

Commentary

Let's be sociable!

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Everybody's talking about Web 2.0 – the many social networking sites and tools that have created numerous platforms and communities for online conversations about thousands of issues. Millions of people are engaged at different levels, and the influence of these communities is growing fast.

What does this mean for assn public relations? It means opportunity – a chance to engage in new strategies to reach desired audiences. It also means rethinking how messages are delivered in this new environment.

Call it “PR 2.0,” as Deidre Breakenridge did in writing a book that carries this title.

But remember that the fundamentals of public relations have not changed. Breakenridge explains: “Journalists want and appreciate interactions with PR pros who are (1) tapped into their needs, (2) understand their publication’s audience and industry trends, and (3) offer precise information that is targeted and suitable for their stories/interests.”

These principles apply whether you’re dealing with *The Wall Street Journal*, a “citizen journalist,” a blogger, or posting to a group on a social networking site.

The essence of public relations is to have your story told in a positive way by others instead of relying solely on advertising and marketing. That’s what Web 2.0 offers for those who know how to tap it – authentic conversations about your organization and issues by people who have found a connection to it.

Traditional media have many gatekeepers (reporters, editors, producers, etc.) who determine what gets published or broadcast. In the Web 2.0 world, gatekeepers are more nebulous. Often an entire online community acts as informal “gatekeeper,” passing instant judgment on your postings for all to see. So, while you can deliver messages more easily, it does not absolve you from the responsibility to make sure people want and need them. If they don’t, you’ve hurt your organization’s image by cluttering up the communication universe with irrelevant information.

Here are a few ways to use social media in public relations:

- Use a “social media template” for news releases.** This means including live links in your copy, shortening copy, and using bulleted message points instead of long paragraphs of text.

- Tag and deliver resources.** Journalists don’t just want to hear what your organization is saying about a given issue. They want to read related conversations occurring outside your organization. Monitor social media conversations in blogs and social media sites and deliver the links to your media contacts along with your brief message points. This gives journalists a balanced perspective, provides several useful sources, saves them time, and puts you in their contact list as a valued source.

•**Find social media entry points to major media.** Read the online versions of big publications and tap into their blogs and social media postings to see what they're talking about. Join the conversation and offer yourself as a resource where appropriate.

•**Watch the pitching.** Don't pitch through blogs or social media conversations. It immediately brands you as someone who doesn't understand the medium and is an unwelcome intrusion into an otherwise authentic conversation.

•**Participate in relevant communities.** Social media have created a range of communities. Participate in those that are appropriate for your messages. Don't expect everyone to connect with what you are saying.

•**Enhance your newsroom.** Does your online newsroom take advantage of social media tools and links? Besides linking to obvious resources such as fact sheets, press releases, position papers, clips, bios, photos, speeches, and research, include videos, blog postings, and links to relevant social media.

Besides delivering compelling messages and content, personal relationships are still important in public relations. Web 2.0 gives you more tools to build these relationships. So dive in and spread the word!

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