

How to Use the Internet for Public Relations



A Primer for Public Relations
Professionals new to cyberspace

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Introduction



Myths and Realities of the Internet

What is the Internet?

- The Internet isn't a "thing". It's millions of independent voices.
 - A network of over millions of computers
 - Located in over 160 countries
 - Linked together with high speed data lines
 - No central "switchboard"; simply a set of electronic connections and language protocols

How was the Internet created?

- Born in the late 1960's
- Funded by the Pentagon to facilitate communication among Defense scientists
- First experimental network connected personnel at four universities
- Graphical tools like Mosaic and Netscape turned it into a consumer phenomenon in the 1990s

Who controls the Internet?

- No one controls the content
- It's an anarchic, online global community
- Central control of registration of all “.com” domain names
- Legislators and regulators would like to:
 - Prevent pornography, protect children
 - Crack down on improper stock trading

Who can publish on the Internet?

- Anyone with an Internet connection
- Verification not required
- Server space often provided by ISP
- Individuals, corporations, activists, governments, etc.
- That's why it's the world's "information frontier"

What are these weird Internet Addresses?

- Organizational Internet addresses
 - ORG Organization
 - MIL Military
 - EDU Education
 - COM Commercial
 - NET Network
 - GOV Government

Internet Address (cont'd)

- Geographical Internet addresses
 - josephinedoe@mindlink.bc.ca
 - joedoe@finance.gov.bc.ca
- Country codes
 - UK United Kingdom
 - IT Italy
 - JP Japan
- American Internet addresses never use US

The Information Superhighway

- The Internet isn't the "Information Superhighway" yet. Why?
 - Too user-unfriendly for ordinary consumers
 - It's slow, slow, slow
 - Severe restriction of bandwidth
 - Connection, transmission problems
- Having said that, it now has over 150 million subscribers worldwide and is growing at 20% annually

Mechanics of the Internet

- ISPs
 - Internet Service Providers
- URL
 - Uniform Resource Locator or Web address
- Web Browsers (Netscape or MS Explorer)
 - “Window” into the World Wide Web Netscape
- http
 - Hyper Text Transfer Protocol


Who Uses the Internet?

- More and more Net users are well-off, well-educated baby boomers, of both sexes
 - 45 % of Net users are women
 - 67% are over 30, 19% over 50
 - 42% have household income above US\$50,000
 - 73% have a college education

What are they using the Internet for?

- Information retrieval and research (75%)
- Email (57%)
- News (43%)
- Researching products for purchase (36%)
- Actually purchasing online (10%)
- Visit the same sites regularly (57%)

Source: 1998 survey; data may have changed!



How the Internet is Being Used by Organized Groups

Corporations

- Selling consumer Products
 - Books/CD's/music/computers
 - Buying and selling
- Providing services
 - Customer support
- Investor relations
 - Shareholder communications, electronic filings
- Reputation management
 - Attempting to build 'online communities'

Use by governments, politicians

- Government information
 - Legislation, program information, debates
 - Products for sale (eg. Reports)
- Political action
 - Grassroots political action
 - Communication to members of political parties, campaign workers
 - Propaganda in cyberspace (Jesse Ventura example)

Use by unions

- Communication to membership
- Campaign propaganda
 - Boycotts, daily information to rally the troops
 - Recruitment of allies
- Networking with other activists
- Monitor and support of world-wide labour campaigns

Use by Interest Groups

- Activist groups very organized
 - On the Net, issues propagate very quickly
 - “Local” issues quickly become “global”
 - Inexpensive
 - Easy, quick to recruit allies
- Example: boycott campaigns
 - Nike, Aspartame, Mcdonalds

Forums for citizen discussion

- Investor sites
 - Motley Fool, Silicon Investor
 - Everything from serious advice to rumors on the street
 - Regulators increasingly concerned about abuse
 - Eg., planting misleading rumors to tout a stock
- Newsgroups and Listservs
 - Heavily used by activist groups
 - Media often check during research



Using the Net for Research

What you can find on the Net

- Information about themselves from
 - Corporations, associations, interest groups
- Reference data
 - Libraries, encyclopedias, compendia
- News Coverage
- Grassroots opinion
 - Newsgroups, Listservs (electronic newsletters)
 - Over 100 million voices

Using search engines


- Vital to sort through an avalanche of information
- Main search engines
 - Excite, Infoseek, Altavista, Go2Com
 - Search both World Wide Web and Newsgroups
- Only 25-50% of Web is searched, indexed
 - Use more than one search engine
 - Consider a meta-search engine like COPENIC, which queries multiple search engines at once

Using Web indexes

- Search engines use automated software to search and index
- Indexes use human researchers who apply judgement
- Yahoo.com is best example
 - Amount of information is less but quality is higher
 - Often a good place to start looking

Using commercial services

- Use software to track key words
- May then analysis to what they find to determine
 - Who's talking?
 - Who's listening?
 - What is the significance and trend?
- Your agency can learn to do this, but it involves
 - Steep learning curve, much labour



Using the Net to Speak Your Piece

Using the Web

- You can create a website for your clients, or for your practice
- Having an effective voice requires understanding the unique dynamics of the medium
 - It's interactive, so don't just post your corporate brochure
 - It permits one-on-one communication, so don't broadcast...narrowcast
 - If possible, create an online community

Using Newsgroups

- You can visit, listen and speak
- Apply good public relations principles
 - Don't lie or spread misinformation
 - Dialogue with truth-seekers who have an open mind
 - Don't debate with ideologues; reason with the uncommitted
 - Line up third-party allies

Broadcast Email

- You can broadcast email to reach large groups. Just remember:
 - Nobody likes spam
 - Always offer an opportunity to be taken off list
 - Keep it short
 - Use sub-headlines
 - Use a signature identifying yourself and your company
 - Use a P.S. -- it's almost always read first

Summing up

- Does the Internet change everything about public relations?
 - It does create a new medium which is growing rapidly, becoming very important, and which has its own rules. We have to learn those rules
 - It doesn't change the basic dynamics of public relations itself:
 - Reputations are one part good works and one part communication
 - You get the reputation you earn