

How Search Engines Have Changed Public Relations

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When it comes to Public Relations, the driving philosophy that underlies even the most minute aspect of a campaign is that perception equals reality. This is as true as ever in the Interactive Age because anyone with Internet access has the ability to voice his or her opinion on the World Wide Web. Internet users now have the ability to present their opinions for public consumption on blogs as well as websites. Thanks to the advent of search engines, web surfers may access any perspective of the online debate (be it positive, negative, or indifferent) ranging in topic from iPods to real estate.

Google has profoundly changed advertising on the internet as well. What distinguishes search from other online marketing strategies is that search provides each individual user with specific information based on their initial inquiry. Often, this information comes from obscure corners of the Internet, thus giving strength to voices that may have gone unheard.

This democratic media revolution brings new challenges for Public Relations- the art dedicated to communicating a business's message to its audience. No longer is PR concerned with the relatively sparse inlets of effective television, radio and print ‐ now, thanks to the Internet, Public Relations has to actually contend with …gulp …the public!

So it makes sense that PR efforts must now encompass the expanding world of search and, in order to survive in the marketplace, your business needs the PR benefits that come as a result. Search Engine Optimization should be utilized by Public Relations professionals to ensure the standards of their client's image. A comprehensive PR strategy must incorporate search as a means of building or maintaining a client's image.

The survival of conventional PR then becomes a question of updated technology. When choosing a Public Relations company to help your business maintain an image, it is no longer a question of who has the longest track record, but who has the longest reach. If your PR company doesn't have a search division of its own at its fingertips, don't expect your campaigns to extend beyond the traditional paper and print. In this sense, it was a natural extension of ICMediaDirect.com to announce its Public Relations division after the successes of its Search and Research divisions. Finding that much of the work performed for SEO and SEM was already inherently related to the new Search-influenced PR, the launching of a PR division in a company long familiar with the details of this industry is no surprise.

How do they relate?

Let's take an imaginary attack on Sunshine Widgets. A disgruntled entity could simply start “blogging” against it. They could harp on a single unfortunate incident, or flat out tell lies about Sunshine Widgets, and its corporate ineptness. It wouldn't take much.

Perhaps Sunshine Widgets runs TV and print ads. These efforts would be undercut by some chap with a blog running a disinformation campaign. Unfair accusations or charges would appear every time someone searches for ‘Sunshine Widgets’. No company, big or small, real or imagined, can afford bad press that pops up with every user search. At this point, the necessity for a comprehensive Public Relations strategy becomes clear.

Sunshine Widgets could, through a practice commonly known as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), be proactive in asserting its corporate voice, thus re-asserting its sterling brand image. The variety of interactive channels to engage in allows Sunshine Widgets greater ability to define its desired message. Here are the ways in which it would benefit from a search oriented Public Relations campaign in the face of these random blog attacks:

- Blog search engines, like Technorati.com and Delicious.com, are growing rapidly in use and popularity. This suggests that online users, when looking for “what the real story is”, are curious not only as to “what people think” but also “when they think it.” For example, there were a lot more ‘Sopranos’ searches on the day before the season premier than there were six months before ‐ and blog searches give you the latest on what bloggers are currently writing, as opposed to search engines which may not take the information posting date into account. Therefore, through Search Engine Optimization, anyone searching the internet for ‘Sunshine Widgets’ would be returned information that is not only accurate with regard to content, but up to date as well.

- Sunshine Widgets could issue press releases to announce company undertakings, strategies for the future, as well as past successes. Press releases are the most widely used means of communication employed by a company and are integral in shaping public perception of your brand. By distributing press releases online, a company has the ability to communicate its immediate message to millions of consumers instantly.

• Sunshine Widgets could engage in a paid search (PPC) campaign to drive searchers to landing pages of Sunshine's choosing. While driving sales numbers becomes secondary to building brand image, a paid search campaign also fuels greater traffic to a company's website, and the company that drives more users to its site helps shape its own reputation — and reputation, it bears repeating, is very important.

These campaigns would all use different tools to achieve the same goal, better public corporate messaging. The benefits brought to the company would vary too. For instance, all of the content published on the web will not only "put the word out there", but crowd out any negativity from some renegade's message. A single, angry blog will not be able to cloud a business's message provided that company maintains an effective PR campaign. The many different messaging formats should insulate from this danger.

While traditional media outlets are still the cornerstone of any successful PR campaign, the internet presents an unprecedented opportunity to reach consumers directly, and on an individual basis. Through an internet campaign, a company may not only protect its brand image against attack, but strengthen and widen its consumer base.

Consider the following statistic: a consumer is four times more likely to recount a negative experience with a company than a positive one. Now consider that a disgruntled consumer has had a negative experience with your company. Now, let us suppose that they write a daily blog encouraging other consumers to boycott your business. Finally, let us imagine that putting your company's name into a search engine brings up said disgruntled consumer's blog as the first search result. Now, ask yourself, would you launch a traditional campaign (print, tv, radio) to reverse the damage done to your brand image, or would you stop the problem at its source through an online campaign?

The answer is obvious, and any company that does not take the internet into account when formulating its PR strategy may as well post negative consumer criticism on its website- that's practically what's happening anyway.