

MEDIA RELATIONS INSIDER

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING TO INCREASE YOUR MEDIA COVERAGE

SUPPLEMENT TO BULLDOG REPORTER'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE EDITIONS

MEDIA TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

Blogging Just Got Bigger: New Large-Scale Survey Issues Call to Action for "Old-School" PR Pros

If you have yet to embrace the blogosphere, it's time to think hard about becoming an active participant. A new annual survey, conducted by integrated marketing communications firm Euro RSCG Magnet in conjunction with Columbia University, emphasizes this urgency with its eye-opening findings: that more than half of journalists use blogs—both as communications forums and insightful research tools—even though the credibility of the medium remains questionable. In fact, nearly three quarters of the more than 1,200 journalists who participated claim to use blogs to perform work-related tasks such as scouring for breaking news and evaluating consumer "buzz" about myriad companies, products and sources—and nearly 30 percent refer to blogs on a daily basis.

"The findings of this year's study simply validate what we have known for some time—that blogs are playing a more significant role in the way information is transmitted to readers and journalists alike, and may profoundly alter the media and communications landscapes," said Aaron Kwittken, CEO of Euro RSCG Magnet. "The fact that the media are using blogs for reporting and research also demonstrates that blogs have an enormous potential to not only influence the general public, but to influence the influencers as well."

Does this mean your company or client needs to crank up its own blog ASAP? Not necessarily—but blog monitoring and even regular posting on blogs in your space should become a crucial ingredient in your media relations plan. The benefits of blog monitoring are somewhat obvious—you get to see firsthand what the public is saying about your company's wares, activities and overall image, and you can prepare your reaction accordingly before it's too late. But the greater benefit, as this study shows, is the visibility your company can gain in the eyes of journalists by actively blogging—on your

own site or anyone else's, especially those that regularly use key words and search terms in the industry or field you want to impact.

That's because blogs are becoming the new standard for mainstream impressions, and reporters are flocking to them in droves. "As blogs continue to gain in popularity, quality and influence, it is becoming imperative that journalists and journalism students continue to integrate blogs, especially blogs that cover technology, into their reporting practices," said Steven S. Ross, associate professor at Columbia University and a partner in the study. "A number of credible and influential blogs, such as Scobleizer, Gizmodo and Boing Boing, provide an invaluable trove of research, story ideas and other information that current and future journalists would be remiss not to leverage in their reporting."

Let's be clear: Blogging is not the same as pitching, and shouldn't necessarily circumvent the more traditional practice of pitching. But given our high-powered Internet society—and considering these study results—information appearing in a blog can be exponentially more valuable to reporters than perhaps even your own press releases. Sure, the concept of blog credibility remains murky, but the fact is consumers and journalists react to blogged info more urgently and more passionately because it sidesteps the greatest downfall of the press release—the blurry line journalists have to recognize between "real" authenticity and perpetuated company hype. The unregulated nature of blog commentary has created a ripe forum for "dishing the real dirt"—in many ways, a journalist's dream come true and, says the study, "a trend that could have a significant impact on future reporting practices."

But just how much is blogging intersecting with "real" journalism? "It's pervading the media at quite a few levels," offers Pete Blackshaw, CMO for Intelliseek and founder of PlanetFeedback, the nation's leading consumer-feedback website. "To some extent, blogging has become an extension of traditional media and journalists can no longer afford not to broaden their franchises to leverage this new publishing format. It's much easier and it costs less, so media writers are extending their models. Some outlets like the *New York*

Post and *Seattle Times* are starting new columns in the blog format. What are the advantages for journalists? It brings a different set of expectations. Reporters aren't obligated to write 1,000 words—they can just share a thought. Many reporters have some great thoughts to share but often don't, because they think they have to put together a long dissertation. Dan Gillmor of the *San Jose Mercury News* has shown us that's no longer the case," he says.

"But there are different layers [of this impact]. For example, there's the [whole concept of] non-credentialed media, which for some of us are as good as media," Blackshaw adds. "They serve as news creators, and they are well read and influential, but don't have the official titles like *The New York Times*. Then there are the

'stringer' bloggers. Think of all the people during the tsunami who had their videophones and camera phones and who were sourcing 90 percent of the content that the Associated Press and others used. They are the informal citizen's media. Bloggers are cornering all aspects of the media, and that's before we even get into the question of accountability."

And what of accountability? As we know, there have been serious lapses of accountability among traditional journalists in the last few years—including several reporters in the country's top outlets like *The Times* and *USA Today*. In fact, another important finding of this study is that journalists' trust in each other has plummeted in the wake of recent scandals. "A full 93 percent say they are less trusting of colleagues who are

PR STRATEGY



How are Blogs Impacting Media? PR Leaders Offer Examples

Leading pros offer these specific examples of how blogging gets media attention—and gets problems solved:

"I recently bought a hybrid car and wasn't getting the mileage that was advertised, so I went to a hybrid car blog and documented my experience," says Intelliseek CMO Peter Blackshaw. "When the media was investigating this issue, a lot of reporting was influenced by the experiences I was sharing. This early story development came about when reporters went to search engines and typed in 'hybrid mileage' and [found] my content. This is happening now constantly. Many people, including journalists, use search engines to find content that shapes their early impressions."

The larger point is that blogs are starting to significantly impact reporting practices. "All PR people who are worried about branding need to consider this," he adds. "This is where bloggers are having a high impact. As long as they're talking contextually about the brand, it's likely that bloggers' comments will get in front of the shelf space of other branding efforts. This must be monitored carefully."

PR pros can create buzz themselves by creating blogs around specific campaigns. "Instead of creating a blog to get the media interested in a story, we created a blog during a pitch and used it to show reporters how

the community was reacting to the news," offers Anjie Meyer of Boulder-based GroundFloor Media. "The news was for one of our pro bono clients, the Tennyson Center for Children, a Rocky Mountain-region residential and day treatment provider offering services for abused and neglected children."

"In short, the Center's building had been sold in a bankruptcy auction to a developer who planned to turn it into a for-profit senior center, a move that would have left nearly 100 children at the Tennyson Center without a home and hundreds more without vital services," Meyer shares. "We created a blog to inform the community and put pressure on the developer to back out of his decision to purchase the building. We then sent the blog to reporters to let them see firsthand how the community was responding to the news."

Emilie Perreault of PAN Communications offers this example: "A Windows user finds a bug in Microsoft's software and wants to report it," she relates. "He knows the company's support site won't get results quickly, so he blogs about the problem. Someone who has been blogging about Microsoft's inner workings for some time, writes that Microsoft is quicker to respond to user problems because it uses tools like PubSub to listen to what the market is saying about the company and head off any potential PR problems."

"A second example details a PR mess narrowly averted," Perreault offers. "A tech reviewer for the *WSJ* blogs in his own journal about Microsoft's inability to get him a product to review. Using PubSub, Microsoft finds the angry reviewer's post and quickly resolves the situation."

paid to act as spokespeople, and 79 percent believe that recent revelations about journalists taking payment from third parties have had quite a strong effect on media credibility," says the report. Likewise, 78 percent believe that RATHERGATE has profoundly altered the media's credibility.

Can blog content really be considered less credible than that? On the contrary: The public's reliance on Internet-generated news is sharply rising. "We know that readerships are down for print papers. Last month, *The New York Times* put out their financials, and they're making more money from their online site now," says Sally Falkow, president of Expansion Plus and Internet marketing and PR strategy specialist. "In early 2004, CNN.com had the biggest online news audience, but six months later it was Yahoo! News. This suggests there's a big opportunity for PR in getting their information on ['non-traditional' news sites like] Google News and Yahoo! News."

So what can you do right now to get in the blogging game and create—or recreate—your company or client's image in the blogosphere? Leading pros offer the following tips:

1. Take a deep breath and dive right in—start blogging. "From a marketer's perspective, it opens the doors to what we've been yearning for—one-to-one relationships with our customers," says Bloomberg Marketing president Toby Bloomberg. "It allows us to talk directly to them without the interference of corporate talk like brochures, media releases or Power Point presentations. Blogs humanize our corporations and allow our customers and stakeholders to see the people who are actually the company." Easier said than done, right? Actually, no. "Blogs are easier to create and use [than regular websites] because you don't have to be able to write in HTML," she says. "If you can write a Word document, you can blog."

2. Go one step further—start an RSS feed. RSS, or "really simple syndication," is the language of blogs and journalists are turning more and more to this medium for getting company info. "Many journalists subscribe to RSS feeds, so you should syndicate your press releases in an RSS feed and make the feed available via RSS directories," advises marketing coach and author of "Blog Lightning: How to Use a Blog to Promote Your Business" John Jantsch.

3. Monitor blog commentary to hear the "real dirt" about your company. The easiest way to stay in the blogging loop, especially if your company is narrowly focused, is to Google key search words and read the blogs that show up—and offer your own comments. If you have

your own blog, you can link to an endless stream of other blogs in your space so that juicy news comes right to you. Alternatively, services like Cymfony and PubSub offer a range of media measurement, blog monitoring and custom reporting packages.

4. Distribute your RSS feed via newswire. "You can submit press releases about your own blog and your blog's RSS feed through a major newswire service, which has the impact of creating links to your blog and can help in search engine ranking," suggests Jantsch.

5. Post comments and trackbacks to media blogs. Jantsch adds: "Many times, the reporters who produce this content will pick-up on it and at the very least take a peek at your blog"—which raises your visibility. "Make sure you're posting relevant, on-topic comments and trackbacks" for best results. ★

PROVIDING SOURCES

Think Outside the Company Box: A Dozen Tips for Turning Your CEO Into an Oft-Quoted Source

Think of all the stories you've seen in which your CEO could have offered some insight and gotten your company or client some ink. Fact is, reporters crave hearing about quality sources who have the track records to back up their statements—like CEOs have. So why isn't yours getting more placements in broader industry and trend stories? Top practitioners offer these timely tips:

1. Take a contrarian stance. "We recently secured coveted coverage for our client, Lexia Learning Systems, using this strategy," offers Beth Andrix Monaghan of The Castle Group. "One of Lexia's top media targets is Education Week, which does not cover product news and rarely quotes product vendors. When President Bush asked Congress to cut more than \$1 billion in education spending and eliminate a state block-grant program that funded many school districts' technology purchases, we jumped on the opportunity. We offered Lexia CEO Jon Bower as an expert source using a contrarian stance—he actually *supported* the cuts and offered some examples of how this would actually help educational technology initiatives. As a result, Jon's comments were included extensively in the article, including a pull-out quote and a description of Lexia's products."

"The media loves controversy," adds Ken Krause, creative director for Tech Image Ltd. "For example, we were working with Jonathon Sapir, whose company InfoPower was developing a product called SnapXT. Jonathon's belief was that traditional IT programming was

on its last legs, and would be replaced by simpler methods that business users would be able to use to create small services or applications. We sent out several expert pitches and conducted a media tour, casting Jonathon as the ‘mad prophet of IT’ telling the industry what it didn’t want to hear. He went from nowhere to being seen in a number of industry and business journals. We also conducted a media tour where he met with *Fast Company*, *BusinessWeek* and other trade publications. His story was just too compelling to ignore.”

2. Validate your CEO’s expertise—encourage bylined articles. “We have used this technique to help a number of clients build some visibility in the marketplace,” says Krause. “After reading their thoughts over a period of time in the media, journalists tend to assign a measure of credibility to the source—providing, of course, that the articles are well-written and accessible. A Google search on the expert’s name that turns up bylined articles in trade or business publications helps legitimize the source. It’s really like any emerging technology. Most people don’t want to take a chance, so they’ll wait to see who else jumps on the bandwagon. If you can gain placements for the CEO first, additional media outlets will be more willing to quote her.”

3. Reach out as a resource. “Leave your pitching platform behind and position your client as a resource in his respective industry or on a particular topic,” advises Matt Batt, media relations manager at Tech Image, Ltd. “There is nothing a reporter likes more than a CEO who she can ‘chat’ with vs. someone who is trying to pitch her a particular product or service related to their company.”

4. Position your CEO outside the company framework. In other words, “Don’t act like a CEO,” suggests Sonia Taylor, senior media specialist with Allison & Partners. “Reporters want an informative, straight-shooting, ego-less expert who doesn’t put a lot of fluff and cushion around soundbites. Drop the CEO-speak and give reporters information they can use.” Also, “Practice out loud before any interview,” she adds.

5. Provide a strong opinion. “Make sure your CEO actually says something,” says Ink Inc PR’s Kelly Bietka. “As much of a no-brainer as that sounds, reporters like CEOs who aren’t afraid to ruffle a few feathers and who will state a position on the topic, not flip-flop around the subject and go into their company’s background.”

6. Offer catchy quotes. “Train your spokesperson to speak in good soundbites—the better the comments, the better your chances,” says Monaghan. “Generate a list of three to four key message points based on the topic the journalist is reporting on,” adds Bietka. “Since the main

purposes of an interview are to get information and to get soundbites, have soundbites ready that are easy to understand, short, straight-forward and that avoid ambiguity. Journalists aren’t looking for nuanced quotes—they’re looking for zingers.”

7. Fight off promotional instincts. “Don’t try to sell a reporter on how great your company is,” Bietka advises. “Inform the journalist with credible facts politely and succinctly, so she can get the information she needs for the story,” not an earful of company hype.

8. Get specific. “Avoid offering your spokesperson as a general ‘expert,’” says Monaghan. “It’s important to provide some real examples of his or her thoughts in the initial correspondence with the media.”

9. Have your CEO ready on short notice. “I worked with a former partner at Deloitte & Touche IT Security Services Group, Tom Patterson, who has since left and written a book, *Mapping Security*. Tom is a media master, and he’s on top of any IT-related topic,” Taylor relates. “I once sent him to a basement bureau of a well-known U.S.-based business network while he was on a business trip in Spain. He called the reporter and said, “Only for you would I go into a studio-basement in Spain at 11 p.m. at night, walking into a space that looks like a drug-dealer haven to do this interview!” But he did, and it was great. Tom is always willing to drop what’s he’s doing to talk with the media at 6 a.m., 11 p.m.—whenever—and he’s willing to give his cell phone to just about anyone with a media credential.”

10. Stay on top of the news and offer timely comments. “Make sure you are staying tuned into what’s going on in the news at all times to get a better understanding of the angles that are being presented—and where your experts can offer a new opinion,” suggests Rachel Meranus, public relations director at PR Newswire. “Match your experts to the stories you are reading about and be ready to offer your expert to the media as soon as the opportunity arises. Consider sending out a media advisory if the topic is timely.”

11. Steer clear of legalese. “Do not let the lawyers dictate your responses—they will turn your words into corporate mush,” advises marketing guru Shel Horowitz.

12. Respond to journalists’ queries in a timely manner. “Post profiles of your experts on your website or in expert databases such as ProfNet Experts, which the media rely on regularly for sources,” Meranus says. “Answer Profnet queries quickly—time is of the essence,” adds Horowitz. ★

—Richard Carufel

