

4imprint.
Blue Papers



The Changing Face of PR Today

The Future of PR

This Blue Paper explores changes in the field of public relations and how these changes impact businesses and marketing professionals everywhere. From the shift to marketing as media, the need for real-time response in corporate communications, to the press releases of tomorrow and everything in between, read on to see expert accounts of what's to come, what it means for you and how you can make sure the public relations still has a part to play in your communications strategy.

How it all began

Often it's difficult to step back and look at the bigger picture to map a future direction unless you have an understanding of the past. The field of public relations is no different.

While the thought of fostering relationships with others in order to build trust and rapport seems to be an inherent quality to most human beings, public relations as a practice and a field didn't formally come about until the early 1900s. That's more than 100 years ago and yet shockingly little has really changed about the foundational philosophies surrounding its core. That is, until the Internet first nudged it and then social media downright knocked it into an existential frenzy. But, that's getting a little ahead of ourselves.

The term 'public relations' is said to have first been documented in a speech to congress, made by U.S. President Thomas Jefferson in 1807. It wasn't until World War I that the term materialised as an official profession. During this time, the U.S. organised publicity for its wartime objectives by establishing the first-ever Committee on Public Information. Members of this elite committee differentiated what they were doing from German propaganda by establishing that their communications should be a two-way dialogue that educated and instilled support among U.S. citizens instead of fear.

Among these original committee members were Ivy Lee - the creator of the first ever press release - and Edward Bernays - who is credited with becoming the world's first public relations theorist. These men are considered the founding fathers of the industry as we know it today.

Just how is their offspring today, though? Would they even recognise it now that it's all grown up?



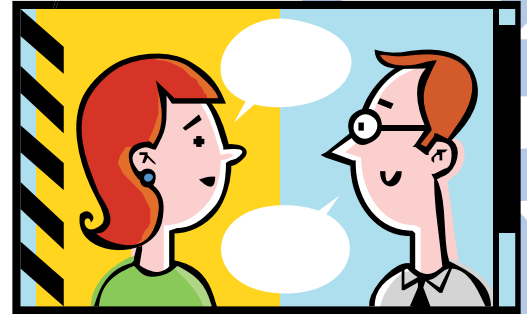
Public Relations Blue Paper

PR today

For the bulk of the field's existence, public relations has held two key ideas as central to its heart:

First, that the lynchpin of public relations is media. The best way to share information about a company or a person has traditionally been to either purchase advertising space or to get it picked up by the media and redistributed as news.

This, of course, is based on the school of thought that people define the media as third-party organisations controlled by gatekeepers - usually the publishers and editorial staff of print publications or producers and commissioning editors of broadcast outlets - who decided what was newsworthy and what wasn't. It is also based on the thought that people believe the media and advertising to be credible sources of information and that people do not seek information about brands and people out on their own but rather stumble upon it as it is delivered to them in their morning paper or on the evening news and on an advertising hoarding or TV advert.



Second, that there is a linear model to communications that follows a Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver pattern. A company establishes a message, chooses an information source then distributes the message to an audience through this channel. The message is received and processed by its intended recipient. Logical steps, one flowing into the other and into the next.

But then the Internet came along and changed everything.

Today, according to research giant Gallup, the majority of Americans say that they have little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly.¹ This is echoed in the UK – the recent scandals around 'phone hacking and the Hillsborough enquiry have made people even more wary about trusting traditional media. People turn to their family, friends and colleagues for recommendations on what to buy and where to spend their money. 'Media' is no longer a term reserved for reporters; it now includes bloggers, social media users, online video and so much more and the only gatekeepers today are a slow Internet connection, a dead battery on your mobile or perhaps censorship of sites by the government in some countries.

¹ "Distrust in U.S. Media Edges Up to Record High." Gallup.Com - Daily News, Polls, Public Opinion on Government, Politics, Economics, Management. 29 Sept. 2010. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/143267/distrust-media-edges-record-high.aspx>>.

A few other things have changed since the days of Lee and Bernays:

- Public relations messages were product and brand focused. Today, it's all about the consumer.
- Public relations messages to audiences were one-way. Today, it's a two-way conversation without a middle man - brands and consumers are talking directly with one another.
- Traditional news media once waited for public relations people to pitch story ideas and send press releases. Today, they - like everyone else - turn to the Internet for leads and inspiration.
- Public relations was its own silo for brands and agencies with its own goals and strategies and measurement objectives. Today, PR overlaps with marketing, social media and customer experience design to achieve common business objectives that are measurable in a variety of ways.

When these shifts first began to occur, the public relations industry was seemingly the last to know. Whether they were waiting for someone to fax them a press release or what is anyone's guess, but the fact of the matter is that many businesses and organisations have been trying to catch up for the past few years. They've been scrambling to figure out how to incorporate these shifts in communications into their own efforts and just exactly how public relations and marketing fit together, and when and where.

Just as we've started to get the hang of things, another wave of shifts is on the horizon and it's time for the practice and field of public relations to adapt again or get left behind.

For an industry that went practically a century without changing at all, public relations has seen more renaissances in recent years than a Da Vinci.

Where public relations is going

Public relations is heading in an exciting direction, one that offers brands and public figures the opportunity to learn from and adapt to target audiences' experiences and expectations. Moving forward, the industry stands to change the most in terms of the attitude and approach of brands and practitioners but also in the ways in which its efforts are consumed by target audiences. We've looked to the experts to pull together the most significant changes that lie ahead.



Public relations

The need for real-time response

If you put a press release in the post to a reporter today, by the time the release actually reached the right person it would be old news - the Web has not only shifted how people communicate, it has changed our expectations of what constitutes a timely delivery. Through social media especially, news is now instantaneous and in real-time. Yet, surprisingly, most companies are still not operating their public relations efforts and responses on this 24/7 basis. The biggest change facing PR in the years ahead will be businesses ability to adapt and respond effectively to the world of real-time.

One of the ultimate case studies in real-time public relations comes from United Airlines and Singer-songwriter, Dave Carroll and his band Sons of Maxwell.

"My God, they're throwing guitars out there," said a woman in a window seat on a United Airlines flight waiting to disembark in Chicago. Dave Carroll and his band mates looked out of the window and immediately realised whose guitars were being thrown out. They spoke up to the crew voicing their concern over how their expensive instruments were being manhandled. The staff onboard told them to talk to the ground staff but no one could agree which ground staff - the crew at Chicago airport or the crew at the final destination. It seemed nobody was willing to do anything there and then.

Once the band arrived in Omaha, Carroll opened his guitar case to confirm his fears: His \$3,500 Taylor guitar had been smashed. He then lodged a series of complaints, seeking damages, with the airlines over the course of a few months, all of which were met with indifference - no one would apologise or take responsibility for the damages.

So, Carroll wrote a song entitled 'United Breaks Guitars', recorded it on video and posted it to YouTube. Within four days the video had over 3 million views. Up to 100 bloggers per day alerted readers to the video and United Airlines remained silent.

No statement, no press release, no tweet, absolutely nothing.

In the age of instantaneous communications, someone else is always willing to fill the vacuum of silence created by an indifferent public relations department.

In this case, first it was Carroll. Then, it was Taylor Guitars.



Bloggers

The custom guitar company with humble roots heard about the video from customers and quickly posted their own video in response - a short 'how-to' with tips on how to fly with your guitar safely and pointing out some rather obscure airline regulations about guitars that few airlines even know about.

A real-time response from United's customer service team could have prevented the video in the first place, while a real-time response from United's PR team could have made United into heroes who swooped in to save the day - creating a light-hearted video response of their own and apologising for the damages. Ultimately, it was the real-time response of Taylor Guitar's public relations efforts that made this case study a win for someone.

Although this all unfolded back in 2008, it's relevant to conversations about the future of public relations in that it sparked a turning point and that turning point has yet to be fully realised by brands still operating in the public relations methods of yesterday. The future offers opportunity to these stragglers to pick up the pace or end up as relics of a bygone era.

Press releases – so yesterday?

After Lee drafted and distributed the first press release in 1906, public relations practitioners used this format as their primary method of distributing announcements to news media up until recent years. While public relations experts the world over agree that these releases - now more aptly known as news releases - are still, and will continue to be, effective tools in the communicator's tool box, they aren't like press releases of old. The important factors of the press releases of today and tomorrow relate to how they are written and where and when they are distributed.

In the '90s, online newswire services like BusinessWire's Smart News Release and PRNewswire's MultiVu multimedia release (MMR) service began to appear, decreasing reliance on fax machines and email for disseminating news releases.

More recently, there has been a shift toward the social media press release - or an online release that has social sharing options and multimedia elements. This was a fun new term and a novel idea, but let's face it: everything online can be shared and sometimes a video alone is more effective than a video linked on a page of text. The press release of tomorrow takes the concept of the social media press release one step further.

News releases are no longer sent to media. Instead, they are increasingly housed on a business's website and blogs and the company itself promotes the release to intended audiences (news



media and the consumers themselves) to these announcements through social and digital media channels. These releases don't look like traditional releases - there is no 'For Immediate Release' scrolled across the top, no 'Ends' at the bottom. Just an announcement, a blog, an article or a video.

"In the past couple of years, we've seen a marked shift in the format of press releases to reflect the accelerating societal shift from mass consumption of media ('push' media) to personalised consumption or 'pull' media," explains David McCulloch, director of public relations at Cisco Systems. "That's a shift that has led Cisco to spend less time telling reporters and bloggers what it is we expect them to write, and more time helping them to understand how what Cisco is doing might fit with their interests."²

What's more, the press release of tomorrow is short and to the point, it avoids jargon and is written in the way that audiences would converse in their own living rooms, it links to more sources, and it delivers content in a variety of formats to any choice of device as frequently as the reader wants.

Kelly McAlearney, an account supervisor at Edelman Digital, a division of the world's largest independently owned public relations firms, agrees that, based on natural progression, the press release will continue to get shorter:

"Engagement with journalists and consumers has evolved considerably over the past five years, to shorter formats. Often, we find that our most effective pitches are our most succinct. And interactions have naturally become more concise as many brands are in constant, direct contact with consumer audiences and media via online channels."³

And lastly, another key change to how professionals currently use press releases will have to do with search engine algorithms. In recent years, an increasing number of businesses and organisations have been posting and distributing traditional press releases online or via the wire not just in the hope of procuring coverage of their news, but intending to create back-links to help in search engine optimisation (SEO) of their brand and its products and services.

But search engines are getting smarter. As the Internet becomes more semantic and search engines gain the ability to discern quality

² Swallow, Erica. "The Future of Public Relations and Social Media." *Mashable The Social Media Guide*. 14 Aug. 2010. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <<http://mashable.com/2010/08/16/pr-social-media-future/>>.

³ Swallow, Erica. "The Future of Public Relations and Social Media." *Mashable The Social Media Guide*. 14 Aug. 2010. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <<http://mashable.com/2010/08/16/pr-social-media-future/>>.



content from fluff, traditional press releases distributed for SEO are on the outs. In April 2011 Google launched the Panda update which effectively began to score pages lower for having low-quality or irrelevant content. Panda (and then Penguin that followed 12 months later in April 2012) moved Google one step further in being able to point out and devalue republished news releases and their included backlinks.

“Looking beyond five years, I could see the algorithms of search engines becoming smart enough to discern whether a backlink comes from syndicated content, which in turn causes it to greatly reduce the value of the backlink,” says Lou Hoffman, CEO of The Hoffman Agency. “In other words, even if a news release is syndicated on the *Wall Street Journal*, with all the ‘authority’ that comes with the site, the search engine figures out that it’s nothing more than a republished news release, so scores the backlink super low.”⁴

As this happens, says Hoffman, the volume of traditional news releases being distributed online is sure to further decline.

The importance of content and context

As the importance of content - blogs, white papers, webinars, videos, how-to articles and more - appears to be a focus within the digital space lead by marketers, it is evident that public relations professionals are beginning to see the value it can provide, too. According to a survey (conducted by HiveFire now known as Curato), content creation is a focus for many professionals in an effort to: establish thought leadership, elevate brands variability and buzz, increase lead generation and boost SEO. While it is beneficial to create content, it is also necessary to create something uniquely valuable and compelling for consumers.⁵

Content allows the public relations professional to become the publisher - completely bypassing traditional media and third-party digital media to reach the consumer directly. As such, content is becoming the way that public relations practitioners can crack open the door to meaningful communications with their target audiences - it captures their attention, serves a need and builds trust.

But, these days, ‘content strategy’ usually means the creation or gathering of it - with the right end goal in mind (thought leadership and SEO), but frequently overlooks the consumer. The absence of a consumer content-



⁴ Swallow, Erica. “The Future of Public Relations and Social Media.” *Mashable The Social Media Guide*. 14 Aug. 2010. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <<http://mashable.com/2010/08/16/pr-social-media-future/>>.

⁵ “If Content Is King, Then Context Is Queen | ClickZ.” *ClickZ | Marketing News & Expert Advice*. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.clickz.com/clickz/column/2042624/content-king-context-queen>>.

focused strategy can often result in an overload of irrelevant content, choice avoidance and layers of confusion for consumers.

Communicating at the point of need and the point of relevancy with the right message for the right audience is all a part of strategic content. With all of this data and insight, we often know what type of consumer we are reaching; however, we are losing the ability to define the context in which they receive the message. Are they receptive to the message? We know that they are predisposed to be responsive, but in what context are they receiving the message?

It's not enough to create content for the sake of creating content. Content needs to be created with the goal of standing out and the intention of helping the consumer. Tomorrow, public relations moves beyond content and into context.

A move toward standardised measurement

Finally, the last frontier in the future of public relations is the measurement factor. For years, the only standardised unit of measurement in the PR industry was based on impressions and how much an equivalent sized ad would have cost and how many people would have seen it. It's now obvious however that due to the changes that have already occurred in PR, this method of calculating return on investment (ROI) is pretty much obsolete. Yet, industry professionals can't seem to agree on how to replace it. Currently, most use a combination of sales figures, online conversion rates, email opens, impressions, website traffic, social media engagement and more. But there isn't a standard and there needs to be. In the years ahead, the industry will move toward reaching a consensus in order to demonstrate the ROI of their efforts to both employers and clients.

How businesses can prepare for the future

So what can businesses, organisations and professionals glean from all of this? How can they prepare for the future? For starters, they can catch up with the status quo and embrace the current changes. Then, they can listen to audiences for clues on how to proceed. Beyond that, Gary McCormick, former chair of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)⁶, outlines six ways of gearing up for the next new PR:

1. Focus on strategy, not tactics

⁶ Robbins/BurrellesLuce, Tressa. "The Future of Public Relations Is Bright - From Above." BurrellesLuce.com. 19 Mar. 2010. Web. 13 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.burrellesluce.com/freshideas/2010/03/the-future-of-public-relations-is-bright-%E2%80%93-the-view-from-above/>>.



Tactics might help your message get heard or build visibility of your brand temporarily, but without strategy your efforts aren't going to stick. This was true in the past and will continue to hold especially true in the world of real-time communications. Strategy will keep your efforts aligned with the bigger picture and the effectiveness of tactics will be more easily measured when clearly aligned with long-term goals and objectives.

2. **Include all the tools available**

This doesn't mean you should use all the tools all of the time, instead you should develop a strategy that establishes a clear message and a target audience. Then, choose the tools that are best suited to reach those audiences and that are most complementary to the messaging. Explore all options and choose those perceived to be the most effective. In the years ahead, however, more and more consumer attention will be paid to mobile devices and content - be sure your strategies address the relevancy of these tools going forward.

3. **Integrate and innovate**

Gone are the days of PR in a silo. More than ever before, the lines of marketing and public relations are becoming blurred. This doesn't mean that one or the other will have to cease to exist. Instead, the public relations industry has to learn to adapt and integrate with other areas of the brand and the business. Collaborations with other teams allows public relations professionals opportunities to innovate- to identify different messages or audiences, to reach audiences in a more creative or more effective way or just become more efficient in how content is created and word-of-mouth power is harnessed.

4. **Embrace the new normal**

The 'new normal' is about fast-paced, real-time change. Go with the flow, think strategically and consider how to collaborate in marketing and other areas of business to best reach your PR goals.

5. **Deliver more listening points than talking points**

In the past, public relations professionals were trained to create talking points, both for spokespeople and within media kits and news releases for reporters and editors. These days, instead of doing all the talking - it's more effective to listen first.



6. Maintain your individual brand ethics

Finally, consistency is key. Be ethical, stay true to your brand and use PR to build business on trust and relationships.

It's an exciting time out there - for news outlets, for consumers, for brands. We have a lot to learn from one another and ultimately can benefit from conversations with each other. The future of public relations lies there.



4imprint Direct Limited is part of 4imprint Group plc that serves more than 100,000 businesses with its innovative promotional items and corporate gifts throughout the UK, Ireland, USA and Canada. Its promotional product offerings include personalised gifts, [promotional pens](#), [Post-it Notes](#), [personalised mugs](#), [printed Keyrings](#), [cotton bags](#), [mousemats](#), [printed drawstring bags](#), [sports bottles](#), [printed USBs](#), [diaries & calendars](#), [printed T-Shirts](#) and much more. 4imprint's 'no quibble' guarantees include the promise that if the personalised goods are not despatched on time they'll be free! For additional information, visit www.4imprint.co.uk

Paper
The
B