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Reaching a different type of influencer

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The traditional model for analyst relations (AR) gave tech vendors a tool to influence industry analysts who develop paid reports for sale through independent research and consulting firms.

Today, with so much more noise in the market and such a need for reliable, independent validation, AR is now as likely to engage earlier and leverage analysts to build brand as much as to build buzz.

AR's appeal has also spread beyond b-to-b tech into such verticals as pharmaceuticals, entertainment, hospitality, professional services, consumer goods, and more.

"Changes in AR are not being driven by analysts, vendors, or PR people," says Joshua Reynolds, SVP of messaging, positioning, and AR at Hill & Knowlton.

Indeed, AR is evolving based on who is asking for guidance and the kinds of questions they are asking.

"AR has emerged as one of the best avenues to test and refine vendors' messages and marketing strategies," notes Reynolds, who has named this emerging form of AR "advanced reconnaissance."

AR is also being viewed as more than just a sales driver for tech vendors. In fact, Dave Stein, CEO of ES Research Group, says this was one of the main reasons he founded his company.

"We saw a tremendous vacuum in the \$5 billion-\$7 billion sales performance improvement industry," he says. "With hundreds of companies, there was no independent source of intelligence."

Consider that when eBay was looking to articulate its new Social Commerce vision, H&K's AR arm tapped Gartner, IDC, Forrester, and Jupiter for its perspective.

"Analysts at each of these firms were already tracking the collision between social networking and e-commerce," notes Reynolds. "We were able to connect eBay's message with existing [market] trends."

In terms of make-up, since 2001, the IT analyst industry has undergone simultaneous consolidation and fragmentation and analyst firms are now more selective in how they work with non-client companies, notes

Michael Young, SVP at Access Communications.

"In years past, analyst houses were keen to take briefings with non-client companies as an entree to build business and relationships," Young says. "That polarity has shifted dramatically, and while they still do take briefings, selectively, they are far less willing or likely to act as press references without a paid relationship."

Young also notes that industry shakeout has led to consolidation of big houses into the big four: Forrester, IDC, Gartner, and Yankee.

"AR continues to evolve as new analyst firms emerge, new ways of delivering information arise, and the profile of analysts change," says Ray Wang, principal analyst, Forrester Research.

Wang encourages AR pros to build relationships with the growing number of newer analysts.

"Many of the large firms create situations where the experienced analysts no longer have financial upside and incentives to remain with the firm, while continuing to hire lower-cost replacements," he explains, adding that there is growing pressure from bloggers and other experts who are now gaining ground in influence.

"Some analyst firms have been better than others in supporting an analysts' freedom to express themselves via blogs; others have done a better job creating interactive forums, producing RSS feeds, and keeping content available on-demand for clients," he says.

New influencers

One such analyst is Joshua Greenbaum, who leverages a blog to publicize his expertise and analysis in tracking multiple industries - tech, pharma, telecom, etc. - for his boutique firm Enterprise Applications Consulting.

"But not every company knows how to deal with this new medium," he laments. "[They're] still trying to figure out what I am and how to interact with me."

Meanwhile, AR pros must continually adapt to navigate an evolving ecosystem of influencers as online, digital communities rise and relationships overlap, says Susan Galer, MD of Burson-Marsteller's technology practice.

"Along with the evolving, multifaceted roles analysts now assume, we're finding that more pragmatic, metric-based industry analyst relations programs are very much the norm," she says. "For example, the reality is most organizations have a defined scope of sometimes-limited resources for industry analyst relations."

To counter, Burson developed an ROI-based methodology that allows clients to allocate AR efforts based upon proven scope of influence that will help achieve specific business objectives. Such services and strategies can only proliferate.

"The future of AR is going to be a combination of messaging and strategy, and over time become a mix of competitive intelligence, strategic planning, messaging, and support," Reynolds says. "We are already seeing at several companies the head of AR now reports directly into strategy. That's where the industry is headed."

Ways AR can positively impact PR

Independent validation

AR secures industry analysts to positively comment about a product, partnership, or program that is in need of publicity.

Messaging

AR solicits input from analysts to test and vet messaging to formulate approaches that resonate with target audiences. It can also help with a comparative analysis on competitors' messaging.

Extends company references

An analyst may incorporate references to the company/product into future interviews with press, include them in comparative published research, and/or include mentions in public-facing commentary via blogs or other reports.

Tactical guidance

AR can tap analysts to provide strategic advice in formulating PR/marketing campaigns based on current trends, help process feedback from customers and partners, and leverage analysis and insight to re-direct media pitches.

Intelligence

Working with analysts, AR can unearth analyst data, uncover and track industry trends, and develop competitive analyses with top competitors to power PR campaigns.