

Communication Has Become A Two-Way Street Be Prepared with Interactive Public Relations

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I distinctly remember the day I first logged onto the Internet. Well, it was AOL but at the time, that was the way consumers understood the Internet. I remember thinking how cool it was that I could check my American Express bill online. I think back on that day and can't imagine living without Internet access. It has completely changed the way I live, from how I get places (mapquest) to what movies I see (Yahoo!) to what books I read (Amazon). Apparently, I'm not alone. EMarketer.com reports that in 2005, the Internet now has over 1 billion users worldwide.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised then that the Internet has changed the marketing, advertising and public relations industry as well. Internet reach just surpassed television in percent of reach at work (54.6% at work compared to a 21.1% reach for TV, according to Online Publishers Association). The biggest change is that for the first time, you don't have to have a printing press or a hat that says "reporter" in order to publish or report on anything. The average guy or gal is able to get his or her voice heard by millions of people through a host of blogs, message boards, and emails. Our traditional communications model has changed to a two-way model, instead of a one-way feed from the media or a company.

What's more, the Internet has started another new trend – online communities of people with 'like' interests, regardless of geographical, language and time boundaries. They are organizing to share their interests with stories, advice, and more. This can mean trouble to the company that ignores this trend and unbelievable success to the one that harnesses it.

In one year, Youtube.com, a social site that allows users to share videos about anything, went from zero to 20 million visitors, according to Nielsen/NetRatings. MySpace and Friendster, other social message board sites, have also seen dramatic rises in popularity. It proves people today are seeking others like them in online communities.

So what's a business to do? At the risk of sounding cliché': Build it and they will come! Yes, my advice is embrace the trend and build a community of users specific to the demographics of your product or service. If you sell cake mix, you have an audience of people who love to bake. If you sell staffing services, you have an audience of HR people.

There are a couple of good reasons why you would want to create an online community: First, there's no doubt that the Internet will continue to grow in popularity for people to express their thoughts – good and bad. By giving them a forum, you control the content. It's much easier to find comments on your company, product or service on your own site

than to have to search the Internet for some unhappy customer! Even if you get a negative comment, your response to this comment can turn into a positive result.

Secondly, it builds brand loyalty. When a group of people who are “like” each other share their interest in you or your product or service, it creates a sense of community and bonds them together to support the cause – your company, product or service. Have you ever been to a two or three day conference and left feeling that you made a hundred or two close friends? The time spent sharing a common interest builds this bond.

Finally, the best reason to have an online community is for marketing purposes. When you build this forum and publicize it, you will develop a following of interested parties – again, good and bad – that can help you learn more about your target audience, hear their thoughts and feedback and gain valuable insight into their world. This means you’ll spend less on focus groups and surveys and be able to address their wants and needs better and market to them better.

According to a poll by eMarketer.com, more than 23% of people reported relying on blogs before purchasing products or services...and this number is expected to grow. There’s no question that consumers are actively seeking the opinions of others, and not just those of the media. There’s no doubt in this experience PR professional’s mind that the trend in Interactive PR is coming fast and is here to stay.

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