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Internet: How to put the IT into publicity

Craig McGuire - 24 Jan 2005 00:00

You may be web-savvy enough to track reporters or post your expert sources on ProfNet. But can you make the most of blogs, RSS, and other new tools?

Since the days of the internet boom way, way back in the 1990s, perhaps no technological advancement has been as empowering as the proliferation of blogs.

Blogs are usually updated daily, using software designed to accommodate users with little or no technical background. Because it is a relatively easy-to-use and inexpensive medium for communication, many PR pros and novices alike have launched blogs.

For instance, Waltham, MA-firm Chen PR recently launched a blog to promote immediate market observations for its clients, using the blog creation tool at blogger.com. But while Chen created its blog using one of the standard templates, it quickly revamped the template to more closely project its own website's look and feel.

Still, despite the relative ease it found jumping onto the blog bandwagon, agency principal Barb Heffner says it is imperative that you realize what you are getting into. "Creating a blog is like acquiring a pet - once you've launched one, you need to be fully committed to it," says Heffner.

Already, she adds, blogging is changing the role of communications as the media strategy for most of today's major product launches and promotional events usually incorporates some sort of outreach.

For a publicist, generating blog buzz among the hard-core audiences that devour certain online offerings is crisp currency to be exchanged for client approval.

That's not a bad exchange rate when you consider all an outreach campaign costs is a compelling e-mail or two to be disseminated to the thousands of bloggers posting daily.

Furthermore, PR pros are not only advised to launch blogs and regularly reach out to the blogging community at large for exposure, but should also encourage clients to start blogging.

Given the level of commitment required to maintain a blog, helping a client blog can draw you both closer. Also coming into the mainstream vernacular is the acronym RSS, otherwise known as Real Simple Syndication.

This lightweight XML (all you really need to know about eXtensible Markup Language is that your RSS feed often comes labeled as XML) format enables your web master to more easily gather and distribute news. Standard web-based news dissemination has traditionally

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involved heavy HTML coding and knowledge of other web- content development applications. RSS files provide news updates from a website in a simple form for your computer to reproduce.

From the perspective of the recipients, their computers read these files using programs called news aggregators, which collect RSS feeds from various websites and provide it to them in a simple form. While there are still many kinks that need to be worked out with the technology, RSS is rapidly gaining momentum.

As assistant news editor and communications specialist at Texas A&M University's agricultural communications department, Blair Fannin has built up an RSS feed that currently receives 700 hits per month.

On the surface, this may not appear to be a staggering circulation list. But, when you consider the e-mail listserv that subscribes to the feed includes more than 500 regular readers in the agricultural industry and news media, it has a reach comparable to many industry trade publications.

Still sitting on the fence?

Then consider that Fannin actually had no computer-programming experience when taking over the lead in the RSS project in August 2003. "Once I stared at the code long enough, I figured out how to serve up our RSS feed," Fannin says. "RSS is pretty simple once you get the hang of it, so I don't think even the novice communicators will have a hard time learning what it does and how to implement it."

Once you have made your content easily available in RSS format and have started channeling it out to subscribers, many of which will likely be bloggers looking to beef up their own content, Fannin recommends conducting a survey to gauge who your actual users are.

For those on the client side that are still a bit wary, ask around at your agency. Chances are, you will be surprised at how far RSS has penetrated the industry.

"We are now starting to include RSS technology in all websites, press rooms, and even internet press kits," says Mike Spataro, EVP, Weber Shandwick, web relations. "We are now able, for instance, to use RSS to combine a client's press announcement with current news to make their announcement even more relevant to reporters and consumers."

Hill & Knowlton has also been recommending RSS feeds for some time for clients who want to give media sources an option other than e-mail for being updated when a press release or piece of content is added to a company site, says agency spokeswoman Yahaira Castro.

"Another way we have recommended using RSS feeds is between sites so that content from a partner site, for example, is constantly synced up to particular pages of our press room," Castro says. "And, we have recommended RSS feeds as part of a reputation-management program for certain clients, such as Yahoo."

Industry service providers, such as PR Newswire and Business Wire, are also well positioned to take advantage of adoption. Both debuted RSS feeds last year. PR Newswire came off the blocks by making content available through RSS feeds on both its public website and its media-only website.

Business Wire offers RSS feeds that are only accessible by registered journalists. Both Microsoft and Apple will reportedly include RSS capabilities in the new versions of their operating systems. Apple's OS X Tiger is slated for debut later this year and Microsoft's Longhorn should be out in 2006.

Technique tips

Do reach out for assistance to get up to speed. There is no shame in asking 'dumb' questions

Do synchronize online and offline communications and make sure your messages align perfectly

Do budget resources properly to manage the use of your online tools

Don't let the internet consume all communication initiatives. Break bread with your clients/partners on a regular basis

Don't launch your online communications program without fully understanding the long-term commitment of using such tools

Don't force-feed technology on senior executives who aren't ready for it. Take a gentler approach

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