

Foreword by **ROBERT SCOBLE**  
coauthor of *Naked Conversations*, [Scobleizer.com](http://Scobleizer.com)

# The **NEW RULES** of **MARKETING** & **PR**

**HOW TO USE NEWS RELEASES,  
BLOGS, PODCASTING,  
VIRAL MARKETING &  
ONLINE MEDIA TO  
REACH BUYERS  
DIRECTLY**



**DAVID MEERMAN SCOTT**

## Praise for *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*

“The Internet is not so much about technology as it is about people. David Meerman Scott, in his remarkable *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, goes far beyond technology and explores the ramifications of the Web as it pertains to people. He sets down a body of rules that show you how to negotiate those ramifications with maximum effectiveness. And he does it with real-life case histories and an engaging style.”

—Jay Conrad Levinson, Father of Guerrilla Marketing and Author, *Guerrilla Marketing* series of books

“*The New Rules of Marketing and PR* teaches readers how to launch a thought leadership campaign by using the far-reaching, long-lasting tools of social media. It is an invaluable guide for anyone who wants to make a name for themselves, their ideas, and their organization.”

—Mark Levy, Co-Author, *How to Persuade People Who Don't Want to Be Persuaded*, and Founder of Levy Innovation: A Marketing Strategy Firm

“*Revolution* may be an overused word in describing what the Internet has wrought, but revolution is exactly what David Meerman Scott embraces and propels forward in this book. He exposes the futility of the old media rules and opens to all of us an insiders' game, previously played by a few well-connected specialists. With this rule book to the online revolution, you can learn how to win minds and markets, playing by the new rules of new media.”

—Don Dunnington, President, International Association of Online Communicators (IAOC); Director of Business Communications, K-Tron International; and Graduate Instructor in Online Communication, Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey

“The history of marketing communications—about 60 years or so—has been about pushing messages to convince prospects to take some action we need. Now marketing communications, largely because of the overwhelming power and influence of the Web and other electronic communications, is about engaging in conversation with prospects and leading/persuading them to take action. David Meerman Scott shows how marketing is now about participation and connection, and no longer about strong-arm force.”

—Roy Young, Chief Revenue Officer,  
MarketingPros.com, and Co-Author,  
*Marketing Champions: Practical Strategies  
for Improving Marketing’s Power, Influence,  
and Business Impact*

“As someone who has come up through the marketing ranks to run several companies, I’ve come to realize that the rules I lived by to manage the marketing mix have become obsolete. What David Meerman Scott shows that is so fascinating is that the new rules are actually better than the old rules because they cut through all the communications clutter and myths about big-budget advertising. This book is a must-read for any executive looking to gain a cost-effective edge in marketing operations and to reach buyers directly in ways they’ll appreciate.”

—Phil Myers, President,  
Pragmatic Marketing

“This is a must-read book if you don’t want to waste time and resources on the old methods of Internet marketing and PR. David Meerman Scott reviews the old rules for old times’ sake while bridging into the new rules for Internet marketing and PR for your cause. He doesn’t leave us with only theories, but offers practical and results-oriented how-tos.”

—Ron Peck, Executive Director,  
Neurological Disease Foundation

“*The New Rules of Marketing and PR* is all about breaking the rules and creating new roles in traditional functional areas. Using maverick, nontraditional approaches to access and engage a multiplicity of audiences, communities, and thought leaders online, PR people are realizing new value, influence, and outcomes. We’re now in a content-rich, Internet-driven world, and David Meerman Scott has written a valuable treatise on how marketing-minded PR professionals can leverage new media channels and forums to take their stories to market. No longer are PR practitioners limited in where and how they direct their knowledge, penmanship, and perception management skills. The Internet has multiplied and segmented a wealth of new avenues for directly reaching and activating key constituencies and stakeholders. A good book well worth the read by all marketing mavens and aging PR flacks.”

—Donovan Neale-May, Executive Director,  
CMO Council

“*The New Rules of Marketing and PR* provides a concise action plan for success. Rather than focusing on a single solution, Scott shows how to use multiple online tools, all directed toward increasing your firm’s visibility and word-of-mouth awareness.”

—Roger C. Parker, Author, *The Streetwise Guide to Relationship Marketing on the Internet and Design to Sell*

“Once again we are at a critical inflection point on our society’s evolutionary path, with individuals wrestling away power and control from institutions and traditional gatekeepers who control the flow of knowledge and maintain the silo walls. As communications professionals, there is little time to figure out what has changed, why it changed, and what we should be doing about it. If you don’t start doing things differently and start right now, you may as well start looking for your next career path. In a world where disruption is commonplace and new ways of communicating and collaborating are invented every day, what does it take for a hardworking, ethical communications professional to be successful? David Meerman Scott’s book, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, is an insightful look at how the game is changing as we play it and some of the key tactics you need to succeed in the knowledge economy.”

—Chris Heuer, Co-Founder,  
Social Media Club

**Also by David Meerman Scott**

*Eyeball Wars: A Novel of Dot-Com Intrigue*

*Cashing in with Content: How Innovative Marketers Use Digital  
Information to Turn Browsers into Buyers*



# The New Rules of Marketing and PR

How to Use News Releases,  
Blogs, Podcasting,  
Viral Marketing, & Online  
Media to Reach Buyers Directly

David Meerman Scott



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*For the Scott women*

My mother, Carolyn J. Scott;  
my wife, Yukari Watanabe Scott;  
and my daughter, Allison C.R. Scott





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# Foreword

**Y**ou're not supposed to be able to do what David Meerman Scott is about to tell you in this book. You're not supposed to be able to carry around a \$250 video camera, record what employees are working on and what they think of the products they are building, and publish those videos on the Internet. But that's what I did at Microsoft, building an audience of more than four million unique visitors a month.

You're not supposed to be able to do what Stormhoek did. A winery in South Africa, it doubled sales in a year using the principles discussed here.

You're not supposed to be able to run a presidential campaign with just a blogger, a videographer, and a Flickr photographer. But that's what John Edwards did in December 2006 as he announced he was running for President.

Something has changed in the past 10 years. Well, for one, we have Google now, but that's only a part of the puzzle.

What really has happened is that the word-of-mouth network has gotten more efficient—much, much more efficient.

Word of mouth has always been important to business. When I helped run a Silicon Valley camera store in the 1980s, about 80 percent of our sales came from it. “Where should I buy a camera this weekend?” you might have heard in a lunchroom back then. Today that conversation is happening online. But, instead of only two people talking about your business, now thousands and sometimes millions (Engadget had 10 million page views in a single day during the Consumer Electronics and MacWorld shows in January 2006) are either participating or listening in.

What does this mean? Well, now there's a new media to deal with. Your PR teams had better understand what drives this new media (it's as influential as the *New York Times* or CNN now), and if you understand how to use it you can drive buzz, new product feedback, sales, and more.

But first you'll have to learn to break the rules.

Is your marketing department saying you need to spend \$80,000 to do a single video? (That's not unusual, even in today's world. I just participated in such a video for a sponsor of mine.) If so, tell that department "Thanks, but no thanks." Or, even better, search Google for "Will it blend?" You'll find a Utah blender company that got six million downloads in less than 10 days. Oh, and 10,000 comments in the same period of time. All by spending a few hundred bucks, recording a one-minute video, and uploading that to YouTube.

Or, study what I did at Microsoft with a blog and a video camera. *Economist* magazine said I put a human face on Microsoft. Imagine that. A 60,000-employee organization and I changed its image with very little expense and hardly a committee in sight.

This advice isn't for everyone, though. Most people don't like running fast in business. They feel more comfortable if there are lots of checks and balances or committees to cover their asses. Or, they don't want to destroy the morale of PR and marketing departments due to the disintermediating effects of the Internet.

After all, you can type "OneNote Blog" into Google, Live.com, or Yahoo!, and you'll find Chris Pratley. He runs the OneNote team at Microsoft. Or, search for "Sun CEO." You'll find Jonathan Schwartz and his blog.

You can leave either one a comment and tell them their product sucks and see what they do in response. Or, even better, tell them how to earn your sale. Do they snap into place?

It's a new world you're about to enter, one where relationships with influentials *and* search engine optimization strategy are equally important, and one where your news will be passed around the world very quickly. You don't believe me?

Look at how the world found out I was leaving Microsoft for a Silicon Valley startup (PodTech.net).

I told 15 people at a videoblogging conference—not A-listers either, just everyday videobloggers. I asked them not to tell anyone until Tuesday—this was on a Saturday afternoon and I still hadn't told my boss.

Well, of course someone leaked that information. But, it didn't pop up in the *New York Times*. It wasn't discussed on CNN. No, it was a blogger I had never even heard of that posted the info first.

Within hours it was on hundreds of other blogs. Within two days it was in the *Wall Street Journal*, in the *New York Times*, on the front page of the BBC Web site, in *BusinessWeek*, *Economist*, in more than 140 newspapers around the world (friends called me from Australia, Germany, Israel, and England, among other countries) and other places. Waggener Edstrom, Microsoft's PR agency, was keeping track and said that about 50 million media impressions occurred on my name in the first week.

All due to 15 conversations.

Whoa, what's up here? Well, if you have a story worth repeating, bloggers, podcasters, and videobloggers (among other influentials) will repeat your story all over the world, potentially bringing hundreds of thousands or millions of people your way. One link on a site like Digg alone could bring tens of thousands of visitors.

How did that happen?

Well, for one, lots of people knew me, knew my phone number, knew what kind of car I drove, knew my wife and son, knew my best friends, knew where I worked, and had heard me in about 700 videos that I posted at <http://channel9.msdn.com> on behalf of Microsoft.

They also knew where I went to college (and high school and middle school), and countless other details about me. How do you know they know all this? Well, they wrote a page on Wikipedia about me at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Scoble](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Scoble)—not a single thing on that page was written by me.

What did all that knowledge of me turn into? Credibility and authority. Translation: People knew me, knew where I was coming from, knew I was passionate and authoritative about technology, and came to trust me where they wouldn't trust most corporate authorities.

By reading this book you'll understand how to gain the credibility you need to build your business. Enjoy!

ROBERT SCOBLE  
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# Introduction

**A**t the height of the dot-com boom, I was vice president of marketing at NewsEdge Corporation, a NASDAQ-traded online news distributor with more than \$70 million in annual revenue. My multimillion-dollar marketing budget included tens of thousands of dollars per month for a public relations agency, hundreds of thousands per year for print advertising and glossy collateral materials, and expensive participation at a dozen trade shows a year. My team put these things on our marketing to-do list, worked like hell to execute, and paid the big bucks because that's what marketing and PR people did. These efforts made us feel good because we were *doing something*, but the programs were not producing significant, measurable results.

At the same time, drawing on experience I had gained in my previous position as Asia marketing director for the online division of Knight-Ridder, then one of the largest newspaper companies in the world, my team and I quietly created content-based, “thought leadership” marketing and PR programs on the Web. Against the advice of the PR agency professionals we had on retainer (who insisted that press releases were only for the press), we wrote and sent dozens of releases ourselves. Each time we sent a release, it appeared on online services such as Yahoo!, *resulting in sales leads*. Even though our advertising agency told us not to put the valuable information “somewhere where competitors could steal it,” we created a monthly newsletter called *TheEdge* about the exploding world of digital news and made it freely available on the homepage of our Web site *because it generated interest from buyers, the media, and analysts*. Way back in the 1990s, when Web marketing and PR was in its infancy, my team

and I ignored the old rules, drawing instead on my experience working at an online publisher, and created a marketing strategy using online content to reach buyers directly on the Web. The home-grown, do-it-yourself programs we created at virtually no cost consistently generated more interest from qualified buyers, the media, and analysts—and resulted in more sales—than the big-bucks programs that the “professionals” were running for us. People we never heard of were finding us through search engines. I had stumbled on a better way to reach buyers.

In 2002, after NewsEdge was sold to The Thomson Corporation, I started my own business to refine my ideas, work with select clients, and teach others through writing, speaking at conferences, and conducting seminars for corporate groups. The object of all this work was reaching buyers directly with Web content. Since then, many new forms of online media have burst onto the scene, including blogs, podcasts, video, and virtual communities. But what all the new Web tools and techniques have in common is that together they are the best way to communicate *directly* with your marketplace.

This book actually started as a Web marketing and PR program on my blog. In January 2006, I published an e-book called *The New Rules of PR*,<sup>1</sup> immediately generating remarkable enthusiasm (and much controversy) from marketers and businesspeople around the world. Since the e-book was published, it has been downloaded more than 200,000 times and commented on by thousands of readers on my blog and those of many other bloggers. To those of you who have read and shared the e-book, thank you. But this book is much more than just an expansion of that work, because I have made its subject marketing *and* PR instead of just PR and because I've included many different forms of online media and conducted more than a year of additional research.

This book contains much more than just my own ideas, because I have blogged the book, section by section, as I have written it. Thou-

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.webinknow.com/2006/01/new\\_complimenta.html](http://www.webinknow.com/2006/01/new_complimenta.html)

sands of you have followed along, and many have contributed to the writing process by offering suggestions via comments on my blog and e-mail. Thank you for contributing your ideas. And thank you for arguing with me when I got off track. Your enthusiasm has made the book much better than if I had written in isolation.

The Web has changed not only the rules of marketing and PR, but also the business-book model, and *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* is an interesting example. My online content (the e-book and my blog) led me directly to a print book deal. I was fortunate to meet Joe Wikert,<sup>2</sup> vice president and executive publisher in the Professional/Trade division of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and writer of the terrific Publishing 2020 blog, at a conference in San Francisco. Joe and I linked up and commented on each other's blogs and I thank him for his help in navigating Wiley, which resulted in the book you are reading now. I also published early drafts of sections of the book on my blog. Other publishers would have freaked out if an author wanted to put parts of his book online (for free!) to solicit ideas. Wiley encouraged it. In fact, some of my favorite books evolved on blogs, including *Naked Conversations* by Robert Scoble<sup>3</sup> and Shel Israel,<sup>4</sup> *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson,<sup>5</sup> and *Small Is the New Big* by Seth Godin<sup>6</sup>—great company indeed. Thanks for leading the way, guys.

## The New Rules

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One of the more interesting debates about this book has been over its title. Many people have told me they like the title because they know what they will be getting. It's descriptive. But others have

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<sup>2</sup> <http://jwikert.typepad.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://scobleizer.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://redcouch.typepad.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://thelongtail.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://sethgodin.typepad.com/>



fought me, saying that there are all kinds of new rules being touted in books and elsewhere but that rarely deliver. “New rules” are just hype, they say. One such comment, on Brian Clark’s terrific Copyblogger,<sup>7</sup> said people who create “new business ideas” only distract you from the fundamentals of business and communication, which haven’t changed for hundreds of years. While it’s true that a search on Amazon for “new rules” brings up thousands of book titles, the Web truly does offer marketers a new way of doing things. I am confident in my choice of title, because before the Web the only way you could get your organization noticed was to buy advertising of some kind or convince a journalist to write about you. Telling your organization’s story directly (via the Web) is new, because, until now, you’ve never been able to reach a potential audience in the millions without buying expensive advertising or getting media coverage.

Here’s the problem, though: There are many people who *still* apply the old rules of advertising and media relations to the new medium of the Web, and fail miserably as a result. I am firmly convinced that we’re now in an environment governed by new rules, and this book is your guide to that (online) world.

## Trying to Write Like a Blog, But in a Book

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As the lines between marketing and PR on the Web have blurred so much as to be virtually unrecognizable, the best media choice is often not as obvious as in the old days. But I had to organize the book somehow, and I chose to create chapters for the various online media, including blogs, podcasts, online forums, social networking, and so on. But the truth is that all these tools and techniques intersect and complement one another. Some things were difficult to place

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.copyblogger.com/don't-take-this-advice-about-online-marketing/#more-205>

into a particular chapter, such as the discussion on RSS (Really Simple Syndication). I moved that section four times before settling on Chapter 13.

These online media are evolving very rapidly, and by the time you read these words, I'll no doubt come across new techniques that I'll wish I could have put in the book. At the same time, I agree that the fundamentals are important, which is why Chapter 10—where you'll start to develop your own online marketing and PR plan—is steeped in practical, commonsense thinking.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I is a rigorous overview of how the Web has changed the rules of marketing and PR. Part II introduces and provides details about each of the various media, and Part III contains detailed “how-to” information and an action plan to help you put the new rules to work for your organization.

While I think this sequence is the most logical way to present these ideas, there's no reason why you shouldn't flip from chapter to chapter in any order that you please. Unlike a mystery novel, you won't get lost in the story if you skip around. And I certainly don't want to waste your time. As I was writing, I was wishing that I could link you (like in a blog) from one chapter to a part of another chapter. Alas, a printed book doesn't allow that, so instead I have included suggestions where you might skip ahead or go back for review on specific topics. Similarly, I have included hundreds of URLs as footnotes so you can choose to visit the blogs, Web sites, and other online media that I discuss that interest you. You'll notice that I write in a familiar and casual tone, rather than the formal and stilted way of many business books, because I'm using my “blog voice” to share the new rules with you—I just think it works better for you, the reader.

When I use the words *company* and *organization* throughout this book, I'm including all types of organizations and individuals. Feel free to insert *nonprofit*, *government agency*, *political candidate*, *church*, *school*, *sports team*, *professional service person*, or other entity in place of *company* and *organization* in your mind. Similarly, when I use the

word *buyers*, I also mean subscribers, voters, volunteers, applicants, and donors, because the new rules work for reaching all these groups. Are you a nonprofit organization that needs to increase donations? The new rules apply to you as much as to a corporation. Ditto for political campaigns looking for votes, schools that want to increase applicants, consultants searching for business, and churches hunting for new members.

This book will show you the new rules and how to apply them. For people all over the world interacting on the Web, the old rules of marketing and PR just don't work. Today, all kinds of organizations communicate directly with their buyers online. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 73 percent of American adults (147 million people) say they use the Internet.<sup>8</sup> In order to reach the individuals online who would be interested in their organization, smart marketers everywhere have altered the way they think about marketing and PR.

## Showcasing Innovative Marketers —

The most exciting aspect of the book is that, throughout these pages, I have the honor of showcasing some of the best examples of innovative marketers building successful marketing and PR programs on the Web. One of the most remarkable is that of Robert Scoble, who kindly shared his story about Microsoft in the Foreword to the book. Thank you, Robert. There are nearly 50 other profiles throughout the book, much of them in the marketers' own words drawn from my interviews with them that bring the concepts to life. You'll learn from people at Fortune 500 companies and at businesses with just a handful of employees. These companies make products ranging from racing bicycles to jet helicopters and from computer software to realistic toy dinosaurs. Some of the organizations are well-known

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/>

to the public, while others are famous only in their market niche. I profile nonprofit organizations, political advocacy groups, and citizens supporting potential candidates for political office. I tell the stories of independent consultants, churches, rock bands, and lawyers, all of whom successfully use the Web to reach their target audiences. I can't thank enough the people who shared their time with me on the phone and in person. I'm sure you'll agree that they are the stars of the book.

As you read the stories of successful marketers, remember that you will learn from them even if they come from a very different market, industry, or type of organization than your own. Nonprofits can learn from the experiences of corporations. Consultants will gain insight from the success of rock bands. In fact, I'm absolutely convinced that you will learn more by emulating successful ideas from outside your industry than by copying what your nearest competitor is doing. Remember, the best thing about new rules is that your competitors probably don't know about them yet.

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# How the Web Has Changed the Rules of Marketing and PR



# 1

## The Old Rules of Marketing and PR Are Ineffective in an Online World

In the summer of 2006, I was thinking of buying a new car. As with tens of millions of other consumers, the Web is my primary source of information when considering a purchase, so I sat down at the computer and began poking around. Figuring they were the natural place to begin my research, I started with the big three automaker sites. That was a big mistake. At all three, I was assaulted on the home page with a barrage of TV-style broadcast *advertising*. And all the one-way messages focused on price. At Ford,<sup>1</sup> the headlines screamed, “Model Year Clearance! 0% financing! 0 for gas!” Chrysler<sup>2</sup> announced a similar offer: “Get employee pricing plus 0% financing!” And over at GM,<sup>3</sup> they were having a “72-hour sale!” I’m not planning to buy a car within 72 hours, thank you. I may not even buy one within 72 days! I’m just kicking the virtual tires. All three of these sites assume that I’m ready to buy a car *right now*. But I actually just wanted to learn something.

Although I didn’t know exactly what I wanted, I was sort of thinking

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fordvehicles.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chrysler.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gmbuypower.com/>



about a compact SUV. Only GM offered a way to check out all of the company's SUV models in one place. To learn about all the Ford products, I had to go to the Ford, Mercury, Land Rover, and Volvo sites separately, even though these brands are all owned by Ford. These individual sites were no better help to me, a person who was considering a new car purchase possibly many months in the future. Sure, I got flash-video TV commercials, pretty pictures, and low financing offers on these sites, but little else.

I looked around for some personality on these sites and was excited when I saw a link for "Ask Dr. Z"<sup>4</sup> on the Chrysler site. This seemed intriguing. Who's Dr. Z? *Cool*, I thought, *here's some authentic content*. Alas, no; it was a cartoon of Dr. Dieter Zetsche, Chairman of DaimlerChrysler, ready to answer my questions in his role of "Internet assistant." But first I am invited to watch TV commercials. I'm not looking for cartoons and I'm not looking for TV commercials. What I really wanted to ask is this: "Are there any real people at these auto companies?"

At each site, I felt as if I was being marketed to with a string of messages that had been developed in a lab or via focus groups. It just didn't feel authentic. If I wanted to see TV car ads, I would have flipped on the TV. I was struck with the odd feeling that all of the big three automakers' sites were designed and built by the same Madison Avenue ad guy. These sites were advertising *to* me, not building a relationship *with* me. They were luring me in with one-way messages, not educating me about the companies' products. Guess what? When I arrive at a site, you don't need to grab my attention; you already have it!

Here's the good news: I did find some terrific places on the Web to learn about compact SUVs. Unfortunately, the places where I got authentic content and where I became educated and where I interacted with humans just aren't part of the big three automakers' sites. Edmunds's cool Car Space,<sup>5</sup> a free consumer-driven social networking and personal page site with features such as photo albums, user

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.askdrz.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.carspace.com/>

groups based on make and model of car, and favorite links, was excellent in helping me narrow down choices. For example, in the forums, I could read over 2,000 messages just on the Toyota FJ Cruiser. I could see pages where owners showed off their vehicles. This is where I was making my decision, *dozens of clicks removed from the big automaker sites*.

Since I first wrote about automaker sites on my blog, dozens of people jumped in to comment or e-mail me with their similar car shopping experiences and frustrations with automaker Web sites. Something is seriously broken in the automobile business if so many people are unable to find, directly on a company site, the information they need to make a purchase decision. And it's not just automakers.

Prior to the Web, organizations had only two significant choices to attract attention: Buy expensive advertising or get third-party ink from the media. But the Web has changed the rules. The Web is not TV. Organizations that understand the New Rules of Marketing and PR develop relationships directly with consumers like you and me.

## Advertising: A Money Pit of Wasted Resources

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In the old days, traditional, nontargeted advertising via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and direct mail were the only ways to go. But these media make targeting specific buyers with individualized messages very difficult. Yes, advertising is still used for megabrands with broad reach and probably still works for some organizations and products (though not as well as before). Guys watching football on TV drink a lot of beer, so perhaps it makes sense for mass-marketer Budweiser to advertise on NFL broadcasts (but not for small microbrews

that appeal to a small niche audience). Advertising also works in many trade publications. If your company makes deck sealant, then you probably want to advertise in *Professional Deck Builder Magazine* to reach your professional buyers (but that won't allow you to reach the do-it-yourself market). If you run a local real estate agency in a smaller community, it might make sense to do a direct mailing to all of the homeowners there (but that won't let you reach people who might be planning to move to your community from another location).

However, for millions of other organizations, for the rest of us who are professionals, musicians, artists, nonprofit organizations, churches, and niche product companies, traditional advertising is generally so wide and broad that it is ineffective. Big media advertising buys may work for products with mass appeal and wide distribution. Famous brands carried in national chain stores come to mind as examples, as do blockbuster movies shown on thousands of screens. But a great strategy for Procter & Gamble, Paramount Pictures, and the Republican U.S. presidential candidate—reaching large numbers of people with a message of broad national appeal—just doesn't work for niche products, local services, and specialized nonprofit organizations.

The Web has opened a tremendous opportunity to reach niche buyers directly with targeted messages that cost a fraction of what big-budget advertising costs.

## One-Way Interruption Marketing Is Yesterday's Message

A primary technique of what Seth Godin calls the TV-industrial complex<sup>6</sup> is interruption. Under this system, advertising agency creative

<sup>6</sup> [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2006/01/nonlinear\\_media.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2006/01/nonlinear_media.html)

people sit in hip offices dreaming up ways to interrupt people so that they pay attention to a one-way message. Think about it: You're watching your favorite TV show, so the advertiser's job is to craft a commercial to get you to pay attention, when you'd really rather be doing something else, like quickly grabbing some ice cream before the show resumes. You're reading an interesting article in a magazine, so the ads need to jolt you into reading the ad instead of the article. Or, you're flying on U.S. Airways from Boston to Philadelphia (which I frequently do), and 20 minutes or so after takeoff, the airline deems it important to interrupt your nap with a loud advertisement announcing vacation destinations in the Caribbean. The idea in all of these examples is that advertising, in all forms, has traditionally relied on getting prospects to stop what they are doing and pay attention to a message.

Moreover, the messages in advertising are product-focused one-way spin. Forced to compete with new marketing on the Web that is centered on interaction, information, education, and choice, advertisers can no longer break through with dumbed-down broadcasts about their wonderful products. With the average person now seeing hundreds of seller-spun commercial messages per day, people just don't trust advertising. We turn it off in our minds, if we notice it at all.

The Web is different. Instead of one-way interruption, Web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a buyer needs it.

Before the Web, good advertising people were well versed in the tools and techniques of reaching broad markets with lowest-common-denominator messages via interruption techniques. Advertising was about great "creative work." Unfortunately, many companies rooted in these old ways desperately want the Web to be like TV, because

they understand how TV advertising works. Advertising agencies that excel in creative TV ads simply believe they can transfer their skills to the Web.

They are wrong. They are following outdated rules.

## The Old Rules of Marketing

- Marketing simply meant advertising (and branding).
- Advertising needed to appeal to the masses.
- Advertising relied on interrupting people to get them to pay attention to a message.
- Advertising was one-way: company-to-consumer.
- Advertising was exclusively about selling products.
- Advertising was based on campaigns that had a limited life.
- Creativity was deemed the most important component to advertising.
- It was more important for the ad agency to win advertising awards than for the client to win new customers.
- Advertising and PR were separate disciplines run by different people with separate goals, strategies, and measurement criteria.

None of this is true anymore. The Web has transformed the rules, and you must transform your marketing to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.

## Public Relations Used to Be Exclusively about the Media

I'm a contributing editor at *EContent* magazine, as a result of which I receive hundreds of broadcast e-mail press releases per

week from well-meaning PR people who want me to write about their widgets. Guess what? In five years, I have *never* written about a company because of a nontargeted broadcast press release that somebody sent me. Something like 25,000 press releases have been sent to me, resulting in no stories. Discussions I've had with journalists in other industries confirm that I'm not the only one who doesn't use unsolicited press releases. Instead, I think about a subject that I want to cover in a column or an article, and I check out what I can find on blogs and through search engines. If I find a press release on the subject through Google News or a company's online media room, great! But I don't wait for press releases to come to me. Rather, I go looking for interesting topics, products, people, and companies. And when I do feel ready to write a story, I might try out a concept on my blog first, to see how it flies. Does anyone comment on it? Do any PR people jump in and e-mail me?

There's another amazing thing: In five years, I can count on one hand the number of PR people who have commented on my blog or reached out to me as a result of a blog post or story I've written in a magazine. How difficult can it be to read the blogs of the reporters you're trying to pitch? It teaches you precisely what interests them. And then you can e-mail them with something interesting that they are likely write about rather than spamming them with unsolicited press releases. When I don't want to be bothered, I get hundreds of press releases a week. But when I do want feedback and conversation, I get silence.

Something's very wrong in PR land.

Reporters and editors use the Web to seek out interesting stories, people, and companies. Will they find you?

## Public Relations and Third-Party Ink

*Public relations* was once an exclusive club. PR people used lots of jargon and followed strict rules. If you weren't part of the "in crowd," PR seemed like an esoteric and mysterious job that required lots of training, sort of like being a space shuttle astronaut or court stenographer. PR people occupied their time by writing press releases targeted exclusively to reporters and editors and by schmoozing with those same reporters and editors. And then they crossed their fingers and hoped ("Oh, please write about me . . .") that the media would give them some ink or some airtime. The end result of their efforts—the ultimate goal of PR in the old days—was the "clip" that proved they had done their job. Only the best PR people had personal relationships with the media and could pick up the phone and pitch a story to the reporter for whom they had bought lunch the month before. Prior to 1995, outside of paying big bucks for advertising or working with the media, there just weren't any significant options for a company to tell its story to the world.

This is not true anymore. The Web has changed the rules. Today, organizations are communicating directly with buyers.

## Yes, the Media Are Still Important

Allow me to pause for a moment to say that the mainstream and trade media are still important components of a great public relations program. On my blog and on the speaking circuit, I've sometimes been accused of suggesting that the media are no longer relevant. That is not

my position. The media are critically important for many organizations. A positive story in *Rolling Stone* propels a rock band to fame. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* brands a company as a player. A consumer product talked about on the *Today Show* gets noticed. In many niche markets and vertical industries, trade magazines and journals help decide which companies are important. However, I do believe that, while these outlets are all vital aspects of an overall PR program, there are easier and more efficient ways to reach your buyers. And here's something really neat: If you do a good job telling your story directly, the media will find out. And then they will write about you!

Public relations work has changed. PR is no longer just an esoteric discipline where great efforts are spent by companies to communicate exclusively to a handful of reporters who then tell the company's story, generating a clip for the PR people to show their bosses. Now, great PR includes programs to reach buyers directly. The Web allows direct access to information about your products, and smart companies understand and use this phenomenal resource to great advantage.

The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media. Blogs, online news releases, and other forms of Web content let organizations communicate directly with buyers.

## Press Releases and the Journalistic Black Hole

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In the old days, a press release was actually a release to the press, so these documents evolved as an esoteric and stylized way for companies to issue “news” to reporters and editors. Because it was assumed that nobody saw the actual press release except a handful of reporters



and editors, these documents were written with the media's existing understanding in mind.

In a typical case, a tiny audience of several dozen media people got a steady stream of product releases from a company. The reporters and editors were already well versed on the niche market, so the company supplied very little background information. Jargon was rampant. *What's the news?* journalists would think as they perused the release. *Oh, here it is—the company just announced the Super Techno Widget Plus with a New Scalable and Robust Architecture.* But while this might mean something to a trade magazine journalist, it is just plain gobbledygook to the rest of the world. Since press releases are now seen by millions of people who are searching the Web for solutions to their problems, these old rules are obsolete.

## The Old Rules of PR

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- The only way to get ink was through the media.
- Companies communicated to journalists via press releases.
- Nobody saw the actual press release except a handful of reporters and editors.
- Companies had to have significant news before they were allowed to write a press release.
- Jargon was okay because the journalists all understood it.
- You weren't supposed to send a release unless it included quotes from third parties, such as customers, analysts, and experts.
- The only way buyers would learn about the press release's content was if the media wrote a story about it.
- The only way to measure the effectiveness of press releases was through "clip books," which noted each time the media deigned to pick up a company's release.
- PR and marketing were separate disciplines run by different people with separate goals, strategies, and measurement techniques.

None of this is true anymore. The Web has transformed the rules, and you must transform your PR strategies to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.

The vast majority of organizations don't have instant access to mainstream media for coverage of their products. People like you and I need to work hard to be noticed in the online marketplace of ideas. By understanding how the role of PR and the press release has changed, we can get our stories known in that marketplace.

There are some exceptions. Very large companies, very famous people, and governments might all still be able to get away with using the media exclusively, but even that is doubtful. These name-brand people and companies may be big enough, and their news just so compelling, that no effort is required of them. For these lucky few, the media may still be the primary mouthpiece.

- If you are J.K. Rowling and you issued a press release about, say, Harry Potter being killed in your final book, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If Apple Computer CEO Steve Jobs announces the company's new iPhone at a trade show, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie issue a press release about naming their cute new baby Shiloh, the news will be picked up by the media.

If you are smaller and less famous but have an interesting story to tell, you need to tell it yourself. Fortunately, the Web is a terrific place to do so.

## Learn to Ignore the Old Rules

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To harness the power of the Web to reach buyers directly, you must ignore the old rules. Public relations is not just about speaking through the media, although the media remain an important component. Marketing is not just about one-way broadcast advertising, although advertising can be part of an overall strategy.

I've noticed that some marketing and PR professionals have a very difficult time changing old habits. These ideas make people uncomfortable. When I speak at conferences, people often fold their arms in a defensive posture and look down at their shoes. Naturally, Marketing and PR people who learned the old rules resist the new world of direct access. But I've also noticed that many marketing executives, CEOs, entrepreneurs, enlightened nonprofit executives, and professionals jump at the chance to tell stories directly. These people love the new way of communicating to buyers. Smart marketers are bringing success to their organizations each and every day by communicating through the Web.

Here's how to tell if the new rules are right for you. Consider your goals for communicating via marketing and public relations. Are you buying that Super Bowl ad to score great tickets to the game? Are you designing a creative magazine ad to win an award for your agency? Do you hope to create a book of press clips from mainstream media outlets to show to your bosses? Does your CEO want to be on TV? Are you doing PR to meet Oprah? If the answers to these questions are "yes," then the new rules (and this book) are not for you.

However, if you're like millions of smart marketers whose goal is to communicate with buyers directly, then read on. If you're working to make your organization more visible online, then read on. If you want to drive people into your company's sales process so they actually buy something (or apply, or donate, or join, or submit their name as a lead), then read on. I wrote this book especially for you.

# 2

## The New Rules of Marketing and PR

**G**erard Vroomen will tell you that he is an engineer, not a marketer. He will tell you that the company he co-founded, Cervélo Cycles,<sup>1</sup> does not have any marketing experts. But Vroomen is wrong. Why? Because he is obsessed with the buyers of his competition bikes and with the engineering-driven product he offers them. He's focused his company to help his customers win races—and they do. In the 2005 Tour de France, David Zabriskie rode the fastest time trial in the race's history on a Cervélo P3C at an average speed of 54.676 kph (33.954 mph). Vroomen also excels at using the Web to tell cycling enthusiasts compelling stories, to educate them, to engage them in conversation, and to entertain them. Because he uses Web content in interesting ways and sells a bunch of bikes in the process, Vroomen is a terrific marketer.

The Cervélo site works extremely well because it includes perfect content for visitors who are ready to buy a bike and also for people who are just browsing. The content is valuable and authentic compared to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cervelo.com/>

the marketing messages that appear on so many other sites. On the Cervélo site, enthusiasts find detailed information about each model, bikes that can cost \$3,000–\$5,000 or more. An online museum showcases production models dating from the early days of the company and some interesting past prototypes. Competitive cycling enthusiasts can sign up for an e-mail newsletter, download audio such as interviews with professional riders from Cervélo-sponsored Team CSC, or check out the company blog. Team CSC wins races, and you can follow the action on Cervélo's Team CSC pages, which include news and bike race photos. Most recently, Cervélo has launched Cervélo.tv, an online channel with product features, race reports, and cycling celebrity interviews.

“Our goal is education,” Vroomen says. “We have a technical product, and we’re the most engineering-driven company in the industry. Most bike companies don’t employ a single engineer, and we have eight. So we want to have that engineering focus stand out with the content on the site. We don’t sell on the newest paint job. So on the site, we’re not spending our time creating fluff. Instead, we have a good set of content.”

Ryan Patch is the sort of customer Cervélo wants to reach. An amateur triathlon competitor on the Vortex Racing<sup>2</sup> team, Patch says, “On the Cervélo site I can learn that Bobby Julich from Team CSC rides the same bike that is available to me. And it’s not just that they are riding, but they are doing really well. I can see how someone from Team CSC won the Giro de Italia on a Cervélo. That’s mind-blowing, that I can get the same bike that the pros are riding. I can ride the same gear. Cervélo has as much street cred as you can have with shaved legs.”

Patch says that if you’re looking to buy a new bike, if you are a hard-core consumer, then there is a great deal of detailed information on the Cervélo site about the bikes’ technology, construction,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vortexracing.org/>

and specs. “What I really like about this Web site is how it gives off the aura of legitimacy, being based in fact, not fluff,” he says.

Vroomen writes all of the content for the Cervélo site himself, and the design work has been done by a moonlighting chiropractor. There’s a content management tool built in, so Vroomen can update the site himself. You wouldn’t call it a fancy site, but it works. “We get negative feedback from Web designers about our site,” Vroomen says. “But we have great comments from customers.”

Search Engine Marketing is important for Cervélo. Because of the keyword-rich cycling content available on the site, Vroomen says, Cervélo gets the same amount of search engine traffic as many sites for bike companies that are 10 times larger. Cervélo is growing very rapidly, but Vroomen is quick to note that growth is not the result of any one thing. “We take as gospel that people have to see the product five different ways [for us] to really get the credibility.” Vroomen makes certain that his bikes are in front of people many different ways, starting with search engines, so that they get those five exposures. “For example, they may see the bike on the site, on TV in a pro race, at the dealer, and on a blog,” He says.

Vroomen says building out the Web marketing at Cervélo takes a lot of time, but it is simple and cost effective. “This is the future for companies like us,” he says. “You can be very small and niche and sell your products all over the world. It’s amazing when we go into a new country the amount of name recognition we have. The Internet gives you opportunities you never had before. And its not rocket science. It’s pretty easy to figure out.”

## The Long Tail of Marketing

I’m a fan of Chris Anderson and his book, *The Long Tail*, and I followed, via his blog, Anderson’s groundbreaking ideas about the Web’s economic shift away from mainstream markets toward smaller niche products and services well before his book was published in

July 2006. There is no doubt that Anderson's thesis in *The Long Tail* is critically important for marketers:

The theory of the Long Tail is that our culture and economy is increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of "hits" (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve and toward a huge number of niches in the tail. As the costs of production and distribution fall, especially online, there is now less need to lump products and consumers into one-size-fits-all containers. In an era without the constraints of physical shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare.<sup>3</sup>

Some of today's most successful Internet businesses leverage the long tail to reach underserved customers and satisfy demand for products not found in traditional physical stores. Examples include Amazon, which makes available at the click of a mouse hundreds of thousands of books not stocked in local chain stores; iTunes, a service that legally brings niche music not found in record stores to people who crave artists outside the mainstream; and Netflix, which exploited the long tail of demand for movie rentals beyond the blockbuster hits found at the local DVD rental shop. Anderson shows that the business implications of the long tail are profound and illustrates that there's much money to be made by creating and distributing at the long end of the tail. Yes, hits are still important. But as the above businesses have shown, there's money to be made beyond *Harry Potter*, Green Day, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

So, what about marketing? While Anderson's book focuses on product availability and selling models on the Web, the concepts apply equally well to marketing. There's no doubt that there is a long-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thelongtail.com/about.html>

tail “market” for Web content created by organizations of all kinds—corporations, nonprofits, churches, schools, individuals, rock bands—and used for reaching buyers—those who buy, donate, join, apply—directly. As consumers search the Internet for answers to their problems, as they browse blogs and chat rooms and Web sites for ideas, they are searching for what organizations like yours have to offer. Unlike in the days of the old rules of interruption marketing with a mainstream message, today’s consumers are looking for just the right product or service to satisfy their unique desires at the precise moment they are online.

Marketers must shift their thinking from the short head of mainstream marketing to the masses to a strategy of targeting vast numbers of underserved audiences via the Web.

As marketers understand the Web as a place to reach millions of micromarkets with precise messages just at the point of consumption, the way they create Web content changes dramatically. Instead of a one-size-fits-all Web site with a mass-market message, we need to create many different microsites—with purpose-built landing pages and “just-right” content—each aimed at a narrow target constituency. As *marketing* case studies, the examples of Netflix, Amazon, and iTunes are also fascinating. The techniques pioneered by the leaders of long-tail retail for reaching customers with niche interests are examples of marketing genius.

## Tell Me Something I Don’t Know, Please

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Amazon.com has been optimized for browsing. At a broad level, there are just two ways that people interact with Web content: They search



and they browse. Most organizations optimize sites for searching, which helps people answer their questions but doesn't encourage them to browse. But, people also want a site to tell them something they didn't think to ask. The marketers at Amazon understand that when people browse the site, they may have a general idea of what they want (in my case, perhaps a book for my daughter about surfing), but not the particular title. So if I start with a search on Amazon for the phrase "surfing for beginners," I get 99 titles in the search results. With this list as a starting point, I shift into browse mode, which is where Amazon excels. Each title has a customer ranking where I instantly see how other customers rated each book. I see reader-generated reviews together with reviews from Amazon staff and other media. I can see "Customers who bought this item also bought" lists and also rankings of "What do customers ultimately buy after viewing items like this?" I can check out customer tags (a way for consumers to categorize a book to purchase later or to aid other consumers) on the item or I can tag it myself. And I can poke around the contents of the book itself. After I purchase the perfect book for my daughter (*The Girl's Guide to Surfing*), I might get an e-mail from Amazon weeks or months later suggesting, based on this purchase, another book that I might find useful. This is brilliant stuff.

The site is designed to work for a major and often-ignored audience: people who do their own research and consider a decision over a period of time before making a commitment. Smart marketers, like the folks at Amazon and Cervélo, unlike those at the big three automakers we saw in Chapter 1, know that the most effective Web strategies anticipate needs and provide content to meet them, even before people know to ask.

Marketing on the Web is not about generic banner ads designed to trick people with neon color or wacky movement. It is about understanding the keywords and phrases that our buyers are using and then deploying micro-campaigns to drive buyers to pages replete with the content that they seek.

## Bricks-and-Mortar News

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The new rules are just as important for public relations. In fact, I think that online content in all of its forms is causing a convergence of marketing and PR that does not really exist offline. When your buyer is on the Web browsing for something, content is content in all of its manifestations. And in an interconnected Web world, content drives action.

On the speaking circuit, I often hear people claim that online content such as blogs and news releases is really only good for technology companies. They believe that traditional bricks-and-mortar industries can't make the strategy work. But I've always disagreed. Great content brands an organization as a trusted resource and calls people to action—to buy, subscribe, apply, or donate. And great content means that interested people return again and again. As a result, the organization succeeds, achieving goals such as adding revenue, building traffic, gaining donations, or generating sales leads.

For instance, The Concrete Network<sup>4</sup> provides information about residential concrete products and services and helps buyers and sellers connect with each other. The company targets consumers and builders who might want to plan and build a concrete patio, pool deck, or driveway—this audience makes up the business-to-consumer (B2C) component of The Concrete Network—as well as the concrete contractors who comprise the business-to-business (B2B) component. The Concrete Network's Find-A-Contractor<sup>5</sup> Service links homeowners and builders who need a project done with contractors who specialize in 22 different services located in 199 metropolitan areas in both the United States and Canada. The company's Web content, combined with a comprehensive direct-to-consumer news release strategy, drives business for The Concrete Network.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.concretenetwork.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.concretenetwork.com/contractors/>

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Web content sells concrete! (You can't get any more bricks-and-mortar than, well, mortar.)

"The new rules of PR are that anybody who wants to be the leader has to have news coming out," says Jim Peterson, president of The Concrete Network. The company's ongoing PR program includes two direct-to-consumer news releases per week; a series of articles on the site; free online catalogs for categories such as countertops, pool decks, patios, and driveways; and photo galleries for potential customers to check out what is available. As a result of all of the terrific content, The Concrete Network gets more traffic than any other site in the concrete industry, according to Peterson. He says that releases with headlines that are tied to holidays, releases that are on the humorous side, and educational releases work best. News releases designed specifically to sell haven't done as well. "We ran a concrete furniture release on April Fool's Day that did really well," Peterson says. The headline, *Concrete Furniture? No April Fools with Concrete Tables, Benches, Bookcases and Even Chairs*, was written in news-story format. Peterson is very conscious of the words and phrases that he uses in news releases and crafts them to reach specific niche targets. For example, "contemporary fireplace," "fireplace mantle," and "fireplace design" are important phrases to reach people who are in the market for a fireplace. The news releases are all sent with beautiful news photos drawn from "Earth's largest collection of decorative concrete photos" on The Concrete Network. For example, Peterson chooses from dozens of photos just of concrete patios.<sup>6</sup>

"We know how many visitors reach us via the news releases, and it is similar to paid search engine marketing," Peterson says, but at a lower cost. "We're also generating links from other sites that index the news releases, and there is a media bonus, too, when we get mentioned in a story." He adds that the site averaged 550,000 visitors per month in 2005 and 850,000 in 2006. "Direct-to-consumer

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.concretenetwork.com/photo\\_library/patios.htm](http://www.concretenetwork.com/photo_library/patios.htm)

news releases are a big part of the increased traffic. When you break it down, we're spending about twenty thousand dollars per year on news release distribution. . . . We see it as another component of our marketing. Some businesses won't want to spend that, but they probably won't be the leader in their marketplace."

## Advice from the Company President

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As president of The Concrete Network, Peterson is that rare executive who understands the power of content marketing, search engine optimization, and direct-to-consumer news releases to reach buyers directly and drive business. What is his advice to other company presidents and CEOs? "Every business has information that can contribute to the education of the marketplace. You need to ask yourself, 'How can I get that information out there?' You have to have a bit longer view and have a sense of how your business will be better down the line. For example, we created an entire series of buyer guides, because we knew that they would be valuable to the market. You need to think about how a series of one hundred news releases over two years will benefit your business and then commit to it, understanding that nothing is an overnight thing."

Peterson also suggests getting help from an expert to get started with a program. "Don't sit there and leave this [as] just a part of your list of good intentions," he says. "Businesses will live or die on original content. If you are creating truly useful content for customers, you're going to be seen in a great light and with a great spirit—you're setting the table for new business. But the vast majority of businesses don't seem to care. At The Concrete Network, we're on a mission. Get down to the essence of what your product solves and write good stories about that and publish them online."

You've got to love it. If content sells concrete, content can sell what you have to offer, too!

## The Long Tail of PR

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In PR, it's not about clip books. It's about reaching our buyers.

I was vice president of marketing and PR for two publicly traded companies and I've done it the old way. It doesn't work anymore. But the new rules do work—really well.

Instead of spending tens of thousands of dollars per month on a media relations program that tries to convince a handful of reporters at select magazines, newspapers, and TV stations to cover us, we should be targeting the plugged-in bloggers, online news sites, micro-publications, public speakers, analysts, and consultants that reach the targeted audiences that are looking for what we have to offer. Better yet, we no longer even need to wait for someone with a media voice to write about us at all. With blogs, we communicate directly with our audience, bypassing the media filter completely. We have the power to create our own media brand in the niche of our own choosing. It's about being found on Google and Yahoo! and vertical sites and RSS feeds. Instead of writing press releases only when we have “big news”—releases that reach only a handful of journalists—we should be writing news releases that highlight our expert ideas and stories, and we should be distributing them so that our buyers can find them on the news search engines and vertical content sites.

To succeed in long-tail marketing and PR, we need to adopt different criteria for success. In the book world, everyone says, “If I can only get on Oprah, I'll be a success.” Sure, I'd like to be on Oprah too. But instead of focusing countless (and probably fruitless) hours on a potential blockbuster of a TV appearance, wouldn't it be a better strategy to have lots of people reviewing your book in smaller publications that reach the specific audiences that buy books like yours? Oprah is a longshot, but right now bloggers would love to hear from you. Oprah must ignore 100 books a day, but bloggers run to their mailbox to see what interesting things might be in there (trust me, I know from experience). Sure, it would be great to have our businesses profiled in *Fortune* or *BusinessWeek*. But instead of putting all of our

public relations efforts into that one potential PR blockbuster (a mention in the major business press), wouldn't it be better to get dozens of the most influential bloggers and analysts to tell our story directly to the niche markets that are looking for what we have to offer?

## The New Rules of Marketing and PR

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If you've been nodding your head excitedly while reading about what some of these companies are up to, then the new rules are for you. As you continue to read, I'll be offering interesting case studies of companies that have been successful with the new rules. In each case example, I've interviewed the person from that organization so we can learn directly from them. I'll follow these chapters on specific areas of online content (such as blogging, podcasting, news releases) with more detailed "how-to" chapters. But before we move on, let me explicitly state the *New Rules of Marketing and PR* that we'll discuss throughout the rest of the book:

- Marketing is more than just advertising.
- PR is for more than just a mainstream media audience.
- You are what you publish.
- People want authenticity, not spin.
- People want participation, not propaganda.
- Instead of causing one-way interruption, marketing is about delivering content at just the precise moment your audience needs it.
- Marketers must shift their thinking from mainstream marketing to the masses to a strategy of reaching vast numbers of underserved audiences via the Web.
- PR is not about your boss seeing your company on TV. It's about your buyers seeing your company on the Web.

- Marketing is not about your agency winning awards. It's about your organization winning business.
- The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media.
- Companies must drive people into the purchasing process with great online content.
- Blogs, podcasts, e-books, news releases, and other forms of online content let organizations communicate directly with buyers in a form they appreciate.
- On the Web, the lines between marketing and PR have blurred.

## The Convergence of Marketing and PR on the Web ---

As I originally wrote this list and edited it down, I was struck by how important one particular concept was to any successful online strategy to reach buyers directly: the convergence of marketing and PR. In an offline world, marketing and PR are separate departments with different people and different skill sets, but this is not the case on the Web. What's the difference between what Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix are doing to reach customers via online marketing and what The Concrete Network does with direct-to-consumer news releases? There's not much difference. How is the news that Cervélo Cycles creates itself and posts on the site different from a story on the *Bicycling* magazine Web site? It isn't. And when a buyer is researching your product category by using a search engine, does it really matter if the first exposure is a hit on your Web site, or a news release your organization sent, or a magazine article, or a post on your blog? I'd argue that it doesn't matter. Whereas I presented two separate lists for The Old Rules of Marketing and The Old Rules of PR, now there is just one set of rules: *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*. Great content in all forms helps buyers see that you and your organization "get it." Content drives action.

# 3

## Reaching Your Buyers Directly

The frustration of relying exclusively on the media and expensive advertising to deliver your organization's messages is long gone. Yes, mainstream media is still important, but today smart marketers craft compelling messages and tell the world directly via the Web. The tremendous expense of relying on advertising to convince buyers to pay attention to your product is yesterday's headache.

Bryan and Jeffery Eisenberg are experts in understanding visitors in order to convert Web site traffic into leads, customers, and sales. They offer these services through their company, FutureNow,<sup>1</sup> and its Persuasion Architecture methodology. The brothers are also authors of *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?: Persuading Customers When They Ignore Marketing*,<sup>2</sup> released in the summer of 2006. In a fascinating tale of online marketing, direct-to-consumer news releases, cats versus dogs, and blogging, *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?* rocketed up the bestseller ranks to number one on the *Wall Street Journal* Business Bestseller list. How in the world did they do it?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.futurenowinc.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cattobark.com>



“We developed a scenario, a persuasion architecture scenario, that gets people to buy the book,” says Jeffrey Eisenberg. The campaign started well before the book was released by targeting existing customers and friends through posts on the FutureNow blog<sup>3</sup> and articles in the company’s GrokDotCom<sup>4</sup> e-mail newsletter. Separately, the authors sent advance-reading copies of the book to hundreds of influential bloggers (even I got one) and other people who might be in the position to generate early, prepublication buzz. Then a campaign of multiple targeted news releases distributed through PRWeb<sup>5</sup> kicked in, months before the publication of the book. “During what we called our bestseller campaign, which was centered on our core audience, we created a sense of urgency around the book,” Jeffrey Eisenberg says. “Our PR strategy is intended to circulate the ideas that are in the book, not simply to sell books. The series of news releases state the ideas of the book in many different ways. We are trying to nudge people along by creating funnels and entry points into the book through the news releases and online marketing.”

In order to drive interest during the critical months leading up to the publication date and then to sustain momentum after publication, the Eisenbergs sent one news release via PRWeb each and every business day. Let me repeat—*they sent a news release every day for a period of several months*. The purpose of the news releases was to get the ideas into the marketplace so that bloggers would find the information covered in the book and then write about it. Note that the Eisenbergs did not send the daily releases to the media via e-mail; rather, this was a strategy to reach bloggers and consumers via search engines and RSS feeds through news release content. Critical to the releases’ success was their focus on real and actionable infor-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://persuasion.typepad.com/architect/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.grokdotcom.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.prweb.com/>

mation that was found in the book. They were crafted with provocative, newsy headlines such as the following:

- *Consistency Across Media Vital to Overall Brand, Say Authors of New Book*
- *Is Google Responsible for Marketing Failures?*
- *Why Your Customers Are More Like Cats than Dogs*
- *Does Traditional Branding Still Work? Experts Say It Takes More in Interactive World*
- *New Marketing Book Says Consumer Polls May Not Reflect Actual Spending Behavior*
- *Best-Selling Authors Show How to Predict Consumer Behavior in New Book*

Jeffrey Eisenberg says that the news releases and the advance-reading copies, as well as promotions on the company site, newsletter, and blog, all helped other bloggers to push the book along and generate interest in many small ways. Some 300 bloggers wrote about the book, developed conversations around its ideas, and helped push it along to many thousands of consumers via word-of-blog. Some examples include:

- “Getting your cat to bark is easier than marketing to teenagers.” (*Search Engine Roundtable*<sup>6</sup>)
- “Do we even want to persuade website visitors who ignore marketing?” (*Cre8pc on Web Site Usability and Holistic SEO*<sup>7</sup>)
- “*Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?* shows you how to think about persuading your prospects to do the things they do want to do.” (*Duct Tape Marketing*<sup>8</sup>)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.seroundtable.com/archives/004013.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cre8pc.com/blog/2006/06/do-we-even-want-to-persuade-website.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ducttapemarketing.com/weblog.php?id=P639>

- “From pre-click (search) to post-click (persuasion), Bryan and Jeffrey are masters. *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?* is a guaranteed *New York Times/Wall Street Journal/International* best seller. No doubt about it.” (Mike Grehan says . . .<sup>9</sup>)

“Buzz doesn’t have a measurable ROI,” Jeffrey Eisenberg says. “The cumulative effect of doing a lot of the right things is what works, so this kind of PR is better explained as a tipping point.” He says that a great number of small marketing efforts, each focused on delivering a targeted message about the book, reached many of the people he calls “influentials,” the majority of whom aren’t part of the mainstream media. “When you are doing direct PR, you recognize the fact that there are influentials who are not editors and reporters but who are important. The people who are looking at the news releases are the bloggers.” And when hundreds of bloggers write about something, the combined reach can be millions of consumers.

Jeffrey Eisenberg uses a farming metaphor to describe successful marketing and PR, noting that you will be much more successful if you forget about trying to get the huge article. Big yields come from cultivating many small relationships rather than a focus on trying to get that one mega-success. “The big hits come by getting to the little guy,” he says. To prove the point, he mentions that he was surprised when the *Wall Street Journal* covered the book in a glowing story called “Buying and Selling in a Finicky World.” They had never pitched the *Journal*—the reporter had found them through word-of-mouth (and word-of-blog). Lots of bits and pieces of content added up to the big strategy and the payoff was a number-one bestselling book. Jeffrey Eisenberg adds, “[Success] is the measure of how many little things you do right. Lots of small things added up make the difference.”

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.mikegrehan.com/2006/05/emetrics-summit-2006-one-of.html>

## Let the World Know about Your Expertise

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All people and organizations—nonprofits, rock bands, political advocacy groups, companies, independent consultants—possess the power to elevate themselves on the Web to a position of importance. In the new e-marketplace of ideas, organizations highlight their expertise in various forms such as great Web sites, podcasts, blogs, e-books, and online news releases that focus on buyers' needs. All these media allow organizations to deliver the right information to buyers, right at the point when they are most receptive to the information. The tools at our disposal as marketers are Web-based media to deliver our own thoughtful and informative content via Web sites, blogs, e-books, white papers, images, photos, audio content, and video, and even things like product placement, games, and virtual reality. We also have the ability to interact and participate in conversations that other people begin in established blogs, chat rooms, and forums. What links all of these techniques together is that organizations of all types behave like *publishers*, creating content that people are eager to consume. Organizations gain credibility and loyalty with buyers through content, and smart marketers now think and act like publishers in order to create and deliver content targeted directly at their audience.

## Develop Messages Your Buyers Want to Hear

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Companies with large budgets can't wait to spend the big bucks on slick TV advertisements. It's like commissioning artwork. TV ads make marketing people at larger companies feel good. But broadcast advertisements from the time of the TV-industrial complex don't work so well anymore. When we had three networks and no cable, it was different. In the time-shifted, multichannel, Webcentric world of

the long tail, YouTube, TiVo, and blogs, spending big bucks on TV ads is like commissioning a portrait was back in the nineteenth century: It might make you feel good, but did it bring in any money?

Instead of deploying huge budgets for dumbed-down TV commercials that purport to speak to the masses and therefore appeal to nobody, we need to think about the messages that our niche audiences wait to hear. Why not build content specifically for these niche audiences and tell them an online story about your product, a story that is created especially for them? Once marketers and PR people tune their brains to think about niches, they begin to see opportunities for being more effective at delivering their organization's message.

## Buyer Personas: The Basics

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Smart marketers understand buyers, and many build formal “buyer personas” for their target demographics. (I discuss buyer personas in detail in Chapter 10.) It can be daunting for many of us to consider who, exactly, is visiting our site. But if we break the buyers into distinct groups and then catalog everything we know about each one, we make it easier to create content targeted to each important demographic. For example, a college Web site usually has the goal of keeping alumni happy so they donate money to their alma mater on a regular basis. So perhaps a college would have two buyer personas for alumni: young alumni (those who graduated within the past 10 or 15 years) and older alumni. Universities also have a goal of recruiting students by driving them into the application process. So the effective college site might have a buyer persona for the high school student who is considering college. But the parents of the prospective student have very different information needs, so the site designers might build another buyer persona for parents. And a college also has to keep its existing customers (current students) happy. In sum, that means a well-executed college site might target five distinct buyer personas, with the goal of getting alumni to donate money, the high school students to complete the application process,

and the parents to make certain their kids complete it. The goal for the current student aspects of the site might be to make certain they come back for another year of studies and to answer routine questions so that staff time is not wasted.

By truly understanding the needs and the mindset of the five buyer personas, the college will be able to create appropriate content. Once you understand the audience very well, then (and only then) you should set out to satisfy their informational needs by focusing on your buyer's problems and create and deliver content accordingly. As mentioned earlier, Web site content too often simply describes what an organization or a product does from an egotistical perspective. While information about your organization and products is certainly valuable on the inner pages of your site, what visitors really want is content that first describes the issues and problems they face and then provides details on how to solve those problems. Once you've built an online relationship, you can begin to offer potential solutions that have been defined for each audience. After you've identified target audiences and articulated their problems, content is your tool to show off your expertise. Well organized Web content will lead your visitors through the sales cycle all the way to the point when they are ready to make a purchase or other commitment to your organization.

Understanding buyers and building an effective content strategy to reach them is critical for success. And providing clear links from the content to the place where action occurs is critical. Consider Mike Pedersen, who is widely acknowledged as one of the leading golf fitness training experts in the United States, having taught thousands of golfers the fitness approach to playing a consistently great game of golf. Pedersen runs an online business providing products for golfers to improve their game by getting in better shape. Pedersen's site<sup>10</sup> and his Perform Better Golf blog<sup>11</sup> are chock full of content created specifically

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.golf-trainer.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.performbettergolf.com/blog/>

for a narrow target market (buyer persona). “I write for the sixty-year-old golfer who has rapidly declining physical capabilities,” says Pedersen. “I like to call it targeted content. When I write an article, I’m targeting a very specific element of golf for my readers. The article might be targeted to a small aspect of the golf swing, for example, and the guys I write for know how it can help them.”

Pedersen offers hundreds of free articles and tips on his site and blog, such as “Golf-Specific Warm-ups” and “Golf Muscles Need to Be Strong and Flexible to Produce More Power in Your Golf Swing.” “Most golfers don’t prepare their bodies before they play golf, and they aren’t able to play a good game,” he says. “I write to be easy to understand and offer exercises that help people to prepare quickly and efficiently.” Each article includes multiple photos of Pedersen illustrating how the exercises should be done.

Pedersen relies on search engines to drive much of his traffic, and his site is number one on search engines for important phrases like “golf training.” He also works with partners and affiliates, and he is the featured golf fitness expert for *Golf* magazine’s Web site,<sup>12</sup> generating even more traffic for his own site. Pedersen says that key to everything about his business is targeting his buyers directly with content specifically for them. His focus on his buyer persona of the older man who loves golf but is physically able to do less in declining years is relentless. “I rely on getting into the consumers’ mind and feeling their pain and their frustration,” he says. “It is easy to write what I think, but much more difficult to write about what my buyers are thinking. With these guys, my target market, if they don’t do anything now, they physically can’t play the game that they love in future years. But I’m a forty-year-old, really fit, healthy guy. If I just wrote for myself, I’d be shooting myself in the foot because I’m not the target market.”

Pedersen makes his money by selling products such as his flagship Golf Fitness Training System for \$150 (the system includes

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.golfonline.com/golfonline/fitness>

DVDs, books, and manuals) and membership for his online Golf Training Program. He also offers individual-topic DVDs and exercise supplies such as weighted golf clubs. At the bottom of each article on the site, there is a clear path and a call to action. “I’m diligent about links from every page both to something free and to the products page,” he says. For example, a recent offer read, “Do you want to learn how your body is keeping you from a near perfect golf swing? Get my Free Golf Fitness Ebook and find out!”<sup>13</sup>

When people register on the site for a free offer, they are added to Pedersen’s 40,000-person e-mail list to get alerts on significant new content added to the site and blog, as well as special offers. The majority of e-mail messages he sends are alerts about new content and contain no sales pitch at all. “I know that if I provide valuable content, then I’ll get more sales,” Pedersen says.

## Think Like a Publisher

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The new publishing model on the Web is not about hype and spin and messages. It is about delivering content when and where it is needed and, in the process, branding you or your organization as a leader. When you understand your audience, those people who will become your buyers (or those who will join, donate, subscribe, apply, volunteer, or vote), you can craft an editorial and content strategy just for them. What works is a focus on your buyers and their problems. What fails is an egocentric display of your products and services.

In order to implement a successful strategy, think like a publisher. Marketers at the organizations successfully using the new rules recognize the fact that they are now purveyors of information, and they manage content as a valuable asset with the same care that a publishing company does. One of the most important things that publishers do is start with a content strategy and *then* focus on the mechanics

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.golf-trainer.com/public/department25.cfm>



and design of delivering that content. Publishers carefully identify and define target audiences and consider what content is required in order to meet their needs. Publishers consider all of the following questions: Who are my readers? How do I reach them? What are their motivations? What are the problems I can help them solve? How can I entertain them and inform them at the same time? What content will compel them to purchase what I have to offer?

## Tell Your Organization's Story Directly

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Ben Argov uses his Wine Storage Blog<sup>14</sup> to highlight good wine storage practice. His company, Le Cache Premium Wine Cabinets, sells furniture-quality wine storage cabinets primarily to individuals, helping them showcase, protect, and properly age fine wine. Although most of his product ends up in wine enthusiasts' homes, another major market is upscale hotels, restaurants, and resorts.<sup>15</sup> In a competitive industry with at least a half-dozen U.S. manufacturers of furniture-quality wine storage cabinets, Le Cache stands out because of the blog and because of Argov's active participation in online wine industry forums and chat rooms.

"All of this is to establish us as the good guys in the industry," says Argov. "We want to be seen as the leaders, and we do that through the blog and by participating in the community." Argov's Wine Storage Blog staked out a position in the industry as being straightforward and approachable. "We assume people want good quality finish and hardware, so we use the blog and our postings online to be honest brokers and to be seen as very knowledgeable about our products," he says.

Argov also frequently posts on Mark Squires's bulletin board on

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<sup>14</sup> <http://wine-storage.blogspot.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.le-cache.com/about-le-cache/le-cache-restaurants.cfm>

eRobertParker.com,<sup>16</sup> the premier site for wine enthusiasts. The bulletin board gets millions of page views every month. “A topic will come up, and if it is appropriate we will pop in,” he says. “There is a healthy debate, and if it is an important topic, we use the blog to promote our point of view. We do our job to say how we think wine should be stored but then bring people back to the blog for more information.” Because Argov is well-known in the wine enthusiast forums and chat rooms and has been blogging since March 2005, he’s seen as an authentic and valuable part of the community.

It also helps that each blog post and forum comment turns into search-engine-marketing fodder to drive more traffic. The effort is paying off. “We send out customer surveys to people who purchase our cabinets,” Argov says. “We ask questions like ‘How did you hear about us?’ and ‘What did you use to research the purchase?’ We have learned that over ninety percent of our customers have found us or researched us online. In fact, we know that many of our sales are coming from places where we don’t even have physical dealers, so we know that the business has to be coming from our blog and participation in the forums.”

## Know the Goals and Let Content Drive Action

On the speaking circuit and via my blog, I am often asked to critique marketing programs, Web sites, and blogs. My typical response, “What’s the goal?” often throws people off. It is amazing that so many marketers don’t have established goals for their marketing programs and for Web sites and blogs in particular.

An effective Web marketing and PR strategy that delivers compelling content to buyers gets them to take action. (You will learn more about developing your own marketing and PR strategy in Chapter 10.)

<sup>16</sup> <http://dat.erobertparker.com/bboard/>

Companies that understand the new rules of marketing and PR have a clearly defined *business* goal—to sell products, to generate contributions, or to get people to vote or join. These successful organizations aren't focused on the wrong goals, things like press clips and advertising awards. At successful organizations, news releases, blogs, Web sites, podcasts, and other content draw visitors into the sales-consideration cycle, then funnel them toward the place where action occurs. The goal is not hidden, and it is easy for buyers to find the way to take the next step. When content effectively drives action, the next step of the sales process—an e-commerce company's "products" button, the B2B corporation's "white paper download" form, or nonprofit's "donate" link—are easy to find.

Working from the perspective of the company's desire for revenue growth and customer retention (the goals), rather than focusing on made-up metrics for things like leads and Web site traffic, yields surprising changes in the typical marketing plan and in the organization of Web content. Web site traffic doesn't matter if your goal is revenue (however, the traffic may *lead to* the goal). Similarly, being ranked number one on Google for a phrase isn't important (although, if your buyers care about that phrase, it can lead to the goal).

Ultimately, when marketers focus on the same goals as the rest of the organization, we develop marketing programs that really deliver action and begin to contribute to the bottom line and command respect. Rather than meeting rolled eyes and snide comments about marketing as simply the "T-shirt department," we're seen as part of a strategic unit that contributes to reaching the organization's goals.

## Content and Thought Leadership

For many companies and individuals, reaching customers with Web content has a powerful, less obvious effect. Content brands an organization as a thought leader. Indeed, many organizations create content especially to position them as thought leaders in their market. Instead of just directly selling something, a great site, blog, or

podcast series tells the world that you are smart, that you understand the market very well, and that you would be a person or organization that would be valuable to do business with. Web content directly contributes to an organization's online reputation by showing thought leadership in the marketplace of ideas. See Chapter 11 for more on thought leadership.

In the next chapters that make up Part II of the book, I will introduce blogs, news releases, podcasting, online forums, viral marketing, and social networking. Then in Part III, I'll present a guide to creating your marketing and PR plan (Chapter 10), followed by detailed chapters with "how-to" information on each technique. Content turns browsers into buyers. It doesn't matter whether you're selling premium wine cabinets or a new music CD, or advocating to stop sonar harm to whales; Web content sells any product or service and advocates any philosophy or image.





# Web-Based Communications to Reach Buyers Directly



# 4

## Blogs: Tapping Millions of Evangelists to Tell Your Story

**B**logging is my front door. Since 2004, my blog<sup>1</sup> has been where I post my ideas, both big and small. There's no doubt that my blog is the most important marketing and PR tool I have as a marketing and PR speaker, writer, and consultant. Even after several years and hundreds of blog posts, I'm always surprised at how effectively this tool helps me accomplish my goals.

My blog allows me to push ideas into the marketplace as I think of them, generating instant feedback. Sure, many blog posts just sit there with no feedback, no comments, and no results. But I learn from these "failures," too; when my audience doesn't get excited about something, it's probably either a dumb idea or poorly explained. On the other hand, some posts have had truly phenomenal results, quite literally changing my business in the process. I'll admit that my ravings about the importance of my blog may sound over the top. But the truth is that blogging really has changed my life.

The first time I shared my ideas about the new rules of PR, in a post on my blog that included a link to an e-book I had written, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.webinknow.com/>



reaction was dramatic and swift. In the first week, thousands of people viewed the post. To date, over 200,000 people have seen the ideas, over a hundred bloggers have linked to them, and thousands of people have commented on them, on my blog and others'. That one blog post—and the resulting refinement of my ideas after receiving so much feedback, both positive and negative—created the opportunity to write the book you are now reading. And as I was writing the book during much of 2006, I continually posted parts of it, which generated even more critical feedback—hundreds of comments—that made the book much better.

Thanks to the power of search engines, my blog is also the most vital and effective way for people to find me. Every word of every post is indexed by Google, Yahoo!, and the other search engines, so when people look for information on the topics I write about, they find me. Journalists find me through my blog and quote me in newspaper and magazine articles *without me having to pitch them*. Conference organizers book me to speak at events as a result of reading my ideas on my blog. I've met many new virtual friends and created a powerful network of colleagues.

As I write and talk to these corporate audiences and other professionals about the power of blogging, many people want to know about the return on investment (ROI) of blogging. In particular, executives want to know, in dollars and cents, what the results will be. The bad news is that this information is difficult to quantify with any degree of certainty. For my small business, I determine ROI by asking everyone who contacts me for the first time, "How did you learn about me?" That approach will be difficult for larger organizations with integrated marketing programs including blogs. The good news is that blogging most certainly generates returns for anyone who creates an interesting blog and posts regularly to it. So what about me? My blog has gotten my ideas out to thousands of people who have never heard of me before. It has helped me get booked for at least a dozen important speaking gigs around the world. I've determined that about 25 percent of the new consulting business I've brought in during the past two years has been either through the blog directly

or from purchasers who cited the blog as important to their decision to hire me. Consider this: If I didn't have a blog, you literally wouldn't be reading these words, because I couldn't have been writing this book without it.

Will writing a blog change your life, too? I can't guarantee that. Blogging is not for everyone. But if you're like countless others, your blog will reap tremendous rewards, both for you personally and for your organization. Yes, the rewards may be financial. But your blog will most certainly serve you as a valuable creative outlet, perhaps a more important reward for you and your business.

The rest of this chapter describes more about blogs and blogging. You will meet other successful bloggers who have added value to their organizations and benefited themselves by blogging. I'll describe the basics of getting started with blogs, including what you should do first—monitor the blogosphere and comment on other people's blogs—before even beginning to write your own. The nitty-gritty stuff of starting a blog, what to write about, the technology you will need, and other details are found in Chapter 17.

## Blogs, Blogging, and Bloggers

Weblogs (blogs) have burst onto the content scene because the technology is such an easy and efficient way to get personal (or organizational) viewpoints out into the market. With easy-to-use blog software, anyone can create a professional-looking blog in just minutes. Most marketing and PR people know about blogs, and many are monitoring what's being said about their company, products, and executives on this new medium. A significant number of people are also blogging for marketing purposes, some with amazing success.

I have found writing this chapter to be a significant challenge because there is great variance in people's knowledge of blogs and blogging. I always ask the audiences I present to, via a show of hands, "How many people read blogs?" I'm continually surprised that only about 20 to 30 percent of marketing and PR people read blogs. That's

a ridiculously low percentage. There's never been an easier way to find out what the marketplace is thinking about you, your company, and your products! When I ask how many people are writing their own blogs, the number is always less than 10 percent. While even the people who are currently reading and writing blogs have varying expertise in the blogosphere, there are significant misconceptions about blogs and blogging among those who don't read them at all. So with apologies in advance to readers who already understand them, I'd like to start with some basics.

A blog is just a Web site. But it's a special kind of site that is created and maintained by a person who is passionate about a subject and wants to tell the world about his or her area of expertise. A blog is almost always written by one person who has a fire in the belly and wants to communicate with the world. There are also group blogs (written by several people) and even corporate blogs produced by a department or entire company (without individual personalities at all), but these are less common. The most popular form by far is the individual blog.

A blog is written using software that puts the most recent update, or post, at the top of the site (reverse chronological order). Posts are tagged to appear in selected information categories on the blog and often include identifiers about the content of the post to make it easy for people to find what they want on the blog and via search engines. Software for creating a blog functions essentially as an easy-to-use, personal *content management system* that allows bloggers to become authors without any HTML experience. If you can use Microsoft Word or successfully buy a product online from Amazon, you have enough technical skills to blog! In fact, I often suggest that small companies and individual entrepreneurs create a blog rather than a standard Web site because a blog is easier to create for someone who lacks technical skills. Today there are thousands of smaller companies, consultants, and professionals who have a blog but no regular Web site.

Many blogs allow readers to leave comments. But bloggers often reserve the right to remove inappropriate comments (spam or pro-

fanity, for example). Most bloggers tolerate negative comments on their blogs and don't remove them. I actually like some controversy on my blog because it can spark debate. Opinions that are different from mine on my blog are just fine! This might take some getting used to, especially for a traditional PR department that likes to control messaging. However, I strongly believe that comments from readers offering different viewpoints than the original post are actually a good thing on a blog, because they add credibility to your viewpoint by showing two sides of an issue and by highlighting that your readership is passionate enough to want to contribute to a debate on *your blog*. How cool is that?

## Understanding Blogs in the World of the Web

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Blogs are independent, Web-based journals containing opinions about anything and everything. *However, blogs are often misunderstood by people who don't read them.* Journalists as well as public relations and marketing professionals are quick to dismiss the importance of blogs because they often insist on comparing blogs with magazines and newspapers, with which they are comfortable. But the blogger's usual focus of promoting a single point of view is dramatically different from the journalist's goal of providing a balanced perspective. In my experience, blogs are deemed "bad" or "wrong" only by people who do not read them regularly. In journalism school and on their first-beat assignments when they begin their career, aspiring reporters and editors are taught that stories are developed through research and interviews with knowledgeable sources. Journalists are told that they can't express their own opinions directly, but instead need to find experts and data to support their views. The journalist's craft demands fairness and balance.

Blogs are very different. Blogging provides experts and wannabes with an easy way to make their voices heard in the Web-based marketplace of ideas. Companies that ignore independent product

reviews and discussions about service quality found on blogs are living dangerously. Organizations that don't have their own authentic and human blog voices are increasingly seen as suspect by many people who pay attention to what's being said on blogs. But as millions of independent voices shout and whisper all over the Net, certain mainstream media and PR people still maintain rigid defensive postures, dismissing the diverse opinions emerging from the Web's main streets and roads-less-traveled.

Many people try to box blogs into their existing worldview rather than understand blogs' and bloggers' unique roles on the Web. Often people who don't get these roles simply react with a cry of "Not real journalism!" But bloggers never claimed to be real journalists; unfortunately, many people continue to think of the Web as a sprawling online newspaper, and this mentality justifies their need to (negatively) compare blogging to what journalists and PR people do. But the metaphor of the Web as a newspaper is inaccurate on many levels, particularly when trying to understand blogs. It is better to think of the Web as a huge city teeming with individuals, and blogs as the sounds of independent voices, just like those of the street-corner soapbox preacher or that friend of yours who always recommends the best books.

Consider the now well-known September 2004 example of how blogs exerted tremendous influence on an issue but were dismissed by people who don't understand bloggers' role in information dissemination. The controversy, dubbed the "memogate" or "Rathergate" case, involved documents critical of President George W. Bush's service in the United States National Guard. In a *60 Minutes Wednesday* broadcast aired by CBS on September 8, 2004, the documents were presented as authentic, but had not been properly authenticated by CBS. The situation unfolded just hours later on the Free Republic news forum site, where a message was posted by a person called "Buckhead," who said the memos Rather used as the basis of his story appeared typographically impossible.<sup>2</sup> Buckhead's post was followed the next morning by entries to blogs including

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1210662/posts?page=47#47>

Little Green Footballs<sup>3</sup> and PowerLine<sup>4</sup> that raised questions about the documents' authenticity. For days, Rather dug in while CBS dismissed the bloggers as a bunch of geeks in pajamas typing away in the dead of night. Of course as we know now, ignoring bloggers cost Rather his job. Had he taken the bloggers seriously and immediately investigated the documents, perhaps he, too, would have very quickly concluded that they were fake. In that case, an explanation and apology might have resulted in the affair blowing over. But dismissing bloggers and their opinions was clearly a mistake. That was years ago. Although bloggers have become more influential since then, there is still a great deal of similarly dismissive behavior going on inside media companies and corporate PR departments.

Okay, so bloggers aren't journalists. Many people in traditional media companies and corporate communications positions trip up because they misunderstand bloggers' actual role in information dissemination. Consider it from the Web-as-a-city perspective: The woman next to you at the bar may not be a journalist, but she sure knows something, and you can choose to believe her or not. Incidentally, seeing the Web as a city also helps make sense of other aspects of online life. Craigslist is like the bulletin board at the entrance of the corner store; eBay, a garage sale; Amazon, a bookstore replete with patrons anxious to give you their book tips. You've even got the proverbial wrong-side-of-the-tracks spots via the Web's adult-entertainment underbelly.

Should you believe everything you read on blogs? Hell, no! That's akin to believing everything you hear on the street or in a bar. Thinking of the Web as a city, rather than a newspaper, and bloggers as individual citizen voices provides implications for all net-citizens. Consider the source (don't trust strangers), and find out if the information comes from the government, a newspaper, a big corporation,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=12526>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.powerlineblog.com/>

someone with an agenda, or some Nigerian oil minister's ex-wife who is just dying to give you \$20 million.

Blogs and bloggers are now important and valuable alternative sources of information, not unlike your next-door neighbor. Take them with a grain of salt . . . but ignore them at your peril. Just remember that nobody ever said your neighbor was the same as a newspaper. The challenge for marketers and PR people is to make sense of the voices out there (and to incorporate their ideas into our own). Organizations have the power to become tremendously rich and successful by harnessing the millions of conversations found in Web City.

## The Three Uses of Blogs for Marketing and PR

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As you get started with blogs and blogging, you should think about three different ways to use them:

1. To easily monitor what millions of people are saying about you, the market you sell into, your organization, and its products.
2. To participate in those conversations by commenting on other people's blogs.
3. To begin and to shape those conversations by creating and writing your own blog.

There are good reasons for jumping into the blog world using these three steps. First, by monitoring what people are saying about the marketplace you sell into as well as your company and products, you get a sense of the important bloggers, their online voices, and blog etiquette. It is quite important to understand the unwritten rules of blogging, and the best way to do that is to read blogs. Next, you can begin to leave comments on the blogs that are important for your industry or marketplace. That starts you on the way to being known to other bloggers and allows you to present your point of

view before you create your own blog. Finally, when you feel comfortable with blogs and bloggers, you can take the plunge by creating your own blog.

In my experience, corporate PR departments' concerns about blogs always focus on issues of actually writing them. But if you've monitored blogs and know that there are, say, a dozen influential bloggers writing about your space, and that those blogs have thousands of loyal readers, you can show a PR person the importance of simply monitoring blogs. Some of the more popular blogs have readerships that are larger than that of the daily newspaper of a major city. PR people care about the readership of the *Boston Globe*, right? Then they should care about a blog that has a similar number of readers. If you become known within your organization as an expert in monitoring blogs, it is a much smaller leap to gaining permission to create your own.

## Monitor Blogs—Your Organization's Reputation Depends on It

“Organizations use blogs to measure what's going on with their stakeholders and to understand corporate reputation,” says Glenn Fannick,<sup>5</sup> a text mining and media measurement expert at Dow Jones. “Reputation management is important, and media measurement is a key part of what PR people do. Companies are already measuring what's going on in the media; now they need to also measure what's going on with blogs.”

Text mining technologies extract content from millions of blogs so you can read what people are saying; in a more sophisticated use, they also allow for measurement of trends. “You can count massive numbers of blogs and look for words and phrases and see what's be-

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<sup>5</sup> <http://fannick.blogspot.com/>



ing said as a whole,” Fannick says. “You really need to rely on technology because of the massive volumes of blogs and blog posts out there. There is an unprecedented amount of unsolicited comments and market intelligence available on blogs. It is a unique way to tap into the mind of the marketplace. It is an interesting and fertile ground.”

As a starting point, all marketing and PR people need to go to blog search engines and run a query on their organization’s name, the names of their products and services, and other important words and phrases such as executives’ names. Technorati<sup>6</sup> is an excellent blog search engine. It allows you to instantly see if any of the 66 million blogs that it tracks have any information you need to know. I can’t imagine an organization that wouldn’t find value in knowing what’s being said about them or their products or the industry or market they sell into on blogs.

More sophisticated marketers then start to analyze trends. Is your product getting greater or fewer blog mentions compared to your nearest competitor’s product? Are the blog posts about your company positive or negative in tone? How does that compare with the ratios from six months ago? “It’s naive to think that what your stakeholders think is not important,” Fannick says. “Opinions are offered on blogs, and understanding the sum of those opinions is very important. You can’t just make decisions on what you think your products do; you need to make decisions on the perceptions of what people are actually doing with your products. Seeing the blogosphere as a source of market intelligence is now vital for companies.”

So become an expert in what’s being said about your organization on blogs. There’s never been a better time for marketers to get a true feel for what’s going on in the real world. Bloggers provide instantaneous and unsolicited comments on your products, and this free information is just waiting for you to tap into it.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.technorati.com/>

## Comment on Blogs to Get Your Viewpoint Out There

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Once you've got a sense of who is out there blogging about your company, its products, and the industry and marketplace you work in, it's time to think about offering comments on blogs. Most blogs have a feature that allows anyone to comment on posts.

"It is amazing what one country boy with a view of a cow pasture can do with blogs, Yahoo groups, Meetup, and Web sites," says Eddie Ratliff, national chairman of Draft Mark Warner.<sup>7</sup> Ratliff, together with co-founder Steve Deak, created Draft Mark Warner, a grassroots effort to urge former Virginia governor Mark Warner to run for president of the United States in 2008.

"I started working on the Draft Mark Warner site on election night 2004 and built it up quickly," Ratliff says. "Then I went onto lots of blogs all over the country and wrote comments about Mark Warner. At that time he was still Governor of Virginia. So pretty soon people were reading stuff on the site about how Virginia was the best-managed state in America."

Ratliff understands the vital importance of a U.S. presidential candidate building a national online support base. He and his team created the Mark Warner for President blog,<sup>8</sup> a series of Yahoo! groups,<sup>9</sup> and Meetups<sup>10</sup> with supporters around the country, and they have coordinated a strategy of active participation to support Warner on hundreds of political blogs. "I don't want to overstate our importance," Ratliff says, "but there's no doubt that a presidential candidate cannot win without a following. We have been the group to get Mark Warner a grassroots following. We're campaigning all over the country. We can't close the deal, but people will recognize the name

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.draftmarkwarner.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.draftmarkwarner.com/blog.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DraftMarkWarner/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://draftmarkwarner.meetup.com/>

Mark Warner.” While not every blog post is a direct result of the work of the Draft Mark Warner organization, a recent check of Technorati shows well over 10,000 blogs that mention Mark Warner.

As Ratliff and his team have built support over several years, the Draft Mark Warner organization’s position as an independent group (not affiliated with Mark Warner in any way) presents interesting challenges. “It just got big,” Ratliff says. “We are the preeminent Warner site at this time, so we have to be very careful because we are doing this without taking direction from anybody. I have a whole team of people sorting out Governor Warner’s positions, and I have them all written out, but I am reluctant to post them at this stage because we don’t actually have contact with Warner himself. We don’t feel it’s our place to frame his positions.”

Draft Mark Warner relies on financial donations to pay the bills, and Ratliff uses the money to build more and more online grassroots support. “At a certain point, I had to bring on people to answer e-mail and to organize in states,” he says. “Now we’ve got organizations in something like 38 states.”

Ratliff is a master at understanding how blogs can be used to build support. “In the past, campaigns usually started a year or two before the election,” he says. “We started the Draft Mark Warner site four years before the presidential election. We believe future campaign organizers will adopt this model.” At the time I interviewed Ratliff, the cycle was just getting going and no candidates had yet declared their intention to run in the 2008 election.

“I’ve been running a race, hard, that’s not even mine for two years for a person I’ve only met a few times,” Ratliff says. “The real goal is to have a campaign in place with workers in the locations that are important. Our expectation is that many in our organization will go on to be active in his campaign once he declares his candidacy.”

Ratliff’s success as the de facto Mark Warner for President organizing group has given him a powerful position as Warner becomes better known. By building support via blogs and the Internet, Ratliff estimates he sees about 20 invitations for every one that Warner can accept. “Since Federal Election Commission rules do not permit our

PAC [Political Action Committee] to coordinate activities with his, we pass them on and hope he's able to accept," Ratliff said. "And now I've got important people reaching out to me because they want to get closer to Mark Warner.

"You'd be surprised what one individual can do when he applies himself," says Ratliff. "Even one person without any political experience can make a huge difference. There is absolutely no way that I could do this without blogs and the Web. I use the Internet to raise money, recruit grassroots supporters, and connect with other organizations. You couldn't do this in the mail-and-fax days. When I read in *The Philadelphia Enquirer* that the Draft Mark Warner movement is gaining momentum, it proves that blogging and the Web work."

Colin Delany,<sup>11</sup> an expert in online political advocacy, agrees with the power of blogging for political candidates as well as advocacy groups. "Even a tiny organization can turn out really good pieces that can then influence policy," he says. "The opinion blogs are important. Bloggers seem to take candidates who have their own blogs more seriously. They seem to reward those who are members of the club a little more. At the same time, if you sound like an idiot, they will still make fun of you!"

The Draft Mark Warner example clearly shows that making a concerted effort to leave comments on other people's blogs works. Although the example is from politics, a similar strategy to comment on and therefore influence the thinking of bloggers should work for most any organization. But it takes an understanding of blogs and blogging etiquette to pull it off without sounding like a corporate shill. Focus on what the blog post says, and comment on that. As appropriate, you can point to your blog (if you have one) or your Web site as your contact information.

Sadly for Ratliff and the many Mark Warner supporters, in October 2006, several months after my conversations with Ratliff and Delany, Warner announced that he would not run for President in 2008.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.epolitics.com>

## Do You Allow Employees to Send E-Mail? How about Letting Them Blog?

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Chapter 17 presents everything you'll need to know to start your own blog. If you already know that you are ready, feel free to jump ahead to learn about how to decide what to blog about, what software you'll need, how to find your voice, and other important aspects. If you're still considering a blog for yourself or your organization, you might be hesitant because of fears that blogging isn't right for your organization.

As I work with companies to help develop a blog strategy, I see much consternation within organizations about the issue of allowing people to blog (or not) and allowing them to post comments on other people's blogs (or not). It's been fascinating to both observe and participate in the debate about blogs in the enterprise. Just like the hand-wringing over personal computers entering the workplace in the 1980s, and also echoing the Web and e-mail debates of the 1990s, company executives seem to be getting their collective knickers in a twist about blogs these days. Remember when executives believed e-mail might expose a corporation to its secrets being revealed to the outside world? Do you remember when only "important employees" were given e-mail addresses? How about when people worried about employees freely using the public Internet and all of its (*gasp!*) "unverified information"?

It's the same debate all over again today with blogs. On one side of the corporate fence, the legal eagles are worried about secrets being revealed by their employees while creating content or commenting on blogs. And on the other, there's the feeling that much of the information being created today is not to be trusted. Corporate nannies want to make certain that their naive charges don't get into trouble in the big scary world of information.

Well, duh; we're talking about people here. Employees do silly things. They send inappropriate e-mail (and blog posts), and they

believe some of the things on TV news. This debate should be centered on people, not technology. As the examples of previous technology waves should show us, attempting to block the technology isn't the answer.

So my recommendation to organizations is simple. Have guidelines about what you can and cannot do at work, but don't try to make a specific set of blogging guidelines. I'd suggest implementing corporate policies that say that employees can't sexually harass anyone, that they can't reveal secrets, they can't use inside information to trade stock or influence prices, and they shouldn't talk ill of the competition *in any way or via any media*. The guidelines should include e-mail, writing a blog, commenting on blogs (and online forums and chat rooms), and other forms of communication. Rather than focus on putting guidelines on blogs (the technology), it is better to focus on guiding the way people behave. However, as always, check with your own legal advisors if you have concerns.

Some organizations take a creative approach to blogging by saying that all blogs are personal and the opinions expressed are of the blogger, not the organization. That seems like a good attitude to me. What I disagree with is putting in place draconian command-and-control measures that say either that employees cannot blog (or submit comments) or that they must pass all blog posts through the corporate communications people before posting. Freely published blogs are an important part of business and should be encouraged by forward-thinking organizations.

## Breaking Boundaries: Blogging at McDonald's

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McDonald's, with its famous golden arches, is one of the most recognized brands in the world. Being large and visible means being a convenient target, and McDonald's has endured rounds of vocal people who criticize the company for contributing to Americans' obesity,

the accumulation of trash, and other societal ills. Unlike most large organizations that remain nameless and faceless, McDonald's has jumped into blogging by launching Open for Discussion,<sup>12</sup> a blog that focuses on social responsibility at the company. Written by Bob Langert, McDonald's senior director of corporate responsibility, the blog features commentary on sustainability of the environment with titles such as "Conserving Fish Supplies for Today and the Future" and "Designing Packaging with the Environment in Mind."

The blog is well written and updated frequently. Sure, it has a corporate-speak tone to it, but it also feels authentic. Langert says in the About page, "I want to use this blog to introduce you to some of the people, programs, and projects that make corporate social responsibility a reality at McDonald's—to take you along with me as I engage with some of our internal and external stakeholders in various parts of the world and to highlight our accomplishments, as well as the challenges we continue to face."

The company also launched *The McDonald's You Don't Know*,<sup>13</sup> a series of video podcasts available from the McDonald's site via RSS and also via Apple's iTunes music store, YouTube.com, and Google video. The series highlights themes of opportunity, food quality, and community.

Steve Wilson,<sup>14</sup> senior director of global Web communications for McDonald's Corporation, manages a team that delivers the corporate portion of McDonalds.com. In an interview that originally appeared in the October 2005 issue of *EContent*, Wilson told me: "The Internet has so changed the role of information for large global brands like McDonald's. If McDonald's is going to get credibility and trust, we have to participate in the [blogging] community. We can't just jump into a blog storm without having built a dialog first." This is sound advice about blogging from a large consumer brand.

<sup>12</sup> <http://csr.blogs.mcdonalds.com/default.asp>

<sup>13</sup> [feed://www.mcdonalds.com/podcast.xml](http://feed://www.mcdonalds.com/podcast.xml)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.swaynewilson.com/wordpress/>

## The Power of Blogs

It is remarkable what a smart individual with passion can do with a blog. People have blogged their way to dream jobs (and book deals) through the ideas they express. Rock bands have built loyal followings and gained record contracts. Political candidates have broken out of the pack. And companies have competed effectively, even against much larger, better-funded players. Consider Alacra, a company that creates online technology and services for financial institutions and professional services firms to find, package, and present business information. In the crowded field of professional information services, Alacra, a company of about 100 people, competes with much bigger players such as Thomson (40,500 employees) and Reid Elsevier (36,500 employees). An important part of Alacra's marketing and communications strategy has been its early forays into corporate blogs and corporate wikis.

"You are what you publish," says Steve Goldstein, CEO of Alacra. "It is better to have a reputation than no reputation. Certainly AlacraBlog<sup>15</sup> is valuable for us as a way to get our name out there."

Goldstein was an early CEO blogger, launching AlacraBlog in March 2004. "We didn't know what would happen, but we wanted to try it," he says. "The competitors are really big. By blogging I am able to put a face on [our] company."

Goldstein uses his blog platform as a way to communicate with his clients, prospects, and partners. He uses the blog to tell his constituents things really quickly and informally. "I can highlight interesting aspects of the company, like employees and partners, that wouldn't go into a more formal press release," he says. "Internally the blog is important, too. We have a London office, so I use it to communicate to employees."

It's fascinating that there are so few bloggers in the publishing industry, perhaps because publishers are cautious about giving content

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.alacrablog.com/>



away for free, or maybe because large publishers feel threatened by blogs. But by starting a blog early and keeping the information flowing, Goldstein has positioned Alacra ahead of many huge information companies hundreds of times the size of Alacra. “Many publishers don’t know what to do about blogging, and very few are doing it,” Goldstein says. “For example, there is nobody big at Thomson or Reid Elsevier who blogs.”

## Get Started Today

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There’s no doubt that every organization should be monitoring blogs to find out what people are saying about them. I find it fascinating that most of the time when I mention a company or product on my blog I do not get any sort of response from that organization. However, about 20 percent of the time, I’ll get a comment on my blog from someone at that company or a personal e-mail. These are the 20 percent of companies that monitor the blogosphere and react to what’s being said. You should be doing this, too, if you’re not already.

It’s also clear to me that in most industries and product categories, early bloggers develop a reputation as being innovative. There are still opportunities for “first-mover advantage” in many blog categories. Once you’re comfortable with reading and commenting on blogs, get out there and start your own! Chapter 17 contains all the information you’ll need to get going.

# 5

## The New Rules of News Releases

**G**uess what? Press releases have never been exclusively for the press.

My first job in the mid-1980s was on a Wall Street trading desk. Every day, I would come to work and watch the Dow Jones Telerate and Reuters screens as they displayed specialized financial data, economic information, and stock prices. The screens also displayed newsfeeds, and within these newsfeeds were press releases. For decades, financial markets professionals have had access to company press releases distributed through BusinessWire, PRNewswire, and other electronic press release distribution services. And they weren't just for publicly traded corporations; any company's release would appear in trading rooms within seconds.

I distinctly remember traders intently watching the newswires for any signs of market-moving events. Often the headline of a press release would cause frenzy: "Did you see? IBM is acquiring a software company!" "It's on the wire; Boeing just got a 20-plane order from Singapore Airlines!" For years, markets often moved and stock prices rose and fell based on the raw press release content issued directly by companies, *not* on the news stories written minutes or

hours later by reporters from newswire outlets like Reuters and Dow Jones (and later Bloomberg).

Press releases have also been available to professionals working within corporations, government agencies, and law firms, all of which have had access to raw press releases through services like NewsEdge, Factiva, and LexisNexis. These services have been delivering press releases to all kinds of professionals for competitive intelligence, research, discovery, and other purposes for decades.

Of course, since about 1995, the wide availability of the Web has meant that press releases have been available for free to anyone with an Internet connection and Web browser.

Millions of people read press releases directly, unfiltered by the media. You need to be speaking directly to them!

As I tell this story to PR pros, I hear cries of “Hang on! We disagree! The role of public relations and the purpose of the press release as a tool are about communicating with the *media*.” For an example of this thinking, look to Steve Rubel, one of the most influential PR bloggers in the world. He responded to my ideas about press releases by writing a post on his blog, titled “Direct to Consumer Press Releases Suck.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s take a look at traditional PR folks’ objection. According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA),<sup>2</sup> “Public Relations is the professional discipline that ethically fosters mutually beneficial relationships among social entities.” In 1988, the governing body of the PRSA—its Assembly—formally adopted a definition of public relations that has become the most accepted and widely used. “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.micropersuasion.com/2006/01/directtoconsume.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.prsa.org/>

each other.” Nowhere does this description mention the media. PR is about reaching your audience.

I think PR professionals have a fear of the unknown. They don’t understand how to communicate directly with consumers and want to live in the past, when there was no choice but to use the media as a mouthpiece. I also think there’s a widely held view about the “purity” of the press release as a tool for the press. PR professionals don’t want to know that tens of millions of people have the power to read their releases directly. It’s easier to imagine a closed audience of a dozen reporters. But this argument is based on fear, not the facts; there is no good reason why organizations shouldn’t communicate directly with their audiences, without a media filter, via releases.

Obviously, the first word of the term *press release* throws off some people, particularly PR professionals. I moderated a virtual debate for the International Association of Online Communicators (IAOC<sup>3</sup>) that touched on this issue. Via the IAOC blog,<sup>4</sup> people commented on direct-to-consumer releases. The consensus of the dozens of professional communicators who weighed in was to call releases aimed at consumers “news releases.” This sounds good to me, so from this point on I’ll refer to direct-to-consumer releases as *news releases*.

## News Releases in a Web World ---

The media have been disintermediated. The Web has changed the rules. Buyers read your news releases directly, and you need to be speaking their language. Today, savvy marketing and PR professionals use news releases to reach buyers directly. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, this is not to suggest that media relations are no longer important; mainstream media and the trade press must be part of an overall communications strategy. In some markets, mainstream media

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.onlinecommunicators.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iaocblog.com/blog>

and the trade press remain *critically* important, and of course, the media still derives some of its content from news releases. But your primary audience is no longer just a handful of journalists. Your audience is millions of people with Internet connections and access to search engines and RSS readers. Here, then, are the rules of this new direct-to-consumer medium.

## The New Rules of News Releases

- Don't just send news releases when "big news" is happening; find good reasons to send them all the time.
- Instead of just targeting a handful of journalists, create news releases that appeal directly to your buyers.
- Write releases that are replete with keyword-rich copy.
- Include offers that compel consumers to respond to your release in some way.
- Place links in releases to deliver potential customers to landing pages on your Web site.
- Optimize news release delivery for searching and browsing.
- Add social media tags for Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us so your release will be found.
- Drive people into the sales process with news releases.

You need to fundamentally change the way you use news releases. If you follow these specific strategies for leveraging this once-lowly medium by turning it into one of the most important direct marketing tools at your disposal, you will drive buyers straight to your company's products and services at precisely the time that they are ready to buy.

## If They Find You, They Will Come

In late 2005, I was preparing a keynote speech called *Shorten Your Sales Cycle: Marketing Programs that Deliver More Revenue Faster* for

the Software Marketing Perspectives Conference & Expo.<sup>5</sup> To be honest, I was kind of procrastinating. Facing a blank PowerPoint file, I decided to hit Google in search of inspiration.

I entered the phrase “accelerate sales cycle” to see if there was anything interesting I could use in my presentation. The highest-ranked listings for this phrase were from WebEx, a company that provides online collaboration services. What was most interesting to me was that the links pointed to *news releases* on the WebEx site.<sup>6</sup> That’s right; at the top of the Google search results was a news release about a new WebEx product, and right there in the first sentence of the news release was the phrase I was looking for, “accelerate sales cycle”:

**WebEx Launches WebEx Sales Center: Leader Expands Suite of Real-Time Collaborative Applications**  
*Enhance Team Selling Process, Engage Prospects Throughout Sales Cycle, and Enable Managers to Monitor and Measure Web Sales Operations*

SAN JOSE, Calif., September 20, 2004—WebEx Communications, Inc. (NASDAQ: WEBX), the leading provider of on-demand collaborative applications, today launched WebEx Sales Center, a new service that helps companies accelerate sales cycles, increase win rates, and close more deals by leveraging online sales calls . . .

Then I went over to Google News<sup>7</sup> and checked out the same phrase. Sure enough, WebEx also had the number-one listing on Google’s news search with a very recent news release dated September 28, 2005: *Application Integration Industry Leader Optimizes Marketing and Sales Processes with WebEx Application Suite*. The news

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.smpevent.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.Webex.com/Webex/press-Webex.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.google.com/>

release, about a WebEx customer, had been sent through PRNewswire<sup>8</sup> and had a direct Web link to the WebEx site to provide additional information. WebEx also provided links in some news releases directly to free trial offers of their services. How cool is that?

“That is exactly our strategy,” says Colin Smith, director of public relations for WebEx. “Google and news keywords have really transformed the news release as a distribution vehicle. Our thinking is that, especially for companies that have an end-user appeal, news releases are a great channel.”

It’s certainly no accident that I found WebEx; I was searching on a phrase that Smith had optimized for search. His research had shown that buyers of the communications services that WebEx provides search on the phrase “accelerate sales cycle” (and also many others). So when I searched on that phrase, WebEx was at the top of the listings.

As a result, WebEx provided me with an excellent (and real) example of a company that had optimized the content of news releases to include relevant terms such as the one I was looking for. And WebEx has greatly benefited from their efforts. In addition to the consumers they already reach online, they’ve added to their audience by getting the information to someone who tells other people about it (me!); I’ve used this example in speeches before well over 10,000 marketing and Web content professionals and executive audiences, and it was also downloaded more than 200,000 times as part of my *New Rules of PR e-book*. And now you’re reading it here, too.

“People are saying that press releases are dead,” Smith says. “But that’s not true for direct-to-consumer news releases.” As Smith has developed his news release strategy to reach buyers directly, he has had to refine his writing and PR skills for this evolving, but very much alive, medium. “I learned the very structured *AP Style Guide* way to write releases,” he says. “But that’s changed as keywords and phrases have suddenly become important and the scale and reach of the Internet have opened up end users as a channel.”

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.prnewswire.com/>

Smith doesn't let keywords dominate how he writes, but he tries to be very aware of keywords and phrases and to insert key phrases, especially, into releases whenever he can. "We don't think that a single keyword works, but phrases are great," he says. "If people are doing a specific search, or one with company names that are in our release, then the goal is that they will find our news release."

## Driving Buyers into the Sales Process

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Smith is careful to include product information in the end-user-focused news releases he crafts for WebEx. "We try to think about what's important to people," he says. "We put free trial offers in the releases that are about the product." About 80 percent of the releases that WebEx puts out are product or customer related. Since WebEx is a public company, the other 20 percent are earnings releases and other regulatory releases. "WebEx is a great mix of real end-user stories," he says. "People get why you need Web meetings, so it is easy to tell the story using news releases."

Because the Web meeting story is a compelling one even for those who don't know the product category, Smith also looks for ways to create a viral marketing buzz. For example, he pays attention to major events in the news where WebEx online collaboration would be useful.<sup>9</sup> "We donated free service for limited use during the time that Boston traffic was snarled as a result of the Big Dig tunnel closures. We did the same thing for the New York City transit strike." Smith knows that people are likely to consider WebEx services during this kind of unusual situation. Offering the service for free often creates loyal future users.

Direct-to-consumer news releases are an important component of the marketing mix at WebEx. "We do track metrics, and we can see

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.Weboffice.com/go/bigdig/>



how many people are going from the release to the free trial,” Smith says. The numbers are significant. But with such success, there’s also a danger. “We don’t want to abuse the news release channel,” Smith says, explaining that the company also has a media relations strategy, of which news releases are a part. “We want the news releases to be interesting for journalists, but also to provide consumers with things to do, such as get the free trial.”

WebEx is successful in using news releases to appeal to all constituents—the financial markets players who monitor the company’s stock, the journalists who write (and speak) about WebEx products and services, and also the consumers who are searching for what WebEx has to offer. WebEx, and thousands of other innovative organizations like it, prove that a direct-to-consumer news release strategy can coexist within an organization that cares about media relations.

## Reach Your Buyers Directly

Under the old rules, the only way to get “published” was to have your news release “picked up” by the media.

We’ve come a long way. The Web has turned all kinds of companies, nonprofits, political campaigns, individuals, and even churches and rock bands into just-in-time and just-right publishers. As publishers, these organizations create news releases that deliver useful information directly onto the screens of their buyers—no “press” involved!

# 6

## Audio Content Delivery through Podcasting

**A**udio on the Web is not new. Audio clips have been available on Web sites since the early days. But until recently, audio files weren't used much because they were difficult to locate and impossible to browse, and there was no easy way to get regular updates. The result was that most files were long—an hour or more—and people had no idea what was in them without actually listening. Not many did.

The transformation from static audio downloads to radio station-like podcasts, which are much more valuable to listeners (and also more valuable as marketing vehicles for organizations), occurred because of two developments. The first development was the ability to add audio feeds and notifications to RSS. This enables listeners who subscribe to an audio feed to download new updates soon after they are released. When audio content was liberated from the need for one large download and went instead to being offered as a series of continuous audio clips, the concept of shows took off. Hosts modeled their shows on radio, producing content on specific subjects catering to distinct audiences. But the podcasting

business model is very different from broadcast radio. Radio spectrums can support only a finite number of stations, and radio signals have limited geographic range. To support the technical infrastructure of radio, broadcasters need large audiences and lots of advertising (or donors in the case of public radio) to pay the bills. Contrast that with Internet audio podcasting, which is essentially free (except for minimal hosting fees and some cheap equipment). A podcast show is available to a potentially worldwide audience, allowing millions of people the opportunity to create shows and listen to them.

The second major development was the availability of those podcast feeds through iTunes. Now all iPod users can simply subscribe to a feed (usually at no cost), and then every time they plug their iPod into their computer, the new shows from the feeds they subscribe to automatically download and are copied to the iPod. People who commute and listen to their iPod in the car or on the train, or those who work out with an iPod, suddenly have access to regularly updating shows from the myriad niches that they specifically choose. With podcasting, people instantly liberate themselves from the tyranny of mainstream, hit-driven broadcast radio and can listen to shows based on their specific interests.

Perhaps we should back up for just a moment. The term *podcasting* confuses some people. A podcast is simply audio content connected to an RSS feed. The medium does not specially require iPods, although that's how the word was derived. You can listen to a podcast on an iPod (or on any other MP3 player) or directly from your computer—no iPod required.

Now marketers have a tool to efficiently create and deliver audio content to those people who wish to receive it. Marketers easily develop a show that specifically targets their buyers' personas and deliver regularly updating content that is welcome and useful to the audience. By appealing to a niche market and delivering audio that people choose to hear, an organization is seen as a thought leader and is the first choice for listeners looking to make a purchase.

## Putting Marketing Back in Musicians' Control

Music is a classic example of a long-tail business. Before the Web came along, bands that didn't have a major label behind them couldn't hope to get national or global attention. The best they could do was to establish a local audience in a city or region, or perhaps with a definable market such as northeastern U.S. college students. Enter podcasting. Now anybody with some simple and easy-to-use equipment can set up as a radio station and get instant global distribution via iTunes and other distribution services.

George L. Smyth hosts the Eclectic Mix podcast,<sup>1</sup> where he challenges listeners to open their minds to new and diverse music and promotes bands that he likes at the same time. The banner of his site even has a definition of *eclectic*, to make sure people understand his approach: *choosing what appears to be the best from diverse sources, systems, or styles.*

"On each show, I select an artist and spotlight their music," Smyth says. "I play literally anything from classical to punk. My interest in music goes back to my college days, when I would copy records to tape and trade with my friends. I had lost track of music for a while, but recently I've found that there's really great music out there, and I can share it with many more people than with the tapes."

Smyth is evangelical in his descriptions of how podcasting has changed the face of music. "Podcasting of music has been a real success with the under-twenty-five crowd," he says. "Podcasting has allowed people to hear the music of groups that are good but perhaps don't have a big label behind them. In the past there was no choice, but now there is a choice. Many artists will tell you that they just want people to hear the music. If you do listen, maybe you'll like it and want to spend money on tickets and perhaps a download of music from iTunes. Many bands don't make much money from CDs, so

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eclecticmix.com/>

they really want people to go to the shows, which is where the big money is for the smaller bands.”

Smyth is careful of copyrights and permissions in his podcasts and uses only “podsafe” music (music that the artist has cleared and has said it is permissible to podcast). The more famous bands typically don’t allow podcasting (or to be more precise, their record labels don’t). But many indie acts embrace podcasting, as well as people like Smyth who promote their music via podcasts. “Uncle Seth is an example of a group that has made it easy for podcasters like me to work with them,” Smyth says. “Uncle Seth is an indie band, but they cross genres, and I like to play them.”

“Podcasters are a different breed; they’re like you and me,” says Jay Moonah, musician and songwriter of the Toronto band Uncle Seth. “TV and commercial radio and MTV-type people work and talk from on high. Podcasting is different. It’s neat that we’ve made fans out of some of these podcasters, such as George Smyth of Eclectic Mix. It’s fun when they play our music, and then if I e-mail them it is great to start a conversation.” Moonah says that indie bands like Uncle Seth that take the lead with podcasting have benefited greatly through wider distribution, which generates new fans.

Editorial note to music fans: Uncle Seth’s 2006 single, an upbeat cover of Joni Mitchell’s classic song, “Both Sides, Now” (available at iTunes), is killer.

Besides working with other podcasters, Moonah and Uncle Seth also host their own podcast.<sup>2</sup> In each episode, the band debates and discusses wacky topics, and plays exclusive tracks of their music not

<sup>2</sup> <http://musicface.com/uncleseth/>

available anywhere else. “The interesting thing about the show is that we made a conscious effort not to make it just the music,” Moonah says. “We wanted to get some of our personality into it. So we went the direction of doing things like talking for an entire show about the first records we ever bought.

“Within the last year or so, podcasting has become a real part of the social networking thing,” Moonah says. “From a technical aspect, you could do podcasting a long time ago. But for us, the social aspect is really neat; bands and other organizations combine the music and the community and mix them together. For example, there is a community of Canadian Jam bands<sup>3</sup> where we’ve met a lot of friends. Like other online communities, it has a real-world community associated with it.”

As Moonah has honed his expertise with podcasting and musician Web sites, he’s developed a side business working with bands, labels, and other musicians on podcasting strategy. “Especially in Canada, it’s difficult making a living as a musician,” he says. “My thing of combining the businesses into a big circle of music and consulting and podcasting really works well for me.

“I like people to understand that podcasting has so many uses,” Moonah continues. “It is a legitimate thing, not a toy for kids. So the advice I have for managers and label people is to not jump into your own podcast until you listen to other podcasts. Find podcasts that you like and you think might play you, and submit your music to them to get going. Then think about what you want to do if you want to make your own podcast. The people who make it work are those who understand it. As a band, you can compete with radio via podcasts because you can get onto several podcasts, and then people will hear you several times, just like a radio rotation.”

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jambands.ca/>

## Podcasting: More Than Just Music ---

Smyth's and Moonah's advice about podcasting is important for all organizations, not just musicians, that want to reach buyers directly. For content that is best delivered via audio or for buyers who prefer to listen to audio content, podcasting is obviously essential. For example, many politicians and churches podcast so that supporters can keep up with speeches and sermons when they can't hear them live. You'll learn more about Podcasting, including tips for setting up your own podcast, in Chapter 18.

While the podcasting of music is perhaps an obvious choice given the medium's similarity to radio, all marketers can learn from what the music business has been doing with podcasts. "Podcasting is almost exactly mirroring the Internet of a decade ago," Smyth says. "Ten years ago, I was telling people about the Web and building example sites. But then some larger companies jumped into the Web. I see the same thing with the evolution of podcasting, with some big organizations jumping in, like NPR."

As a component of a larger content-marketing strategy, podcasting is also an increasingly important part of the marketing mix. For example, customer service departments increasingly deliver "how-to" podcast series to keep users of their products informed. Companies that market to people who are on the road often (such as traveling salespeople) and therefore have downtime in their cars or on airplanes have had success reaching people with interesting podcasts. For many organizations, podcasting for marketing purposes is not an either/or decision. Instead, podcasting coexists with blogging, a great Web site, e-books, and other online marketing tools and programs in a cohesive marketing strategy.

Digg,<sup>4</sup> a technology news Web site that combines social bookmarking, blogging, RSS, and nonhierarchical editorial control, uses a podcast to deliver technology news, commentary, and information to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://digg.com/>

its constituents. But Digg also has a blog and a content-rich Web site, and the different marketing tools work together. The *Diggnation*<sup>5</sup> podcast, which generates more than 100,000 downloads per episode, is classic thought-leadership content. Hosted by Kevin Rose, founder and chief architect of Digg, *Diggnation* is not just about the company and its products. The 2006 People's Choice Podcast Awards chose *Diggnation* as the best tech podcast because people learn about technology as they listen. And they keep coming back.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://revision3.com/dignation>





# 7

## Forums, Wikis, and Your Targeted Audience

**A**s millions of people use the Web for doing detailed research on products and services, getting involved in political campaigns, joining music and film fan clubs, and reviewing and discussing hobbies and passions, they congregate in all kinds of online places. The technologies go by various names but all include a way for people to express opinions online: chat rooms and message boards (places where people meet and discuss topics online), list serves (similar to a chat room but with messages going out by e-mail to members who have registered), wikis (a Web site that anybody can update), and blogs that have an active community of people who provide comments to blog posts written by the blog author. At specialty sites of all kinds, like-minded hobbyists, professionals, fans, and supporters meet and discuss the intricate nuances of subjects that interest them.

Interactive forums like these were once seen as insignificant backwaters by PR and marketing people—not worth the time to even monitor, let alone participate in. I’ve heard many marketers dismiss online forums with disdain, saying things like, “Why should I worry about a bunch of geeks obsessively typing away in the dead of night?” However, as many marketers have learned, ignoring forums

can be hazardous to your brand, while participating as a member reaps rewards.

On October 31, 2005, in a post on his blog<sup>1</sup> called “Sony, Rootkits and Digital Rights Management [DRM] Gone Too Far,” Mark Russinovich detailed an analysis he conducted on characteristics of the software used on Sony BMG<sup>2</sup> music CDs to manage permissions for the purchased music. Russinovich argued that shortcomings in the software design create security issues that might be exploited by malicious software such as worms or viruses. He also showed that both the way the software is installed and its lack of an uninstaller utility were troublesome.

“The entire experience was frustrating and irritating,” Russinovich wrote on his blog. “Not only had Sony put software on my system that uses techniques commonly used by malware [*malicious software*] to mask its presence, the software is poorly written and provides no means for uninstall. Worse, most users that stumble across the cloaked files with an RKR scan will cripple their computer if they attempt the obvious step of deleting the cloaked files. While I believe in the media industry’s right to use copy protection mechanisms to prevent illegal copying, I don’t think that we’ve found the right balance of fair use and copy protection, yet. This is a clear case of Sony taking DRM too far.”

The reaction to Russinovich’s post was immediate and dramatic. In the next several days, hundreds of comments, many harshly critical of Sony BMG Music, were posted on his blog. “Thank you very much for bringing to light what Sony is doing. I have purchased many thousands of dollars of their products over the years. Next year’s purchases will be zero,” said User101. “I SAY BOYCOTT THE BASTARDS!!” said Jack3617. “If you plan on boycotting, let the offending company know. They need to know that they are losing customers and WHY. Perhaps others companies will get the message as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sysinternals.com/blog/2005/10/sony-rootkits-and-digital-rights.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sonybm.com/>

well,” said Kolby. “Great article by Mark and scandalous behavior by Sony,” said Petter Lindgren.

Hundreds of other bloggers jumped in with their own take on the issue, and chat rooms and forums such as Slashdot<sup>3</sup> were abuzz. Many people expressed frustration that the music industry disapproves of music piracy and sues music downloaders, yet treats its customers poorly (which reflected negatively on the entire industry, not just Sony BMG). Soon, reporters from online news sites such as ZDNet and InformationWeek wrote their own analyses, and the issue became international news.

So where was Sony BMG during the online hullabaloo? Not on the blogs. Not on the message boards. Nobody from Sony BMG participated in the online discussions. Nobody spoke with online media. Sony BMG was dark (not participating in the communities at all), which added to the frustrations of those who were concerned about the issues. Finally on November 4, 2005, Sony BMG’s global digital business president Thomas Hesse went on NPR’s *Morning Edition*<sup>4</sup> to defend the company. The choice of NPR (radio) as a forum to react to a storm of protest on the Web was a poor one. Had Hesse immediately commented on Russinovich’s blog or agreed to speak with a technology reporter for an online publication, he could have gotten his take on the issue onto the screens of concerned people early in the crisis to help diffuse the anger. But instead of understanding customer concerns, Hesse downplayed the issue on *Morning Edition*, saying he objected to terms such as *malware*, *spyware*, and *rootkit*. “Most people, I think, don’t even know what a rootkit is, so why should they care about it?” he said in the interview.

Online debate intensified. On November 18, 2005, Sony BMG reacted with the announcement of an exchange program.<sup>5</sup> “To Our Valued Customers,” the announcement read. “You may be aware of

<sup>3</sup> <http://it.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/31/2016223&tid=172&tid=158>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4989260>

<sup>5</sup> <http://blog.sonymusic.com/sonybm/archives/111505.html>

the recent attention given to the XCP content protection software included on some SONY BMG CDs. This software was provided to us by a third-party vendor, First4Internet. Discussion has centered on security concerns raised about the use of CDs containing this software. We share the concerns of consumers regarding these discs, and we are instituting a mail-in program that will allow consumers to exchange any CD with XCP software for the same CD without copy protection and receive MP3 files of the same title. . . .”

Unfortunately for Sony BMG, the exchange program didn't end the issue. On November 21, 2005, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott sued Sony BMG under the state's 2005 spyware law. California and New York followed with class-action lawsuits. Soon after, law student Mark Lyon started a blog<sup>6</sup> to track Sony BMG XCP rootkit lawsuits. “I trusted Sony BMG when they asked to install a ‘small program’ on my computer,” Lyon wrote on his blog. “Instead, they infected my computer with poorly written code, which even if it wasn't designed for a malicious purpose (like reporting my activities—something they expressly promised they were not going to do), opened me up to a number of computer viruses and security problems. This site exists to help others who have been harmed by Sony BMG and their XCP Content Protection.” As of this writing, Sony has settled with 40 states and Lyon has continued to cover all the action on his Sony Suit blog.

Of course, we will never know what would have happened if someone from Sony BMG had quickly jumped into the blogstorm, apologized, stated Sony's plan of action, and offered the exchange program immediately. Yes, I'm sure it would still have been a crisis situation for the music publisher, but I'm also certain that the negative effects would have been substantially diminished.

What's important for all organizations to take away from this incident is that it is critical to respond quickly to situations as they unfold on the Web. Reacting quickly and honestly in the same forums

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sony Suit.com/>

where the discussions are taking place is essential. You may not be able to completely turn a negative situation around, but you will instantly be seen as a real person who gives a name and a personality to a large, seemingly uncaring organization. Just by participating you will contribute to making the situation right. The Web's power of linking should ensure that participants who see your posts on one forum or blog will link to them from other forums and blogs, so you don't have to worry about contributing to multiple places. What's important is first getting out there; after that, remember that authenticity and honesty are always paramount.

## Your Best Customers Participate in Online Forums—So Should You

On the Web, customers, stakeholders, and the media can immediately see what's on people's minds. There's never been as good of an opportunity to monitor what's being said about you and your products than the one we have now. The Internet is like a massive focus group with uninhibited customers offering up their thoughts *for free!*

Tapping this resource is simple: You've got to monitor what's being said. And when an organization is the subject of heated discussions, particularly negative ones, it just feels weird if a representative of that organization doesn't jump in with a response. If the company is dark, not saying a thing online, participants start wondering, "What are they hiding?" Just having a presence on the blogs, forums, and chat rooms that your customers frequent shows that you care about the people who spend money with your organization. It is best not to wait for a crisis. You should participate as appropriate all the time. How can you afford not to become closer to your most vocal constituents?

Let's look at another example, but one with a much different outcome. In late 2005, Nikon introduced a new "prosumer" digital camera, the D200 model, which appeals to very advanced amateur

photographers and professionals alike. Nikon launched the new model globally through specialty distributors and high-end camera stores frequented by experienced hobbyists and professionals. But Nikon also offered the D200 outside of the normal distribution channels by selling the model in “big box” stores such as Circuit City and Best Buy. The camera was a hot commodity when launched just prior to the holidays, and supply was constrained when it first hit the stores.

“The places where camera guys like me normally get Nikon gear were caught out because of a lack of supply,” says Alan Scott, an experienced photographer and long-time Nikon customer. “People who preordered the D200 or who were waiting for camera retailer sites to go live with an announcement of availability were gnashing their teeth wanting to get the camera.”

Like many other photographers, Scott frequents popular online digital photography forums, including Nikonians: The Nikon User Community and DPR: Digital Photography Review. “The forums were active with lots of people complaining that they couldn’t get the camera from their normal long-term suppliers but that the big box stores had them,” Scott says. “Then a thread was started on Nikonians<sup>7</sup> and later picked up on DPR<sup>8</sup> that discussed how popular New York City photography supplier B&H Photo-Video, a trusted source with a knowledgeable staff that many professionals and high-end hobbyists go to, had taken orders but then were canceling them.”

The first post, from ceo1939, said, “I ordered a D200 from B&H this afternoon about 4:30 mountain time. The charge was made against my credit card. An hour later I got an e-mail that said they had a technical problem and the camera was actually not in stock, but they would hold my order and charge for when they actually get in stock. I tried cancelling the charge, and got an e-mail back on how

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nikonians.org/dcforum/DCForumID202/15453.html#1>

<sup>8</sup> <http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/readflat.asp?forum=1021&thread=16962271&page=1>

to handle a disputed charge. I will see what happens when I call them in the morning.”

Many camera enthusiasts and customers of B&H were monitoring the thread at this point. “Within a few hours, several dozen posts appeared on the thread and the tone had become critical of B&H, with people complaining that the company was purposely screwing them,” Scott says. “Forum participants said that e-mail notifications from B&H did not work and people who called in were getting cameras in front of those who had signed up for an alert system.”

The B&H situation sounds a bit like the Sony BMG incident, doesn't it? In both cases, avid participants in specialty online forums sounded off about a company, its products, and its business practices. Both sets of threads occurred in little-known nooks of the Web, far outside mainstream media channels and other typical places that PR people monitor for what's being said about their company and its products. But the B&H case is very different because a B&H employee was an active participant on the boards.

“Unfortunately as everyone who frequents this site knows, Nikon USA has been remarkably reluctant (diplomatic, eh?) to put this camera in retailers' hands,” wrote Henry Posner of B&H Photo-Video, Inc. on the DPR thread. “The result in this particular case is that had we left the order open, we'd still be sitting on your money and would have been unable to fulfill the D200 order and it's reasonable to presume you'd be chafing to get your camera, which we'd have been (and are) unable to supply due to circumstances beyond our control. . . . We regret and apologize for having vexed you.”

Unlike in the Sony BMG example, people at B&H had been monitoring the messages and were prepared to participate. “So in steps Henry Posner, who is with B&H,” Scott says. “He came into the forum and said, basically, ‘you're right, we screwed you,’ but then explained what happened, apologized, and said that B&H will make it right. By acknowledging the issue, one guy with one post changed the whole tone of the thread and the reputation of B&H. After that, the posts changed to become incredibly positive.”

Indeed, they were. “Henry's participation in various Web forums



is something I respect greatly,” wrote BJNicholls on one thread. “I can’t think of someone of power with any other business who engages in public discussion of store issues and products.”

“I also admire his forthrightness,” added N80. “He admits there have been some mistakes and that the situation has been hard to handle. However, he firmly denies the charges of lying and deceitfulness that have been flying around. And I absolutely believe him.”

What happened at B&H was not a coincidence or a one-time situation. The message boards and online forums are a critical component of the company’s marketing and communications strategy.

“I spend a great deal of time poking around in the forums,” says Henry Posner, director of corporate communications for B&H Photo-Video Inc. “Being a part of the forums is really important and is actually in my job description. Because my background is in professional photography, as a person who has actually used the equipment we sell I have legitimacy in the forums.” Before joining B&H in the mid-1990s, Posner worked for a company that provided photography services for colleges and high schools; he covered events such as basketball and football games.

Posner monitors about a dozen message boards and forums on a daily basis. “I try to find things about photography equipment or technique where I can make a meaningful contribution,” he says. “We want to make certain that my credibility is maintained—that’s the most important thing—so I don’t go in and say something like ‘that’s right’ just to get my name and the B&H name into a conversation. But if I see that there is a discussion that I can add value to, about equipment or technique that I am familiar with, I will jump in.”

B&H has a mail-order catalog, an e-commerce Web site, and a 35,000-square-foot retail store in Manhattan. “Our customer is anyone from the amateur up to the professional photographer working in Beirut who is running around with cameras bouncing on his hips while looking for a Wi-Fi connection to send images back to the bureau,” he says. “I contribute to the forums when it is appropriate, but if anyone ever asks about where to buy something being discussed, I immediately take the conversation offline via e-mail. I don’t want to

promote my company directly. The other conversations I look for are when people are talking about B&H itself. I often hold back and let others speak for me. Other people will often say positive things about B&H because I am so active in the forums. So if someone does jump in about B&H, I will thank them, and then I will address the issue directly.”

Don't you wish your customers had been as understanding as the photography enthusiasts on these forums the last time *your* company screwed up? Well, as Henry Posner shows, if you participate in an active way in the online communities that your customers frequent, you will gain more of their sympathy and patience.

## Your Space in the Forums

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The last two examples were of companies that had discussions started about them on online forums. But how should a marketer interact? “Participation in forums is a must,” says Robert Pearlman, editor of collectSPACE: The Source for Space History & Artifacts.<sup>9</sup> Pearlman started collectSPACE in 1999 because there wasn't a single site to serve collectors of space memorabilia and to preserve space history. “Before the Internet, there were space memorabilia collectors, but they were in pockets of communities in Germany and Japan, in Houston, and near the Kennedy Space Center in Florida,” he says. “But there was no way for them to communicate with each other. The biggest impact is that collectSPACE has educated the market. We've brought the various pockets of collectors into one place.”

The collectSPACE community has grown into a network of collectors around the world who share their knowledge of the pieces that they own. The site counts 3,500 registered users (most actively post on the site) and about 100,000 unique readers each month. Interestingly, collectSPACE also includes many people who worked in the

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.collectspace.com/>

early space program; they participate in the forums and talk about the history of the artifacts that they had a hand in building. Pearlman says many astronauts read the forums because they are able to get a sense of the market for the memorabilia that they may have amassed over the years and to find out what fellow astronauts are up to on the lectures and appearances front. Astronauts also use the forums to keep up with the history of the space program and protect their legacy.

“In other areas of collecting, collectors and museums have been at odds,” says Pearlman. “Museums looked at collectors as hoarders storing stuff in the basement, while their own mission was more altruistic: sharing with public. And collectors looked at museums and said that they did a good job with major items like spacesuits and spacecraft but did a lousy job with literally the nuts and bolts except put them away in the archive. What collectSPACE does is allow museums to read what their ‘competition’ is doing and interact with collectors and ask their advice. Collectors have helped to plan exhibits and loaned items to the museums, and at the same time, museums were able to sell surplus items to collectors.”

Pearlman sees a huge benefit for dealers, manufacturers, and auction houses that specialize in space items to participate in the collectSPACE forums. “By participating in the forums, dealers and manufacturers now know what collectors are interested in,” he says. “Products can be developed based on what the current trends are in the market. Auction houses and dealers have been able to preview items to the market before a sale to gauge interest. In the case of unique items, you get instant feedback through a mini-market study.”

As moderator of the collectSPACE forums, Pearlman has personally followed tens of thousands of posts and seen the good and the bad from space memorabilia dealers. “If there is a post that is not flattering to a business, someone from that business needs to have been monitoring the posts and respond as required,” he says. “In discussion forums where people have a common bond, people feel that the forum is theirs. We see people who have 500 or even 1,000 posts, and they treat that as a badge of honor. People who represent businesses

need to let the collectors know that you care enough about them to go to [their] turf instead of expecting them to come to yours.”

As Pearlman advises and the Sony BMG and B&H examples show, marketers must take active participation in the communities that matter for their markets. But you can't just stand on the virtual sidelines and post only when you have something for sale or a comment about your products or services. The most successful companies come in and provide ideas and advice on a wide variety of subjects and topics that they are knowledgeable about. They are full and active participants in the community. Then, when people complain or want specific product advice from a company, they will trust the community member more. Active participation can pay off exponentially for companies who are participants in the community.

## Wikis, List Serves, and Your Audience

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Close cousins to forums like Nikonians and collectSPACE include group e-mail lists (often called list serves) and wikis. Just like forums, a list serve is a way that groups of like-minded people stay connected to one another. Typically, any member can post to the list, but instead of requiring that people go to a central place to read messages, a list serve sends messages out to the members of the group via e-mail.

Lisa Solomon, Esq.<sup>10</sup> provides legal research and writing services to other attorneys on an outsourced basis. Solomon has been extremely involved in participating in list serves such as the Solosez<sup>11</sup> discussion list for solo attorneys, which is run by the American Bar Association. “The list serve has been important in the way that I develop my law practice. I am an active participant and try to always

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.questionoflaw.net/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.abanet.org/soloseznet/>

add value to the subjects that are being discussed. In my list serve signature is my Web address. That is the place that I send people to show them what I do. I have writing samples on the site, and that's how they can check out what I do at their convenience. The participation has been great for meeting contacts and building business."

Wikis are Web sites that permit users to update, delete, or edit the content on the site. The most famous wiki is Wikipedia,<sup>12</sup> the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit, which has more than 1.3 million entries, all contributed by people like you and me. If you haven't done so already, you should hightail it over to Wikipedia and conduct some searches on your organization name, important brand names, your CEO, and other notable executives and board members. The fact is that Wikipedia entries loom large in search engine rankings, and Wikipedia is in the top 10 most visited sites on the Web.

When you find an entry about your company or brand, you should check it for accuracy. It's fair game to correct any inaccuracies (such as the number of employees in your company). But don't try to manipulate the entry. The Wikipedia community is quick to react when articles are edited to present a certain point of view. It is not uncommon to see an entry updated several times per day and with larger organizations the updates can be much more frequent. In fact, one of the pillars of the community is: "All Wikipedia articles must be written from a neutral point of view, representing views fairly and without bias." So, if your organization was party to a lawsuit that makes you look bad in some way and it's in Wikipedia, don't try to remove the reference.

Sometimes, it might be best to create a new article on Wikipedia. For some organizations, authoring something on a particular niche where you have expertise may have tremendous value. Make sure that you aren't promoting your company and its products or services, though; it needs to be an article of value to people researching the topic you know well. As a starting point, you might notice that there are articles in the area you have knowledge in and that those

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

articles link to an empty Wikipedia page. Blue (or purple, if you have already visited them) links represent pages that do exist. Red links point to pages that don't yet have any content. If you see a bunch of red links indicating that an author expects new content to be added, and you have knowledge and expertise in that area, maybe it's time for you to create a page to fulfill a need. For example, a technology company might provide details on patents it holds that relate to products that already have Wikipedia entries.

## Creating Your Own Wiki

It's entirely possible that for your organization's area of expertise, no appropriate forum, list serve, or wiki has been established. Just like Robert Pearlman of collectSPACE, you may find an unfulfilled need in your marketplace to organize people and ideas into a single resource. A wiki could be just what the doctor ordered—and you can start it, gaining tremendous value for your organization as a result.

In September 2005, Alacra and its CEO, Steve Goldstein, whom we met earlier in Chapter 4 describing his own AlacraBlog, unveiled AlacraWiki,<sup>13</sup> an open and collaborative resource for producers and consumers of business information. AlacraWiki brings together in-depth profiles of information sources, companies, and important people in the industry, and much more. The front page, which populates via RSS feeds, is filled with information industry news from the premier analysts and trade publications. “We had amassed a tremendous amount of valuable information on publishers and databases through our content licensing efforts,” Goldstein says. “We thought it would be useful to make this information available on the Web, and a wiki was clearly the best format.”

Goldstein was surprised that at the time AlacraWiki was launched, there was no directory of business information in the market. “We

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.alacrawiki.com/>

included reference data for the industry in a wiki form as a service to industry,” he says. The wiki is a collaborative effort where anybody can create and update listings. To start the project, Goldstein hired a summer MBA student intern, who built the initial infrastructure and initial listings in just eight weeks. Although many people have contributed, some don’t update their personal or company profiles. “It’s strange that people don’t go in and change it, because it’s so easy,” he says.

As someone who has created both a blog and a wiki, how would Goldstein compare the skill sets to create them? “To be successful at blogging, you need to have something to say,” Goldstein says. “You need to have some communications skills to be successful. Over on the wiki side, you need to be an expert in something to get it populated to begin with, and then you need the resources to keep it up.”

Forums, chat rooms, wikis, and list serves are places that people congregate to discuss things that are important to them. Where are people discussing your industry, and the products and services you offer? If that place already exists, you should monitor it and participate as appropriate. If it doesn’t yet exist, consider starting a forum or wiki and bask in the glow of being at the center of information within your market.

# 8

## Going Viral: The Web Helps Audiences Catch the Fever

**A**mazingly, if you toss a Mentos candy into a bottle of Diet Coke, you get a marketing explosion. More tangibly, the mint/cola reaction triggers a geyser that sprays 10 feet or more. This phenomenon was popularized in the summer of 2006 in video experiments produced by Fritz Grobe and Stephen Voltz<sup>1</sup> on their eepybird site. After their initial success, Grobe and Voltz made a video of an extreme experiment to answer the following question: “What happens when you combine 200 liters of Diet Coke and over 500 Mentos mints?” Web audiences were mesmerized by the result—it’s insane—and caused a classic viral phenomenon. In only three weeks, four million people viewed the video. Hundreds of bloggers had written about it. Then mainstream media jumped in, with Grobe and Voltz appearing on *Late Night with David Letterman* and *The Today Show*.

Imagine the excitement in Mentos marketing offices when the videos took off online—millions of Mentos exposures at no cost (more

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<sup>1</sup> <http://eepybird.com>



on this later). The price tag to get results like that from traditional marketing might have totaled tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars.

## Minty-Fresh Explosive Marketing

For marketers, one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off, it can propel a brand or company to fame and fortune *for free*. Whatever you call it—viral, buzz, or word-of-blog marketing—having other people tell your story drives action. Many viral phenomena start innocently. Somebody creates something—a funny video clip, a cartoon, or a story—to amuse friends, and one person sends it to another and that person sends it to yet another, on and on. Perhaps the creator might have expected to reach at most a few dozen friends. One of the first examples I remember was the “dancing baby” from the mid-1990s. It was grainy and low-tech, but it was cool and it spread like crazy. Instead of reaching a few hundred friends and colleagues, dancing baby struck a nerve and reached millions.

The challenge for marketers is to harness the amazing power of viral. There are people who will tell you that it is possible to create a viral campaign, and there are even agencies that specialize in the area. But when organizations set out to go viral, the vast majority of campaigns fail. Worse, some companies set up fake viral campaigns where people who are employed by the company or in some way compensated write about a product. The Web is hyperefficient at collective investigative reporting and smoking out trickery, so these campaigns rarely succeed and may even cause great harm to reputations. Often a corporate approach is some gimmicky game or contest that just feels forced and advertisement-like. I think it is virtually impossible to create a Web marketing program that is *guaranteed* to go viral. A huge amount of luck and timing are necessary. A sort of homemade feel seems to work, while slick and polished doesn't. For

example, the Numa Numa Dance<sup>2</sup> that was so popular several years ago was about as homemade as you can get—just a guy with a Web camera on his computer—and it helped to popularize the song and sell a bunch of downloads.

Of course, it's not just crazy dancing that goes viral. The formula is a combination of some great (and free) Web content (a video, a blog entry, or an e-book) that is groundbreaking or amazing or hilarious or involves a celebrity, plus a network of people to light the fire, and all with links that make it very easy to share. While many organizations plan viral marketing campaigns to spread the word about their products or services, don't forget that something may go viral *that you didn't start* (like Mentos and Diet Coke), and it may show you or your products in either a positive or negative light. You need to be monitoring the Web for your organization and brand names so you are alerted quickly about what people are talking about. And if a positive viral explosion that you didn't initiate begins, don't just hang on for the ride—push it along!

## Monitoring the Blogosphere for Viral Eruptions

Every day, bloggers, podcasters, and vloggers (video bloggers) promote and pan products. Consumers tell good and bad tales in which products and services play a starring role. Sadly, most companies are clueless about what's going on in the blogosphere. At a minimum, marketing professionals need to know immediately when their brand names or executives are mentioned in a blog (refer back to the discussion about monitoring blogs in Chapter 4). Beyond mention-counting, analysis is important. What are the significant trends in words and phrases currently popular in the blogosphere, as they relate to your organization, product, and industry? On the day that the

<sup>2</sup> [www.ifilm.com/ifilmdetail/2665487](http://www.ifilm.com/ifilmdetail/2665487)

Diet Coke and Mentos experiments went viral, there was a tenfold spike in the number of blog posts mentioning Mentos. If you follow the word “Mentos,” you’d want to know what was going on, so you could either respond to the crisis or leverage the positive development. At the least, you should learn the reason for the spike and alert company managers; when the *Wall Street Journal* calls for comment, “Huh?” is not the savviest response.

Over at Alexa,<sup>3</sup> a service that measures the reach and popularity of Web sites, the comparisons between the viral eepybird site created by Grobe and Voltz to showcase their videos and the official Mentos site<sup>4</sup> are remarkable. Marketers use Alexa to figure out what sites are hot and use that information to make their own sites better. The three-month average Web site ranking among all sites on the Web after the release of the video was 282,677 for the official Mentos site, while eepybird was 8,877.

“The whole Mentos geyser phenomenon seems to bubble up every few years,” says Pete Healy, vice president of marketing for Perfetti Van Melle USA, makers of Mentos. “But this was the first time it came around that there was an infrastructure where people could post videos online. We contacted the two guys at eepybird and said that we really liked the way the Mentos brand was represented. We had recently conducted a meeting about our brand personality, and we decided that if our brand was a person, it would be like Adam Sandler—quirky, tongue-in-cheek, and fun. Because the eepybird video had those qualities, we were delighted.”

Healy recognized that he had an opportunity and worked to push the viral excitement forward. First, he linked to the video from the official Mentos site. Then he offered Grobe and Voltz the company’s support. “When they appeared on *Late Night with David Letterman* and *The Today Show*, we were there with our ‘Mentos ride,’ a classic convertible with Mentos branding, giving away samples on the street

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alexa.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://us.mentos.com>

to add support.” Soon after, Healy decided that there might be others who would want to create their own video, so the company launched a Mentos geyser video contest using a purpose-built Web site.<sup>5</sup> The top prize was 1,000 iTunes downloads and a year’s supply of Mentos, 320 rolls, and according to Healy, over 100 videos were submitted and posted to the site, which was viewed nearly a million times. (Incidentally, note the wisdom of choosing iTunes downloads as a prize; the folks at Mentos reasonably suspected that the kinds of media-savvy people who would submit entry videos are likely the kinds of people who would be more interested in free music downloads than in traditional prizes like shopping sprees or irrelevant trips. This contributes to the authentic feel of Mentos’s attempts to further spread this viral phenomenon.)

“The power to influence what a brand means to others is something that poses a dilemma, but also an opportunity, for the owners of a brand,” says Healy. “It has always been true that what a brand means is determined by a consumer, the end user. Now there is a feedback loop that didn’t exist before. The Internet is like the town plaza or the town square. For any company that is marketing a brand, the first thing is to be genuine in communicating what the brand is about, the personality of the brand. If we had pretended that the Mentos brand is more than it is, then we would have gotten shot down.”

Interestingly, while Healy supported and helped drive the viral aspects of the videos, marketers at Coca-Cola tried to distance the Diet Coke brand from the phenomenon. “When the Mentos and Diet Coke video became big, Coca-Cola took a few shots from the market, because they felt that the eepybird site didn’t fit the Diet Coke brand. They took hits from bloggers.” Healy says. “As long as we keep in mind that we are just a candy manufacturer, creators of a small pleasure, we can work with interesting things that might happen to our brands on the Web.”

Healy did an excellent job pushing the Mentos and Diet Coke

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mentosgeysers.com/>

buzz along without getting in the way by being too much of a corporate nanny. Too often, corporate communications people at large companies distance themselves from what's going on in the real world of blogs, YouTube, and chat rooms. But it's even worse when they try to control the messages in ways that the marketplace sees as inauthentic.

## Creating Viral Buzz for Fun and Profit

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While I think it is difficult to purposely create viral marketing buzz, it is certainly possible. I think the way to create viral programs is a lot like the way that venture capitalists invest in startup companies and that studios create films. A typical venture capitalist has a formula that states that most ventures will fail, a few might do okay, and 1 out of 20 or so will take off and become a large enterprise that will pay back investors many times the initial investment. Record companies and movie studios follow the same principles, expecting that most of the projects that they green-light will have meager sales but that the one hit will more than pay back the cost of a bunch of flops. The problem is that nobody knows with certainty which movie or venture-backed company in the portfolio will succeed, so it requires a numbers game of investing in many prospects. The same goes for viral efforts. Create a number of campaigns and see what hits, then nurture the winners along.

## The Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese Sandwich and Jerry Garcia's Toilet

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Consider GoldenPalace.com, the Internet casino that has cornered the market on eccentric eBay purchases for viral promotional pur-

poses.<sup>6</sup> The online casino is the proud owner of dozens of offbeat knickknacks such as Pete Rose's corked baseball bat, William Shatner's kidney stone, and the famous Virgin Mary grilled cheese sandwich. The marketers at GoldenPalace.com also grab unusual advertising space sold on eBay, such as, *ahem*, a woman's cleavage, the opportunity to tattoo a logo on someone's forehead, and billboard space on the back of a person's wheelchair. Some of this stuff, all purchased on eBay, generates significant viral marketing buzz for GoldenPalace.com. For example, when Shatner's kidney stone was nabbed, it seemed like every TV station, newspaper, and online outlet reported on the sale: "Shatner Passes Kidney Stone to GoldenPalace.com," the headline ran. "Ha-ha-ha," the reporters and bloggers went, dismissing the money spent as foolish. But each story referenced GoldenPalace.com! At a mere \$25,000, this foray into a place where no man has gone before was the viral marketing and advertising bargain of the century. And kudos, too, to Shatner, who got his name plastered all over the place (and donated the cash to Habitat for Humanity).

The professional eBay bidders at GoldenPalace.com know that not every one of the hundreds of quirky purchases they make will be a hit with bloggers and the media. But they can count on some of them, maybe 1 out of 20, hitting the mark in just the right way.

## When You Have Explosive News, Make It Go Viral

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Although I've said that I think it is difficult to dream up campaigns that will definitely go viral, there are times that an organization possesses news that is so important to the target market they serve that

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.goldenpalaceevents.com/auctions>

they just know the news has significant viral potential. The hiring of a famous CEO away from another company, a merger or acquisition announcement, or a huge celebrity endorsement deal might be just the thing that lights up the blogs in your marketplace. If that's the case, it is important to get that news out in order to create the maximum effect. (Of course there is the opposite example—bad news—which also goes viral, and which you would prefer to contain or minimize. But in this chapter, let's just focus on the kind of good news that you want to get out to as wide an audience as possible.) If you want to push news along to maximum effect, it's critical to have a plan and a detailed timeline of whom you will tell the news to and when.

In early July 2006, Outsell, Inc.,<sup>7</sup> a research and advisory firm for the information industry, had just completed but not yet released a report, titled “Click Fraud Reaches \$1.3 Billion, Dictates End of ‘Don't Ask, Don't Tell’ Era,” that was the first to quantify, in real dollars and advertiser sentiment, the click-fraud problems that plague advertisers on search engines. The Outsell report, based on a study of 407 advertisers responsible for about \$1 billion in ad spending, told the explosive story of a problem threatening the core business model of search engines like Google. The analysts at Outsell revealed the scope of the problem of fraudulent clicks on Web advertisements that appear as part of search results, clicks that companies doing the advertising were paying for. Outsell analysts knew that they had a story with viral potential.

“At first we hinted at the report in our client newsletter,” says Chuck Richard, vice president and lead analyst at Outsell and the author of the report. “We always make certain that the paying clients get access to reports before they hit the media. But internally and with our PR firm, Warner Communications,<sup>8</sup> we thought it was going to be big.” Outsell had a logistical problem in that the report was

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.outsellinc.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.warnerpr.com/>

to be released to clients over the American Independence Day holiday weekend. The PR firm sent a media advisory, headlined “Outsell, Inc. Pegs Click Fraud as \$1.3 Billion Problem that Threatens Business Models of Google, Others; Study Shows 27% of Advertisers Slowing or Stopping Pay-Per-Click Ads Due to Fraudulent Billings,” to selected media. The advisory offered an early look at the report to approved media under an embargo period—stories could not appear until Wednesday, July 5 at the earliest. Verne Kopytoff of the *San Francisco Chronicle* spent the holiday weekend researching the problem identified by Outsell, interviewing Richard, and reaching out for comment from spokespeople at the search engines. His story, “Click Fraud a Huge Problem: Study Finds Practice Widespread; Many Cut Back Online Ads,” was the first to break on the morning of Wednesday, July 5, 2006.

“The viral aspect came from bloggers and built over the course of a week or so,” Richard says. Within just five days, over 100 bloggers had picked up the story, including heavy hitters such as *John Batelle’s Searchblog*, Jeff Jarvis’s *BuzzMachine*, *ClickZ News Blog*, Danny Sullivan at *Search Engine Watch*, and *paidContent.org*. After the story broke, Richard was busy doing interview after interview for mainstream media, resulting in a wave of nearly 100 stories in just the first week. Outlets including NPR, MSNBC, *Barron’s*, the *Financial Times*, *AdAge*, *eWeek*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, ABC News, *ZDNet*, *BusinessWeek Online*, and *TheStreet.com* all ran stories online, in print, and via broadcast media.

In the following weeks, Richard, now seen in the market as an expert in click fraud, received many press requests based on an existing Arkansas click-fraud class-action settlement that Google was proposing. Within a week, Google announced it would start providing statistics on the fraudulent clicks it intercepted, one of the key changes called for in the Outsell study; many media referenced this development in follow-up stories. Richard believes that the online buzz has prompted the paid search business to finally accept that it can’t escape having its own click-fraud tracking, auditing, and certification processes. “This is great news for users, publishers, and advertisers,” Richard says.



“For a small company to have access to this kind of reach of journalists and bloggers is remarkable,” Richard says. “It couldn’t have happened this way even a few years ago. The exposure has made a fundamental difference in [people’s] awareness of the firm. Many of our clients have contacted us to say ‘congratulations,’ that they were happy to see us be more visible. And I’ve gotten on the prime source lists of many reporters who cover the space, and they proactively call me for comment on stories now.” Indeed, *BusinessWeek* wrote a cover story for the October 2, 2006 issue, “Click Fraud: The Dark Side of Online Advertising,” and quoted the Outsell report.

But Richard is also aware of how a significant news item or report can influence a company, or even an entire industry. “It’s given us a reminder of our responsibility,” he says. “If something like this can affect a company’s share price or performance or investor inquiries on earnings calls, we need to be confident on our opinions.”

The Outsell example clearly illustrates that a piece of news, properly delivered to the market, can go viral. But with careful nurturing over the news cycle and an awareness of traditional news media’s and bloggers’ roles in promoting ideas, the story can reach much larger audiences and help a smart organization to reach its goals.

Viral marketing—having others tell your story for you—is one of the most exciting and powerful ways to reach your audiences. It’s not easy to harness the power, but with careful preparation when you are sitting on news and with clever ideas for what has the potential to create interest, any organization has the power to become famous on the Web.

# 9

## The Content-Rich Web Site

If you've read from the beginning of the book, at this point you might be tempted to think that each of the media that innovative marketers use to reach buyers—including blogs, podcasts, news releases, and all the rest—is a standalone communications vehicle. And while each certainly could be a self-contained unit (your blog does not need to link to your corporate site), most organizations integrate their online marketing efforts to help tell a unified story to buyers. Each medium is interrelated with all the others. Podcasts work with blogs. A news release program works with an effective Web site and online media room. Multiple Web sites for different divisions or countries come together on a corporate site. No matter how you choose to deploy Web content to reach your buyers, the place that brings everything together in a unified place is a content-rich Web site.

As anyone who has built a Web site knows, there is much more to think about than just the content. Design, color, navigation, and appropriate technology are all important aspects of a good Web site. Unfortunately, in many organizations these other concerns dominate. Why is that? I think it's *easier* to focus on a site's design or

technology than on its content. Also, there are fewer resources to help Web site creators with the content aspects of their sites—hey, that’s why I wrote this book!

Often the only person allowed to work on the Web site is your organization’s *Webmaster*. At many companies, Webmasters—the kings of technology—focus all their attention on cool software plug-ins; on HTML, XML, and all sorts of other ’MLs; and on nitty-gritty stuff like server technology and Internet Service Providers. But with a Webmaster in charge, what happens to the content? In other organizations, Webmasters are pushed aside by graphic designers and advertising people who focus exclusively on creating Web sites that look pretty. At these organizations, well-meaning advertising agencies obsess over hip designs or hot technology such as Flash. I’ve seen many examples where site owners become so concerned about technology and design that they totally forget that great *content* is the most important aspect of any Web site.

Thus, the best Web sites focus primarily on content to pull together their various buyers, markets, media, and products in one comprehensive place where content is not only king, but president and Pope as well. A great Web site is an intersection of every other online initiative, including podcasts, blogs, news releases, and other online media. In a cohesive and interesting way, the content-rich Web site organizes the online personality of your organization to delight, entertain, and—most important—inform each of your buyers.

## Political Advocacy on the Web ---

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is the nation’s most effective environmental action organization. According to its Web site,<sup>1</sup> the organization uses law, science, and the support of 1.2 million members and online activists to protect the planet’s wildlife and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nrdc.org/>

wild places and to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all living things. What makes the organization interesting is the vast amount of Web content available on its site; the various media that its marketers deploy; and the tools it provides to online activists and political bloggers in order to spread the group's message. The professionals at NRDC, which was named by *Worth* magazine as one of America's 100 best charities, know that more than one million members are the best storytelling asset available. By developing a terrific Web site to enlist people to donate their online voices, NRDC expands the team and its message-delivery capabilities considerably.

The site includes environmental news, resources, and information on topics such as Clean Air & Energy; Clean Drinking Water & Oceans; Wildlife & Fish; and Parks, Forests, & Wetlands. In addition, it offers online publications, links to laws and treaties, and a glossary of environmental terms. The NRDC delivers the organization's message via audio, video, and text and also encourages others to support the cause through giving their time and money and through reusing online content.

Throughout the site, widgets (small applications found on Web sites and blogs) and links are available for bloggers to use in helping spread the message. Prominent widgets include social bookmarking tools to add tags to del.icio.us and Digg (to make it easier for people who use those sites to find information from NRDC). The site also offers independent bloggers and Web site owners "badges" (graphical images that look like banner ads) that they add to their blog or site and then link back to NRDC to show support. For example, people who wish to help grow solutions to both global warming and dependency on oil might put a biofuels badge<sup>2</sup> on their blog or Web site; the badge links to NRDC content about biofuels. The badges available include small ones that look like the RSS links found on many blogs and larger ones similar to banner ads. The NRDC has also created Squidoo lenses such as "Understanding Global Warming

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nrdc.org/badges/biofuels.asp>

(from the experts at NRDC),”<sup>3</sup> and it encourages its constituents to do the same. (A Squidoo lens is a Web page built by someone with expertise on a topic—for more about Squidoo, see Chapter 20.)

“I came to NRDC from NPR initially, doing media relations,” says Daniel Hinerfeld, associate director of communications for NRDC. “But because I’m in the L.A. office and we have entertainment industry contacts, I’ve started creating multimedia content for the site. We have a video called *Lethal Sound*<sup>4</sup> narrated by Pierce Brosnan that was my first big taste of multimedia.” The video, which has been a hit on the festival circuit, details evidence linking sonar to a series of whale strandings in recent years. To encourage people to take action, the landing page for the video has multiple widgets and tools. From this page viewers can easily send messages to elected officials, donate money, and send online postcards to friends. Links to additional content, such as an NRDC press release titled “Navy Sued Over Harm to Whales from Mid-Frequency Sonar” and a detailed report titled “Sounding the Depths II,” are a just a click away. All this well-organized content, complete with easy ways to link to related information and to share content on blogs and with friends, is pulled together on the site and contributes greatly to the NRDC leadership position. And online content experts at NRDC are constantly looking for new ways to deliver their important messages.

“We created a podcast channel<sup>5</sup> with broadcast-quality, journalistic-style packages,” Hinerfeld says. “Our communications strategy is not just to reach the media, but to also reach the constituents directly.” Hinerfeld draws extensively from his experience at NPR when he produces shows for the NRDC podcasts. “I always try hard to include points of view that are at odds with our own,” he says. “I think it makes it more interesting, and it reinforces our own position. For example, when we conduct interviews with our own staff, we chal-

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.squidoo.com/globalwarmingprimer/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nrdc.org/wildlife/marine/sonar.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nrdc.org/onearth/shared/podcasts.asp>

lenge people with difficult questions, not just softballs, much like a journalist would. Going this route makes it authentic. People don't want PR, they want something that's real."

Hinerfeld says that multimedia is very exciting because it gives NRDC an opportunity to reach younger constituencies. "I've come across people who are huge consumers of podcasts, and many listen to them during long commutes," he says. "We use this sort of content to bond with people in a different, less wonky way. We also profile our younger staff members, which is a way to personalize the institution." Some staff members have MySpace profiles and use them to spread the word as well (more on MySpace is in Chapter 19).

NRDC is very well known within the news media that cover environmental issues on Capitol Hill. But the site content, the audio and video, and the site components that are offered to bloggers to spread the message (and cause it go viral) make the organization much more approachable, especially to online activists and the younger MySpace generation. The NRDC staffers are active participants in the market and on the sites and blogs their constituents read. All these efforts make their content authentic, because it is contextually appropriate for the audiences the group needs to reach.

## Content: The Focus of Successful Web Sites

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The NRDC site is an excellent example of a Web site that is designed to reach buyers. For the NRDC, the "buyers" who use the site's content are the more than one million members, advocates, and activists who use the site to work to protect the planet's wildlife and wild places and to promote a healthy environment.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of sites are built with the wrong focus. Yes, appearance and navigation are important: Appropriate colors, logos, fonts, and design make a site appealing. The right technologies such as content-management systems make sites easier

to update. But what really matters is the *content*, how that content is organized, and how it drives action from buyers.

To move content to its rightful place in driving a successful marketing and PR strategy, content must be the single most important component. That focus can be tough for many people, both when their agencies push for hip and stylish design and when their IT departments obsess about the architecture. It is your role to think like a publisher and begin any new site or site redesign by starting with the content strategy.

## Putting It All Together with Content

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As you're reading through this discussion of unifying your online marketing and PR efforts on your Web site, you might be thinking, "That's easy for a smaller organization or one that has only one product line, but I work for a large company with many brands." Yes, it is more difficult to coordinate wide varieties of content when you have to juggle multiple brands, geographic variation, languages, and other considerations common to large companies. But with a large, widely dispersed organization, putting it all together on a corporate site might be even more important because showing a unified personality reaps benefits.

"The key is the collaboration between the different business units, the corporate offices, and the departments," says Sarah F. Garnsey, head of marketing and Web communications at Textron Inc.<sup>6</sup> "At Textron, each business has its own independently operated Web site, which makes coordination difficult because each is a well-defined brand that may be more familiar to people than our corporate brand."

Textron Inc, a global company with yearly revenues of \$10 billion and more than 37,000 employees in 33 countries, is recognized for

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.textron.com/>

strong brands such as Bell Helicopter, Cessna Aircraft, E-Z-GO (golf cars), and many others. The company has several dozen Web sites, typically for the individual brands, such as Bell Helicopter.<sup>7</sup> “Through search logs we learned that many people were searching for product and business information on the corporate [Textron] site,” Garnsey says. “That was a wakeup call for us, because we had thought that people were going to the business sites for this information. So we’ve built out the corporate site with more content about each of the businesses.” On a recent visit to the new site, I was able to watch a video featuring Cessna Aircraft<sup>8</sup> CEO Jack Pelton, check out a lot of great photos of the products, and read feature stories about employees such as John Delamarter, who’s the program manager of Lycoming’s Thunderbolt Engine and who discussed his pride and pleasure in his work. Textron has a well-organized online media room and, because the company’s stock is traded on the New York Stock Exchange, there is also an Investor Relations section on the site.

“We work with the businesses to showcase interesting things, and we try to have fresh content on the site and update it with new weekly stories,” Garnsey says. “But the content is only as good as the management of the content and the processes. With a large site, rigor of process is required that many companies might underestimate. It takes coordination and management. For example, I can’t make the content in the recruiting section of the site compelling unless I get the complete cooperation of the human resources department. People had grown to believe that you just throw the content at a Webmaster and it all just works. But it doesn’t—the days of the guy with the server under the desk are over.”

Garnsey has a set of processes and procedures to make certain that the Textron site meets the needs of buyers and that everything on it works well, and she has a small team that works with her to coordinate with the people who manage division and product-company

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bellhelicopter.textron.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cessna.com/>



Web sites. “We have a content management process to make sure everything is fresh, has been reviewed, and is passed by legal,” she says. “But a primary component is that we make sure that the voice of the customer is captured and built into all of our electronic communications. We work on how to draw users into the content and use the site to form a relationship with them. Even if they don’t purchase something from us right away, maybe they will become interested in the company stock or in something from one of the brands like Cessna.” To make sure the site follows best practice, Garnsey brings people into a lab for annual usability tests and research. “We also do an audit of all of our dot-com sites every year to make sure that all sites comply with the standards,” she says. “And each year we hold a Web Summit of all the Textron people working on Web initiatives from all over the company. We try to foster a community of people who otherwise would have no reason to speak with each other because the individual businesses don’t have a lot in common.”

## The Great Web Site: More an Art Than a Science

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The more I research Web sites—and I’ve checked out thousands over the past several years—the more I realize that many important factors usually come together in a way that is difficult to describe. It just feels right—as if the creator of the site cares a great deal and wants her passion to shine through. It’s like a sprinkling of fairy dust: important but indescribable. However, I’m convinced that the key is to understand buyers (or those who may donate, subscribe, join, vote, etc.) and build content especially for them. I’ll be sharing ideas and examples on how to create (or enhance) your site in Chapter 13.

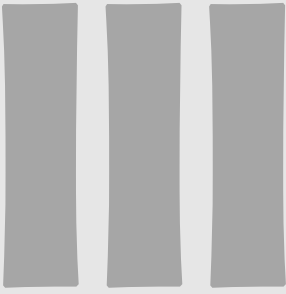
Terrific sites draw on the passion of the people who build them and reflect the personality of someone dedicated to helping others. As you develop content to further your organizational goals, remember that a successful approach is often more art than science. The

content you offer must have distinctive qualities, and your personality needs to show. A well-executed Web site, like a quality television program or film, is an effective combination of content and delivery. But on the Web, many organizations spend much more time and money on the design and delivery aspects than on the content itself.

Don't fall into that trap. Perfecting that critical mix of content, design, and technology is where the art comes in. Adding in personality and authenticity and reaching particular buyer personas makes the challenge even more daunting. Just remember, there is no absolute right or wrong way to create a Web site; each organization has an individual and important story to tell.

Now let's spend some time on the specifics of how you can implement these ideas for your own organization. Part III of the book starts with a discussion of how you build a comprehensive marketing and PR plan to reach your buyers directly with Web content. Armed with your plan, the chapters that follow will give you advice for developing thought leadership content and writing for your buyers. Finally, I provide detailed information on how to implement a news release program, build an online media room, create your own blog and podcast, and work with social-networking sites. Because I'm convinced of the value of hearing from innovative marketers who have had success with these ideas, I continue to sprinkle case studies throughout the remaining chapters to give you some examples of how others have implemented these ideas and to help you get your own creative juices flowing.





# Action Plan for Harnessing the Power of the New Rules



# 10

## You Are What You Publish: Building Your Marketing and PR Plan

**D**oes your company sell great products? Or, if you don't work in a traditional company, does your organization (church, non-profit, consulting company, school) offer great services? Well, get over it! Marketing is not *only* about your products! The most important thing to remember as you develop a marketing and PR plan is to put your products and services to the side for just a little while and focus your complete attention on the *buyers* of your products (or those who will donate, subscribe, join, or apply). Devoting attention to buyers and away from products is difficult for many people, but it always pays off in the form of bringing you closer to achieving your goals.

Think Starbucks for a moment. Is the product great? Yeah, I guess the three-dollar cup of coffee I get from Starbucks tastes pretty good. And most marketers, if given the opportunity to market Starbucks, would focus on the coffee itself—the product. But is that really what people are buying at Starbucks, or does Starbucks help solve other buyer problems? Maybe Starbucks is really selling a place to hang out for a while. Or, for that matter, isn't Starbucks a convenient place for people to meet? (I use Starbucks several times a month as a place

to connect with clients or conduct interviews.) Or do people use Starbucks for the free wireless Internet connections? Maybe Starbucks saves 10 minutes in your day because you don't have to grind beans, pour water into a coffee maker, wait, and clean up later. For some of us, Starbucks just represents a little splurge because, well, we're worth it. I'd argue that Starbucks does all those things. Starbucks appeals to many different buyer personas, and it sells lots of things besides just coffee. If you were marketing Starbucks, it would be your job to segment buyers and appeal to them based on their needs, not just to talk about your product.

The approach of thinking about buyers and the problems our organizations solve for them can be difficult for many marketers, since we've constantly been told how important a great product or service is to the marketing mix. In fact, standard marketing education still talks about the four *Ps* of marketing—product, place, price, and promotion—as being the most important things. That's nonsense. In order to succeed on the Web under the new rules of marketing and PR, you need to consider your organizational goals and then focus on your buyers *first*. Only when you understand buyers should you begin to create compelling Web content to reach them. Yes, marketers often argue with me on this. But I strongly believe that the product or service you sell is secondary when you market your organization on the Web.

So, I will ask you to put aside your products and services as you begin the task for this chapter: building a marketing and PR plan that follows the new rules. While the most important thing is to focus on during this process is buyers, we will do that in the context of your organizational goals. Trust me—this will be like no marketing and PR plan you've created before.

## What Are Your Organization's Goals?

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Marketing and PR people have a collective difficulty getting our departmental goals in sync with the rest of the company. And our man-

agement teams go along with this dysfunction. Think about the goals that most marketers have. They usually take the form of an epic to-do list: “Let’s see; we should do a few trade shows, buy yellow-pages ads, maybe create a new logo, get press clips, produce some T-shirts, increase Web site traffic, and, oh yeah, generate some leads for the salespeople.” Well, guess what? Those aren’t the goals of your company! I’ve never seen “leads” or “clips” or “T-shirts” on a mission statement or balance sheet. With typical marketing department goals, we constantly focus on the flare-up du jour and thus always focus on the wrong thing. This also gives the marketing profession a bad rap in many companies as a bunch of flaky slackers. No wonder marketing is called the “branding police” in some organizations and is often the place where failed salespeople end up.

Many marketers and PR people also focus on the wrong measures of success. With Web sites, people will often tell me things like, “We want to have ten thousand unique visitors per month to our site.” And PR measurement is often similarly irrelevant: “We want ten mentions in the trade press and three national magazine hits each month.” Unless your site makes money through advertising so that raw traffic adds revenue, traffic is the wrong measure. And simple press clips just don’t matter. What matters is leading your site’s visitors and your constituent audiences to where they help you reach your real goals, such as building revenue, soliciting donations, gaining new members, and the like.

This lack of clear goals and real measurement reminds me of seven-year-olds playing soccer. If you’ve ever seen little children on the soccer field, you know that they operate as one huge organism packed together, chasing the ball around the field. On the sidelines are helpful coaches yelling, “Pass!” or “Go to the goal!” Yet as the coaches and parents know, this effort is futile: No matter what the coach says or how many times the kids practice, they still focus on the wrong thing—the ball—instead of the goal.

That’s exactly what we marketers and PR people do. We fill our lists with balls and lose sight of the goal. But do you know what’s even worse? Our coaches (the management teams at our companies) actually encourage us to focus on balls (like sales leads or press clips



or Web site traffic statistics) instead of real organizational goals such as revenue. The VPs and CEOs of companies happily provide incentives based on leads for the marketing department and on clips for the PR team. And the agencies we contract with—advertising and PR agencies—also focus on the wrong measures.

What we need to do is align marketing and PR objectives with those of the organization. For most corporations, the most important goal is profitable revenue growth. In newer companies and those built around emerging technologies, this usually means generating new customers, but in mature businesses, the management team may need to be more focused on keeping the customers that they already have. Of course, nonprofits have the goal of raising money; politicians, to get out the vote; rock bands to get people to buy CDs and iTunes downloads; and universities, to get student applications.

So your first step is to get with the leaders of your organization—your management team or your associates in your church or nonprofit or your spouse if you run a small business—and determine your business goals. If you run a nonprofit, school, church, or political campaign, consider your goals for donations, applications, new members, or votes. Write them down in detail. The important things you write down might be “grow revenue in Europe by 20 percent” or “increase new-member signups to one hundred per month in the fourth quarter” or “or generate a million dollars in Web donations next quarter” or “generate five paid speaking engagements in the upcoming year.”

Now that you have the marketing and PR plan focused on the right goals (i.e., those of your organization), the next step is to learn as much as you can about your buyers and to segment them into groups so you can reach them through your Web publishing efforts.

## Buyer Personas and Your Organization

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Successful online marketing and PR efforts work because they start by identifying one or more buyer personas to target, so you need to

make buyer personas a part of your planning process. A buyer persona (which we touched on back in Chapter 3) is essentially a representative of a type of buyer that you have identified as having a specific interest in your organization or product or having a market problem that your product or service solves. Building buyer personas is the first step and probably the single most important thing that you will do in creating your marketing and PR plan. Consider the U.S. presidential elections of 2004. Marketers for the two major candidates segmented buyers (voters) into dozens of distinct buyer personas. Some of the names of the buyer personas (sometimes called “microtargets” in the political world) became well known as the media began to write about them, while many other persona labels remained internal to the candidates. Some of the better-known buyer personas of the 2004 presidential election were “NASCAR Dads” (rural working-class males, many of whom are NASCAR fans) and “Security Moms” (mothers who were worried about terrorism and concerned about security). By segmenting millions of voters into distinct buyer personas, the candidates built marketing campaigns and PR programs that appealed specifically to each. Contrast this approach with a one-size-fits-all campaign that targets everybody but appeals to nobody.

You, too, need to segment buyer personas so you can then develop marketing programs to reach each one. Let’s revisit the college example from Chapter 3 and expand on it. Remember that we identified five different buyer personas for a college Web site: young alumni (those who graduated within the past 10 or 15 years), older alumni, the high school student who is considering college, the parents of the prospective student, and existing customers (current students). That means a well-executed college site might target five distinct buyer personas.

A college might have the marketing and PR goal of generating 500 additional applications for admission from qualified students for the next academic year. Let’s also pretend that the college hopes to raise \$5 million in donations from alumni who have never contributed in the past. That’s great! These are real goals that marketers can build programs around.

## The Buyer Persona Profile

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After identifying their goals, the marketing people at the college should build a buyer persona profile, essentially a kind of biography, for each group they'll target to achieve those goals. The college might create one buyer persona for prospective students (targeting high school students looking for schools) and another for parents of high school students (who are part of the decision process and often pay the bills). If the school targets a specific type of applicant, say student-athletes, they might build a specific buyer persona profile for the high school student who participates in varsity sports. To effectively target the alumni for donations, the school might decide to build a buyer persona for younger alumni, perhaps those who have graduated in the past 10 years.

For each buyer persona profile, we want to know as much as we can about this group of people. What are their goals and aspirations? What are their problems? What media do they rely on for answers to problems? How can we reach them? We want to know, in detail, the things that are important for each buyer persona. What words and phrases do the buyers use? What sorts of images and multimedia appeal to each? Are short and snappy sentences better than long, verbose ones? I encourage you to write these things down based on your understanding of each buyer persona. You should also read the publications and Web sites that your buyers read to gain an understanding of the way they think. For example, college marketing people should read the *US News and World Report* issue that ranks America's Best Colleges as well as the guidebooks that prospective students read, such as *Countdown to College: 21 To-Do Lists for High School: Step-By-Step Strategies for 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Graders* and *The Ultimate College Acceptance System: Everything You Need to Know to Get into the Right College for You*. Reading what your buyer personas read will get you thinking like them. By doing some basic research on your buyers, you can learn a great deal, and your marketing will be much more effective.

The best way to learn about buyers and develop buyer persona profiles is to interview people. I have no doubt that representatives of the two presidential candidates interviewed many NASCAR Dads and Security Moms to build profiles for these and many other buyer personas they identified. Similarly, the marketing person at our hypothetical college must interview people who fit the personas the school identified. The college marketing people might learn a great deal if they turned the traditional in-person college admissions interview around by asking prospective students questions such as the following: When did you first start researching schools? Who influenced your research? How did you learn about this school? How many schools are you applying to? What Web sites, blogs, or podcasts do you read or subscribe to? Once you know this first-hand information, you should subscribe to, read, and listen to the media that influence your target buyer. When you read what your buyers read, pay attention to the exact words and phrases that are used. If students frequent MySpace or other social-network sites, so should you, and you should pay attention to the lingo students use. By triangulating the information gathered directly from several dozen prospective students plus information from the media that these students pay attention to, you easily build a buyer persona for a high school student ready to apply to a college like yours.

“A buyer persona profile is a short biography of the typical customer, not just a job description but a person description,” says Adele Revella,<sup>1</sup> who has been using buyer personas to market technology products for more than 20 years. “The buyer persona profile gives you a chance to truly empathize with target buyers, to step out of your role as someone who wants to promote a product and see, through your buyers’ eyes, the circumstances that drive their decision process. The buyer persona profile includes information on the typical buyer’s background, daily activities, and current solutions for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.buyerpersona.com/>

their problems. The more experience you have in your market, the more obvious the personas become.”

This may sound a bit wacky, but I think you should go so far as to name your persona the way that the campaigns did with NASCAR Dads and Security Moms. You might even cut out a representative photo from a magazine to help you visualize him or her. This should be an *internal name only* that helps you and your colleagues to develop sympathy with and a deep understanding of the real people to whom you market. Rather than a nameless, faceless “prospect,” your buyer persona will come to life.

For example, a buyer persona for a male high school student who is a varsity athlete and whom you want to target might be named “Sam the Athlete” and his persona might read something like this: “Sam the Athlete began thinking about colleges and the upcoming application process way back when he was a freshman in high school. His coach and parents recognized his athletic talent and suggested that it will help him get into a good college or even secure a scholarship. Sam knows that he’s good, but not good enough to play on a Division 1 school. Sam first started poking around on college Web sites as a freshman and enjoyed checking out the athletic pages for the colleges in his home state and some nearby ones. He even attended some of these colleges’ games when he could. Sam has good grades, but he is not at the top of his class because his sports commitments mean he can’t study as much as his peers. He has close friends and likes to hang out with them on weekends, but he is not heavily into the party scene and avoids alcohol and drugs. Sam frequents MySpace, has his own MySpace page, and has a group of online friends that he frequently Instant Messages with. He is hip to online nuance, language, and etiquette. Sam also reads *Sports Illustrated Magazine*. Now that he is a junior, he knows it is time to get serious about college applications, and he doesn’t really know where to start. But to learn, he’s paying more attention to the applications pages than the athletic pages on college Web sites.”

Okay, so you’re nodding your head and agreeing with this buyer persona profiling thing. “But,” you ask, “how many buyer personas

do I need?” You might want to think about your buyer personas based on what factors differentiate them. How can you slice the demographics? For example, some organizations will have a different profile for buyers in the United States versus Europe. Or maybe your company sells to buyers in the automobile industry and in the government sector, and those buyers are different. The important thing is that you will use this buyer persona information to create specific marketing and PR programs to reach each buyer persona, and therefore you need to have the segmentation in fine enough detail that when they encounter your Web content, your buyers will say: “Yes, that’s me. This organization understands me and my problems and will therefore have products that fit my needs.”

Marketers and PR pros are often amazed at the transformation of their materials and programs as a result of buyer persona profiling. “When you really know how your buyers think and what matters to them, you eliminate the agony of guessing about what to say or where and how to communicate with buyers,” says Revella. “Marketers tell me that they don’t have time to build buyer personas, but these same people are wasting countless hours in meetings debating about whether the message is right. And of course, they’re wasting budgets building programs and tools that don’t resonate with anyone. It’s just so much easier and more effective to listen before you talk.”

## The Importance of Buyer Personas in Web Marketing

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One of the simplest ways to build an effective Web site or to create great marketing programs using online content is to target the specific buyer personas that you have created. Yet most Web sites are big brochures that do not offer specific information for different buyers. Think about it—the typical Web site is one-size-fits-all, with the content organized by the company’s products or services,

not by categories corresponding to buyer personas and their associated problems.

The same thing is true about other online marketing programs. Without a focus on the buyer, the typical press release and media relations program is built on what the organization wants to say rather than what the buyer wants to hear. There is a huge difference. Companies that are successful with direct-to-consumer news release strategies write for their buyers. The blogs that are best at reaching an organizational goal are not about companies or products but rather customers and their problems.

Now that you've set quantifiable organizational goals and identified the buyer personas that you want to reach, your job as you develop your marketing and PR plan is to identify the best ways to reach buyers and develop compelling messages that you will use in your Web marketing programs. If you've conducted interviews with buyers and developed a buyer persona profile, then you know the buyer problems that your product or service solves, and you know the media that buyers turn to for answers. Do they go first to a search engine? If so, what words and phrases do they enter? Which blogs, chat rooms, forums, and online news sites do they read? Are they open to audio or video? You need to answer these questions before you continue.

## In Your Buyers' Own Words

Throughout the book, I often refer to the importance of understanding the words and phrases that buyers use. An effective Web marketing plan requires an understanding of the ways your buyers speak and the real words and phrases they use. This is important not only for building a positive online relationship with your buyers, but also for planning effective search engine marketing strategies. After all, if you are not using the phrases your buyers search on, how can you possibly reach them?

Let's take a look at the importance of the actual words buyers use,

by way of an example. Several years ago, I worked with Shareholder.com to create a Web content strategy to reach buyers of the company's new Whistleblower Hotline product and move those buyers into and through the sales cycle. The Shareholder.com product was developed as an outsourced solution for public companies to comply with rule 301 (the so-called "Whistleblower Hotline" provision) of the U.S. Sarbanes-Oxley legislation that passed in 2002 in the wake of corporate scandals such as Enron. Most importantly, we interviewed buyers (such as chief financial officers within publicly traded companies) who were required to comply with the legislation. We also read the publications that our buyers read (such as *CFO*, *Directors Monthly*, and the *AACA Docket* of the American Corporate Counsel Association); we actually downloaded and read the massive Sarbanes-Oxley legislation document itself; and we studied the agendas of the many conferences and events that our buyers attended that discussed the importance of Sarbanes-Oxley compliance.

As a result of the buyer persona research, we learned the phrases that buyers used when discussing the Sarbanes-Oxley whistleblower hotline rule, and so the content that we created for the Shareholder.com Web site<sup>2</sup> included such important phrases as: "SEC mandates," "complete audit trail," "Sarbanes-Oxley rule 301," "confidential and anonymous submission," and "safe and secure employee reporting." An important component of the Web site we created (based on our buyer persona research) was thought leadership-based content, including a Webinar called "Whistleblower Hotlines: More than a Mandate" that featured guest speakers Harvey Pitt (former chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission) and Lynn Brewer (author of the book *House of Cards: Confessions of an Enron Executive*). Because this Webinar discusses issues of importance to *buyers* (not only Shareholder.com products), and the guest speakers are thought leaders that buyers are interested in learning from, 600 people eagerly watched the presentation live.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www360.shareholder.com/home/Solutions/Whistleblower.cfm>



“The Webinar was very important because when we launched the product we were starting from a position with no market share within this product niche,” says Bradley H. Smith, director of marketing/communications at Shareholder.com. “Other companies had already entered the market before us. The Webinar gave us search engine terms like ‘Harvey Pitt’ and ‘Enron’ and offered a celebrity draw. Search engine placement was important because it created our brand as a leader in Whistleblower Hotline technologies even though we were new to this market. Besides prospective clients, the media found us, which resulted in important press including prominent placement in a *Wall Street Journal* article called ‘Making it Easier to Complain.’”

Shareholder.com then took the service to the Canadian market where the legislation was called “Ontario Securities Commission and The Audit Committees Rule of the Canadian Securities Administrators Guidelines Multilateral Instrument 52-110” (quite a mouthful). Smith and his colleagues interviewed buyers in Canada and did some buyer persona research to determine if there were any differences in the words and phrases used in Canada. There were! Unlike the other U.S. companies attempting to enter the Canadian market for hotline solutions by just using their U.S. marketing materials, Shareholder.com created a separate set of Web content for Canadian buyers. Used in the pages for these buyers were specific phrases that were used by Canadian buyers (but not buyers in the U.S.), such as “governance hotline,” “conducting a forensic accounting investigation,” and the exact name of the Canadian legislation.

Because the marketers at Shareholder.com had done extensive buyer persona research and had created Web content with the words and phrases used by buyers, the Shareholder.com pages were visited frequently and linked to often, and they became highly ranked by the search engines. In fact, at the time of this writing, Shareholder.com is number one out of 258,000 hits on Google for the phrase “whistleblower hotline.” As a result of traffic driven from the search engines and great Web content for both U.S. and Canadian buyers (such as Webinars), the product launch was a success. “In the four months immediately after the Webcast, we signed 75

clients,” Smith says. “Furthermore, the Webcast archive of the event continued to work for us throughout the year, advancing our brand presence, generating sales leads, and contributing to the strongest Shareholder.com standalone product launch ever.”

Figuring out the phrases for your market requires that you buckle down and do some research. Although interviewing buyers about their market problems and listening to the words and phrases they use is best, you can also learn a great deal by reading the publications that they read. Check out any blogs in your buyers’ space (if you haven’t already), and study the agendas and topic descriptions for the conferences and seminars that your buyers frequent. When you have a list of the phrases that are important to your buyers, use those phrases not only to appeal to them specifically, but also to make your pages appear in the search engine results when your buyers search for what you have to offer.

## What Do You Want Your Buyers to Believe?

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Now that you have identified organizational goals, built a set of one or more buyer personas, and researched the words and phrases your buyers use to talk about and search for your product, you should think about what you want each of your buyer personas to *believe* about your organization. What are the messages that you will use for each buyer persona? Think back again to the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Once they had identified buyer personas such as NASCAR Dads and Security Moms, the campaigns had to create a set of messages, Web sites, TV ads, direct mail campaigns, and talking points that the candidates would use in speeches to these groups. For example, George W. Bush appealed to Security Moms with speeches and advertising that claimed that families would be safer from the threats of terrorism with his “stay the course” approach if he were re-elected rather than if John Kerry were elected.

You must do the same thing with your buyer personas. What do you want each group to believe about your organization? What messages will you use to reach them on the Web? Remember, the best messages are not just about your product. What is each buyer persona really buying from you? Is it great customer service? the “safe choice”? luxury? For example, Volvo doesn’t just sell a car; it sells *safety*.

And don’t forget that different buyer personas buy different things from your organization. Think about Gatorade for a moment. For competitive athletes, Gatorade has been the drink of choice for decades. I found some interesting messages on the Gatorade Web site,<sup>3</sup> including “If you want to *win*, you’ve got to replace what you *lose*,” and “For some athletes, significant dehydration can occur within the initial 30 minutes of exercise.” These are interesting messages, because they target the buyer persona of the competitive athlete and focus on how Gatorade can help those athletes win.

Now I’m not an expert on Gatorade’s buyer personas, but it seems to me that they could further refine their buyer personas based on the sports athletes play or on whether they are professionals or amateurs. If tennis players see themselves as very different from football players, then Gatorade may need to create buyer persona profiles and messages to target both sports separately. Or maybe women athletes make up a different buyer persona for Gatorade than men.

But there’s another buyer persona that I have never seen Gatorade address. I remember back to my early twenties, when I lived in an apartment in New York City and was single and making the rounds in the party circuit and late night club scene. To be honest, I was partying a little too hard some weeknights, skulking home in the wee hours. Of course, I then had to make it down to my Wall Street job by 8:00 A.M. I discovered that drinking a large bottle of Gatorade on the walk to the subway stop helped make me feel a lot better. Now I don’t *actually* expect Gatorade to develop messages for young professionals

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gatorade.com/>

in New York who drink too much, but that buyer persona certainly has different problems from those that Gatorade solves for athletes. Imagine advertising for this buyer persona: “Last night’s third martini still in your system? Rehydration is not just for athletes. Gatorade.”

Of course, the point is that different buyer personas have different problems for your organization to solve. And there’s no doubt that your online marketing and PR programs will do better if you develop messages for each buyer persona, instead of simply relying on a generic site that uses one set of broad messages for everyone.

## Developing Content to Reach Buyers

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You must now think like a publisher. You should develop an editorial plan to reach your buyers with focused content in the media that they prefer. Your first action might be to create a content-rich Web site with pages organized by buyer persona. This does not mean you need to redesign the entire existing Web site, nor does it necessitate a change in the site architecture. You can start by just creating some new individual pages, each with specialized content customized for a particular buyer persona, creating appropriate links to these pages, and leaving the rest of the site alone. For example, our hypothetical college might create content for each of the buyer personas they identified. Sam the Athlete (the high school student who is a varsity athlete and a candidate for admission) should have specific content written for him that describes what it is like to be a student-athlete at the college and also gives tips for the admission process. The college could include profiles of current student-athletes or even a blog by one of the coaches. In addition, appropriate links on the homepage and the admissions pages should be created for Sam. An appropriate homepage link such as “high school athletes start here” or “special information for student-athletes” would attract Sam’s attention.

At the same time, the college should develop pages for parents of high school students who are considering applying for admission.

The parents have very different problems from those of the students, and the site content designed for parents would deal with things like financial aid and safety on campus.

As you keep your publisher's hat on, consider what other media your organization can publish on the Web to reach the buyers that you have identified. A technology company might want to consider a whitepaper detailing solutions to a known buyer problem. Perhaps you have enough information to create an e-book on a subject that would be of interest to one or more of your buyer personas. You may want to develop a series of a dozen direct-to-consumer news releases focusing on a series of issues that you know your buyer is interested in. Or it might be time to start a blog or a podcast to reach your buyers.

Consider creating an editorial plan for each buyer persona. You might do this in the form of a calendar for the upcoming year that includes Web site content, an e-book or whitepaper, a blog, and some news releases. Notice as you build an editorial plan and an editorial calendar for the next year that you're now focused on creating the compelling content that your buyers are interested in. Unlike the way you might have done it in the past (and the way your competitors are marketing today), you are not just creating a big brochure about your organization. You're writing for your buyers, not your own ego.

## Launching a Baby Dinosaur

In February 2006, executives from UGOBE, the latest endeavor for polymath toy inventor and Furby co-creator Caleb Chung, unveiled their newest creation: Pleo<sup>4</sup>—a one-week-old infant *Camarasaurus* from the Jurassic period. They were presenting at the DEMO 2006 conference, a highly selective launch venue for new products and companies. Just to be at DEMO was a feat, considering that 1,500 companies applied and only 70 were accepted. While a great deal of marketing and

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ugobe.com/pleo/index.html>

PR planning had gone into getting the DEMO gig, the company still had more than one year before Pleo was ready to hit store shelves.

“We knew that we needed to leverage PR and the Internet to really allow us to get the message into the market about how Pleo is different,” says Diana Stern, director of marketing and operations for UGOBE. “The Internet has become the dominant influence with consumers. But part of our early success has been because Pleo is just different enough that he has captured the imagination. Pleo is one of the most amazing products I have ever seen. Whenever I see Pleo, I have to glance over, and I am completely captivated.”

Pleo is what UGOBE calls a “designer species.” He is specifically engineered and enhanced to mimic life and relate to his owner on a personal level. Pleo is equipped with senses for sight, sound, and touch, and he learns as he explores his environment. He will exhibit genuine reactions to sensory stimuli. Every Pleo begins life with certain tendencies, but interaction with his environment has subtle effects on his behavior. Every Pleo eventually exhibits a unique personality. He can feel joy and sorrow, anger and annoyance, and when Pleo is tired, he will become drowsy and go to sleep. Pleo was a hit when he was shown to the crowd at DEMO,<sup>5</sup> and the resulting video caught an initial viral wave.

“I think that the combination of the product and the timing and the media being willing to embrace a new concept really worked well for us at the launch,” Stern says. But that was just the beginning. “Next we wanted to build consumer awareness,” she says. “We are a new company, and there is nothing on the market that does what Pleo does. But there are other products that use some of the language that we wanted to use like ‘artificial intelligence,’ ‘autonomous,’ and ‘interactive,’ so we were worried that consumers might become suspicious—is it really true? So we needed to find a substantial way to show that Pleo is different, and we had to do it with a really small marketing budget.”

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.demo.com/demonstrators/demo2006/63039.php>

To build the marketing and PR plan for Pleo, Stern started by defining quantifiable goals based on the product's release schedule. "He will be launched in March 2007, which is unfortunate because we are missing Christmas," she says. "But it is nice for us because we can do a slow launch of Pleo, and we can put out the best product possible. Our goal is to sell over 50,000 units in the first and second quarter of 2007."

Stern then identified the different buyer personas for Pleo, not an easy task for a robotic baby dinosaur that is expected to sell for around \$200. "We had initially thought that seven-to-twelve-year-olds were going to be the sweet spot," she says. "But we have more than 7,000 people, mostly adults, who have signed up on the site to get Pleo updates, which is phenomenal."

In order to learn more about the people who are interested in Pleo and to determine the buyer personas that her marketing and PR programs needed to target, Stern sent out a survey to 1,900 people who had registered on the site and got back 800 responses (a remarkable 42% response rate). "We learned that 40 percent of the responses came from males age 25 and up who are very interested in robotics and high-tech toys," she says. "That was interesting, and we thought that these people would be our early adopters. Based on this interest, we expected that many people will want to hack Pleo, and we are even putting out an SDK [software development kit] so people will be able to do that. But we also learned that many women in their forties, fifties, and sixties were interested, which is a really surprising demographic. The women say Pleo is just wonderful and he is just what they want. It seems he brings out a nurturing instinct and people fall in love with him." Note that not only did buyer persona profiling help UGOBE to communicate better with each buyer persona, but it also added significantly to product development efforts. What the company learned from buyers resulted in the development of an SDK.

With the information collected about the different potential buyers of Pleo, Stern then worked on strategies to develop communications and marketing for each buyer persona. She developed a marketing and PR plan and began to reach out to the media and

bloggers with the help of SHIFT Communications.<sup>6</sup> “For women, we are positioning Pleo as a family pet,” Stern says. “His strongest and most appealing feature is that you connect emotionally with him. Besides that, he looks cute, and he has these big eyes. But the secret is that he moves so well. It is realistic, and his body language changes. Pleo is special because he engages you in an emotional way. My dog thinks that Pleo is like a cat. She is curious and treats Pleo with respect.”

The positioning for the high-tech early adopters was very different. “Because these guys are online and are likely to set up fan sites and to blog about him, we targeted them initially.” The PR team scored articles in influential early adopter–targeted blogs such as Engadget<sup>7</sup> and magazines such as *Popular Science* and *PC*. As they had hoped, the coverage spawned several fan sites and blogs, including My Pleo,<sup>8</sup> PleoBot,<sup>9</sup> and Pleo Toy Dinosaur,<sup>10</sup> which then fueled mentions in other blogs.

In the time remaining before commercial availability, Stern and the PR team have launched strategies to reach younger people. “We will use viral videos to target people in their twenties, perhaps with contests to see who can do the best video of Pleo, with fans voting on the best one,” Stern says.

In a world where most marketers just whip together a generic site and don’t think about targeting different buyer personas, the example of what Stern has done to build the marketing and PR Plan for Pleo stands out. That the product isn’t released and has still garnered national media attention, thousands of potential buyers who are eager for updates from the company, and even several fan sites makes it even more interesting as an example worth studying. With their final

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.shiftcomm.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.engadget.com/2006/02/06/ugobes-pleo-dino-bot/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://mypleo.blogspot.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://pleobot.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pleo-toy.co.uk/>



prerelease marketing and PR efforts as of this writing, who knows what will happen when UGOBE launches Pleo? “We want to keep capitalizing on the Internet for PR and marketing even after Pleo is released,” Stern says.

## Stick to Your Plan

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If you’ve read this far, thank you. If you’ve developed a marketing and PR plan that uses the New Rules of Marketing and PR and you’re ready to execute, great! The next 10 chapters will give you more specific advice about implementing your plan.

But now I must warn you: Many people who adhere to the old rules will fight you on this strategy. If you are a marketing professional who wants to reach your buyers directly, you will likely encounter resistance from corporate communications people. PR folks will get resistance from their agencies. They’ll say the old rules are still in play. They’ll say you have to focus on “the four Ps.” They’ll say you need to talk only about your products. They’ll say that the media is the only way to tell your story and that you can use press releases only to reach journalists, not your buyers directly. They’ll say that bloggers are geeks in pajamas who don’t matter.

They are wrong.

As the dozens of successful marketers profiled in this book say, the old rules are old news. Millions of people are online right now looking for answers to their problems. Will they find your organization? And if so, what will they find?

Remember, on the Web, you are what you publish.

# 11

## Online Thought Leadership to Brand Your Organization as a Trusted Resource

If you've read the book starting from the beginning, I hope I've been able to convince you that Web content sells. (If you've skipped ahead to this chapter, welcome!) An effective online content strategy, artfully executed, drives action. Organizations that use online content well have a clearly defined goal—to sell products, generate leads, secure contributions, or get people to join—and deploy a content strategy that directly contributes to reaching that goal. People often ask me: “How do you recommend that I create an effective \_\_\_\_\_?” (fill in the blank with *blog*, *podcast*, *whitepaper*, *e-book*, *e-mail newsletter*, *Webinar*, etc.). While the technologies for each form of online content are a little different, the one common aspect is that through all of these media, your organization can exercise thought leadership rather than simple advertising and product promotion; a well-crafted whitepaper, e-book, or Webinar contributes to an organization's positive reputation by setting it apart in the marketplace of ideas. This form of content brands a company, a consultant, or a nonprofit as an expert and as a trusted resource.

## Developing Thought Leadership Content

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What is thought leadership, and how do you do it?

The first thing you need to do is put away your company hat for a moment and—you guessed it—think like one of your buyer personas. The content that you create will be a solution to those people's problems and *will not mention your company or products at all!* Imagine for a moment that you are a marketer at an automobile tire manufacturer. Rather than just peddling your tires, you might write an e-book or shoot a video about how to drive safely in the snow, and then promote it on your site and offer it for free to other companies (such as automobile clubs and driver's education schools) to put on their sites. Or imagine that you run a local catering company and you have a blog or a Web site. You might have a set of Web pages or podcasts available on your site. The topics could include "Plan the Perfect Wedding Reception" and "What You Need to Know for the Ideal Dinner Party for Twelve." A caterer with a podcast series like this educates visitors about their problems (planning a wedding or a dinner party) but does *not* sell the catering services directly. Instead, the idea here is that people who learn through the caterer's information are more likely to hire that caterer when the time comes.

Mark Howell, a consultant for Lifetogether,<sup>1</sup> is a pastor who works with Christian organizations and uses a thought leadership blog to get his message out. "My primary targets are people who are working in churches or Christian organizations that are trying to figure out better ways to do things," he says. "So I keep my content to things that seem secular but have broad application to churches. For example, I recently did a post called 'Required Reading: Five Books Every Leader Needs' where I tie broader business trends and marketing strategies to churches."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.strategycentral.org/>

What makes Howell's blog work is that he's not just promoting his consulting services but instead is providing powerful information with a clear focus, for readers that just might hire him at some point. "My personal bias, and what I write about, is that for a lot of leaders in churches, the personal passion for what they are doing could be enhanced if they just got a taste for what more secular writers, such as Tom Peters, Guy Kawasaki, and Peter Drucker, are saying," Howell says. "There are so many ideas out there, and if I could just give people a sense of what some of these thinkers are saying, then my hope is that they can see that there is application for church leadership."

## Forms of Thought Leadership Content

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Here are some of the various forms of thought leadership content (there may be others in your niche market). We've seen many of these media in earlier chapters, but let's focus now on how they can help your company establish itself as a thought leader.

*Whitepapers* "typically [argue] a specific position or solution to a problem," according to Michael A. Stelzner,<sup>2</sup> author of *Writing White Papers*. "Although white papers take their roots in governmental policy, they have become a common tool used to introduce technology innovations and products. A typical search engine query on 'white paper' will return millions of results, with many focused on technology-related issues. White papers are powerful marketing tools used to help key decision makers and influencers justify implementing solutions." The best whitepapers are *not product brochures*. A good whitepaper is written for a business audience, defines a problem, and offers a solution, but it does not pitch a particular product or company. Whitepapers are usually free and often have a registration requirement (so the authors can get the names

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.writingwhitepapers.com/>

and contact details of people who download it). Many companies syndicate whitepapers to business Web sites through services such as TechTarget<sup>3</sup> and Knowledge Storm.<sup>4</sup>

*E-books* are being used more and more by marketers as a fun and thoughtful way to get useful information to buyers. As I have mentioned, the book you are reading right now started as an e-book called *The New Rules of PR* that I released in January 2006. For the purposes of marketing using Web content, I define an e-book as a PDF-formatted document that identifies a market problem and supplies an answer to the problem. E-books have a bit of intrigue to them—like a hip younger sibling to the nerdy whitepaper. I recommend that e-books be presented in a landscape format, rather than the whitepaper's portrait format. Well executed e-books have lots of whitespace, interesting graphics and images, and copy that is typically written in a lighter style than the denser whitepaper. In my view, e-books (as marketing tools) should be free, and I strongly suggest that there be no registration requirement.

*E-mail newsletters* have been around as long as e-mail, but still have tremendous value as a way to deliver a regular series of thought leadership content. However, the vast majority of e-mail newsletters that I see basically just serve as advertising for a company's products and services. You know the type I'm talking about—each month you get some lame product pitch and a 10-percent-off coupon. But consider using a different type of e-mail newsletter, one that focuses not on your company's products and services, but on simply solving buyers' problems once per month. Let's consider the hypothetical tire manufacturer or caterer that we discussed above. Imagine the tire manufacturer doing a monthly newsletter on safe driving or the caterer writing a newsletter on party planning.

*Webinars* are online seminars that may include audio, video, or graphic images (typically in the form of PowerPoint slides) and are often used by technology companies as a primer about a specific

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.techtarget.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.knowledgestorm.com/>

problem that technology can solve. Often, Webinars feature guests who do not work for the company that sponsors the Webinar. For example, I participated as a guest speaker on a Webinar called “Search Engine Marketing for Publishers: The Art of Being Found Online,” hosted by technology company ECNext.<sup>5</sup> Webinars are usually between 30 and 90 minutes long and may be done live (including live question-and-answer sessions) or may be prerecorded and posted on a site for people to watch whenever they have time.

*Wikis* are started by an organization as thought leadership content because it wants to be seen as an important player in a distinct marketplace. “You can use wikis to reach the people you want to reach and help them to organize content,” says Ramit Sethi, co-founder and vice president of marketing for PBwiki,<sup>6</sup> a company that provides wiki software tools. “So if you’re in a company, you can use a wiki to allow your users to add their own Frequently Asked Questions, and other people can supply answers, which helps everyone. People love being a part of the community, and they really like that a wiki gives them a way to discuss their interests.” Sethi says that the personality and culture of an organization play an important role in the decision to start a company-sponsored wiki. “Companies that are a little bit fearless about letting people write their opinions make the best candidates for a wiki,” he says. “But the most important thing is that you need to build something that is worth talking about and you need to make it really easy. People don’t want to install all kinds of software; they just want to get typing.”

*Research and survey reports* are used by many companies that conduct research projects or surveys and publish the results for free. This can be an effective approach if the research or survey is *real and statistically significant* and the results are interesting to your buyers.

A *blog* is a personal Web site written by someone who is passionate about a subject and wants the world to know about it, with the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ecnext.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://pbwiki.com/>

benefits rubbing off on the company that he or she works for. Writing a blog is the easiest and simplest way to get your thought leadership ideas out and into the market. See Chapter 17 for information on how to start your blog.

*Podcasts* are an ongoing series of audio downloads available by subscription that are very popular as thought leadership content in some markets. Some people just prefer audio, and if your buyers do, then a podcast of your own might be the thing for you. See Chapter 18 for information on how to start your own podcast.

*Video content, vodcasts, and vlogs* (three names, one medium) are regularly updated videos that offer a powerful opportunity to demonstrate your thought leadership, given most people's familiarity with the video medium. See Chapter 18 for information on video.

## How to Create Thoughtful Content —

While each technique for getting your thought leadership content into the marketplace of ideas is different, they share some common considerations:

- Do not write about your company and your products. Thought leadership content is designed to solve buyer problems or answer questions and to show that you and your organization are smart and worth doing business with. This type of marketing and PR technique is *not* a brochure or sales pitch. Thought leadership is *not* advertising.
- Define your organizational goals first (see Chapter 10). Do you want to drive revenue? Get people to donate money to your organization? Encourage people to buy something?
- Based on your goals, decide whether you want to provide the content for free and without any registration (you will get many more people to use the content, but you won't know who they are), or you want to include some kind of registration mechanism (much lower response rates, but you build a contact list).

- Think like a publisher by understanding your audience. Consider what market problems your buyer personas are faced with and develop topics that appeal to them.
- Write for your audience. Use examples and stories. Make it interesting.
- Choose a great title that grabs attention. Use subtitles to describe what the content will deliver.
- Promote the effort like crazy. Offer the content on your site with easy-to-find links. Add a link to employees' e-mail signatures, and get partners to offer links as well.
- To drive the viral marketing effects that we looked at in Chapter 8, alert appropriate reporters, bloggers, and analysts that the content is available and send them a download link.

## Leveraging Thought Leaders outside of Your Organization

Some organizations recruit external thought leaders that buyers trust, which is an effective technique for showing your buyers that you are plugged in and work with recognized experts. You might have a thought leader from your industry guest blog for you, author a whitepaper, participate on a Webinar, or speak to your clients at a live event. For example, Cincom Systems, Inc., a software industry pioneer, publishes the *Cincom Expert Access*<sup>7</sup> e-zine that is read by 135,000 people in 49 countries. *Cincom Expert Access* delivers information from several dozen business leaders, authors, and analysts such as Al Reis, author of *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*; Lisa Nirell, founder of Energize Growth; and Skip Press, author of more than 20 books, including *How to Write What You Want and Sell What You Write*. I am also a member of Cincom's Ask the Expert network.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.internetviz-newsletters.com/cincom/>



*Cincom Expert Access* provides concise, objective information from personalities that Cincom's clients trust, sometimes in an irreverent, humorous manner, to help readers do their jobs better.

## How Much Money Does Your Buyer Make?

“People often ask me, ‘Steve, how much should we be paying our product managers?’” says Steve Johnson,<sup>8</sup> an instructor at Pragmatic Marketing, the premier product marketing firm for technology companies. “I used to just throw out a number that sounded about right. But I realized that my estimated salary figure was based on old data, back from the days when I hired product managers.” Because Pragmatic Marketing conducts training for product managers, the company is seen as the expert on all things related to that job function. This situation created a terrific opportunity for some thought leadership. “We realized that we didn't really know current benchmarks, so we decided to find out.”

Johnson composed a survey to gather data from the thousands of people in the Pragmatic Marketing database. “We said, ‘If you tell us your salary and other information about your job via the anonymous survey, we will tell you everyone's salary in the form of benchmarks,’” he says. The results were an instant hit with the Pragmatic Marketing buyer persona—product managers—and the survey has become an annual undertaking. “In our e-mail newsletter that goes out to more than twenty-five thousand people, in October we say ‘Heads up, next month we're doing the annual salary survey.’ Then in November we announce that the survey is live and ask people to please take it. We get hundreds of responses in just a few days, aggregate the data, and publish the results on the Web.<sup>9</sup> In 2005, for example, we learned that the average U.S. product management

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pragmaticmarketing.com/Blogs/index.asp>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pragmaticmarketing.com/productmarketing/survey/2006/index.asp>

compensation is \$90,610 in salary and that seventy-nine percent of product managers get an annual bonus that averages \$10,961. But we also learned other information, such as that product managers receive fifty e-mails a day and spend roughly two days a week in internal meetings—fifteen meetings per week. But fifty percent are going to fifteen meetings or more each week, and twenty-seven percent attend twenty or more meetings.”

Johnson sees tremendous benefits in survey-based thought leadership. “First of all, the data is really useful,” he says. “Now I command the authority to say something like ‘Ninety percent of Product Managers have completed college and forty-six percent have completed a masters program.’ But more importantly, the buyers we are trying to reach to sell training services to, product managers, recognize us as the thought leader because we have up-to-date information on what’s really going on with technology product managers. And the data that sits on our Web site is fantastic for search engine marketing because anyone looking for information about product managers in technology businesses will find us.”

This is a new world for marketers and corporate communicators. The Web offers an easy way for your ideas to spread to a potential audience of millions of people, instantly. Web content in the form of true thought leadership holds the potential to influence many thousands of your buyers in ways that traditional marketing and PR simply cannot.

To embrace the power of the Web and the blogosphere requires a different kind of thinking on the part of marketers. We need to learn to give up our command-and-control mentality. It isn’t about “the message.” It’s about being insightful. The New Rules of Marketing and PR tell us to stop advertising and instead get our ideas out there by understanding buyers and telling them the stories that connect with their problems. The new rules are to participate in the discussions going on, not just try to shout your message over everyone else. Done well, Web content that delivers authentic thought leadership also brands an organization as one to do business with.



# 12

## How to Write for Your Buyers

**Y**our buyers (and the media that cover your company) want to know what specific problems your product solves, and they want proof that it works—in plain language. Your marketing and PR is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers and to drive action (such as generating sales leads), which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want to hear this in *their* own words. Every time you write—yes, even in news releases—you have an opportunity to communicate. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials will help your buyers understand how you, specifically, will help them.

Whenever you set out to write something, you should be writing specifically for one or more of the buyer personas that you developed as part of your marketing and PR plan (see Chapter 10). You should avoid jargon-laden phrases that are overused in your industry, unless this is the language the persona actually uses. In the technology business, words like *groundbreaking*, *industry-standard*, and *cutting-edge* are what I call gobbledygook. The worst gobbledygook offenders seem to be business-to-business technology companies. For some reason, marketing people at technology companies have a particularly tough time explaining how products solve customer

problems. Because these writers don't understand how their products solve customer problems, or are too lazy to write for buyers, they cover by explaining myriad nuances of how the product works and pepper this blather with industry jargon that sounds vaguely impressive. What ends up in marketing materials and news releases is a bunch of talk about "industry-leading" solutions that purport to help companies "streamline business process," "achieve business objectives," or "conserve organizational resources." *Huh?*

## An Analysis of Gobbledygook

Many of the thousands of Web sites I've analyzed over the years and the hundred or so news releases I receive each week are laden with these meaningless gobbledygook adjectives. As I'm reading a news release, I'll pause and say to myself, "Oh, jeez, not another flexible, scalable, groundbreaking, industry-standard, cutting-edge product from a market-leading, well-positioned company! I think I'm gonna puke!" Just like with a teenager's use of catch phrases, I notice the same words cropping up again and again—so much so that the gobbledygook grates against my nerves and many other people's, too. Well, *duh*. Like, companies just totally don't communicate very well, you know?

So I wanted to see exactly how many of these words are being used and created an analysis to do so. First, I selected words and phrases that are overused by polling select PR people and journalists to get a list of gobbledygook phrases. Then I turned to Factiva, from Dow Jones,<sup>1</sup> for help with my analysis. The folks at the Factiva Reputation Lab used text-mining tools to analyze news releases sent by companies in North America. The Lab analyzed each release in the Factiva database that had been sent to one of the North American news release wires it distributes during the period from January 1, 2006, to Septem-

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.factiva.com/>

ber 30, 2006. The news release wires included in the analysis were Business Wire, Canada NewsWire, CCNMatthews, CommWeb.com, Market Wire, Moody's, PR Newswire, and PrimeNewswire.

The results were staggering. The news release wires collectively distributed just over 388,000 news releases in the nine-month period, and just over 74,000 of them mentioned at least one of the gobbledygook phrases. The winner was *next generation*, with 9,895 uses. There were over 5,000 uses of each of the following words and phrases: *flexible*, *robust*, *world class*, *scalable*, and *easy to use*. Other notably overused phrases with between 2,000 and 5,000 uses included *cutting edge*, *mission critical*, *market leading*, *industry standard*, *turnkey*, and *groundbreaking*. Oh, and don't forget *interoperable*, *best of breed*, and *user friendly*, each with over 1,000 uses in news releases.

## Poor Writing: How Did We Get Here?

When I see words like *flexible*, *scalable*, *groundbreaking*, *industry standard*, or *cutting-edge*, my eyes glaze over. What, I ask myself, is this supposed to mean? Just saying your widget is “industry standard” means nothing unless some aspect of that standardization is important to your buyers. In the next sentence, I want to know what you mean by “industry standard,” and I also want you to tell me why that standard matters and give me some proof that what you say is indeed true.

People often say to me, “Everyone in my industry writes this way. Why?” Here's how the usual dysfunctional process works and why these phrases are so overused: Marketers don't understand buyers, the problems buyers face, or how their product helps solve these problems. That's where the gobbledygook happens. First the marketing person bugs the product managers and others in the organization to provide a set of the product's features. Then the marketing person reverse-engineers the language that they think the buyer wants to hear based *not on buyer input* but on what the product

does. A favorite trick these ineffective marketers use is to take the language that the product manager provides, go into Microsoft Word's find-and-replace mode, substitute the word *solution* for *product*, and then slather the whole thing with superlative-laden, jargon-sprinkled hype. By just decreeing, through an electronic word substitution, that "our product" is "your solution," these companies effectively deprive themselves of the opportunity to *convince* people that this is the case.

Another major drawback of the generic gobbledygook approach is that it doesn't make your company stand out from the crowd. Here's a test: Take the language that the marketers at your company dreamed up and substitute the name of a competitor and the competitor's product for your own. Does it still make sense to you? Marketing language that can be substituted for another company's isn't effective in explaining to a buyer why *your* company is the right choice.

I'll admit that these gobbledygook phrases are mainly used by technology companies operating in the business-to-business space. If you are writing for a company that sells different kinds of products (shoes, perhaps), then you would probably not be tempted to use many of the above phrases. The same thing is true for nonprofits, churches, rock bands, and other organizations—you're also unlikely to use these sorts of phrases. But the lessons are the same. Avoid the insular jargon of your company and your industry. Instead, write for your buyers.

"Hold on," you might say. "The technology industry may be dysfunctional, but I don't write that way." The fact is that there is equivalent nonsense going on in all industries. Here's an example from the world of nonprofits:

The sustainability group has convened a task force to study the cause of energy inefficiency and to develop a plan to encourage local businesses to apply renewable-energy and energy-efficient technologies which will go a long way toward encouraging community buy-in to potential behavioral changes.

What the heck is that? Or consider this example from the first paragraph of a well-known company's corporate overview page. Can you guess the company?

[Company X] has remained faithful in its commitment to producing unparalleled entertainment experiences based on its rich legacy of quality creative content and exceptional storytelling. Today, [Company X] is divided into four major business segments. . . . Each segment consists of integrated, well-connected businesses that operate in concert to maximize exposure and growth worldwide.

## Effective Writing for Marketing and PR

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Your marketing and PR is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers (and journalists). As the marketing and PR planning process in Chapter 10 showed, this begins when you work at understanding your target audience and figure out how they should be sliced into distinct buying segments or buyer personas. Once this exercise is complete, identify the situations each target audience may find themselves in. What are their problems? business issues? needs? Only then are you ready to communicate your expertise to the market. Here's the rule: When you write, start with your buyers, not with your product.

Consider the entertainment company blurb above. The marketing and PR folks at Disney (did you guess it was Disney's corporate overview page<sup>2</sup> I quoted from above?) should be thinking about what customers want from an entertainment company, rather than just thinking up fancy words for what they think they already provide. Why not start by defining the problem? "Many television and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://corporate.disney.go.com/corporate/overview.html>



cinema fans today are frustrated with the state of the American entertainment industry. They believe today's films and shows are too derivative and that entertainment companies don't respect their viewers' intelligence." Next, successful marketers will use real-world language to convince their customers that they can solve their problem. Be careful to avoid corporate jargon, but you don't want to sound like you're trying too hard, either—that always comes across as phony. Talk to your audience as you might talk to a relative you don't see too often—be friendly and familiar but also respectful: "Like our audience, we care about and enjoy movies and TV shows—that's why we're in this business in the first place. As such, we pledge to always. . . ." Now I have no connection with Disney and don't know about the Disney business. But I have purchased a lot of Disney products: movies, TV shows, videos, and visits to theme parks. It might seem strange to people at Disney to actually write something like I suggest. It might feel strange for the PR and marketing people at Disney to use a phrase like "movies and TV shows" rather than "quality entertainment content," but it's absolutely essential to establishing a relationship with customers.

## The Power of Writing Feedback (from Your Blog)

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I want to pause for a moment to share a story about the power of communications and feedback on the Web. When I first published the results of this study on my blog<sup>3</sup> in a post titled "The Gobbledygook Manifesto" on October 12, 2006 (I also sent a news release the next day), there were zero hits on Google for the exact phrase "gobbledygook manifesto." I purposely invented a phrase that I could establish on the Web. Within just three weeks, as a result of several dozen bloggers writing about The Gobbledygook Manifesto and over

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.Webinknow.com/2006/10/the\\_gobbledygoo.html](http://www.Webinknow.com/2006/10/the_gobbledygoo.html)

100 comments on my blog and others, the exact phrase “gobbledygook manifesto” yielded over 500 hits on Google: zero to 500 in just three weeks. Better yet, readers of my blog and others suggested other overused gobbledygook words and phrases such as *best practices*, *proactive*, *synergy*, *starting a dialog*, *thinking outside of the box*, *revolutionary*, *situational fluency*, and *paradigm shift*.

Dave Schmidt, VP for Public Relations Services at Smith-Winchester, Inc., contacted me to share the results of a survey he conducted of general business and trade publication editors in September 2006. Schmidt asked the editors about the use of overused words and phrases he’s seen and wanted to find out how many editors agreed that each of the phrases was overused in news releases and company-authored articles. He received responses from 80 editors:

- *Leading* (used as an adjective, as in “. . . a leading producer of . . .”)—94% of editors feel is overused. Since everyone wants to be the leading something, there are no longer any true leaders.
- “We’re excited about . . .” (as used in a quote from management)—76% of editors feel is overused. Companies also say, “We’re pleased . . .” and “We’re thrilled. . . .” Can you picture an editor running a CEO quote like one of these? You need to quote your spokespeople with words that you would like to see in print.
- *Solutions*—68% of editors feel is overused. The word *solutions* has been ruined by overuse in news releases to the point that it is best avoided, even by solutions providers.
- “. . . a wide range of . . .”—64% of editors feel is overused. This has become the lazy person’s way of avoiding precise writing.
- *Unparalleled*—62% of editors feel is overused.
- *Unsurpassed*—53% of editors feel is overused.

Thank you to the many people who contacted me with suggestions of overused gobbledygook. I just think it is so cool that you

can create something on the Web, use it to get thoughtful information into the market quickly and efficiently, and then have people offer suggestions to make the original writing even better.

Your online and offline marketing content is meant to drive action, which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want this in their own words, and then they want proof. Every time you write, you have an opportunity to communicate and to *convince*. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials combined with effective marketing programs will lead your buyers to understand how your company can help them. Good marketing is rare indeed, but a focus on doing it right will most certainly pay off with increased sales, higher retention rates, and more ink from journalists.

# 13

## How Web Content Influences the Buying Process

**T**oday when people want to buy something, the Web is almost always the first stop on their shopping trip. In any market category, potential customers head online to do initial research. The moment of truth is when they reach your site: Will you draw them into your sales process or let them click away?

When prospects use search engines and directories to reach your site, link to it through another site, or respond to a marketing campaign, you have an opportunity to deliver a targeted message at the precise moment when they are looking for what you have to offer. Yet marketers often fail to realize the potential of their Web sites, which must hook buyers in from the start and hang on to them until the sale is complete. Individuals don't go to the Web looking for advertising; they are on a quest for content. By providing information when they need it, you can begin a long and profitable relationship with them. Editors and publishers obsess over readership, and so should you.

In this chapter, we're going to build on some of the ideas and concepts that I've already introduced in the book. In Chapter 3 we talked about reaching buyers directly with your organization's online

content, and Chapter 10 was when we put together a detailed plan to identify buyer personas and target each one with an individualized approach. Remember, great Web content is about your buyers, not about you. Now I'll provide some ideas for how you can make a Web site that takes buyers through their consideration process and moves them toward the point where they are ready to buy (or donate, join, subscribe, etc.), which, of course, is the goal of all Web content.

While it is important for your Web site to have an attractive design and for all of the technical aspects (HTML and so on) to work properly, these aspects are beyond the scope of this book. There are many excellent texts on how to write HTML, XML, ASP, JavaScript, and other Web languages. And there are also great resources for getting the design aspects right—things like colors, fonts, logo placement, and whatnot. While these elements are critical to an overall site, I want to focus on how *content drives action* on Web sites, because the content aspect is often overlooked.

To best leverage the power of content, you first need to help your site's visitors find what they need on your site. When someone visits a site for the first time, the site communicates messages to the buyer: Does this organization care about me? Does it focus on the problems I face? Or does the site only include information describing what the company has to offer from its own narrow perspective? You need to start with a site navigation that is designed and organized with your buyers in mind. Don't simply mimic the way your company or group is organized (e.g., by product, geography, or governmental structure), because the way your audience uses Web sites rarely coincides with your company's internal priorities. Organizing based on your needs leaves site visitors confused about how to find what *they* really need.

You should learn as much as possible about the buying process, focusing on issues such as how people find your site or the length of a typical purchase cycle. Consider what happens offline in parallel with online interactions so that the processes complement each other. For example, if you have an e-commerce site and a printed catalog, coordinate the content and messages so that both efforts support and reinforce the buying process (i.e., include URLs for your

online buying guide in the catalog and use the same product descriptions so people don't get confused). In the B2B world, trade shows should work with Internet initiatives (by collecting e-mail addresses at the booth, for example, then sending a follow-up e-mail with a show-specific landing page at your site). Understanding the buying process in detail, both online and offline, allows you to create Web content that influences the buying decision.

## Segmenting Your Buyers

The online relationship begins the second a potential customer hits your homepage. The first thing he needs to see is a reflection of himself. That's why you must organize your site with content for each of your distinct buyer personas. How do your potential customers self-select? Is it based on their job function, or on geography, or on the industry they work in? It's important to create a set of appropriate links based on a clear understanding of your buyers so that you can quickly move them from your homepage to pages built specifically for them.

For example, the New York Public Library (NYPL),<sup>1</sup> an institution that has 50.6 million items in its collections housed at 89 locations and overseen by 3,200 staff members, has a Web site that must serve many varied visitors. The NYPL site appeals to a very diverse set of buyer personas (people who use the libraries' services both online and offline), who download materials directly from the site. For example, here are just a few of the buyer personas that the NYPL site serves:

- Academic researchers from around the globe who need access to the NYPL digital information collections.
- People who live in the Bronx and speak Spanish as a first language. (The library offers introductory classes, conducted

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nypl.org/>

in Spanish at the NYPL's Bronx location, on how to use a computer.)

- Tourists who want to take a tour of the beautiful main library building on Fifth Avenue while in New York City.
- Film studios, TV producers, and photographers who use the famous NYPL setting. (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Spiderman* are just a few of the movies that have been filmed there.)
- Individuals, foundations, and corporations that help support the library with donations.

The NYPL site includes detailed content throughout to reach each of these buyer personas (as well as others). The front page of the NYPL Web site is broken into several main sections, including “Find Books & Do Research” (information on what is in the library’s catalogs for people who need a particular book), “Libraries” (branch information for those who live in New York City), “Digital Library” (information that anybody in the world can download), “News,” “NYPL Live!” (events), and “Support the Library” (membership and giving information for people who want to donate money or time to the NYPL). Each landing page has additional information to make browsing this huge Web site easy.

One way many organizations approach navigation is to link to landing pages based on the problems your product or service solves. Start by identifying the situations in which each target audience may find itself. If you are in the supply chain management business, you might have a drop-down menu on the homepage with links that say, “I need to get product to customers faster” or “I want to move products internationally.” Each path leads to landing pages built for buyer segments, with content targeted to their problems. Once the prospects reach those pages, you have the opportunity to communicate your expertise in solving these problems—building some empathy in the process—and to move customers further along the buying cycle.

## Elements of a Buyer-Centric Web Site

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As you build a site that focuses on your buyers and their purchasing process, here are a few other things to consider:

### Think about Your Buyers' Preferred Media and Learning Styles

At a conference in late 2006, I had a great conversation with Ted Demopoulos,<sup>2</sup> author of *What No One Ever Tells You About Blogging and Podcasting*. We spoke about blogging versus podcasting, people's learning styles, and the choices of what content to put on a site. Ted brought up an interesting point: It's not an either/or decision. "It's worth having your message in different formats," he says. "I love to read. And I often listen to informative audio while driving, biking, or mowing the lawn. But I do not like video. It's not like reading; it progresses at its own rate. I can't watch faster or skim easily, like with text, and it demands total attention, unlike with audio." Of course, other people are the opposite of Ted. They don't like to read but love video content. We all have different learning styles and media preferences. So, on your site, you should have appropriate content designed for your buyers. This does not mean that you need to have every single format, but you should think about augmenting text with photos and maybe some audio or video content. "Not only do people like different formats, but psychologists have shown that people learn better with different media," Demopoulos adds. "Marketers should have messages in as many formats as practical. Even though the messages are the same, they will appeal for different groups of people. For example, some will want an e-book, but you can take the same content and turn it into a tele-seminar."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.demop.com/>



## Develop a Site Personality

It is important to create a distinct, consistent, and memorable site, and an important component of that goal is the tone or voice of the content. As visitors interact with the content on your site, they should develop a clear picture of your organization. Is the personality fun and playful? Or is it solid and conservative? For example, on the Google homepage, when people search they can click “I’m Feeling Lucky,” which is a fun and playful way to get you directly to the top listing in the search results. That one little phrase, “I’m Feeling Lucky,” says a lot about Google. And there’s much more. For example, in the collection of more than 100 languages that Google supports from Afrikaans to Zulu there is also Google in the language of Elmer Fudd,<sup>3</sup> with everything translated into Elmer Fudd, such as “I’m Feewing Wucky.” Cool; but that wouldn’t work for a more conservative company—it would just seem strange and out of place. Contrast that with Accenture’s homepage.<sup>4</sup> At the time of this writing, just under the Accenture logo was the phrase “High Performance. Delivered.” There is a photo of Tiger Woods and a message (“We know what it takes to be a Tiger”) with an offer (“See findings from our research and experience with over 500 high performers”). Both of these homepages work because the site personality works with the company personality. Whatever your personality, the way to achieve consistency is to make certain that all the written material and other content on the site conforms to a defined tone that you’ve established from the start. A strong focus on site personality and character pays off. As visitors come to rely on the content they find on your site, they will develop an emotional and personal relationship with your organization. A Web site can evoke a familiar and trusted voice, just like that of a friend on the other end of an e-mail exchange.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.google.com/intl/xx-elmer/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.accenture.com/>

## Photos and Images Tell Your Story

Content is not limited to words; smart marketers make use of non-text content—including photos, audio feeds, video clips, cartoons, charts, and graphs—to inform and entertain site visitors. Photographs in particular play an important role for many sites. Photos are powerful content when page visitors see that the images are an integrated component of the Web site. However, generic “stock” photographs (happy and good-looking multicultural models in a fake company meeting room) may actually have a negative effect. People will know instantly that the photo is not of real people in your organization. Neither you nor your users are generic. On a technical note, while photos, charts, graphs, and other nontext content make great additions to any site, be wary of very large image sizes and of using distracting multimedia content like Flash Video. Visitors want to access content quickly, they want sites that load fast, and they don’t want to be distracted.

## Include Interactive Content Tools

Anything that gets people involved with the content of a site provides a great way to engage visitors, build their interest, and move them through your sales cycle. Examples of interactive tools include such things as the stock quoting and charting applications found on financial sites and “e-mail your congressman” tools on political advocacy sites. Interactive content provides visitors with a chance to immerse themselves in site content, which makes them more likely to progress through the sales consideration cycle to the point where they are ready to spend money.

## Make Feedback Loops Available

Providing a way for users to interact with your organization is a hallmark of a great site. Easy to find “contact us” information is a must,

and direct feedback mechanisms like “rate this” buttons, online forums, viewer reviews, and opportunities to post comments provide valuable information by and for site visitors.

## Provide Ways for Your Customers to Interact with Each Other

A forum or wiki where customers can share with one another and help each other works well for many organizations as a way to show potential customers that there is a vibrant community of people using their products or services. In other words, an existing set of customers interacting with each other on your site is great marketing!

## Create Content with Pass-Along Value that Could Go Viral

Web content provides terrific fodder for viral marketing—the phenomenon where people pass on information about your site to their friends and colleagues or link to your content in their blogs (more on viral marketing is in Chapter 8). When content proves interesting or useful, visitors tend to tell friends, usually by sending them a link. Creating buzz around a site to encourage people to talk it up isn’t easy. Creating content that has a pass-along value is never a certain process, because it happens more organically. There are a few things you can do to help the process, though. When creating site content, think carefully about what content users might want to pass along and then make that content easy to find and link to. Make the actual URLs permanent so that no one finds dead links when visiting months (or years) later. To be successful with viral marketing is to say something interesting and valuable and to make it easy to find and share.

## Using RSS to Deliver Your Web Content to Targeted Niches

It is so easy for those of us in the media and analyst community to get information via RSS (Really Simple Syndication) that I can't stress its importance enough as a component of a Web marketing strategy; it's my preferred method in my work tracking markets, companies, and ideas. Once information is in RSS format, an RSS-aware browser such as Firefox or a Web application such as NewsGator checks the feed for changes and displays them on a Web page. Having the information come to me is just so much easier than in the days when I had to go looking for it myself. RSS and news aggregation software is easy to use, usually free, and provides a way to get information from any device. I particularly like that RSS provides a powerful information-management tool that bypasses the increasingly crowded and annoying e-mail channel. Having my favorite Web sites, media outlets, and blogs feeding RSS is my own custom compilation of exactly what I want to see.

Surprisingly, only a small percentage of organizations deploy RSS for syndicating news and content to the outside world. Even fewer understand how RSS feeds are a preferred way to market to niche customers who have very specific needs. Learn from the way that most major news sites such as the BBC, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and thousands more deploy RSS. Almost any content that can be broken down into discrete items (such as news releases, blog postings, product updates, or SEC filings) can be syndicated via RSS.

Netflix offers RSS feeds<sup>5</sup> for which video fans sign up to receive updates based on their interests. Available feeds include Netflix Top 100, New Releases, Documentary Top 25, Comedy Top 25, Classics Top 25, and many more, and they all target specific customers who select only

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.netflix.com/RSSFeeds>

the content that interests them. So if I'm a fan of independent films, I subscribe to the RSS feed, and any time independent film-related content changes on the Netflix site, I'm alerted to it via my RSS reader.

What sets this apart from the standard one-size-fits-all marketing model is that it is highly targeted and delivered directly to micro-audiences of interested consumers. Contrast this with the typical way that companies market to their customers on the Web. Often when you become a customer, the organization signs you up for its "special offers" e-mail. After you get two or three of these e-mails, it becomes painfully obvious that they are just untargeted messages to the entire customer list and have little value for you. No wonder that house e-mail lists suffer from significant opt-out numbers. Note how different the Netflix approach of offering information that has been selected and is welcome is when compared with the old world of blasting generic e-mail ads to the masses.

## Link Content Directly into the Sales Cycle

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Marketers with the most successful sites specifically design content to draw buyers into the sales cycle. People considering a purchase always go through a certain thought process. In the case of something simple and low-cost, say deciding to download a song from iTunes, the process is likely very straightforward and may only take seconds. But for a major decision such as buying a new car, sending your child to college, or accepting a job offer, the process may take weeks or months. For many business-to-business sales, the cycle may involve many steps and multiple buyer personas (a business buyer and an IT buyer, perhaps) and may take months or even years to complete.

Effective Web marketers take Web site visitors' buying cycle into account when writing content and organizing it on the site. People in the early stages of the sales cycle need basic information about their problems and the ways that your organization solves them. Those

further along in the process want to compare products and services, so they need detailed information about the benefits of your offerings. And when buyers are ready to whip out their credit cards, they need easy-to-use mechanisms linked directly from the content so they can quickly finish the purchase (or donation, subscription, etc.).

For an example of a very long sales cycle, consider our college example from earlier chapters. High school students apply to colleges in the fall of their senior year and typically make a decision about which school to attend in the spring. But the sales cycle starts much earlier. When students visit colleges in person, they tend to be juniors in high school, but when students first visit college Web sites, they are likely freshmen or sophomores. The college Web site is often the first place that a student comes into contact with the college and must cater to an audience of young teenagers who won't be ready to apply for admission for two or even three years. Creating appropriate content to develop a lasting relationship over a long sales cycle is only possible when an organization knows the buyer personas well and understands the sales process in detail. The college must provide high school students with appropriate content so they get a sense of what college life would be like if they were to attend and what the admission process entails.

A focus on understanding buyers and the sales cycle and developing appropriate content that links visitors through the cycle to the point of purchase is essential for a great site. Based on my years of research, the vast majority of sites are little more than online brochures or vast one-way advertising vehicles. These sites are almost wholly ineffective. The Web offers significant opportunities to those marketers who understand that content is at the forefront of the best sites.

## A Friendly Nudge

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After you've demonstrated expertise in the market category and knowledge about solving potential customers' problems, you can introduce

your product or service. When creating content about your offerings, remain focused on the buyer and her problems, rather than elaborating distinctions between products. As people interact with your content at this middle stage in the buying process, it is appropriate to suggest subscriptions to related content—perhaps an e-mail newsletter, Webinar (Web-based seminar), or podcast. But remember, if you're asking for someone's e-mail address (or other contact details), you must provide something equally valuable in return.

Prospects want to poke, prod, and test your company to learn what sort of organization you are. They also have questions. That's why well-designed sites include a mechanism for people to inquire about products or services. Be flexible but also consistent; offer them a variety of ways to interact with your company, and make contact information readily available from any page on the site (one click away is best). Also keep in mind that, particularly with expensive products, buyers will test you to see how responsive you are, so you must make responding to these inquiries a priority. At this stage, you want people to think: "This is an organization I can do business with. They have happy customers, and they are responsive to me and my needs."

## Close the Sale and Continue the Conversation

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As the customer approaches the end of the buying process, you must provide tools that facilitate the sale. Buyers may be unsure which of your products is appropriate for them—so you may need to provide online demonstrations or a tool that allows them to enter specific details about their requirements and then suggests the appropriate product.

Once the deal is closed, there's one more step. You must continue the online dialog with your new customer. Add her to your customer e-mail newsletter or customer-only community site where she can in-

teract with experts in your organization and other like-minded customers. You should also provide ample opportunities for customers to give you feedback on how to make the products (and sales process) better.

## An Open-Source Marketing Model

John Roberts, co-founder and CEO of SugarCRM,<sup>6</sup> has built a successful new business on great Web content while his entrenched competitors have followed the old rules. “What is different is that SugarCRM is a commercial open-source software application for CRM,” he says. Customer relationship management (CRM) software is used by sales, marketing, and customer service departments to manage customer lists, track interactions with customers, help salespeople close deals, and handle customer problems. “I got tired of working at companies that spent a lot of money in sales and marketing instead of spending on the product. So my co-founders and I quit our jobs in April 2004 to form SugarCRM. The proprietary way to sell software at other companies has been to put huge numbers of salespeople on the street and spend an average of seven dollars in sales and marketing for each dollar in product development. Looking at the evolution of the Internet, we saw that there was a better way: using the Internet to build the product, interact with people who want to use it, and use the interactions as marketing for our product. We’ve used the Internet to get to nine-hundred-plus paying customers in just two years.”

The basis of SugarCRM is an open-source software project called SugarForge,<sup>7</sup> for which the programming code is available to anyone for free and without registration; computer-savvy users may make changes to it and build new versions of the software as they see fit. Indeed, there are now 200 projects in 60 different languages using

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sugarcrm.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.sugarforge.org/>



open-source SugarCRM. “We never ask for any personal information at all,” Roberts says. “You can download and use the application for free without even giving any information. Investing in engineering and writing the software in an open environment, it makes the phone ring.”

SugarCRM supports the community with a very active user-community forum<sup>8</sup> and with SugarWiki,<sup>9</sup> a community-contributed knowledge base. What makes this form of Web content interesting as a marketing and PR tool is that it is totally open for customers and noncustomers alike. Many companies have interactive communities but lock them away in password-protected nooks. At SugarCRM it is all out in the open—showing other interested potential users what’s really going on. “At any one time, there are hundreds of people online in the forums,” Roberts says. “They discuss bugs and how to adapt the applications and even how to use the source code.”

Through Web content, SugarCRM first introduces people to the product, then offers free working products while encouraging users to participate in the online forum and SugarWiki, and finally makes money by selling an enterprise version of SugarCRM to larger organizations. All of this Web content serves as the company’s marketing engine. “This represents the future of software. Instead of a big sales force telling you what is good like at other CRM companies, we say let’s prove it with the free product and the content on the sites.”

On the commercial SugarCRM site, there are role-based demonstrations for each of the five buyer personas that the company has identified: salespeople, marketers, support staff, executives, and administrators. SugarCRM is quite definitely a for-profit business with 80 employees and investors who expect a return. Roberts clearly wants to grow his paying customer base into the thousands of companies, but he is very careful to keep the free open-source site at SugarForce.org and the paid versions at SugarCRM.com completely separate. “We keep church and state separated,” he jokes. “The free

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sugarcrm.com/forums/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sugarcrm.com/wiki/>

version is not 'baitware' to get you to buy the other version. To be successful with this business model, you need to get comfortable that the people who use your software may never, ever, pay you a dime. Many companies will not be comfortable with that. But what we find is that you can create an online ecosystem that is bigger and more valuable than a company that is closed and proprietary or one that grows exclusively through massive sales and marketing funding."

For every organization, the key to a great Web site is to understand buyers and build valuable content especially for them.

But there is one final step. Effective marketers constantly measure and improve. Because it is so easy to modify Web content at any time, you should be measuring what people are doing on the site. Benchmarking elements such as the self-select links and testing different landing page content can help. If you have two offers on a landing page (a free whitepaper and a free demonstration, say) you might measure which one works to get more clicks but also measure how many people who respond to the offer actually buy something. This way you will know not just numbers of clicks, but revenue by offer type, and you can use that in future landing pages. Armed with real data, you make valuable modifications. You might want to just see what happens if you change the order of the links on the homepage. Sometimes people just click the thing on top of a list. What happens if something else is on top?

Of course, product superiority, advertising, the media, and branding remain important to the marketing mix. But on the Web, smart marketers understand that an effective content strategy, tightly integrated to the buying process, is critical to success.



# 14

## How to Use News Releases to Reach Buyers Directly

**A**s the fascinating case studies from Chapter 5 show, the Web has changed the rules for news releases. Buyers now read your news releases on Google, Yahoo! and other search engines, on vertical market portals, and with RSS readers. Thus, smart marketing and PR professionals craft news releases to reach buyers directly, propelling books to number-one spots on bestseller lists, driving more Web traffic, securing more donations, and selling more products. Again, this is not to suggest that mainstream media and media relations programs are no longer important. In most markets, mainstream media and the trade press remain vital. But your primary audience is no longer just a handful of journalists. Your audience is millions of people with Internet connections and access to search engines and RSS readers. So, how do you get started with a direct-to-buyer news release program? Let's start by recalling the New Rules of News Releases from Chapter 5:

- Don't just send news releases when "big news" is happening; find good reasons to send them all the time.
- Instead of just targeting a handful of journalists, create news releases that appeal directly to your buyers.

- Write releases that are replete with keyword-rich copy.
- Include offers that compel consumers to respond to your release in some way.
- Place links in releases to deliver potential customers to landing pages on your Web site.
- Optimize news release delivery for searching and browsing.
- Add social media tags for Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us so your release will be found.
- Drive people into the sales process with news releases.

In this chapter, we'll use these rules to develop a news release strategy.

## Developing Your News Release Strategy

The most important thing to think about as you begin a news release program is, once again, the need to write for your buyers. You should consider what you learned through the buyer persona research part of your marketing and PR plan (described in Chapter 10) and develop an editorial calendar for news releases based on what buyers need to know. Implementing a news release strategy to reach buyers directly is like publishing an online news service—you are providing your buyers with information that they need in order to find your organization online and then learn more about you.

Part of thinking like a publisher is remembering the critical importance of content. “Everything is content-driven in public relations,” says Brian Hennigan, marketing communications manager for dbaDIRECT,<sup>1</sup> a data infrastructure management company. “I like using news releases to reach the market and my potential customers.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dbadirect.com/>

With news releases, for a hundred bucks you can talk to the world.” Hennigan supplements his news releases with longer and more detailed whitepapers to get dbaDIRECT ideas into the market. “I write the news releases like news stories,” he says. “We look at the needs of the market and entrepreneurial trends as interesting, and we write to these trends.”

As you make this fundamental change in how you do news releases, you will probably find yourself wondering, at first, what to write about. The rule of thumb is: Big news is great, but don't wait. Write about pretty much anything that your organization is doing:

- Have a new take on an old problem? Write a release.
- Serve a unique marketplace? Write a release.
- Have interesting information to share? Write a release.
- CEO speaking at a conference? Write a release.
- Win an award? Write a release.
- Add a product feature? Write a release.
- Win a new customer? Write a release.
- Publish a whitepaper? Write a release.
- Get out of bed this morning? Okay, maybe not . . . but now you're thinking the right way!

## Publishing News Releases through a Distribution Service

The best way to publish news releases so they are seen by your buyers is to simultaneously post a release to your own Web site and send it to one of the news release wires. The benefit of using a news release distribution service is that your release will be sent to the online news services, including Yahoo!, Google, Lycos, and many others. Many news release distribution services reach trade and industry Web sites as well. In fact, you can often reach hundreds of Web sites with a single news release. The significant benefit of this

approach is that your release will be indexed by the news search engines and vertical market sites, and then when somebody does a search for a word or phrase contained in your release, *presto*, that potential customer finds you. As an added bonus, people who have requested alerts about your industry from sites that index news releases will get an alert that something important—your news release—is available.

There are a number of options for wire distribution of news releases. I've included some of the U.S. news release distribution services here. Similar services exist in other countries, such as CCNMatthews<sup>2</sup> serving the Canada market. Take a look at the various services and compare them yourself.

*A Selection of the Larger U.S. News Release Distribution Services*

- Business Wire: [www.businesswire.com](http://www.businesswire.com)
- Market Wire: [www.marketwire.com](http://www.marketwire.com)
- PrimeNewswire: [www.primezone.com](http://www.primezone.com)
- PR Newswire: [www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com)
- PRWeb: [www.prweb.com](http://www.prweb.com)

In order to get your news releases to appear on the online news services, including Google News, you just have to purchase a basic news release coverage area offered by a news release distribution service. Coverage is based on geographical distribution of your release to reporters. Because I am located in the Boston area, the cheapest distribution with some services for me is the Boston region. The services also have many value-added options for you to consider, such as national distribution. But what is important to know is that most news release distribution services include distribution to online media such as Google News in *any geographical distribution*. So, as you make your choice, remember that when your purpose for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ccnmatthews.com/>

sending news releases is to reach buyers via search engines and vertical sites, maximizing the newsroom and geographical reach offered by a service is less important than ensuring that your releases are included on major online news sites.

## Reaching Even More Interested Buyers with RSS Feeds

Many news release distribution services also offer RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds of their news releases, which they make available to other sites, blogs, journalists, and individuals. This means that each time you publish a news release with the service, the news release is seen by thousands of people who have subscribed to the RSS content feeds in your market category (as offered by the distribution service). So if you tag your release as being important for the automotive industry, your news release will be delivered to anyone (or any site) that has subscribed to the news release distribution services automotive RSS feed. And online news services such as Google News have RSS feed capability, too, allowing people to receive feeds based on keywords and phrases. Each time your release includes a word or phrase of importance to someone who has saved it as part of their alerts, a link to your news releases will appear via e-mail or RSS feed in near real time in the future.

## Simultaneously Publishing Your News Releases to Your Web Site

Post your news releases to an appropriate and readily findable section of your Web site. Many organizations have a media room or press section of their Web site, which is ideal (see Chapter 15 for details on how to create your online media room). You should keep the



news release live for as long as the content is appropriate, perhaps for years. This is very important because most of the online news sites do not maintain archives of news for more than a few months. If potential customers look for the content of your news release the week after it is distributed via a service, they will certainly find it on Google News and the others. But they won't find it if they do the search next year unless the release is on your own site as a permanent link so that it is indexed by Google.

## The Importance of Links in Your News Releases

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Particularly because your releases may be delivered by feeds or on news services and various sites other than your own, creating links from your news releases to content on your Web site is very important. These links, which might point to a specific offer or to a landing page with more information, allow your buyers to move from the news release to specific content on your Web site that will then drive them into the sales process, as we saw in the previous chapter.

However, there is another enormous benefit to including links in news releases. Each time your news release is posted on another site, such as an online news site, the inbound link from the online news site to your Web site helps to increase the search engine ranking of your site, because the search engines use inbound links as one of the important criteria for their page-ranking algorithms. So when your news release has a link to your site and it is indexed somewhere on the Web, you actually increase the ranking of the pages on your site! Said another way, when your news release appears on a Web site somewhere and there is a link in your news release that points to a URL on your site, the search engines will increase the rankings of the page where the URL is pointing. How cool is that? Sending a news release that includes links increases your own Web site's search engine rankings.

## Focus on the Keywords and Phrases Your Buyers Use

As I've suggested before, one thing successful publishers do that Web marketers should emulate is understand the audience first and then set about to satisfy their informational needs. A great way to start thinking like a publisher and to create news releases that drive action is to focus on your customers' problems and then create and deliver news releases accordingly. Use the words and phrases that your buyers use. Think about how the people you want to reach are searching, and develop news release content that includes those words and phrases. You can get the information you need to do so by thinking back to your buyer personas. Don't be egotistical and write only about your organization. What are your buyers' problems? What do they want to know? What words and phrases do they use to describe these problems? I know, I've said this already several times—that's because it is very important.

CruiseCompete.com,<sup>3</sup> cited in the October 2006 issue of *Kiplinger* as one of the 25 Best Travel Sites, helps people secure quotes for cruises from multiple travel agencies, based on the dates and ports specified. CruiseCompete.com is a great example of a company that uses news releases to reach people based on the phrases that their buyers are searching with. In October 2006, for example, during the lead-up to the holiday season, the company issued a news release via Market Wire with the headline "Cruise Lines Set Sail With Hot Holiday Vacation Prices." Importantly, part of an early sentence in the release, ". . . some seven-night vacations can be booked for well under \$1,000 per person, including Thanksgiving cruises, Christmas cruises and New Year's cruises," included three critical phrases. Not only did this release's mention of "Thanksgiving cruises," "Christmas cruises," and "New Year's cruises" generate traffic from users

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cruisecompete.com/>

searching on these common phrases, it also helped guide searchers into the sales cycle; each of the three phrases in the news release was hyperlinked to a purpose-built landing page on the CruiseCompete.com site that displayed the holiday cruise deals. Anyone who clicked on the “Christmas cruises” link was taken directly to deals for Christmas cruises.<sup>4</sup>

What makes this case so exciting is that at the time I was writing this in late October 2006, the CruiseCompete.com holiday cruise news release was at the top of the Google News search results for the phrases “Thanksgiving cruises,” “Christmas cruises,” and “New Year’s cruises.” More importantly, the bump that the links in the news release gave to the three landing pages helped those pages reach the top of the Google Web search results lists. For example, the CruiseCompete.com landing page for the phrase “Christmas cruise” was ranked in the fourth position among 5,830,000 other hits on Google.

“We know that people have thought about traveling for the holidays,” says Heidi M. Allison-Shane,<sup>5</sup> a consultant working with CruiseCompete.com. “We use the news releases to communicate with consumers that now is the time to book, because there are dynamite prices and they will sell out.” Allison-Shane makes sure that CruiseCompete includes the ideal phrases in each news release and that each release has appropriate links to the site. This strategy makes reaching potential customers a matter of “simply understanding what people are likely to be searching on and then linking them to the correct page on the site where we have the content that’s relevant,” she says. “We try to be useful with the right content and to be focused on what’s relevant for our consumers and to provide the links that they need. This stuff is not difficult.”

The CruiseCompete.com news release program produces results by increasing the Google rankings for the site. But the news releases

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cruisecompete.com/specials/holiday/christmas\\_cruises/1](http://www.cruisecompete.com/specials/holiday/christmas_cruises/1)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.allisonandtaylor.com/>

also reach buyers directly as those buyers search on relevant phrases. “Each time we send a targeted news release, we see a spike in the Web traffic on the site,” Allison-Shane says.

As you craft your own phrases to use in your news releases, don’t get trapped by your own jargon; think, speak, and write like your customers do. Though you may have a well-developed lexicon for your products and services, these words don’t necessarily mean much to your potential customers. As you write news releases (or any other form of Web content), focus on the words and phrases that your buyers use. As a search engine marketing tool, news releases are only as valuable as the keywords and phrases that are contained in them.

## Include Appropriate Social Media Tags

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Many (but not all) news release distribution services provide a way to include social media tags to make the news releases easy to find on services like Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us. Use them! Social media tags make your releases much easier to find. For example, the Technorati search engine, which many people turn to for the latest blog posts from around the world in categories that interest them, also include news release content. So if I check out the “Marketing” category on Technorati (which I frequently do), I will see not only the latest blog posts that are tagged “Marketing” by the blogger but also any news releases that are tagged “Marketing” by the organization that issued the release. The key is that in an online world, you must do everything you can to ensure that your news releases are displayed and retrievable in as many relevant places as possible.

To make it easy to remember all the various tags and other features (such as associated photos and audio feeds) of a well-executed news release, Todd Defren, principal at SHIFT Communications, created a social media news release template.<sup>6</sup> “All news release content will

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<sup>6</sup> [www.pr-squared.com](http://www.pr-squared.com)

ultimately wind up on the Web,” he says. “So why not put it out in such a way that makes it accessible to anybody who can use that content? Both traditional and new-media journalists are used to working in a hyperlinked environment and are used to people providing context through social bookmarking sites such as del.icio.us and buttons to add to DIGG. The template makes it easy to remember to do all of those things.” Defren’s template is an excellent tool to use as you develop your news releases because it helps you get the most out of all the available features that can make the release more useful and easier to find.

## If It’s Important Enough to Tell the Media, Tell Your Clients and Prospects, Too!

Many companies devote extensive resources to their PR and media relations programs. Often, the results of these efforts are buried in a difficult-to-find news section of the company Web site. Consider rewriting your news releases in an easy-to-read paragraph or two and make it a section of your e-mail newsletter for clients and prospects. Or establish RSS feeds to deliver your news to anyone who’s interested. And don’t forget your employees—if they know about your news, they can be your greatest evangelists.

One of the most cost-effective ways to reach buyers is to look for ways to leverage the work you’re already doing by repurposing content for other audiences. Too often, organizations spend tons of money on, say, a PR program that targets a handful of journalists but fails to communicate the same information to other constituents. Or a company’s advertising program designed to generate new sales may drive people to a Web site that doesn’t match the message of the ads, resulting in lost interest. Sadly, the failure to integrate sales, marketing, and communications—both online and offline—will always result in lost opportunities. Happily, the Web makes it a relatively

simple task to integrate your news release program into your larger online strategy.

Here's one more thing that you may never have considered: Having a regular editorial calendar that includes a series of news releases also means your company is "busy." When people go to your online media room and find a lack of news releases, they often assume that you are not moving forward or that you have nothing to contribute to the industry. In the new world of marketing, consistent, high-quality news release content brands a company or a nonprofit as a busy market player, an active expert in the industry, and a trusted resource to turn to.



# 15

## The Online Media Room: Your Front Door for Much More Than the Media

The online media room (sometimes called a press room or press page) is the part of your organization's Web site that you create specifically for the media. In some organizations this page is simply a list of news releases with contact information for the organization's PR person. But many companies and nonprofits have elaborate online media rooms with a great deal of information available in many different formats: audio, video, photos, news releases, background information, financial data, and much more. A close cousin to the online media room is the online Investor Relations room that many public companies maintain, although I won't be covering IR sites in the book.

Before I give you ideas on how to create a valuable online media room of your own, I want you to consider something that is vitally important: all kinds of people visit your online media room, not just journalists. Stop and really let that soak in for a moment. Your buyers are snooping around your organization by visiting the media pages on your Web site. Your current customers, partners, investors, suppliers, and employees all visit those pages. Why is that? Based on casual research I've done (I often speak with people who are responsible for



their organizations' online media rooms about visitor statistics), I'm convinced that when people want to know what's *current* about an organization, they go to an online media room.

Visitors expect that the main pages of a Web site are basically static (i.e., they do not update often), but they also expect that the news releases and media-targeted pages on a site will reveal the very latest about a company. For many companies, the news release section is one of the most frequently visited parts of the Web site. Check out your own Web site statistics; you may be amazed at how many visitors are already reading your news releases and other media pages online.

So I want you to do something that many traditional PR people think is nuts. I want you to design your online media room for your *buyers*. By building a media room that targets buyers, you will not only enhance those pages as a powerful marketing tool, you will also *make a better media site for journalists*. I've reviewed hundreds of online media rooms, and the best ones are built with buyers in mind. This approach may sound a bit radical, but believe me, it works.

## Your Online Media Room as (Free) Search Engine Optimization

When news releases are posted on your site, search engine crawlers will find the content, index it, and rank it based on words, phrases, and other factors. Because news release pages update more often than any other part of a typical organization's Web site, search engine algorithms (tuned to pay attention to pages that update frequently) tend to rank news release pages among the highest on your site, driving traffic there first.

"There's no question that a well organized media room often has higher search results and drives more traffic because of the way the search engines work," says Dee Rambeau,<sup>1</sup> founder and managing

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.adventuresinbusinesscommunications.com/>

partner of The Fuel Team, a provider of online tools for professional business communicators. “A news release dynamically builds out a new set of content in your online media room, with each news release generating its own indexable page, which the search engines all capture. Google and the other search engines love fresh content that relates back to similar content on the other pages of the site. Aggressive companies take advantage of this by sending news releases frequently to get high rankings from the search engines. Frequency has a great deal to do with search engine rankings—if you do ten news releases, that’s great, twenty is better, and one hundred is better still.”

## Best Practices for Online Media Rooms

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An online media room is an important part of any organization’s Web site and a critical aspect of an effective media relations strategy. When done well, an online media room will turn journalists who are just browsing into interested writers who will highlight your organization positively in their stories. And more importantly, an online media room can move your buyers into and through the sales process, resulting in more business for your organization and contributing to meeting your organization’s *real goals* of revenue and customer retention. I’ve noticed as I’ve checked out hundreds of online media rooms that most fail to deliver compelling content. Sure, they may look pretty, but often the design and graphics, not the content that journalists (and your buyers) require, are in the forefront. Here, then, is a list of tips that will help your online media room work as effectively as some of the best ones I’ve seen.

### You Control the Content

One important consideration that many marketing and PR people overlook when considering the benefits of an online media room is

that *you control the content*, not your IT department, Webmaster, or anyone else. The best practice idea here is that you design your online media room as a tool to reach buyers and journalists, and you don't need to take into consideration the rules for posting content that the rest of the organization's site may require. If you build this part of your site using a specialized online media room content-management application such as the one offered by The Fuel Team<sup>2</sup> or the Media-Room<sup>3</sup> product from PR Newswire, you will control a corner of your organization's Web site that you can update whenever you like using simple tools, and you won't need to request help from anyone in other departments or locations. So start with your needs and the needs of your buyers and journalists, not the needs of those who own the other parts of your organization's Web site.

### Start with a Needs Analysis

When designing a new online media room (or planning an extensive redesign), start with a needs analysis. Before you just jump right into site aesthetics and the organization of news releases, take time to analyze how the site fits into your larger marketing, PR, and media relations strategy. Consider the buyer persona profiles you built as part of your marketing and PR plan. Talk with friendly journalists so you can understand what they need. Who are the potential users of the online media room and what content will be valuable to them? When you have collected some information, build buyers' and journalists' needs into your online media room. As you work toward starting your design, try to think a bit more like a publisher and less like a marketing and PR person. A publisher carefully identifies and defines target audiences and then develops the content required to meet the needs of each distinct demographic. Graphical elements, colors, fonts, and other visual manifestations of the site are also im-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefuelteam.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mediaroom.com/>

portant but should take a back seat during the content-needs analysis process.

## Optimize Your News Releases for Searching and for Browsing

The best online media rooms are built with the understanding that some people need to search for content and others are browsing. Many people already know what they are looking for—the latest release, perhaps, or the name of the CEO. They need answers to specific questions, and organizations must therefore optimize content so that it can be found, perhaps by including a search engine. The second way that people use content is to be told something that they do not already know and therefore couldn't think to ask. This is why browsability is also important; it allows users to stumble across useful information they didn't even know they were looking for. While many Web-savvy marketers understand the importance of search-engine optimization, they often forget that sites must be designed for browsing, too. Failing to do so is particularly unfortunate because the high traffic on news release pages comes partly from the many people who browse these pages as they conduct research.

You should deploy a navigational design in a way that provides valuable information visitors might not have thought to ask for. Consider including multiple browsing techniques. For instance, you can create different links to targeted releases for different buyer personas (maybe by vertical market or some other demographic factor appropriate to your organization). You might also organize the same releases by product (because some members of the media may be covering just one of your products in a review or story), by geography, or by market served. Most organizations simply list news releases in reverse-chronological order (the newest release is at the top of the page, and ones from last year are hidden away somewhere). While this is fine for the main news release page, you need to have additional navigation links so people can browse the releases. Don't forget that people may also need to print

out news releases, so consider providing printer-friendly formats (e.g., PDF format as well as HTML).

## Create Background Information that Helps Journalists Write Stories

You should publish a set of background materials about your organization, sometimes called an online media kit or press kit, in an easy-to-find place in your online media room. This kit should contain a lot of information, basically anything you think journalists might need in order to write about you and your products or services. Company history and timeline, executive biographies, investor profiles, board of advisors' or board of directors' bios, product and service information, information about analysts who cover your company, and links to recent media coverage will help your media kit save journalists time and tedious effort. Make this content easy to find and to browse with appropriate navigational links. I think a set of information organized around customers and how they use products and services offered by the company is another key component of an online media room, and I rarely see it. Case studies in the customers' own words are particularly useful, not only for journalists but also for buyers. Remember, the easier you make a journalist's job, the more likely she is to write about your organization, particularly when she is on a tight deadline. I recall researching a feature story I was writing for *EContent* magazine called "On Message: The Market for Marketing-Specific Content Management." In the article I was looking at companies and products that help marketers to organize information, and I knew the top players in the field and interviewed company executives for the article. But to round out the piece, I needed to include some newer niche companies in the space. How did I choose the companies that made it in? You guessed it—the ones that made my job easiest by having an effective online media room that helped me to instantly understand the company and products.

## Include Multimedia Content

Innovative communicators make use of nontext content, such as photos, charts, graphs, audio feeds, and video clips, to inform site visitors and the media. Include executive photos, logo images, product photos, and other content that is ready (and preapproved) to be published or linked to by journalists. You should offer audio and video clips (such as parts of executive speeches or product demonstrations), photos, and logos in such a way that journalists can use them in their written stories as well as on TV and radio shows. Again, you will find that many people besides journalists will access this content, so include appropriate examples for your buyer personas as well as for the media.

## Include Detailed Product Specs and Other Valuable Data

Communicators who use online media rooms to offer valuable content are more likely to score the positive story. However, organizations often shy away from posting much of their best content because they deem it *proprietary*. On many sites, even information like detailed product specifications and price lists are available only through a direct connection with a PR contact or a lengthy registration form with approval mechanisms. Yet this is exactly the sort of content that, if freely available, would help convince journalists to write a story. All communicators and marketing professionals working at corporations, government agencies, or nonprofits struggle to decide what content is appropriate to post on their organizations' sites. However, with well-meaning executives who worry about corporate image, legal departments with a reflexive tendency to say "no," and salespeople who think it is easier to sell when they're the sole source of knowledge, it might be difficult to gain the necessary approvals to post "proprietary" content. But there is no doubt that the more valuable your media room's content looks to reporters and buyers, the more attractive your company will look to them as well.

## If Appropriate, Go Global

The Web has made reaching the world far easier, so when it is appropriate, the effort to create and offer local content to customers worldwide can help an organization better serve both local and global journalists. Many organizations, particularly those headquartered in the United States, make the mistake of including site content that reflects (and therefore has value for) only the home market. Basic approaches to get your site up to global standards might include offering case studies from customers in various countries or spec sheets describing products with local country standards (such as metric measurements or local regulatory compliance). Sometimes the little things make a difference. For example, don't forget that the rest of the world uses standard A4 paper instead of the U.S. letter size, so having fact sheets and other materials that print properly on both formats is useful to users outside the United States. Providing content in local languages can also help show the global aspect of your business, though this need not mean a wholesale translation of your entire online media room. A simple Web landing page with basic information in the local language, a few news releases, a case study or two, and appropriate local contact information will often suffice.

## Provide Content for All Levels of Media Understanding

To be effective, communicators at many organizations specifically design media room content that supports journalists' level of knowledge of your organization. Some journalists may never have written about your company before; they need the basics spelled out in easy-to-understand language. In other cases, a reporter or analyst may have been covering the company for years, enjoy personal relationships with the executives, and know a great deal about what's going on with you, your competitors, and your market. You need content for this person, too; she may want to compare your offerings, and she therefore needs detailed company information, lists of features

and benefits, and stories about your customers. Of course, all reporters need easy navigation directly to content so they get what they need quickly. In my experience, the vast majority of online media rooms are little more than online brochures with a bunch of news releases. Don't let the opportunities that the Web offers pass your online media room by. Help journalists along the path to their keyboards by offering content directly linked to their various levels of understanding.

### List Executive Appearances, Conferences, and Tradeshow Participation

One of the best ways to positively influence journalists is to visit with them in person. Many journalists attend tradeshows, conferences, and other events on a regular basis and use that time to meet with representatives of companies that they may consider writing about. The best way to get your organization on journalists' calendars is to make certain that they know where your executives will be appearing. List all appropriate public speaking appearances, tradeshow and conference participation, and other events in a separate calendar section in your online media room. Make certain to list all appropriate future events, and remember to include any international events. Keep the older listings up for at least a few months after the events to show that you are in demand as experts in your field, but be sure to keep the list up to date. Don't forget that even this information is not just for the media. Even if they do not attend industry events, your buyers will see that your company is active and that your executives are in demand as speakers and presenters; this adds to your corporate credibility and your image as an industry leader.

### Include Calls to Action for Journalists

It is a great idea to include special offers for the media. Perhaps the simplest thing to offer is an executive interview. But why not



include a trial or demonstration offer of some kind, where journalists get to test out your offerings, attend your events, or in some way experience what your organization does? You can even create a landing page specifically for journalists with a registration form and special offers. Include this link within news releases and other pages in the online media room to drive interested journalists to the landing page.

## Embrace Bloggers as You Do Traditional Journalists

Bloggers who cover your company visit your online media room. Encourage them by responding to inquiries quickly, by including bloggers in your news release distribution e-mail list, and by granting them interviews with executives upon request. The fact is that bloggers are influential, and they want to be treated with the same respect as traditional journalists. It's to your advantage to do so.

## Avoid Jargon, Acronyms, and Industry-Speak

I review more than a hundred news releases in an average week. Some releases are sent directly to me from companies that want me to write about them in a magazine article, an upcoming book, or my blog, and others I find by checking out online media rooms. I visit many online media rooms in an average week and read the other content available as well as news releases. Unfortunately, most online media rooms are chock full of jargon, three-letter acronyms that I don't understand, and other egocentric nonsense. I'm interested in what companies are up to, but I'm just too busy to decipher gobbledygook. I normally give a news release 10 seconds to catch my attention, but the surest way to get me to delete a release in frustration is to write in a way that I just can't understand. If your mother doesn't understand your news, a journalist probably won't, either.

## An Online Media Room to Reach Journalists, Customers, Bloggers, and Employees

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“As we were looking for solutions to reach the media, one of the frustrations we had was getting timely information onto our corporate Web site,” says Clay Owen, senior director of media relations at Cingular Wireless. “We used to have a process that went through the Information Technology department, and they would say ‘Okay, we will get it up onto the site a week from Thursday.’ But I used to be a producer at CNN, and I’m used to instantaneous news. So it was frustrating that I couldn’t get the news releases up right away.”

Owen implemented an online media room<sup>4</sup> primarily to put control of media content into his own hands so that he could get news releases up onto the site right away. “What we’ve tried to do is have a lot of information,” he says. “The media is looking for more than the news release. They want images, both high-resolution and Web versions, and they want fact sheets, so we’ve put a lot of time into our online press kit. Journalists are looking for value-add on a corporate media site, and it needs to be much more than just a news release. We also focus on optimizing our pages for keywords and phrases so that Google and the other search engines can find the information.”

As Owen launched the Cingular Wireless online media room, he found that the bloggers who cover the wireless and gadget space make heavy use of the content. “You have to hit the bloggers several different ways because it is a crowded marketplace for ideas,” he says. “So we send bloggers our news releases and encourage them to make use of the online media room.”

The Cingular Wireless online media room was severely tested during the 2005 hurricane season; Cingular serves customers in

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<sup>4</sup> <http://cingular.mediaroom.com/>

hard-hit areas such as New Orleans and Florida. “It was a real eye-opener for us because we didn’t realize the power of getting a lot of news up onto the site really quickly,” Owen says. “It was the first series of storms of that severity in the Internet age. Even though we were updating the pages every few hours, we just couldn’t get information out quickly enough. I drew from my experience at CNN. As more and more journalists have access to the Internet, it is up to us to get information to them in a timely manner. We have to ‘feed the beast,’ and there’s no way to do that without an online media room that I can post to directly. Going through the Information Technology department wouldn’t have worked.”

To make it easy for all kinds of people, not just journalists, to get updates, Owen created a new URL<sup>5</sup> that pointed to specific pages in the Cingular online media room. “We built out a section for consumers by working with our Customer Services people that included a Frequently Asked Questions section and toll-free numbers for customers,” he says. “We answered questions like ‘What if I can’t pay my bill this month?’ We found that the media room was also a vehicle for communications with our employees who were in the disaster area. It was an extraordinary time and extraordinary measures were needed, and we were very pleased with the responses.”

Based on his site statistics, the Cingular Wireless online media room clearly serves more people than just journalists. “We know that a large number of consumers find their way to the media room, because the online media room had eighteen thousand page views at its peak on September 5, 2005,” he says. “And our average was ten thousand page views per day in the month of September 2005 compared to a baseline of about two thousand page views per day in August 2005, before the storms.”

As the Cingular Wireless example shows, it is important for all companies to be prepared to communicate during emergency situations. While the highest traffic to the Cingular Wireless online media

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cingularhurricaneupdates.com/>

room in recent years was during the 2005 hurricane season, the numbers they got during this period helped Owen to see a trend that was already happening: that consumers *do* think to use online media rooms when they need information.

## Really Simple Marketing: The Importance of RSS Feeds in Your Online Media Room

To provide alternative content routes, many organizations use digital delivery methods, including e-mail newsletters for journalists and bloggers and RSS feeds, as part of their online media rooms; this pushes content directly to the media and other interested people. Smart organizations are using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to easily update prospects, customers, investors, and the media, but too few organizations are using this really simple marketing technique for sharing valuable information.

RSS feeds can (and should) be added to most parts of your Web site. But because they are essentially subscription mechanisms to regularly updated content, many organizations have the RSS subscription page as part of the online media room and use it as a primary way to deliver news release content. Companies such as Microsoft, IBM, and Intel syndicate information via RSS feeds to reach specific external audiences such as the media, Wall Street analysts, customers, partners, distributors, and resellers. For example, Intel<sup>6</sup> offers a suite of feeds that includes Intel Products, Intel Press Room, Intel Investor Relations, Software at Intel, Networking and Communications, Intel Reseller Center, and IT@Intel. It also offers country-specific RSS feeds from Brazil, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and others. How cool is it that interested people

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.intel.com/intel/rss.htm>

subscribe to just-right corporate information from Intel in the same way that they subscribe to media feeds from major newspaper and magazine sites and those of independent bloggers? This is just another example of how the main currency of online marketing is excellent content delivered in the way that people demand.

The online media room is a place where many people congregate, not just journalists. It is one place on your organization's Web site that *you can control*, without interference, approval processes, and IT support, so it presents a terrific opportunity for marketing and PR people to get content out into the marketplace. On the Web, success equals content. And one of the easiest ways to get content into the market is via an online media room with RSS feeds.

# 16

## The New Rules for Reaching the Media

**A**s the Web has made communicating with reporters and editors extremely easy, breaking through using the online methods everyone else uses has become increasingly difficult. These days, you can find the e-mail addresses of reporters in seconds, either through commercial services that sell subscriptions to their databases of thousands of journalists or simply by using a search engine. Unfortunately, way too many PR people are spamming journalists with unsolicited and unrelenting commercial messages in the form of news releases and untargeted broadcast pitches. I hate to say it, but among the many journalists I speak with, the PR profession has become synonymous with spammers. For years, PR people have been shotgun-blasting our news releases and blind pitches to hundreds (or even thousands) of journalists at a time—without giving any thought to what each reporter actually covers—just because the media databases we subscribe to make it so darn simple to do.

*Barraging large groups of journalists with indiscriminate PR materials is not a good strategy to get reporters and editors to pay attention to you.*

## Nontargeted, Broadcast Pitches Are Spam

As I've said, I get dozens of news releases, pitches, and announcements from PR agency staffers and corporate communications people every business day. Like all journalists, my e-mail address is available in many places: in the articles I write, on my blog, in my books, and at the *EContent* magazine Web site (I'm a contributing editor). That easy availability means that my address has also been added to various databases and lists of journalists. Unfortunately, my e-mail address also gets added (without my permission) to many press lists that PR agencies and companies compile and maintain; whenever they have a new announcement, no matter what the subject, I'm part of the broadcast message. *Ugh*. The PR spam approach simply doesn't work. Worse, it brands your organization as one of the "bad guys."

Okay, that's the depressing news. The good news is that there are effective "new rules" approaches that work very well to get your messages into the hands (and onto the screens) of reporters so they will be more likely to write about you. Don't forget that reporters are always looking for interesting companies, products, and ideas to write about. They want to find you. If you have great content on your Web site and your online media room, *reporters will find you* via search engines.

Try to think about ways to reach journalists that aren't just one-way spam. Pay attention to what individual reporters write about by reading their stories (and, better yet, their blogs) and write specific and targeted pitches crafted especially for them. Or start a real rela-

tionship with reporters by commenting on their blogs or sending them information that is not just a blatant pitch for your company. Become part of their network of sources, rather than simply a shill for one company's message. If you or someone in your organization writes a blog in the space that a reporter covers, let them know about it, because what you blog about may become prime fodder for the reporter's future stories. Don't forget to pitch bloggers. Not only does a mention in a widely read blog reach your buyers, reporters and editors read these blogs for story ideas and to understand early market trends.

## The New Rules of Media Relations

The Web has changed the rules. If you're still following the traditional PR techniques, I'm sure you're finding that they are ineffective. To be much more successful, consider The New Rules of Media Relations:

- Nontargeted, broadcast pitches are spam.
- News releases sent to reporters in subject areas they do not cover are spam.
- Reporters who don't know you yet are looking for organizations like yours and products like yours—make sure they will find you on sites such as Google and Technorati.
- If you blog, reporters who cover the space will find you.
- Pitch bloggers, because being covered in important blogs will get you noticed by mainstream media.
- When was the last news release you sent? Make sure your organization is “busy.”
- Journalists want a great online media room!
- Some (but not all) reporters love RSS feeds.
- Personal relationships with reporters are important.
- Don't tell journalists what your product does. Tell them how you solve customer problems.



- Does the reporter have a blog? Read it. Comment on it. Track back to it (send a message whenever you blog on a subject that the reporter blogged about first).
- Before you pitch, read (or listen to or watch) the publication (or radio program or TV show) you'll be pitching to!
- Once you know what a reporter is interested in, send her an individualized pitch crafted especially for her needs.

## Blogs and Media Relations

Getting your organization visible on blogs is an increasingly important way not only to reach your buyers, but also to reach the mainstream media that cover your industry, because reporters and editors read blogs for story ideas. Treat influential bloggers exactly as you treat influential reporters—read their stuff and send them specifically targeted information that might be useful to them. Offer them interviews with your executives and demonstrations or samples of your products. Offer to take them to lunch.

“For a company or product that sells into a niche, you’ll never get noticed by editors at major publications like the *Wall Street Journal*, but you will get niche bloggers to be interested in you,” says Larry Schwartz, president of Newstex,<sup>1</sup> a company that syndicates blogs for distribution to millions of people in corporations, financial institutions, and government agencies. “For example, if you are in the consumer technology business, getting your product mentioned in Gizmodo<sup>2</sup> and getting a link back to your site from Gizmodo are probably more important than even a mention in the *Wall Street Journal*. Increasingly, the way for people to find out about products is through blogs, and you often get a link to your Web site, too. It used

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newstex.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gizmodo.com/>

to be that the moment of truth was when somebody went to the store to find your product. Now the moment of truth is a link to your site from a blog.”

Pitching influential bloggers as you would pitch mainstream media is an important way to get noticed in the crowded marketplace of ideas. But even more effective is having your own blog so that bloggers and reporters find you. “Blogging gives me a place in the media community to stand out,” says John Blossom, president of Shore Communications Inc.,<sup>3</sup> a research and analysis company. Blossom has been blogging since March 2003 and writes about enterprise publishing and media markets. “In ways that I didn’t expect, my blog has allowed me to become a bit of a media personality. I’ve been picked up by some big bloggers, and that makes me aware that blogging is a terrific way to get exposure, because the rate of pickup and amplification is remarkable. The press reads my blog and reaches out to me for quotes. Sometimes I’m quoted in the media by a reporter who doesn’t even speak with me. For example, a reporter from the *Financial Times* recently picked up a quote and used it in a story—based on my blog alone.”

## How to Pitch the Media

As marketers know, having your company, product, or executive appear in an appropriate publication is great marketing. That’s why billions of dollars are spent on PR each year (though much of it’s wasted, I’m afraid). When your organization appears in a story, not only do you reach the publication’s audience directly, you also can point your prospects to the piece later, using reprints or Web links. Media coverage means legitimacy. As I’ve said, broadcast spamming of the media doesn’t work. But sometimes you really want to target a

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.shore.com/>

specific publication (your hometown paper, perhaps). So, what should you do?

- *Target one reporter at a time.* Taking the time to read a publication and then crafting a unique pitch to a particular journalist can work wonders. Mention a specific article he wrote and then explain why your company or product would be interesting for the journalist to look at. Make certain to target the subject line of the e-mail to help ensure that it gets opened. Recently I got a perfectly positioned pitch crafted especially for me from a company that provides a Web-based sales-lead qualification and management system. The PR person had read my blog and knew what I was interested in, so I e-mailed back within minutes to set up an interview with the company's CEO.
- *Help the journalist to understand the big picture.* Often it's difficult to understand how some widget or service or organization actually fits into a wider trend. You make a journalist's job much easier if you describe the big picture of why your particular product or service is interesting. Often this helps you get mentioned in the reporter's future articles or columns about trends in your space.
- *Explain how customers use your product or work with your organization.* Reporters hear hundreds of pitches from company spokespeople about how products work. But it's much more useful to hear about a product in action from someone who actually uses it. If you can set up interviews with customers or provide written case studies of your products or services, it will be much easier for journalists to write about your company.
- *Don't send e-mail attachments unless asked.* These days, it is a rare journalist indeed who opens an unexpected e-mail attachment, even from a recognized company. Yet many PR people still distribute news releases as e-mail attachments. Don't do it. Send plain-text e-mails instead. If you're asked for other information, you can follow up with attachments, but

be sure to clearly reference in the e-mail what you're sending and why, so the journalist will remember asking for it.

- *Follow up promptly with potential contacts.* Recently I agreed to interview a senior executive at a large company. An eager PR person set it up, and we agreed on date and time. But I never got the promised follow-up information via e-mail, which was supposed to include the telephone number to reach the executive. Needless to say, the interview didn't happen. Make certain you follow up as promised.
- *Don't forget, it's a two-way street—journalists need you to pitch them!* The bottom line is that reporters want to know what you have to say. It is unfortunate that the spam problem in PR is as big as it is, because it makes journalists' jobs more difficult.

As an illustration of this last point, recently a company executive I met at a conference made a comment on a new trend that gave me a brilliant idea for my column. I was delighted, because it made my life easier. Thinking of column subjects is hard work, and I need all the help I can get. The executive's company fit in perfectly with the column idea, and I'll use his product as the example of the trend he told me about. Without the conversation, the column would never have been written—but a straight product pitch wouldn't have worked. We reporters need smart ideas to do our job. Please.

“The single most effective thing PR people do is read what I write and send me personalized, smart pitches for stories that I am actually likely to write,” says Peter J. Howe, a business reporter for the *Boston Globe*.<sup>4</sup> Howe has been at the *Globe* for 20 years and spent the last 7 years covering telecommunications, the Internet, energy, and, most recently, airline companies. Howe prefers to be pitched by e-mail, with a subject line that helps him to know it's not spam. “PR pitch for *Boston Globe* Reporter Peter Howe' is actually a very effective way to get my attention. If you're getting literally four or five

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<sup>4</sup> <http://boston.com/>

hundred e-mails a day like I am, cute subject lines aren't going to work and in fact will likely appear to be spam."

Howe's biggest beef with how PR people operate is that so many have no idea what he writes about before they send him a pitch. "If you simply put 'Boston Globe Peter Howe' into a Google.com/news search and read the first ten things that pop up, you would have done more work than 98 percent of the PR people who pitch me," he says. "It's maddening how many people in PR have absolutely no sense of the difference between what the *Boston Globe* covers and what, say, *Network World* or *RCR Wireless News* or the *Nitwitville Weekly News* covers. And I don't mean to sound like a whining diva; the bigger issue is that if you're not figuring out what I cover and how before you pitch me, you are really wasting your own time."

Howe also encourages people to try to think big. "If you have a small thing to pitch, pitch it. But try to also think of the bigger story that it can fit into a page-one or a Sunday section front story," he says. "That could even wind up meaning your company is mentioned alongside three or four of your competitors, but wouldn't you rather be mentioned in a page-one story than in a one-hundred-twenty-word news brief?"

There is no doubt that mainstream media are still vital as a channel for your buyers to learn about your products. Besides all the people who will see your company, product, or executive's name, a mention in a major publication lends you legitimacy. Reporters have a job to do, and they need the help that PR people can provide to them. But the rules have changed. To get noticed, you need to be smart about how you tell your story on the Web—and about how you tell your story to journalists.

# 17

## Blogging to Reach Your Buyers

**B**logs are now a mainstream vehicle for organizations to get their ideas into the marketplace. The readers of blogs view the information shared by smart bloggers as one of the few forms of real, authentic communication. Audiences consume advertising with skepticism and consider pronouncements by CEOs to be out of touch with reality. But a good blog written by someone within a large or small company, a nonprofit, a church, or a political campaign commands attention.

At the same time, blogs have seen a lot of hype in recent years. Business magazines regularly include breathless enthusiasm about how blogs and blogging hold the power to transform your business. While I absolutely agree that blogs can change your business and your life (as my blog has changed mine), there is still some mystery to blogging if you haven't done it before. This chapter will set out the basics of how to establish your own blog. But I recommend that, before you begin to write, you first monitor blogs in your market space and that you step into the blogosphere by commenting on a few blogs before you write your own. You might want to reread Chapter 4, where I introduced blogs and provided some case studies of

successful bloggers. As you begin to comment on other people's blogs, you'll develop your own blogging voice and get a sense of what you like to discuss online. That's great! You're experimenting on someone else's blog real estate. If you're like many people, soon you'll be itching to write your own blog. But if commenting is a painful chore for you, maybe you're not cut out to be a blogger. That's okay—there are many more blog readers than blog writers. This form isn't for everybody.

It's impossible to tell you everything you need to know about blogging in this one chapter. While the case studies and basic information will certainly get you started, the best thing is to experiment to find your voice. Read other blogs and be aware of what you like and dislike about other bloggers' styles. You might also check Debbie Weil's excellent *The Corporate Blogging Book*.<sup>1</sup>

## What Should You Blog About?

People often struggle to decide what to blog about. This is particularly true for marketing and PR professionals, because we have been taught to be slaves to the notion of flogging our products and services with “on message” advertising and press releases; for most organizations, that's exactly the wrong way to blog. The first thing to ask yourself is “Whom do I want to reach?” For many people, the answer is a combination of buyers, existing customers, and influencers such as analysts and the media. You need to find a topic that you are passionate about. If you aren't excited about the topic or if it feels painful to write, you're unlikely to sustain the effort; and if you do manage to keep going, the writing is likely to be forced.

Most first-time bloggers try to cover too much. It is better to start with a narrow subject and leave room to expand. Be authentic. People read blogs because they want to find an honest voice speaking passionately about a subject. You do not have to be harsh or contro-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thecorporatebloggingbook.com/>

versial if that is not your style. If you are interesting and provide valuable information, your readership will grow.

Grant D. Griffiths, a Kansas family and divorce lawyer, started his blog<sup>2</sup> in March 2005. “I’ve learned that in the legal profession, and probably any other profession, you need to be very targeted,” Griffiths says. His blog is written for a very specific buyer persona. “I’m not writing my blog for other attorneys; I write for the public. More specifically, I write for people in Kansas who need a family lawyer. My practice blog is my storefront, shingle, office sign, newspaper ad, and yellow-pages ad.”

Griffiths has averaged about a dozen e-mail inquires per week since August 2005 from new contacts who find him as a result of his blog. “And on average I get two to three new cases a week from the blog,” he says. “If you type in anything related to Kansas and family law into a search engine, then my blog is usually in the top few hits on the first page. I stopped doing yellow-pages ads last year. In talking to other lawyers, I hear they are scared of not doing a yellow-pages ad because they are afraid that if they don’t, then they won’t get any more business. They don’t feel like real lawyers without a yellow-pages ad because it is traditional marketing.”

In its “State of the Blogosphere” report,<sup>3</sup> blog search engine Technorati claimed that it tracked more than 57 million blogs (and counting) as of October 2006 and that about 100,000 new blogs are created every day, which means that, on average, a new blog is created every second of every day. That’s a heck of a lot of competition, and you might ask yourself if it is worth the effort. But remember back to the *long tail* theory we discussed in Chapter 2. If you write a niche blog (e.g., a blog about Kansas family law), then you’re not competing with 57 million other blogs. You’re writing in a space where there are few (if any) other blogs, and you will no doubt find readers who are interested in what you’re saying. If you have a small

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<sup>2</sup> [www.kansasfamilylawblog.com](http://www.kansasfamilylawblog.com)

<sup>3</sup> <http://technorati.com/weblog/2006/11/161.html>



niche, you may interest only a few hundred readers. But you'll reach the right readers—those people who are interested in what you and your organization have to say.

## Blogging Ethics and Employee Blogging Guidelines

Some organizations have created formal guidelines for employee bloggers. Your organization should decide for itself whether to create such guidelines, and the decision should be determined based on input from marketing, HR, and other departments. I think it is much better for organizations to establish policies about all communications (including verbal communication, e-mail, participation in chat rooms, and the like) rather than to focus on a new medium (blogs). I feel strongly that a company can and should set policy about sexual harassment, disparaging the competition, and revealing company secrets, but there's no reason to have different policies for different media. Once the policy is set, employees should be permitted to blog away as long as they follow it. No matter what the decisions you make about who should blog and what the rules are, it is always better for the blogger to avoid passing individual posts through a PR department or legal team. However, if your blog posts *must* be reviewed by others in your organization before going live, then have your colleagues focus only on the content, not your actual words. Do not let others in your organization turn your authentic and passionate writing into another form of marketing gobbledeygook.

Let's talk about ethics for a moment. All sorts of unethical practices go on in the blogosphere, and you must be certain to hold yourself and your organization accountable for your actions as a blogger. Some organizations have gotten caught using unethical practices on their blogs and have done great harm to their corporate reputations. I've included some of the issues you need to pay attention to, as well as an example of each unethical practice. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but rather a starting point for you to think about ethics.

- *Transparency.* You should never pretend to be someone you are not. For example, don't use another name to submit a comment on any blog (your own or somebody else's), and don't create a blog that talks about your company without disclosing that someone from your company is behind it.
- *Privacy.* Unless you've been given permission, don't blog about something that was disclosed to you. For example, don't post material from an e-mail someone sent you unless you have permission.
- *Disclosure.* It is important to disclose anything that people might consider a conflict of interest in a blog post. For example, if I write in my blog about a product from a company that is one of my consulting clients, I put a sentence at the end disclosing my relationship with the company.
- *Truthfulness.* Don't lie. For example, never make up a customer story just because it makes good blog content.
- *Credit.* You should give credit to bloggers (and other sources) whose material you have used in your blog. For example, don't read a great post on someone else's blog, take the idea, change a few words, and make it your own. Besides being good ethical practice, links to other bloggers whose ideas you have used helps to introduce them to your blog and they may link to you.

Again, this is not a complete list. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association has created an *Ethical Guide for Bloggers*.<sup>4</sup> I recommend that you read and follow the guidelines. But you should also follow your gut. If sending a post feels funny to you for some reason or makes you uncomfortable, it may be unethical. What would your mother say about that post? If she would tell you it is wrong, it probably is, so don't send it. Please do the right thing.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.womma.org/blogger/>

## Blogging Basics: What You Need to Know to Get Started

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Unlike Web sites, which require design and HTML skills to produce, blogs are quick and easy to set up using off-the-shelf software with easy-to-use features. With just a little basic know-how, you can quickly and easily establish and promote your blog. Here are some specific tips to keep in mind:

- Before you begin, think carefully about the name of your blog and its tagline, which will be indexed by the search engines. It is very difficult to go back and change this information once you have established it.
- Easy-to-use blogging software is available from Blogger,<sup>5</sup> TypePad,<sup>6</sup> WordPress,<sup>7</sup> and others. Some of the services are free and others require a small subscription fee. Research the services and choose wisely based on your needs, because it is difficult to switch to a different service without losing all the content you have already created. And once your blog has been indexed by search engines, and people have subscribed to your RSS feed or bookmarked your URL, a change to different software is really tough.
- You will need to choose a URL for your blog. The blogging services all offer customizable URLs (such as [yourblog.typepad.com](http://yourblog.typepad.com)). You can also map your blog to your company's domain ([www.yourcompany.com/yourblog](http://www.yourcompany.com/yourblog)) or to a custom domain ([www.yourblog.com](http://www.yourblog.com)).
- Blogging software makes it easy to choose color, design, and font, and to create a simple text-based masthead. You might consider using a custom graphical image as your masthead—

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.blogger.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.typepad.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://wordpress.org/>

these are easy to design and will make your blog more attractive to readers.

- As you begin your blog, tweak your design, and tentatively try a few posts, I recommend you use password protection for the first few weeks or so. That way you can share your blog with a few friends and colleagues first and make changes before opening it up to the world.
- The look and feel of the blog could be complementary to your corporate design guidelines, but it should not be identical. For many blogs, it is better to be a bit different from the corporate look to signal to readers that the blog is an independent voice, not corporate-speak.
- Blogging software usually allows you to turn on a comments feature so your visitors can respond to your posts. There are several options for you to consider. Some people prefer their blogs to have no comments from readers at all, and that might be the right choice for you. However, one of the most exciting things about blogging is when your readers comment on what you've written. Depending on your blogging software, you may opt for open comments (where people can write comments that are not subject to your approval) or for a system where you need to approve each comment before it appears on your blog. Many bloggers use the approval feature to watch for inappropriate comments. But I encourage you to allow any comments from people who disagree with you—debate is one of the best indications of a well-read blog. Unfortunately, the blogosphere is plagued by the problem of comment spam, so to prevent automated comment robots from vandalizing your blog, some comment systems require people to answer a simple question before their comments go live (I use this approach, and it works very well).
- Most blogs also have a feature to allow trackbacks, which are messages that another blogger sends to you when she has posted something on her blog that references a post you wrote first. A trackback says to your blog readers, “Hey, if

you're reading this original post, you might also be interested in a related post on another blog, so click here." Thus, a trackback is similar to a comment. However, instead of leaving a comment on *your* blog, the other blogger writes a post on her blog and sends you a trackback so your readers know her post is there. I recommend you set up your blog so that you must approve trackbacks before they get posted there.

- Pay close attention to the categories you choose for your blog, and add social media tags for services like Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us to each post. (Take another look at Chapter 14 for more on social media tags.)
- RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a standard delivery format for many of your readers. Make certain that your new blog has RSS capability. Most blogging software services have RSS feeds as a standard feature.
- Include an "About" page that includes your photo, biography, affiliations, and information about your blog. Often when people visit a blog for the first time, they want to know about the blogger, so it is important to provide background.
- Encourage people to contact you, make it easy for them to reach you online, and be sure to follow up personally on your fan mail. You'll get a bunch of inquiries, questions, praise, and an occasional detractor if you make it easy for people to contact you. Because of the huge problem with spam, many people don't want to publish e-mail addresses. But the biggest problem is with automated robots that harvest e-mail addresses, so to thwart them, write your e-mail address so humans can read it but the machines cannot. On my Web site, for example, I list my e-mail address as david (at) DavidMeermanScott (dot) com.

## Pimp Out Your Blog

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Before my daughter started eighth grade in September 2006, she spent the entire week pimping out her school binder. All the cool

girls do it, transforming standard plastic three-ring binders with photos, stickers, song lyrics, and other bits and bobs on the outside. She's even got a spot for a quote of the day that she updates each morning. Inside, the binder has page dividers she's customized and pocket folders with pens and protractors and whatnot.

I got to thinking that the same is true of good blogs. A pimped-out blog shows the blogger's personality. I've pimped out my own blog with lots of cool stuff. On the top is a masthead that I had a friend who's a designer create. In TypePad (which I use for my Web Ink Now blog), if your blog is 800 pixels wide in total, you just have someone design an image that's 770 pixels wide by 100 or 150 pixels high and drop it in—TypePad automatically adds a border and replaces the rather plain-looking text masthead with the new design. Other blog software tools also support graphical mastheads, although the specific requirements and implementation methods will be different.

On the right and left columns of my blog, I have links to Amazon from the cover images of my books. Because these links are part of my Amazon Associates program account, I'm even paid a small commission for every book sold. (Hey, it's not much money, but every few months I can take my family out for a decent dinner on the proceeds.) I've also got links to pages on my site and to my other Web content, such as my blog about my collection of Apollo space artifacts,<sup>8</sup> my Squidoo lens, and through Technorati I've created a link to the blogs that link to mine. Through the use of small logos with embedded links, I send people to the articles I've written for *EContent* magazine, to information about the Newstex Blogs On Demand network that syndicates my blog, and to the homepages of associations with which I'm affiliated. Finally, I have easy sign-up links for people who want to view my blog as an RSS subscription via FeedBurner,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.apolloartifacts.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.feedburner.com/>

and an e-mail subscription option with FeedBlitz<sup>10</sup> so people can get each of my blog posts sent to their e-mail inbox.

One of the downsides of a blog is that the reverse-chronological aspect (most recent post at the top) means that much of your best stuff, which may have been written last month or last year, is hidden away. Thus, I've also included easy navigation links on my blog so people can quickly find the good stuff. For example, I include "The Best of Web Ink Now" with links to a handful of my most popular posts, a scrolling list of recent comments on the blog, and navigation by category of post.

Pimping out your blog is easy. If you devote a few hours to it, you can make a very cool-looking blog that even my teenage daughter would approve of. Sure, the standard templates offered by the blog software providers are great to get started, but once you are fully committed to blogging, it is important to make your blog personality shine through with links, images, a masthead, photos, and other add-ons.

## Building an Audience for Your New Blog

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When you send your first few blog posts, you are likely to hear a deafening silence. You'll be waiting for comments, but none will come. You'll check your site statistics and be disappointed by the tiny number of visitors. Don't get discouraged—that's normal! It takes time to build an audience for your blog. When you're just getting started, make sure people know it is there and can find it! Create links to your blog from your homepage, product pages, or online media room. Mention your blog in your e-mail or offline newsletters, and create links to your blog as part of your e-mail signature and those of other people in your organization.

The good news is that blogs that are regularly updated generate high search engine rankings, because the algorithms that are used by

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.feedblitz.com/>

Google, Yahoo!, and the other search engines reward sites (and blogs) that update frequently. It is likely that you will get significant search engine traffic once you've been consistently blogging for a while. I typically post three or four times a week to my blog, and most days my blog generates over 100 visitors via search engines. To ensure that your new blog is found by your buyers as they search for what you have to offer, be certain to post on topics of interest and to use the important phrases that people are searching on (see Chapter 10 if you want to review how to identify the words and phrases that your buyers use). Smart bloggers understand search engines and use their blogs to reach audiences directly.

Commenting on other people's blogs (and including a link to your blog) is a good way to build an audience. If you comment (and track back to) blogs in the same space as yours, you might be surprised at how quickly you will get visitors to your new blog. A curious thing about blogging etiquette is that bloggers who are competitive for business offline are usually very cooperative online, with links back and forth from their blogs. It's a bit like all the auto dealers in town congregating on the same street—proximity is good for everyone, so people work together.

Your customers, potential customers, investors, employees, and the media are all reading blogs, and there is no doubt that blogs are a terrific way for marketers to tell authentic stories to their buyers. But building an audience for a blog takes time. Most blog services provide tools for measuring traffic. Use this data to learn which posts are attracting the most attention. You can also learn what sites people are coming from when they visit your blog and what search terms they used to find you. Use this information to continually improve your blog. Once again, think like a publisher.

## Tag, and Your Buyer Is *It* ---

With the total number of existing blogs now in the tens of millions and with the availability of niche blogs on virtually any topic, it is



easy to get lost in the blogosphere. The simple truth is that it isn't always easy for people to find a blog post on subjects of interest. Recently, a colleague of mine needed new tires for his car. Instead of just heading to the local retailer to be at the mercy of a salesperson, or poking around tire manufacturer Web sites, he went to one of the blog search engines to see what people were writing about tires. He entered the keyword "tires," and sure enough, within a few clicks he reached several blogs that had useful information about purchasing tires. But he also faced a heck of a lot of useless noise with the word *tires* in the results—things like analysis of tires used in a recent NASCAR race, rants about the garbage on the sides of freeways (which includes discarded tires), and even posts about . . . ahem . . . "spare tires" on middle-aged men.

It is precisely this problem—the false hits in word-and-phrase searches, not middle-aged men's lack of exercise—that led blog search engine Technorati to develop a tagging feature that lets bloggers categorize what their posts are about. To use this feature, a blogger simply creates a set of meta-tags for each blog post. So, if someone is looking for a blog post about tires, she can go to Technorati and search on the tag for tires rather than on the keyword. This gets readers much closer to what they are looking for than a simple word search.

From the blogger's perspective, the benefits of adding tags to create increased precision about the post's content, whereby each post reaches more people, are worth the extra effort. For example, I assign each post that I write to multiple appropriate categories, such as "marketing," "public relations," and "advertising." New visitors reach my blog every day as a result of searching on the tags that I had added to blog posts.

## Bloggng Outside of North America —

People often ask me about blogging in other countries. They want to know if the marketing approaches I outline work elsewhere. Specifically, many people ask if blogs are a good way to do marketing and PR in Europe and Asia. While I cannot comment on every single country,

I can say that blogging is a global phenomenon in countries with widespread web access and that many bloggers from other countries are active in the global blogging community. I've received links and trackbacks from bloggers in something like 40 different countries. It's so cool when a comment or a link comes into my blog from someone in, say, Russia or Finland or Thailand.

There is other clear evidence that blogging is alive and well outside of North America. TypePad offers services in the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Finland, and Belgium, in addition to the United States. And Technorati, the blog search engine, maintains sites in English, French, German, Italian, Chinese, and Korean. My wife, Yukari Watanabe Scott,<sup>11</sup> an author of Japanese-language novels, magazine articles, and nonfiction books, maintains a blog to reach her readers in Japan. This technique is especially important because her readers there are halfway around the world from where we live, near Boston.

One of my favorite blogs is Adrian Neylan's Cablog,<sup>12</sup> a hilarious collection of stories about his life as a taxi driver in Sydney, Australia. This is what blogging is all about: giving a global voice to a common bloke, transforming him into a totally uncommon international media personality. Neylan shares fascinating stories about the people in his backseat and, in a funny way, tells us a little about ourselves, even though many of us are a dozen time zones away. I've been to Sydney 20 or so times, and I can assure you that next time business takes me there, I will hire Neylan to drive me where I need to go.

For a true international blogging success story, consider the example of Linas Simonis, a marketing consultant from Lithuania who established in April 2005 one of the first business blogs<sup>13</sup> in that country. The reaction from the Lithuanian business community was almost immediate. "People didn't know what RSS was in Lithuania at that time, so I created an e-mail subscription to my blog," Simonis

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<sup>11</sup> <http://watanabeyukari.weblogs.jp/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cablog.com.au/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pozicionavimas.lt/>

says. “By the end of the first year, I had four hundred subscribers, and you must remember that less than three-and-a-half million people live in Lithuania, so the equivalent would be something like forty thousand subscribers in the United States.”

The business press also took notice. “Now I am quoted as a positioning and marketing expert because of my blog,” he says. “Journalists are calling me, not because I pitched them, but because of my blog posts. I did some pitches a while ago, but they were totally unsuccessful. But news on my blog is picked up and used widely by the media. One article on my blog, called ‘How to Position Lithuania,’ generated two TV appearances on major TV channels in prime time, a radio interview with the country’s biggest radio station, and about a dozen pickups in print media. And this was without any effort from my side, without any pitch, all because of great blog content.”

But what’s really remarkable about Simonis’s story is the new business that he generated via his blog. “Three months after I started the blog, my company stopped needing to make cold calls to solicit new business,” he says. “The blog and the company Web site generated so many requests that we didn’t need to actively seek new clients—they come to us. Soon after I started blogging, I was even hired by conference organizers to deliver speeches and seminars, and I had calls from universities to speak to students.” Simonis has also started consulting for several corporate clients in Lithuania that wish to establish blogs, and he publishes an English-language blog<sup>14</sup> as a forum to write about positioning strategy in a Web 2.0 world.

## What Are You Waiting For?

Everybody I’ve spoken with about starting a blog has said the same thing (but in slightly different ways). They were all a bit uncomfortable when they started a blog. They felt a little dorky because they

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.positioningstrategy.com/>

didn't know all the unwritten rules. They were even a little scared to push the button on that first post. We've all been there. To get comfortable before you take the plunge, remember back to Chapter 4: You should follow a bunch of blogs in your industry first. What things do you like about those blogs? What's annoying? What would you do differently? Then before you jump into the water by creating your own blog, you can stick your toe in by leaving comments on other people's blogs. Test out your blog voice. Finally, when it feels right, start your own blog. And when you do get going, please send me your URL so I can check it out.



# 18

## Podcasting and Video Made, Well, as Easy as Possible

Creating audio and video content for marketing and PR purposes requires the same attention to appropriate topics as other techniques outlined in this book. It requires targeting individual buyer personas with a thoughtful message that addresses some aspect of their life or a problem they face. By doing so, you brand your organization as smart and worthy of doing business with. However, unlike text-based content such as blogging or sending news releases, audio and video require a modest investment in additional hardware such as microphones and video cameras, as well as software, and, depending on the level of quality you want to achieve, may also necessitate the time-consuming editing of files. Although the actual procedures for podcasting and video are a bit more convoluted than, say, starting a blog, they are still not all that difficult.

### Podcasting 101

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A podcast is a piece of audio content tied to a subscription component so people can receive regular updates. The best way to think of

podcasting is that it's like a radio show except that you listen to each episode at your convenience by downloading it either to your computer or to a mobile device like an iPod. The equipment you'll need to start podcasting will range in cost from a few hundred dollars at the low end to a bit over a thousand dollars for professional-level sound. Plus, you'll probably want to host your audio files on an external server requiring a monthly fee.

How do you get started? "I've found that the most important thing is show preparation," says John J. Wall, producer of *The M Show*,<sup>1</sup> a 10-minute news, talk, and entertainment show. "Unless you are real comfortable talking extemporaneously, you will want to have a script laid out ahead of time. It just sounds more polished when you do." I don't have my own podcast, but as a frequent guest on radio shows and podcasts, I agree with Wall—the best shows I participate in are those where the interviewer knows the material, shares some questions with me ahead of time so I can prepare, and keeps things focused.

Beginning with developing a script, below are the steps and technical issues involved with producing a podcast. To really learn the ins and outs before you start your own podcast, you might want to check out one of the detailed books on the subject, such as *Podcasting for Dummies* by Tee Morris and Evo Terra.

- *Show preparation* includes gathering ideas for the show and creating a script. Think about your buyer personas and what you can discuss that interests them. If you plan to interview guests, make sure you know how to pronounce their names (don't laugh, this is a frequent mistake) and you have their titles, affiliations, and other information correct. It's common practice to plug a guest's business, so know ahead of time what URL or product you will mention.
- *Recording when you are near your computer* is done with a microphone (many options to choose from) that delivers the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.themshow.com/>

audio into your computer. You'll need podcasting software such as CastBlaster<sup>2</sup> as an interface to create and publish your podcast.

- *Mobile recording gear* is required if you are going to do the roving-reporter thing and interview people at events or perhaps your employees around the world. Mobile recording gear is made by several companies including iRiver.<sup>3</sup>
- *Phone interviews* require a digital recording switch device, such as those built by Telos Systems,<sup>4</sup> that connects to your telephone.
- *Editing your audio files* is optional; you can always just upload the files as you recorded them. If you choose to clean them up, you can edit at the micro-scale (removing *um*, *uh*, and other audible pauses) or at the macro-scale (e.g., removing the last five minutes of an interview). Many podcasters edit segments that they recorded at different times, putting them together to create a show. Apple's GarageBand<sup>5</sup> software includes many of the audio capabilities of a professional radio station and makes editing simple.
- *Postproduction editing* sometimes includes running a noise-reduction program (to get rid of that annoying air-conditioner noise in the background) and sound compression (to even out volume of sections that had been recorded at different times and places).
- *Tagging the audio* is an important step that some people overlook or perform without taking due care. This step involves adding text-based information about the audio to make it easier for people to find. This information is what appears in the search engines and audio distribution sites such as iTunes.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.castblaster.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iriver.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.telos-systems.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/>



Your tags also display on listeners' iPod displays, so don't ignore or gloss over this step.

- *Hosting and distribution* is necessary to ensure that people can easily obtain your podcasts. Services such as Liberated Syndication<sup>6</sup> host the (sometimes very large) audio files and syndicate them to the distribution networks such as iTunes.
- *Promotion* is essential to make sure that people find out about your podcasts. If you do interview shows (which are an easy way to get started and provide excellent content), make sure that you provide links to the show to all of the guests. Many people will help you promote the show that they have been featured on. You will also want to network with other podcasters in your space, because very short on-air plugs cross-promoting other podcasts is common and a good way for people to build audiences. Don't forget to put links to your podcast on your Web site, in your e-mail signature, and on your offline materials including business cards and brochures. Also, send out a news release alerting people to important shows (see Chapter 14).
- A *companion blog* is a key component used by nearly all podcasters to discuss the content of each show. An important reason for having a companion blog is that its text will be indexed by the search engines, driving more people to sign up for the podcast feed. A blog also allows the show's host to write a few paragraphs about the content of that particular show and to provide links to the blogs and Web sites of guests who will be appearing (so people can get a sense of a show's content prior to listening). Most organizations that use podcasting as a marketing tool also use the podcast blog as a place to move people into the sales process by providing links to the company site or to demonstrations or trial offers.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.libsyn.com/>

“You can be up and running with your new podcast in less than a month,” says Wall. “The principles are all quite simple, but it takes a bit of time to figure out the various hardware and software elements. But the community is very helpful. Make sure you let other podcasters know that you have a new show, because we often reference each other with quick on-air plugs.”

## My Audio Is Your Podcast

The Student Loan Network<sup>7</sup> is an online student loan company that’s been around since 1998. The company is a significant lender, with some \$150 million to \$200 million in loans produced each year. The Student Loan Network site excels as an online guide to student loans and financial aid, and it reaches students and parents directly with financial aid advice and student loan services. Particularly interesting is the company’s *Financial Aid Podcast*,<sup>8</sup> a six-days-per-week podcast available on iTunes and other podcast distribution and subscription services.

“We’re always looking for a competitive edge online,” says Christopher S. Penn, chief evangelist for The Student Loan Network and host of *Financial Aid Podcast*. His show helps students (and some parents, too) make college more affordable through shows on topics such as credit cards, international student issues, private student loans, and scholarships. But Penn also produces episodes dealing with other aspects of finance that interest young people. The podcast was the first and is by far the most popular show about financial aid for college-bound students. “So much of modern American society revolves around money in one way or another, and the more I learn about it, the more I see, the more I understand,” Penn says on the bio page of his podcast’s companion

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.studentloannetwork.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.FinancialAidPodcast.com>

blog. “Money, economics, all that stuff is so important, so vital to understand, and it’s what really drives me to crank out a podcast every single day. Each day, another piece gets added to the puzzle, and I know a little bit more about how to make the world work for me—and for my listeners.

“The audience for *Financial Aid Podcast* is primarily people who are looking to get into college, are currently in college, or have just graduated,” Penn says. “The nice thing about the college aid demographic is that they all have iPods, which is ideal for the podcast as a marketing tool.” Because Penn understands his buyer personas— young people—he can speak to them in an authentic, resonant way. Penn knows that for his demographic, a podcast is perfect, because so many people are already listening to audio and have iTunes accounts.

“Podcasting is great marketing because, like blogging, it is a human voice,” Penn says. “Most podcasts don’t have a PR stamp on them, so the shows come across as being human. The reason why this is interesting is that there is a big marketing shift going on right now. The older, traditional advertising model, like 1950s TV, is that we publish and you consume. However, today’s marketing model is that we publish and you respond. It provides me real feedback from real people, and I have conversations. I can be interactive.”

Penn sees a clear link between marketing and customer service at companies. He suggests that customer service needs to be real and authentic and have a human voice, just like great marketing. “There is no such thing as ‘on message’ anymore,” Penn says. “[Customer service] is no longer about spin, but instead becoming a part of the conversation. Now I think that companies that do not make the jump to blogging and podcasting and interacting with customers look like dinosaurs. Some industries are tailor-made for this, but they do not get it. For example, I would think that real estate agents could do a great job with video podcasts, but it is very rare. If you have a customer services department, you need to be doing this kind of marketing.”

Penn has conducted research about his audience and has adapted

his show accordingly. “Podcasting is time-shifted,” he says. “You can take it with you and listen to it at any time. My shows are all eighteen to twenty-four minutes, because twenty-four minutes is the average commute, and the average American’s attention span is eighteen minutes.” Penn also has an interesting perspective on competition. He says that he competes with every other podcaster, because listeners have only 24 hours in a day.

Penn has learned that the best way to drive his listeners into The Student Loan Network sales process is to mention URLs on his show. But he is quick to point out that the show is not a sales pitch. “The podcast is not an immediate business generator. We are real and authentic. We want to help people. We want to be beneficial to people,” he says. However, based on promotions the company has run, Penn knows that he’s generated over \$10 million in loans directly from podcasts. “It’s way beyond beer money,” he says.

Who would have thought that a podcast would help to sell millions of dollars in student loans? What Penn clearly realized was that members of his buyer persona, young people, are active podcast listeners. Penn’s decision to start the *Financial Aid Podcast* has certainly paid off; are you missing out on a similar opportunity?

## Video and Your Buyers

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Organizations that deliver products or services that naturally lend themselves to video have been among the first to actively use the medium to market and deliver messages about their offerings. For example, many churches routinely shoot video of weekly services and offer it online for anybody to watch, drawing more people into the congregation. Many amateur and professional sports teams, musicians, and theater groups also use video as a marketing and PR tool.

The idea of *companies* using video for Web marketing is still new. Video follows both blogs and podcasting on the adoption curve at organizations that don’t have a service that naturally lends itself to

video. Some companies are certainly experimenting, typically by embedding video (typically hosted at YouTube) into their existing blogs. I'm starting to see video snippets of CEO speeches and quick product demonstrations on corporate blogs, but this is still quite rare. Guy Kawasaki,<sup>9</sup> managing director of Garage Technology Ventures, uses occasional video clips on his blog to great effect.

Whether they're new to the game or have been offering Web video for years, organizations get their video content onto the computer screens (and video iPods) of buyers in several different ways:

- *Posting to video-sharing sites.* YouTube<sup>10</sup> is the most popular video-sharing site on the Web, although there are others. Organizations post video content on YouTube and send people a link to the content (or hope that it goes viral). Creating a simple video is easy—all you need is a digital video camera or even a mobile phone and a YouTube account. Just like with podcasting, there are all sorts of enhancements and editing techniques you can use to make the video more professional. An example of compelling video contributed by a company and available on YouTube is the Smirnoff “teapartay” video,<sup>11</sup> which features old-money New Englanders rapping. It reminds me of people I went to college with, so I've watched it a bunch of times. IBM has experimented with “mockumentaries,” including a hysterical three-part series called “The Art of the Sale,”<sup>12</sup> which is like a cross between *The Office* TV show and a sales training video. And the viral components of these corporate videos clearly work, because here I am sharing them with you.

<sup>9</sup> <http://blog.guykawasaki.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y4-5Zouvjs>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSqXKp-00hM>

- *Developing an online video channel.* Companies that take online video programming seriously develop their own channel, often with a unique URL. Examples include Weber Grills' Weber Nation Web site,<sup>13</sup> which features video grilling classes, and Ford Bold Moves,<sup>14</sup> a site with a weekly video documentary series that takes visitors inside Ford Motor Company as it attempts one of the largest corporate turn-arounds in history.
- *Attempting stealth insertions to YouTube.* Some companies try to sneak corporate-sponsored video onto YouTube in a way that makes it seem like it is consumer-generated. The YouTube community is remarkably skilled at ratting out inauthentic video, so this approach is fraught with danger.
- *Vlogging.* Short for "video blogging," this term refers to when people embed video content into a blog. The text part of the blog adds context to each video and aids with search engine marketing.
- *Vodcasting.* A vodcast is like a podcast but with video—a video series tied to a syndication component with iTunes and RSS feeds. For example, BMW<sup>15</sup> offers a weekly vodcast series of two-to-three-minute videos about what's going on at BMW. The company uses the vodcasts to publicize the cool things it's doing around the world.
- *Inviting your customer communities to submit video.* This technique is how some companies, including Mentos and Converse,<sup>16</sup> try to generate viral marketing interest. These companies sponsor contests where customers submit short videos. The best are usually showcased on the company site,

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.webernation.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fordboldmoves.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://vodcast.bmw.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.conversegallery.com>

and the winners often get prizes. In some cases, the winning videos are also played on TV as “real” commercials.

Owen Mack,<sup>17</sup> co-founder and head of strategy and development for coBRANDiT, a company that does social media video production, is a pioneer in using video for marketing and PR purposes. From the early days of online video, Mack has helped companies like Puma and Pabst Brewing create video strategies. “Video is an extension of the blogging ethos,” Mack says. “Do you have an interesting story to tell? If you don’t, can you develop something? You need to see what people are saying about you already and know how you can mesh with that. Transparency and openness are required. Done properly, video is very compelling.”

## Knifing the Competition . . . and It’s All Caught on Video

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Mack has taken his interest and expertise in online video to help create video content to market products for a kitchen retail store his family owns in Boston, called KitchenArts;<sup>18</sup> it’s basically a hardware store for cooks. “We have a staff of only four people, but we launched a vlog,” he says. “We shoot quick-and-dirty video about the things that we sell, like how to use kitchen knives. We use a \$300 camera, and then we link to our eBay store where people can buy—this is the low-cost, grassroots way to do video.”

Mack’s use of video for KitchenArts has allowed the small company to present information in a way that the big players don’t. “Our competition is places like Williams-Sonoma,” he says. “I can’t compete with them by doing a better Web site. But I can do a better job

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<sup>17</sup> <http://cobrandit.com/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.kitchenarts.biz/>

with video. I can transmit the ethos and show the personality and demonstrate knowledge of our products on the Web. It's basically home video, but we show how to use things and demonstrate products, so we compete with the big guys. It's also cheap. The eBay store and blog software combined is only about \$50 a month."

KitchenArts has nearly 100 different products for sale online, each with a short video demonstration segment. "It's not making barrel-loads of money, but the sales we make from video as a percentage of my extremely low costs represent terrific margins."

Mack sees video as an important component in an effective marketing mix. "For brands big and small, it's just about putting out interesting and engaging information about your story," he says. "Anybody can do it. The bigger companies can build brand communities to excite brand loyalists and advocates. In this way, video extends the two-way dialog of the blog."

Audio and video content on the Web are still very new for marketers and communicators. But the potential to deliver information to buyers in new and surprising ways is greater when you use a new medium. And while your competition is still trying to figure out "that blogging thing," you can leverage your existing blog into the new worlds of audio and video and leave the competition way behind.





# 19

## Social Networking Sites and Marketing

The popularity of social networking sites including MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, and Xanga is phenomenal. Social networking sites make it easy for people to create a profile about themselves and use it to create a virtual network of their offline friends and to make new friends online. According to comScore Media Metrix,<sup>1</sup> MySpace had 55 million unique visitors and Facebook 14 million unique visitors in August 2006. Of course, not all visitors to these sites create their own profile, but there are millions and millions of people who do create one to share their photos, journals, videos, music, and interests with a network of friends.

### Check Me Out on MySpace ---

Marketing on these sites can be tricky because the online community at social networking sites hates overt commercial messages. Ac-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.comscore.com/>

ceptable marketing and promotion usually involves an offline personality creating a page on a social networking site to build and expand an online following. It is common for members of rock bands to have a MySpace page. For example, Boston-based rock band Guster<sup>2</sup> has a popular MySpace page with a network as of this writing of 88,391 friends.

Volkswagen has taken a different approach. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, marketers at Volkswagen created a MySpace profile page for Helga,<sup>3</sup> the German character who appears in some of the company's TV commercials. Visitors learn Helga's Likes ("I love the smell of gasoline. Gears turning, oil burning, stomach churning. Go fast or go home. Efficiency") and Dislikes ("Pimped rides, bumper balls, people in the left lane going 40 with the blinker on. Traffic. Scorpios, you can't trust them"). Users can download ringtones, images of Helga, and short audio clips in Helga's strong German accent. My favorite Helga clip is "My xenon headlights are on." The Helga MySpace page works because Helga is very clearly a made-up character and she is fun. Yes, this is advertising. However, it works (she has 8,632 friends) because Helga is seen as an interesting, slightly offbeat (albeit fictional) online character.

Yet another tactic that some smart nonprofit organizations use is to encourage employees to establish a personal page, with details of the cause they support, as a way to spread the word. Supporters of political candidates (as well as some candidates themselves) create pages on social networking sites, too. As with all good marketing, it is important to create content that is right for the people whom you want to reach, and that starts with the choice of which social networking site (or sites) to have a profile on.

While some people might be tempted to create a page on all the social networking sites, this may not be necessary, since each one appeals to different users. "While the top social networking sites

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/guster>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/misshelga>

are typically viewed as directly competing with one another, our analysis demonstrates that each site occupies a slightly different niche,” says Jack Flanagan, executive vice president of comScore Media Metrix. “MySpace.com has the broadest appeal across age ranges, Facebook.com has created a niche among the college crowd, Friendster.com attracts a higher percentage of adults, and Xanga.com is most popular among younger teens. There is a misconception that social networking is the exclusive domain of teenagers, but this analysis confirms that the appeal of social networking sites is far broader.”

As you consider a strategy to get yourself out there and onto a social networking site for marketing and PR purposes, just remember that authenticity and transparency are critical. Don't try to fool the community into thinking that the page is something that it is not (you might want to reread the discussion of ethics in Chapter 17). Frequent eruptions within these communities happen when members uncover a fraud of some kind, such as an advertising agency creating fake profiles for people to promote products. Yes, you can use social networking sites such as MySpace to build a following, but the approaches that bands like Guster and companies like Volkswagen take work best; avoid sleazy fake profiles of people who supposedly use your products.

## Do You Squidoo?

Another social networking site called Squidoo<sup>4</sup> is based not on personal profiles of individuals but on people's expertise in a niche subject. Squidoo is another way for marketers to build an online presence easily and for free. Squidoo, headed up by “original squid” Seth Godin<sup>5</sup>—the founder of Yoyodyne (which he sold to Yahoo! in

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.squidoo.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://sethgodin.typepad.com/>

1998), creator of “Permission Marketing,” and best-selling business author of *Purple Cow* and *Small Is the New Big*—is built around online lenses, which are a way to filter a person’s expertise on a subject onto a single page. Interested people check out a lens on a topic and quickly get pointed to useful Web sites. A person who makes a lens is a lensmaster, and he or she uses a lens to provide context. “Everyone is an expert,” the Squidoo site says, and Squidoo helps everyone share that expertise with the world.

A lens is not a destination, but rather like a guide that sends visitors to other places. The Squidoo FAQ says, “It’s a place to start, not finish.” Lenses provide detail on a topic and point to other content such as blogs, favorite links, RSS feeds, Flickr photos, Google maps, or Amazon books. I’ve created (at this writing) five lenses, and for a lensmaster like me, the effort is minimal (each lens took only a few hours to create), yet my lenses are consistently among the top five referring sites to my blog and Web site—only the search engines such as Google and the magazine and marketing sites I write for generate more traffic for me.

Vince Ciulla, a professional automotive technician with over 30 years’ experience, has created a popular Squidoo lens called Auto Repair—Trouble Shooting<sup>6</sup> that points to content on his main site.<sup>7</sup> A part of the All Info About network, this main site offers over 20,000 pages of auto repair content, including some 9,000 questions and answers. “A lot of people want to do their own repairs, and finding information about specific vehicles on the Web is difficult,” Ciulla says. “Fixing your car is easy; the hard part is figuring out what’s wrong. My Web site and links from my Squidoo lens are how people can get the information they need for free, such as how to replace a brake master cylinder. I also explain things like how the cruise control works.”

Most of the traffic to Ciulla’s site comes through search engines, but visitors also come from Squidoo. “The last time I checked, there were 210,000 search terms pointing to my pages,” he says. Ciulla

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.squidoo.com/autorepair\\_diagnostics/](http://www.squidoo.com/autorepair_diagnostics/)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.allinfoaboutautorepairs.com/Home.html>

makes money from advertising on his site and also from telephone consultations with people who want to discuss specific auto repair issues with him. He's conducted some 2,500 paid telephone consultations as a result of people finding him online and wanting to tap his expertise. "To get more exposure for my content, I do a regular guest appearance on *America's Car Show*<sup>8</sup> syndicated radio show and I have the Squidoo lens, which I use to funnel people to my All Info About site. There's not much maintenance required in Squidoo, and it drives traffic, so it is worth doing. I also started a Squidoo group<sup>9</sup> with other people who have auto repair lenses, and we've got some people who provide information on hybrid cars."

Squidoo is not just for companies and independent consultants. Consider Global Action Foundation (GAF), a nonprofit organization started by a group of young professionals who work to eradicate extreme poverty. The GAF promotes their efforts (such as a project the group has begun in Sierra Leone to support amputees and their families) via the organization's Squidoo lens.<sup>10</sup> The lens includes photos depicting the extreme poverty conditions that GAF helps to eradicate, links to the blog written by young American medical student John Daniel Kelly (who is a driving force behind GAF), and links for making online donations. This lens successfully portrays GAF work via the comprehensive content, and it encourages people to contribute.

## Optimizing Social Networking Pages

If you're creating pages on MySpace, Squidoo, and the other social networking sites, and if you've been following the planning process outlined in Chapter 10, then you're creating content that reaches

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.americascarshow.com/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.squidoo.com/groups/Auto\\_Repair](http://www.squidoo.com/groups/Auto_Repair)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.squidoo.com/GlobalAction/hq>

your buyers and helps you to achieve your goals. Although social networking sites aren't advertising, you can still use the sites to lead people into your buying process. For example, Guster has links to the band's latest album, touring schedule, and online ticket purchasing tools; Volkswagen links to the automaker's other sites; Vince Ciulla links to his extensive set of content pages; and Global Action Foundation links to a place where visitors can make online donations.

Here are some ideas to get the most out of using social networking sites for marketing:

- *Target a specific audience.* Create a page that reaches an audience that is important to your organization. It is usually better to be thinking about a small niche market to target (e.g., people who want to do their own car repairs but don't know how to diagnose what's wrong).
- *Be a thought leader.* Provide valuable and interesting information that people want to check out. As you will remember from Chapter 11, it is better to show your expertise in a market or a buyer's problems than to blather on about your product.
- *Be authentic and transparent.* Don't try to impersonate someone else. It is sleazy, and if you get caught you can do irreparable harm to your company's reputation. If your mother would say it is wrong, it probably is.
- *Create lots of links.* Link to your own sites and blog, and those of others in your industry and network. Everybody loves links—it makes the Web what it is. You should certainly link to your own stuff from a social networking site (like your blog), but also link to other people's sites and content in your own market.
- *Encourage people to contact you.* Make it easy for people to reach you online, and be sure to follow up personally on your fan mail.
- *Participate.* Create groups and participate in online discussions. Become an online leader and organizer.

- *Make it easy to find you.* Tag your page and add your page into the subject directories. Encourage others to bookmark your page with del.icio.us and DIGG.
- *Experiment.* These sites are great because you can try new things. If it isn't working, tweak it. Or abandon the effort and try something new. There is no such thing as an expert in social networking—we're all learning as we go!

## Second Life: Marketing in a Virtual World

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One of the reasons why I love Web marketing is that the tools, techniques, and content are constantly evolving. This stuff is more art than science, and your buyers reward creativity by responding to your online efforts. But the Web moves very quickly. Just when you've figured out that blogging thing, along comes podcasting and YouTube. But if you're open to trying out new things, you can be first in your industry to use something new to communicate to your buyers. Some of the very first blogs are still the most popular in their niches—the authors are rewarded for their foresight with popularity.

During the process of researching and writing this book, I became fascinated with the online virtual world called Second Life.<sup>11</sup> Second Life is a 3-D online world entirely built and owned by its residents. But this is not a game because there is no goal and nobody is keeping score; rather, it is a world with well over a million residents (as of this writing) and an economy built on the Linden dollar in which millions of U.S. dollars (at the current exchange rate) change hands each month. The Second Life World is teeming with people who use a self-created, in-world avatar to interact with others by buying, selling, and trading things with other residents (and just milling about

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<sup>11</sup> <http://secondlife.com/>



and chatting). You can purchase land (as of this writing, the equivalent of US\$1,200 buys an island, but there are rumors in the community that land prices will soon rise), build a store or business, and make money. People sell clothes for avatars, artwork and furniture for homes and businesses, and basically anything that you need in the real world. Not surprisingly, there is even an underworld of sleaze as well. But you don't have to be into commerce; you can just walk around and hang out. The best way to learn about Second Life is to become a resident. It's free. But if you want to bone up first, I recommend the excellent book *Second Life: The Official Guide* by Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Cory Ondrejka, and Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham.

"Try to imagine Second Life as a three-dimensional Web page," says C.C. Chapman,<sup>12</sup> vice president of new marketing at crayon, an agency that operates in Second Life. "It's a virtual world. Many people look at it and say that it looks like a video game. Individuals create a 3-D representative of themselves. You can build houses and replicas of colleges and other real-world places. From the marketing standpoint, it is the next phase of evolution of a Web page, and any product or service or company that wants to engage with people should be in Second Life with a presence. For example, Telus has a presence by selling virtual cell phones for your avatar. Universal did a concert in what looked like a Manhattan loft. You could go to Universal's loft and see cool stuff on the walls and walk around and interact with other people about the music. And you could even buy the music. But this stuff is just in its infancy. Many brands are jumping in, and I hope that the companies stick around and grow with the community and not just put up a billboard and leave."

As I write this, Second Life is still very new and not well-known yet, but the growth rate is phenomenal. I wouldn't be surprised if the population quadruples between the time I write these words and the time this book is in stores. I've been a resident for only a few months

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cc-chapman.com/>

(my in-world name is Meerman Henley—if you bump into me, say “hey”), and I don’t feel like a newbie because everyone is still figuring it all out. What’s absolutely fascinating to me as an online marketer is the rapid growth of companies that have set up in Second Life. Some interesting corporate outposts in Second Life include the following:

- CNET, an interactive media company, has opened an office in Second Life that looks like its real-world San Francisco office.
- Sun Microsystems has a presence where they work with their gaming developers.
- Suzanne Vega did a live concert in Second Life and other major recording artists have followed.
- John Hockenberry, host of *The Infinite Mind*,<sup>13</sup> NPR’s popular mental health program, interviewed author Kurt Vonnegut inside Second Life.
- The Second Life Boutique<sup>14</sup> is a place for entrepreneurs to sell things such as clothing for your avatar.

Companies that work with technology businesses in the real world have been among the first to jump in. For example, Text100,<sup>15</sup> a public relations firm serving technology companies, has a PR office in Second Life, and they conduct live press conferences for clients. “We view virtual worlds as the next stage in the evolution of peer-to-peer media like blogs, wikis, social networks and other online forums,” says Georg Kolb, EVP and leader of the peer media practice at Text100.

The global information company Reuters<sup>16</sup> opened the world’s first virtual news bureau in Second Life. Reuters reporter Adam Paskick, known as Adam Reuters in Second Life, serves as virtual bureau

<sup>13</sup> <http://theinfinitemind.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.slboutique.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.text100.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/>

chief. “Like any reporter, I’ll cover Second Life events as they happen, interview residents, and uncover interesting stories,” Pasick says. “Reuters’s capability and experience in news and financial reporting will be valuable to the thousands of people who need to make decisions about how they run their businesses inside Second Life. Whatever the news, Reuters will be there.”

As Second Life grows, more and more marketing and PR people will be thinking about what this online virtual world means for their organization. “Second Life is a new thing for everybody,” says Kami Watson Huysse,<sup>17</sup> principal of the offline agency My PR Pro, who founded a group of communicators that meets in Second Life on the second Thursday of each month. “Although we’ve met for several months, we always have many new people who come to check it out who hadn’t been in Second Life before. We have reporters who come to the meetings, too. What we’ve learned is that residents of Second Life want to have a better experience, so the most successful companies are likely to be those that can add to the experience. Duran Duran doing a live concert is cool, but what if the band opened a club and then had their rocker friends come in once a month and do concerts?”

As a demographic, people who are early residents of Second Life are a marketer’s dream. “These are creative and innovative people with a high education level who are independent thinkers with libertarian views,” Huysse says. “But it is sort of strange from the marketing and PR perspective. Whom do you market to: the Second Life avatar? Or the person behind it?” In a world where you can make your avatar anything you want—a different race, sex, and age for example—whom you market to is a fascinating question. As you read this, the general public will know much more about Second Life. I wouldn’t be surprised if a major business magazine ran a Second Life cover story (remember in 2005, when blogs were on all the business magazine covers?).

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<sup>17</sup> <http://overtonecomm.blogspot.com/>

What is certain is that marketing and PR on the Web will continue to evolve—quickly. Success comes from experimentation. With a site like Second Life (or whatever the next new thing is), nobody knows the rules at first. Smart marketers are succeeding just by trying. Reuters, for example, generated a ton of stories in the mainstream media and on blogs when it opened the first virtual news bureau in Second Life. They got a huge amount of buzz just for trying. The trick of any new media: participate in it; don't just try to use it. Be a part of the action! Whatever your social networking site of choice, don't hesitate to jump in and see what you can do.



# 20

## Search Engine Marketing

**S**earch engine marketing is remarkable because, unlike almost every other form of marketing, it does not rely on the interruption technique. Think again for a moment about what I've called "old-rules" marketing and its interruption-based advertising techniques. As I've discussed in previous chapters, the old rules required you to interrupt TV viewers and hope they weren't already flipping to another channel; or to interrupt people as they sorted through the mail and hope your message wouldn't go into the junk-mail pile; or to interrupt magazine readers and hope they would pause at your stinky pull-out perfume sample. These days, ads are everywhere—on signs along the highway, on the sides of supermarket carts, in elevators. These interruptions are not only annoying for consumers (and harmful to a brand if overdone); they are also increasingly ineffective.

Now think about how you use search engines. Unlike nontargeted, interruption-based advertising, the information that appears in search engines after you've typed in a phrase is content you actually want to see. You're actually *looking* for it. This should be a marketer's dream-come-true.

Here's something very important to consider: *This entire book is*

*about search engine marketing.* Please pause to reflect on that. If you followed the New Rules of Marketing and PR as outlined in these pages, you will have built a fantastic search engine marketing program! You started with your buyer personas, then you built content especially for these buyers—content that talks about the problems they face in the words and phrases your customers use. Then you delivered the content in the online forms they prefer (podcasts, blogs, e-books, Web sites, and so on). This terrific content designed especially for your buyers will be indexed by the search engines and . . . that's it. You already have a terrific search engine marketing program!

But even a great program can benefit from focused enhancements, so in this chapter we'll talk about how to further develop and improve your search engine marketing strategies. Let's start with a few basic definitions:

- *Search engine marketing* means using search engines to reach your buyers directly. Search engines include general search engines such as Google and Yahoo! as well as vertical market search engines that are specific to your industry or to the people you are trying to reach.
- *Search engine optimization (SEO)* is the art and science of ensuring that the words and phrases on your site, blog, and other online content are found by the search engines and that, once found, your site is given the highest ranking possible in the *natural search results* (i.e., what the search engine algorithm deems important for the phrase entered).
- *Search engine advertising* is when a marketer *pays* to have advertising appear in search engines when a user types in a particular phrase that the marketer has “purchased.” Usually this advertising comes in the form of small text ads appearing next to the natural search results for a particular search term. Google AdWords<sup>1</sup> and Yahoo! Search Marketing<sup>2</sup> are the two

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<sup>1</sup> <https://adwords.google.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://searchmarketing.yahoo.com/>

large search engine advertising programs. Marketers bid to have their ads appear based on keywords and phrases, competing against others who want the same phrases. Your ad will appear somewhere in the list of ads for that phrase based on a formula used by the search engine that takes into account two main factors: how much you are willing to bid (in dollars and cents) for each person who clicks the ad plus your click-through rate (the number of people who click your ad divided by the number of people who see it in the search results).

## Search Engine Optimization ---

In my experience, people often misunderstand search engine marketing because there are a slew of SEO firms that make it all seem so darned complicated. To add to the problem, many (but certainly not all) SEO firms are a bit on the shady side, promising stellar results from simply manipulating keywords on your site. Perhaps you've seen the spam e-mail messages of some of these snake-oil salesmen (I've received hundreds of unsolicited e-mail messages with headlines like: "Top Search Engine Rankings Guaranteed!"). While many search engine marketing firms are completely reputable and add tremendous value to marketing programs, I am convinced that the single best thing you can do to improve your search engine marketing is to focus on building great content for your buyers. Search engine marketing should not be mysterious and is certainly not trickery.

However, the many intricacies and nuances that can make good search engine marketing great are beyond the scope of this small chapter. Many excellent resources can help you learn even more about the complexities of search engine marketing and especially search engine algorithm factors such as the URL you use, placement of certain words within your content, tags, metadata, inbound links, and other details. These resources also add to our discussion in Chapter 10 of how to identify appropriate keywords and phrases. A great place to start understanding search engine optimization is



Search Engine Watch,<sup>3</sup> where you will find resources and active forums to explore. I also recommend a book called *Search Engine Marketing, Inc.* by Mike Moran and Bill Hunt. To learn more about search engine advertising, start with the tutorials and Frequently Asked Questions pages of the Google AdWords and Yahoo! Search Marketing sites.

## The Long Tail of Search

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Perhaps you've already tried search engine marketing. Many marketers have. In my experience working with many organizations, I've learned that search engine marketing programs often fail because the marketers optimize on general keywords and phrases that do not produce sufficiently targeted results. For example, someone in the travel business might be tempted to optimize on words like *travel* and *vacation*. I just entered "travel" into Google and got 124 million hits. It is virtually impossible to get to the top of the heap with a generic word or phrase like "travel," and even if you did, that's not usually how people search. *It is ineffective to try to reach buyers with broad, general search terms.*

You have a choice when you create search engine marketing programs. One method is to optimize on and advertise with a small number of words and phrases that are widely targeted, in order to try to generate huge numbers of clicks. Think of this approach as like an oceangoing drag fishing boat with huge nets used to find one species of fish. Sure, you capture thousands of fish at a time, but you throw away almost all of them, and it is a very expensive undertaking.

True success comes from driving buyers directly to the actual content they are looking for. Several years ago I wanted to take my family on vacation to Costa Rica, so I went over to Google and typed in "Costa Rica Adventure Travel." I checked out a bunch of sites at the top of the search results (both the natural search results and the advertisements) and chose one that appealed to me. After exchanging

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<sup>3</sup> <http://searchenginewatch.com/>

several e-mails to design an itinerary, I booked a trip for several thousand dollars, and a few months later I was checking out howler monkeys in the rainforest. This is how people *really* search (for what they are looking for on the Web, not for howler monkeys). If you're in the Costa Rican adventure travel business, don't waste resources optimizing for the generic term "travel." Instead, run search engine marketing programs for phrases like "Costa Rica ecotourism," "Costa Rica rainforest tour," and so on.

The best approach is to create separate search engine marketing programs for dozens, hundreds, or even tens of thousands of *specific* search terms that people might actually search on. Think of this approach as rigging thousands and thousands of individual hooks on a long line and exposing the targeted bait at precisely the right time to catch the variety of fish you are after. You won't catch a fish on each and every hook. But with so many baited hooks, you will catch lots of the prized fish you value most.

## Carve Out Your Own Search Engine Real Estate

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One rarely discussed but very important aspect of search engine marketing is choosing product and company names so that they will be easy to find on the Web via search engines. When you consider the name of a new company, product, book, rock band, or other entity that people want to find on the Web, you typically go through a process of thinking up ideas, getting a sense of whether these names sound right, and then perhaps seeing if you can copyright or trademark the ideas. I would suggest adding one more vital step: You should run a Web search to see if anything comes up for your proposed name; I urge you to drop the name idea if there are lots of similarly named competitors—even if the competition for the name is in a different industry. Your marketing goal should be that when someone enters the name of your book or band or product, the

searcher immediately reaches information about it. For example, before I agree to a book title, I make certain those names are not being used in any other way on the Web. It was important for me to “own” my titles on the search engines: searching on *Eyeball Wars*, *Cashing in with Content*, and now *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* brings up only my books or reviews, articles, and discussions about them.

Many people ask me why I use my middle name in my professional endeavors, and I’ve had people accuse me of being pretentious. Maybe I am a *bit* pretentious, but that’s not why I use my middle name—Meerman. The reason is simple: There are so many other David Scotts out there. One David Scott walked on the moon as commander of Apollo 15. Another is a six-time Iron Man Triathlon Champion. Yet another is a U.S. Congressman from Georgia’s 13th district. Good company, all, but for clarity and search engine optimization purposes, I chose to be unique among my fellow David Scotts by becoming David Meerman Scott.

The lesson here is that if you want to be found on the Web, you need a unique identity for yourself, your product, and your company to stand out from the crowd and rise to prominence on search engines. As you are thinking of names to use for marketing, test them out on the search engines first and try to carve out something that you alone can own.

## Web Landing Pages to Drive Action —

While I won’t be covering all the details of search engine marketing, I definitely want to touch on one of the most common mistakes made by search engine marketers. Most people focus a great deal of time on keyword and phrase selection (that’s a good thing!), and they also do a good job of ensuring that their organization ranks highly for those phrases, by optimizing the site and/or purchasing search engine advertising. But most organizations are terrible at building a landing page, the place people go after they click on a search hit.

Think back to our last example. As I was planning my Costa Rican

vacation, many of the sites that were ranked highly for the phrase I entered were a kind of bait and switch. I thought I would be getting targeted information about Costa Rican travel and was instead taken to a generic landing page from a big travel agency, an airline, or a hotel chain. No, thanks, I'm not interested. I wanted information on Costa Rica, not an airline or hotel chain, and so I clicked away in a second. Because I wanted information about Costa Rican adventure travel, I chose the landing page that had the best information, one from an outfit called Costa Rica Expeditions.<sup>4</sup> This means that you're likely to need dozens or hundreds of landing pages in order to implement a great search engine marketing program.

You need to build landing pages that have specific content to enlighten and inform the people who just clicked over to your site from the search engine.

Marketing with Web landing pages is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to get a message read by a target market, and it's a terrific tool for moving buyers through the sales cycle. A landing page is simply a place to publish a targeted message for a particular demographic that you're trying to market to, and they are used not only in search engine marketing but other Web marketing programs as well. For example, landing pages are ideal for describing special offers mentioned on your Web site or calls to action referenced in another content page (such as a blog or e-book). Landing pages also work well for telling an organization's story to a particular target market, promoting a new product offering, or providing more information to people who link from your news releases. Marketing programs such as search engine optimization are—to borrow an idea from the classic sales cycle definition—designed to attract the

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.costaricaexpeditions.com/>

prospect's attention. The landing page is where you take the next step; once you've got your audience's attention, generate and develop customer interest and conviction, so that your sales team gets a warm lead ready to be worked to a closed sale or so you can point people to an e-commerce page to buy your product right away.

Effective landing page copy is written from, you guessed it, the buyers' perspective, not yours. Landing pages should provide additional information to searchers, information based on the offer or keyword they just clicked on. Many successful organizations have hundreds of landing pages, each optimized for a particular set of related search engine marketing terms.

Don't make the mistake of so many organizations by investing tons of money into a search engine advertising program (buying keywords) and then sending all the traffic to your homepage. Because the homepage needs to serve many audiences, there can never be enough information there for each search term. Instead, keep the following landing page guidelines in mind:

- *Make the landing page copy short and the graphics simple.* The landing page is a place to deliver a simple message and drive your prospect to respond to your offer. Don't try to do too much.
- *Create the page with your company's look, feel, and tone.* A landing page is an extension of your company's branding, so it must adopt the same voice, tone, and style as the rest of your site.
- *Write from the prospect's point of view.* Think carefully of who will be visiting the landing page, and write copy for that demographic. You want visitors to feel that the page speaks to their problems and that you have a solution for them.
- *A landing page is communications, not advertising.* Landing pages are where you communicate valuable information. Advertising gets people to click to your landing page, but once a prospect is there, the landing page should focus on communicating the value of your offering to the buyer.
- *Provide a quote from a happy customer.* A simple testimonial on a landing page works brilliantly to show people that others

are happy with your product. A sentence or two with the customer's name (and affiliation if appropriate) is all you need.

- *Make the landing page a self-contained unit.* The goal of a landing page is to get prospects to respond to your offer so you can sell to them. If you lose traffic from your landing page, you may never get that response. Thus, it is sometimes better to make your landing page a unique place on the Web and *not* provide links to your main Web site.
- *Make the call to action clear and easy to respond to.* Make certain you provide a clear response mechanism for those people who want to go further. Make it easy to sign up or express interest or buy something.
- *Use multiple calls to action.* You never know what offer will appeal to a specific person, so consider using more than one. In the business-to-business world, you might offer a white paper, a free trial, an ROI calculator, and a price quote all on the same landing page.
- *Only ask for necessary information.* Don't use a sign-up form that requires your prospects to enter lots of data—people will abandon the form. Ask for the absolute minimum you can get away with—name and e-mail address only, if you can, or perhaps even just e-mail. Requiring any additional information will reduce your response rates.
- *Don't forget to follow up!* Okay, you've got a great landing page with an effective call to action, and the leads are coming in. That's great! Don't drop the ball now. Make certain to follow up with each response as quickly as possible.

## Search Engine Marketing in a Fragmented Business

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The market that Scala, Inc.<sup>5</sup> serves is so fragmented, people can't even agree on what the product category is called: Digital Signage, Digital

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scala.com/>

In-Store Merchandising, Electronic Display Networks, Electronic Billboards, or any of a dozen other names are used. And to make the marketing challenge even more difficult, potential customers in this market don't congregate at any one tradeshow, magazine, or Web portal. And that's just the way Gerard Bucas, president and CEO of Scala, Inc., likes it because he uses search engine marketing to his advantage to reach buyers. "We pioneered the digital signage industry," he says. "Our services are used for retail, corporate communications, factory floor, and many other diverse business applications." Because Scala serves so many buyers in diverse market segments, there is no clear decision maker. In retail it's the marketing department. In corporate communications for internal purposes it is often the CEO or the HR department. And the company serves many verticals such as cruise lines, casinos, and more. "Since we can't possibly advertise in so many different places to reach these people, we rely on a great Web site with a strong focus on search engine marketing."

Bucas says it is critical to use the same terminology as his target market and to include industry terms that lead to an appropriate Scala page. "We continuously monitor the top thirty to forty search terms that people look for when they search for us on the Net," he says. "When we find new terms, we write content that incorporates those terms, and as the term becomes more important, we expand on the content."

For Bucas, effective search engine marketing means understanding his buyers and creating compelling content using important keywords and phrases and then getting each one indexed by the search engines. "For example, *digital signage* is one of our search terms," he says. "We want to be at the top of the results. But we also care about similar phrases such as *digital sign* and *digital signs*. Each of the terms gives different results. It's amazing to me."

The Scala site includes detailed product content, client case studies, and information on how digital signage is used in different industries. "Regular news releases and case studies are all intended to bring search engines to us," he says. "With case studies and news re-

leases, we're getting some phrases into the market that we don't often use, which cause some long tail results with the search engines."

Scala has a lead-generation system using search engines to drive buyers to landing pages where traffic converts into leads that are funneled into the company's reseller channel. In this system, the company gathers names through offers (such as a free demo DVD<sup>6</sup>) on each landing page. "Our resellers love us because we're constantly pumping them with new leads," Bucas says. "We effectively help to generate business for them, so they become very loyal to us. Our partners see the value of the lead generation." According to Bucas, the lead system, which manages more than 4,000 open sales leads at any one time, automates communication at particular points in the sales process by sending e-mail to prospects.

The success Scala enjoys shows how a well-executed content strategy on the Web will deliver buyers to landing pages who are actually looking for a product. "We are growing very rapidly," Bucas says. "And a large percentage of the business comes from Web leads—certainly more than fifty percent of our business comes from the Web."

If you're planning on implementing the ideas in this book, you will, by definition, be doing search engine marketing. You will understand your buyers and create great, indexable Web content especially for them. The best search engine marketing comes from paying attention to and understanding your buyers, not from manipulating or tricking them. Still, once you've executed a great content strategy, adding effective landing pages and focusing on the long tail of search terms will give you an even more powerful marketing asset that will generate results for months and years to come.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.scala.com/demodvd/>





# 21

## Make It Happen

**T**hanks for hanging in there with me and for reading this far! When I run seminars on the New Rules of Marketing and PR, this is the point at which many people are excited to get out there and make it happen. They want to start a blog right away or generate some news releases or begin buyer persona research in preparation for writing a marketing and PR plan that will guide them to create a content-rich Web site. If that describes you, great!

But in the audiences of my seminars and speeches there is always another group of people who tend to feel a bit overwhelmed. There is just too much information, they say, or too many new and unfamiliar ideas. If you are in this category, you might be thinking that the people profiled in the book were able to figure out things that are just too complex and time-consuming for you to tackle, especially given your already hectic schedule. Hey, we all have stuff on our plates, and for most of us, implementing the ideas in the book will represent an addition to our workload. But here's one of the greatest things about the New Rules of Marketing and PR: You can implement these ideas in bits and pieces! In fact, I don't expect anybody to implement *all* the ideas here. I don't do *that* many of them myself

(Okay, I admitted it—don't tell). Yes, I have a blog, and it is very important to me. But I don't have a podcast, and I haven't produced original videos and posted them on YouTube. I just do what I can and what works for me. And so should you.

Unlike a linear, offline marketing campaign where you must take a methodical, step-by-step approach leading up to a big “release day,” the Web is . . . well, it's a *web*. You can add to the Web at any time because it is iterative, not linear. Think about the last print advertisement you or others in your organization did. Everything had to be perfect, requiring thorough proofreading, tons of approvals from your colleagues (or your spouse), lengthy consultation with a bunch of third parties such as advertising agencies and printers, and—above all—lots of money. Your neck was on the line if there was a screw-up, so you obsessed over the details. Contrast that with a Web content initiative that you can implement quickly, get people to check out live, and make changes to on the fly. It really is much less stressful to create an online program. If you create a Web page that doesn't work for you, you can just delete it. You can't do that with a print ad or direct-mail campaign. So I would urge you to think about how you might *selectively* experiment with the ideas in these pages rather than fret about coordinating them all and trying to get everything right on the first go.

Many organizations I've worked with have found that an excellent approach is to first do some buyer persona research. By reading the publications that your buyers read, perhaps attending a Webinar that they attend, reading a few of the blogs in the space, and maybe interviewing a few buyers, you can narrow down the book's large list of techniques to determine the most appropriate Web-based marketing and PR initiatives for you and work on them first.

Others have found that the best way to get started is to add a few pages of targeted thought leadership content for an important market to an existing Web site (perhaps with links from the homepage). What's great about this approach is that you don't have to redesign your site; all you are doing is *adding* some targeted content to what you already have. That's easy, right?

Still another first step might be to read the blogs in your market and begin to comment on them in order to coax your blogging voice out of its shell. Once you feel comfortable, you can take the plunge by creating your own blog. But the good news is that you don't need to show the world right away—you can password protect it and share it with only a few colleagues at first. Then, with some feedback you can tweak your approach and finally remove the password protection, and you're off. The important thing is to just get out there. Remember, on the Web, you are what you publish.

## Great for Any Organization

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There's no doubt that your organization will benefit from your getting out there and creating Web content in whatever form you're most comfortable with. But I'm also convinced that no matter who you are or what you do, your professional and personal life will improve, too. If you are an innovator with the ideas in this book, it may lead to greater recognition in the office. And if you're like many bloggers and podcasters I know, you will derive a therapeutic benefit as well. It's fun to blog and podcast and it makes you feel good to get your ideas out into the world.

If you're like me, you will prefer to write rather than create audio or video content. But I know plenty of people who hate to write and have created terrific pod- and vodcast content to reach buyers. And it works for all kinds of organizations: corporations, nonprofits, rock bands, and politicians. People often say to me: "But I'm just a \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank with *pastor*, *painter*, *lawyer*, *consultant*, *sales representative*, *auto dealer*, *real estate agent*], why should I blog or create a podcast?" My answer is that you'll not only reach your buyers directly with targeted content, you'll have fun, too—Web content is for everyone, not just big companies.

In fact, one of my all-time favorite examples of success with the New Rules of Marketing and PR comes from an unlikely marketer: the pastor of a church in Washington, D.C. But his isn't a typical

church, because he doesn't actually have a church building. Instead he uses video technology, blogs, podcasts, and the Web to tell stories and build a spiritual community both on- and offline.

"The church should be using technology to reach people; that's what Gutenberg did in the fifteenth century with the printing press," says Mark Batterson, lead pastor of National Community Church (also known as TheaterChurch.com), a multisite church in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area that conducts five services per week in three nontraditional locations. "Most churches have a church building, but we feel that a building can be an obstacle to some people, so we do church in theaters and have built the largest coffee house in the Washington, D.C., area."

What distinguishes National Community Church is Batterson's approach of embracing technology and Web marketing and applying it to church. The TheaterChurch.com site<sup>1</sup> includes a content-rich Web site, podcasts of the weekly services, a motivational Webcast series, video, an e-mail newsletter, and Batterson's extremely popular Evotional blog<sup>2</sup> (tagline: "Spirit Fuel"). "The greatest message deserves the greatest marketing," Batterson says. "I am challenged that Madison Avenue and Hollywood are so smart at delivering messages. But I believe that we need to be just as smart about how we deliver our messages."

Attendance at National Community Church exceeds 1,000 adults in an average weekend; 70 percent of them are single people in their twenties. "I think we attract twentysomethings because our personality as a church lends itself to twentysomethings," Batterson says. "Our two key values are authenticity and creativity. That plays itself out in the way we do church. I think that church should be the most creative place on the planet. The Medieval church had stained glass to tell the gospel story to the churchgoers, who were mostly illiterate. We use the movie studio to tell the story to peo-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://theaterchurch.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.evotional.com/>

ple. We use video to add color and to add flavor to what we do. If Jesus had video in his day, it wouldn't surprise me if he made short films."

Batterson's focus on the Web site, podcasts, and online video (as well as video at the services) means that National Community Church staff members have some unique job titles, including "media pastor," "digital pastor," and "buzz coordinator." "We want to use technology for really good purposes," Batterson says. "Our Web site and my blog are our front door to National Community Church. The site is a virtual location in a sense. We have a lot more people who listen to the podcast and watch the Webcast than who go to the services, so it is a great test drive for people. They can get a sense of the church before they arrive physically."

Batterson has gained online fame well beyond the Washington, D.C. area—his blog is followed by tens of thousands of readers all over the world, and the podcast is one of the fastest growing church podcasts in America. He also wrote a book that was released in October 2006, called *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day: How to Survive and Thrive When Opportunity Roars*. "Blogging cuts six degrees of separation into three," he says. "I write knowing that my audience is another pastor in Australia, a housewife in Indiana, my friends, and people in Washington, D.C. Marketing through my blog is powerful. For example, last week I did a blog post about my book and asked my blogging friends to also post about it. We went up to number forty-four on the Amazon best-seller list, and Amazon sold out of the book that day. They just ordered another thousand copies."

Batterson's enthusiasm for how churches can use the Web has caught the attention of thousands of other church leaders who follow his blog. "The two most powerful forms of marketing are word of mouth and what I call word of mouse. A guy named John Wesley, who founded the Methodist church, traveled 250,000 miles on horseback and preached something like 40,000 sermons. With one click of the mouse, I preach that many sermons with my podcast—that's word of mouse. It is about leveraging the unique vehicles on the Web.

The message has not changed, but the medium has changed. We need to continually find new vehicles to get the messages out.”

## Now It's Your Turn

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Isn't the power of Web content and the New Rules of Marketing and PR something? Here's a guy who's a church leader *without* a church building, and through innovative use of a blog, a podcast, and some video, he has become a leader in his field. He's got a bestselling book and tens of thousands of devoted online followers. Whether you're religious or not, you've got to be impressed with Batterson's business savvy and with the way the new rules have helped him reach his buyers.

You can do it, too. It doesn't matter what line of work you're in or what group of buyers you're trying to reach. You can harness the power of the Web to reach your target audience directly.

If you're like many of my readers, my consulting clients, and the people who attend my seminars, you have colleagues who will argue with you about the new rules. They will say that the old rules still apply. They will tell you that you need to spend big bucks on advertising. They will tell you that the only way to do PR is to get the media to write about you. By now you know that they are wrong. If I haven't convinced you myself, surely the 50 or so innovative people profiled in these pages must have. Go on. Be like the people you met in this book—get out there and make it happen!

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