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PR Technique: Newswires - Working with the wires - and their newfangled offerings [SH] Newswires now offer countless ways to slice and dice your message. As Craig McGuire reports, the first step in working with them is knowing who you need to reach.

STEVE LILIENTHAL - 14 Feb 2000 00:00

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Today there are so many channels - faxes, e-mail and (need we say it?)

the Web - for distributing press releases and other information that the

major newswires have had to constantly add new services to stay

relevant.

And they are staying relevant. Waving everything from vertical marketing schemes to 51 flavors of multimedia, wire services are tripping over each other chasing PR dollars. The trick for the pursued PR professional, however, is to work with the wires to select the right tools for each campaign.

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The many services newswires are packaging for clients include customized distribution, streaming and archived multimedia, e-monitoring and measuring, database access, Web posting, vertical targeting, media mapping and research, to name a few.

Gregg Castano, Business Wire's vice president of national sales, says that in working with the wires, the number one priority 'is identifying who it is you want to reach in the media and investment community.'

Business Wire, like most distribution services, has developed an extensive network of distribution points. Once a core audience has been identified, the PR pro selects - and can even customize - a circuit (or, media list) for dissemination. These vary from sprawling, mainstream national and international circuits with cross-demographic appeal to specific, narrow niche targets, such as trade publications.

Moving beyond the wire

The wires are also getting involved in other types of media.

In October, Business Wire competitor PR Newswire worked with Bozell Camstra Advertising to orchestrate a media event on behalf of the State of Pennsylvania to introduce an economic development initiative. 'It included a live Web-cast from Philadelphia and a simulcast from a remote location 200 miles away in St. Mary's,' says Marlin Collingwood, partner and director at Bozell Camstra.

Collingwood explains that he first began organizing similar Web-casts internally but now advises using wire services to help.

'Forget that doing it ourselves costs four times as much,' says Collingwood.

'Listen, I'm a PR guy, not a tech guy. I don't want my people worrying about the technical aspects. Just focus on the content.'

The Reader's Digest association recently resorted to multimedia channels to get out an important message. Last month, less than two years after pulling out of a painful financial tailspin, the company was ready to report the seventh consecutive quarter of earnings growth.

Minutes after the 4 pm bell sounded on Wall Street on January 26, the release announcing the earnings was shot out over the wires. Soon after, PR Newswire began Web-casting a video of Reader's Digest chairman and CEO Thomas Ryder discussing the earnings. Simultaneously, a different version of the speech was broadcast over the company's intranet to employees around the world. At 8:30 the next morning Reader's Digest held a live teleconference hosted by PR Newswire partner Visual Data Corp. The price tag for the entire operation: a little under dollars 10,000.

'Even before the conference call went off, we got eight inches in The Wall Street Journal, six inches in Bloomberg, The New York Times picked up the Bloomberg piece and we also got placement in Dow Jones, The New York Post and Gannet,' says William Adler, corporate communications director at Reader's Digest. 'We never could have gotten that with just e-mails or faxes. And imagine how much advertising would have cost for that level of exposure.'

Other newswires are specializing in specific vertical marketing.

'For our 2,300 clients, we distribute targeted company news announcements over the Internet,' says Amy Orebaugh, PR manager at InternetWire. 'Current vertical channels include technology, business/finance, entertainment, travel/leisure, health/lifestyle, education, medical/biotech, food, legal, government, nonprofit organizations and sports.'

In addition, wires have realized they can make money offering PR pros ways to extend the scope and shelf life of their presentations. These services include everything from online archiving of multimedia, as with Business Wire's Newstream.com service, to PR immortality in Lexis-Nexis.

'In this, the day and age of the recurring Lexis-Nexis syndrome, it's absolutely critical that you get your information entered into databases,' says Jeff Eller, managing director at New Jersey-based public affairs agency Public Strategies. 'Really, the best way to do that is with US Newswire and the other wires.'

The next generation of reporters

As PR professionals demand more for their clients' money, newswires continue to expand their product lines. The industry will likely see more deals like PRN's recent acquisition of Internet monitoring service eWatch from WAVO Corp., initiating an aggressive push beyond its core electronic distribution service.

'We use both (PRN and eWatch), so for us it's a natural pairing in terms of coordinating the front-end distribution and the back-end monitoring,' says Jon Austin, managing director of corporate communications at Northwest Airlines.

All of this technology is just a sampling of what's to come - with many PR professionals already bracing for the future.

'I think we're going to have to start paying attention to the next generation of reporters and the tools they'll use,' says Public Strategies' Eller.

'Just look at the hand-held wireless devices like the BlackBerry and the Palm 7 (which allow journalists to receive media alerts from anywhere).

The next wave of reporters is going to be virtual and we've got to be ready for them.'

DOS AND DON'TS

DO

- 1 Define the target audiences you need to reach.
- 2 Use multimedia offerings - including photos, graphics, audio and video - with text announcements.
- 3 Make sure your press releases are reaching the databases.
- 4 Write clear and compelling headlines and lead paragraphs to distinguish your release from the 50 others on the editor's desk.

DON'T

- 1 Buy national distribution from a wire if your campaign is local; don't overexpose a local news release by sending it out across the country.
- 2 Be afraid to ask questions; the reps at the wire services are there to serve you.
- 3 Forget to include after-hours or weekend contact information on important releases.
- 4 Spam journalists with too many press releases.

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