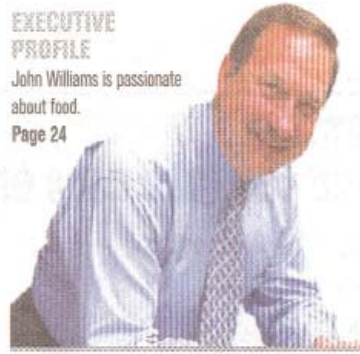


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TWO DOLLARS

Public relations professionals see promise but few results in blogs

BY LEE S. ETTLEMAN
STAFF INTERN

Tampa Bay area public relations firms are touting new ways of using Internet-based tools such as Web logs and message boards to promote their clients, and although many have gotten their feet wet, few have really begun to surf.

Technologies such as blogs, real-time chats and message boards have been around for years. Now as more of the market becomes Internet savvy, companies and their PR agents have to learn how to use these tools for their own benefit, said Jan Luongo, president of Alliance Communications Inc. in Tampa.

"Businesses and PR people really need to pay attention to what's happening in our media because we've really changed the model," Luongo said. "We are still plugging press releases to the media and waiting for them to respond as normal. What's really happening is consumers are plugging their own media and millions of people are reading them."

Over the past year, Luongo has recommended that some of her clients start blogs. Only now are some of them trying it out.

A church she represents has a blog where the priest writes weekly articles, and she helped Tarpon Springs-based Collegiate Risk Management start a message board and a live chat where customers can talk to loan officers in the evening hours.

CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY

Creating blogs and message boards, where users post questions that companies can answer, on a company Web site is one way of harnessing the power of the Internet to promote a message. A company blog on which users can comment will attract enthusiasts who might be more likely to



Alliance Communications Inc.'s Jan Luongo, president, Marti Woznicki, office manager, Sal Luongo, managing partner, and Missy Hurley, account executive, in their Tampa office with tools of their blog and Web trade.

buy from that company, but more importantly, who will help spread that message.

It's a strategy that hasn't gained much traction in Tampa Bay but has proven successful on a national level. Automaker General Motors' FastLane blog was launched two years ago, and many industry insiders credit reader feedback from the blog with inspiring features on a recently redesigned Chevrolet Camaro, said Josh Hallett, a blog and social media consultant in Winter Haven.

Much of the benefit in so-called "social media" or "online communities" lies in the fact that anyone can create content, and many people already are. If a company doesn't want to create its own blog, it can still promote its message by working with others.

Todd Josko, president of Tampa-based communications firm Josko & Associates, often speaks with homeowners associations on behalf of his developer clients to alleviate concerns over planned projects. One neighborhood group in Davie agreed with his point of view and created a Web site to promote neighborhood development.

Neighborhood groups often speak out against developments at planning meetings, so a blog or site created by citizens can be seen as more trustworthy than information coming from developers, Josko said.

"[Transparency] ensures accountability and engages that silent majority on a project where they may not have the ability to travel to the county courthouse and sit in on planning meetings," Josko said.

DIFFICULTY GETTING STARTED

The promise of so-called "new media" is there — but for many, the reality is not. A report released in August by eMarketer.com said that only 14 percent of U.S. Internet users read blogs, and more than 90 percent of businesses do not blog.

When Luongo first proposed a company blog to a client last year, "they laughed at me," she said.

She has only a few clients that have started. The idea of ceding control to a site where anyone can comment is at odds with mainstream notions of corporate communications, which emphasize planned responses to questions.

But if someone posts a negative comment, don't delete it, Luongo said.

"What happens is that the other people who are enthusiasts who have been posting beautiful things attack that person," she said.

According to Dan Gillmor, author of new media bible, "We the Media," the command-and-control model of communications is no longer viable.

"It's not necessarily intuitive for people who come from traditional backgrounds," Gillmor said. "You start by listening and appreciating that media is a two-way conversation."

Patrick Harrison, principal of public relations for The HLA Group Inc., in Tampa agreed listening can be the best use of blogs. Public relations professionals can monitor other people's blogs to stay on top of what posters are saying about their clients.

"It's no longer a case of trying to reach them," he said. "We're trying to interact with them so we can gauge what a customer is feeling without doing research."

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