to the site and builds brands. It also gives increased ad sales opportunities.

It is the same with television stations, although that's more difficult because video bandwidth is more cumbersome and video files move slower.

Since YouTube launched, TV stations have realized that the Iron Curtain that had been wrapped around the industry emphasizing "broadcast quality," doesn't really seem to matter as much.

Two years from now everything is just going to move faster. The drop-off trend in print media from physical print, to newspapers, to online, will accelerate. Eventually, a printed newspaper will be a premium product, available as a convenience for those who want to pay extra for it. And it won't be too long before a number of major dailies stop printing on newsprint altogether.

Inroads made with television moving online will accelerate and more online video will result in less traditional TV and cable. And with mobile communications, increased technology will make content easier to stream and transmit on to cell phones.

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