

Traditional PR versus social media

Nicolina Meerholz from The Line, a well-established boutique PR and communications company, offers an overview on traditional public relations versus social media campaigns.

Public relations (PR) is a very broad term – it covers a wide spectrum of various brand-building services, across a number of different platforms. Traditionally, a big part of PR was garnering brand exposure by creating and disseminating content for clients, generally in the form of copy and images, that would be used in print, online or broadcast media. However, the influx of social media has changed the landscape somewhat, as traditional PR is no longer the only viable means of improving a brand's below-the-line media exposure.

Social media can be used to great effect to do the same thing – if implemented correctly, it can be leveraged as a powerful marketing tool to really push your brand to a wide audience. However, although the outcome is comparatively similar to traditional PR, in the way that the brand will receive added exposure, when it comes to social media, the “how and why” remain very different from traditional PR.

In order to better understand how each brand-building service can be implemented into your personal marketing strategy in order to make the biggest impact, it is important to better understand the roles of these two PR mediums, as well as their differentiating factors. Here are the main ones:

They don't necessarily speak to the same audience: The audience for traditional PR is captive, as they will have accessed the information deliberately. For example, they will have bought or subscribed to a particular publication willingly. With social media on the other hand, the audience is casual – they will have stumbled upon the information while browsing online, or the information will have been shared with them by someone who thinks they may be interested in the subject matter.

The content is different: Content for traditional PR allows for detail, giving clients an opportunity to educate their audiences in their particular fields of expertise. The content needs to be well crafted and should have a unique angle in order to generate the most below-the-line exposure. The intended lifespan of the content is usually quite long – ranging from a day (newspapers and online articles) to a couple of months (magazines and business publications).

However, the content for social media is short and sweet – it must grab the audience's attention in a couple of sentences or less. The most important thing about social content is that it's the brand's voice – it is casual and to the point, and it needs to be consistent and appealing to the audience it is targeting. The lifespan of the content is short and must be acted on quickly in order to remain relevant.

The intensity of the conversation varies: Traditional PR acts as a go-between for the client and any publication that needs an expert in the client's particular field. The message must make the audience see the client as the most knowledgeable and up-to-date providers in their field. PR agencies must be in constant contact with journalists and reporters in order to facilitate this kind of exposure. To a large extent, this kind of conversation is one directional.

With social media on the other hand, there are thousands of conversations occurring simultaneously. The audience can sift out what topics are trending and join in immediately. They can also use this medium as a sounding board, and if managed diligently, it can be powerful means of providing added customer service and building customer relations and loyalty.

The relationships required for maximum reach is different: For traditional PR, PR agencies need to maintain and develop well-established relations with media contacts, as the exposure generated is dependent on ensuring that the content gets to the right person via the right media channels. Social media is much more direct – it allows you to reach the audience directly.

Getting the timing right: In traditional PR, deadlines can be tight, but there is usually time for adequate planning and client-approval processes to be put into place. With social media however, timing is critical. These platforms functions on a 24/7 basis, and messages must be topical and up-to-date. This medium is unforgiving when it comes to mistakes and late responses, which may damage the brand if not handled in time.

End results may differ: A successful traditional PR strategy will ensure that a well-planned press release will get a lot of exposure for the brand. This exposure has a broad base to draw from – ranging from newspapers, consumer magazines and B2B publications, right through to online websites and blogs. This means that the exposure will be staggered and will therefore be visible for a substantially longer period.

Using social media platforms to generate brand exposure will take a lot longer to establish. The success will not be noticeable immediately, but relies on building an audience of loyal followers. The message will only be displayed for a short time, but constant communication will keep the audience interested. Once an audience has been established, this form of marketing allows for excellent real-time marketing.

In my experience, although social media and PR differ in lots of ways, they usually get the best results when they work hand-in-hand with a campaign that includes both of them, along with some traditional advertising. The important thing is that there has to be a solid strategy in place that embraces all the marketing avenues that are currently available and applicable to a particular client. If these avenues are handled professionally and consistently, it's possible to take a brand to new heights.