

COLUMNS

PR and media in rapid mobile-powered transition

June 28, 2016



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By **Vanessa Horwell**

The global public relations industry, while growing, is teetering on the precipice of decline: growth slowed to 5 percent in 2015, according to new research. It is a troubling spot for the sector to be in, especially as PR remains incredibly valuable to businesses and their marketing teams. How valuable?

Data from one PR technology company shows that PR generates conversion rates 10 to 50 times that of advertising conversions.

What the company does not quite specify is what type of PR that data point encompasses.

Perhaps the lack of clarity echoes the broader issue at hand that it is hard to say what public relations in 2016 really is anymore.

Hacking it

Now that any brand or individual can earn media coverage on the back of practically any news or information released into the digital domain, PR has become an integrated discipline in itself spanning far beyond traditional media relations to social media in all its forms, content marketing and sales enablement.

Media relations too, is an evolving concept in itself.

Currently, 83 percent of journalists use just 10 percent of press releases they receive.

Although some agencies may have you believe otherwise, PR has never been just about press releases. But for the longest time, they were a reliable message delivery vessel especially for business-to-business companies.

Of course, companies still want that direct avenue to the media, and they still expect their PR agencies to provide them one. But the relationship between companies and the media has irrevocably changed.

Defining PR in the current media landscape

Now that every company has a story, and there are a million or more ways to tell them, what does "the media" really mean anymore?

Journalists, bloggers and "influencers" are all high-value targets for securing earned coverage. And where is the line between media, PR and advertising in a more disintermediated landscape in which branded content and thought leadership articles can be just as impactful as traditional journalism and certainly more measurable from an ROI perspective?

From a PR perspective, third-party validation from the media is supposed to foster trust between a brand and an

audience. That is why companies invest in PR, after all: to grow their brand awareness, to build a stronger relationship with their customer base, and to bolster their credibility in ways advertising simply cannot.

But with 71 percent of Internet consumption predicted to happen via mobile this year, media companies have been putting more of their budgets and creative efforts into mobile-optimized content and less on traditional PR tactics that are much harder to measure or properly attribute.

As such, the bigger concern facing the PR industry today is not really PR itself. It is the question of how brands should use PR to build trust with their audience in such a changing, mobile-dominant media landscape.

Increasing costs, lowering budgets

The challenges for brands are deep.

Faced with slowing global economic growth, only 52 percent of companies planned to increase their marketing budgets this year an 11 percent decrease from 2015.

Brands are investing in digital advertising to lower skyrocketing cost-per-acquisitions (CPAs). But studies show that online advertising fraud now costs advertisers \$8.2 billion per year and that is sure to balloon in the next few years.

Couple that with advertisers remaining over-indexed to legacy media platforms and you can see the murky picture developing.

Yet as with all evolving industries in the digital era, the challenges are as big as the opportunities.

Consumer-facing and B2B companies alike have more avenues than ever for sharing insights in a direct channel to organically grow their reputation with consumers and attract more qualified traffic and leads without boosting advertising spend.

As the PR, advertising, and media industries adapt to a mobile-dominated reality, the rise of online media has created such a strong appetite for information across every industry. PR, or at least the newer version of it, is essential to feeding that appetite with high-value information, chiefly in the following three areas:

1. Contributed thought leadership

The rise of sponsored content means that the bar for this type of owned media is getting higher and more valuable.

In our digital world, trust starts with information.

Businesses should be leveraging what they know by positioning their unique expertise to drive new ways of thinking across their industries.

2. Content marketing

Creating high-quality blogs and downloadable resources is important for educating customers and fueling social media feeds, but it can do much more than that.

A consistent flow of quality material can also drive stronger media interest and pickups, especially if journalists start visiting a company's blog for ideas, data or contributed material.

3. [INSERT] relations

That is not a typo.

Across various areas of public relations, the emphasis is increasingly on the R: With so many stories coming at them, journalists are mainly only interested in hearing from the people they know and trust.

PR alone cannot solve business' challenges entirely. Changing times call for changing strategies. It is time for a long, hard look at what strategies are essential to success in a media landscape that is shifting to mobile.

AS OUR INDUSTRIES evolve, it is also time for marketers to embrace PR as a more embedded element of customer acquisition strategies.

PR has always been about relating to the public that is, establishing a connection between a company and its audience.

But perhaps we should rethink what those letters P and R to mean "Profitable Relationships" instead, essential to building and growing trusted connections and making it essential to building and growing companies' bottom lines, as well.

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