

Forge Stronger Links Between Search Engine Optimization, Social Media and PR

By Scott Huegerich, PR Newswire

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As communicators, our words are our greatest tools. They determine our success in building relationships and positive brand visibility. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the Internet. Online communication is still growing and developing, giving us more opportunities than ever to connect with our stakeholders. But our audience is becoming increasingly fragmented. News sites, search engines, blogs and web sites all vie for attention, making it much more difficult to control our message.

So how do we effectively communicate our message to each segment of these many audiences? What line do we take? In the online space, are we spokespeople, publicists, marketers, or a little bit of each?

Two audiences: Consumers and the media

As public relations professionals, our main responsibility is to provide positive branding for companies through media coverage and online visibility. The media remain the most important and wide-reaching platform for spreading our message. What has changed with the Internet is that we now have a chance not only to push the message out, but to pull customers and prospects in as well, creating a cycle of communication that links and feeds on itself.

Companies on the cusp of the media revolution are taking Web 2.0 and changing internal processes to make the best use of its tools. In particular, marketing and PR departments are coming together to create better communication strategies to target these two audiences: consumers and the media.

Integrated communication

Consumers

Given the scope of online communication options available, it is possible to make it easy for the media to report on a company's news while increasing visibility to consumers. But it takes internal cooperation. For communication, following up with information is as important as gaining initial interest.

In terms of crossover from PR to marketing, consider how your company handles online leads. Is your marketing department aware of the traffic that your news releases generate when you distribute them online? Do visitors to the company web site land on a page that engages them and invites them to learn more about or interact with the company?

The people who seek out your company's website after reading the news release are highly qualified prospects. Ensuring that the information they find on the site is appealing is critical to converting these prospects, whether they are potential customers or journalists or bloggers looking for a story.

The media

Companies that develop visible, organized, easy-to-navigate and highly informative media rooms on their web sites ensure that members of the media are as well taken care of as the consumers who reach the sites.

Yet it would be naïve to think that any member of the media relies solely on a company's web site or media room for information. A recent study of journalists by Fusion PR found that the majority often consult blogs for information. It is increasingly apparent that we need to meet them in the online space of blogs, search engines and news aggregators as well as in the media room, and through traditional news release distribution.

Dee Rambeau, product specialist for PR Newswire's MediaRoom services and managing partner of The Fuel Team, a provider of web-based solutions for the marketing and PR professionals, says that based on their own analysis, clients who have used MediaRoom have "increased their media audience, improved the loyalty of that audience due to the 'unsubscribe' feature, increased the specificity of their media audience by offering 'categories' of news, and increased the usability of their MediaRoom content by offering multimedia galleries, podcasts, images and videos."

Tips and tools for optimizing a news release

News releases that are search-engine-optimized can establish an online avenue to draw qualified, interested people to information about your company. Constructing a marketing- and media-friendly release does, however, require internal coordination and planning in order to best use your resources. Here are some tips:

- **Style guides and key messaging.** Maintaining messaging consistency across all levels of a corporation is always important, but especially when it comes to ratcheting up your online branding. Search engines use specific words and phrases to categorize news and build a relationship between your company's news releases and its web site. If your news releases reflect words people are using to find information related to your company or industry, your release will establish a channel leading interested readers to your web site. Develop style guides with your marketing and product teams to make sure your words are consistent.

- **Choose your keywords carefully.** Before you write your news release, determine its theme, a list of keywords to represent that theme, and finally two or three keywords or phrases to focus on. Use keyword research tools to determine how your audience searches for news about your industry. These may also indicate the sort of competition that exists in relation to your chosen words. Your marketing team has probably already conducted this research; synchronizing your efforts will save time and establish a uniform company voice. When crafting your release, though, remember to keep your wording natural, so that readers still connect with your message.

- **Place your keywords up front.** Specifically, work them into a short (80-character) headline, and repeat them in your lead paragraph. The inverted pyramid of news release writing lends itself well to search engine optimization. Search engines typically scan the title tag of a page, the headline, and the first paragraph of a release, so be sure to include all important information and relevant keywords at the beginning.

- **Distribute your news online.** Most newswires post your news releases directly to search engines and relevant industry web sites as a part of the media distribution your company receives. Be sure to include links in your release that direct Internet users to your company's site. Inbound links to your company's website enhance its ranking on search engines, as search engines count each link to your website as a vote for its significance.

-Use anchor text. In addition to including your company's URL in a release, use anchor text (terms that appear as hyperlinks leading to pages on your company site). Link important keywords to relevant web pages to create a pathway for your readers (and search engines) to easily find information. This drives traffic to your products, creates links back to your web site, and teaches search engines to associate the hyperlinked words with your company's web site and news releases. All of these add to your site's search rankings.

-Link coverage to your media page. This is when your news release stops being a collection of words and facts and becomes part of a larger, cohesive corporate message. For instance, if your company has an upcoming product launch, start by researching key industry publications' editorial calendars and develop a pitching timeline. Communicate in advance with your marketing/website team and make sure that when you receive media coverage, your site reflects that coverage. Make full use of your PR success—don't keep it locked up in a clip book!

Follow-up: Socialize

Using these tips can help ensure that your release will feature highly in search engine rankings (and links back to your media room or web site). That same release can now be shared beyond these borders using social media. The inclusion of social media elements in a news release is offered by some newswires, as is search engine optimization. But what makes your news worth sharing?

-Tags. There are more than 300 social bookmarking sites for Internet users out there, and inclusion comes down to presenting people with readily available tags, such as for digg, technorati or del.icio.us. The key, of course, is well-written news: an interesting perspective, an innovative product or a creative article.

-Include multimedia elements whenever possible. Engaging photos and videos enhance your message, making it more attractive and worthy of sharing with others. Including these elements also goes a long way toward gaining media coverage, as it increases journalists' options in the ways that they can cover your news.

-Provide reliable, refreshed information. Whether you maintain a corporate media room or publish a blog, provide the media with one place to find content that is specific, reliable and useful. Develop a regular readership by providing consistent, interesting, reliably refreshed news and information.

-Use RSS feeds. Utilizing RSS distribution from your company web site and other online content distributors pushes your news automatically to interested parties. It also means that your site will be constantly spidered by search engines, which will in turn improve its ranking in search results.

Case study: CME Group

CME Group, the combined entity for the Chicago Board of Trade and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, had a robust web site, but no section for the media. Its communication team wanted to create a dedicated media section that they could control, without relying on IT to update the content. Their main objective was to create a single location on the site for reporters seeking information while also providing information and social media elements that were relevant to customers and CME members, academics, researchers, analysts and employees.

Prior to launching the media pages, CME did a communication audit with reporters to find out what information they would like to see on the site. CME also worked with its internal marketing teams and product managers to determine how they could collaborate on product and service launches. Based on

the information gained from the audit, CME was able to determine what links and information would be useful.

Working with a third-party vendor's strategic public relations tool, CME developed its social media-enabled media room. The communication team now has full control over the posting and editing of content in their online press room. Through a password-protected interface, the director of communication posts corporate background materials, high-resolution images, fact sheets, executive bios, downloadable press kit documents and key press clips. There is also a feature allowing reporters to sign up for a mailing list and request an interview with an executive at CME. The company benefits from the automatic posting of news releases to the press room, RSS distribution and podcasting.

CME can now find out what people are linking to (most and least), and develop and build areas of interest based on that information. It has also been able to promote use of the RSS feed as another alternative way to receive news. Initially CME's media room averaged between 300 and 500 unique visitors per day; today it receives 2,500.

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