



Book Winning PR in the Wired World

Powerful Communications Strategies for the Noisy Digital Space

Don Middleberg
McGraw-Hill, 2001

Recommendation

Don Middleberg adapts key public relations strategies to the new media landscape, transformed by the Internet and wireless communications. He emphasizes the need for response speed and short-term - as well as long-term - planning, since this new environment changes so quickly as to render the future unpredictable. He outlines techniques for getting buzz, which is now a critical element in effective branding. However, this book cannot help but be affected by the dot-com downfall: Many of its examples refer to now defunct companies, or to those who are in deep trouble (and may well be deceased by the time you read this review). Still, if you overlook the problems that come from writing during the Internet reality-warp, *BooksInShort.com* recommends this executive guide for its solid PR strategies, which although geared for a high-tech world, are firmly rooted in traditional method.

Take-Aways

- Today, every company needs public relations (PR) to support its brand.
- Public relations people target journalists; advertisers target customers.
- The Internet has made speed and agility essential.
- PR people have gained increased access to CEOs as advisors, not just communicators.
- PR should be directed not only to the media but to other pivotal stakeholders, including investors and employees.
- Since information travels so quickly today, any brand or public relations campaign must have integrity and credibility.
- If you have a good story angle to earn coverage of your product or company, PR is much less expensive than advertising.
- Look for ways to differentiate your product to attract media and consumer interest.
- PR is especially effective at reaching innovators and early adopters.
- The digital media is simply another way to get your story out, even if you also use traditional PR methods.

Summary

How the Internet Changed PR

In the early 1990s, journalists were wary of the Internet. However, since 1996, many journalists have become digitally literate, if only to survive in today's networked world. Now, large public relations (PR) firms and in-house PR departments try to link wireless and wired communications seamlessly, and marketing employees simultaneously carry out standard and Internet PR. However, effective wired communications requires top management's full support.

"Today, the marketplace depends on credibility. You have to be truthful, or you get flamed out of business."

Corporations invest in public relations because a nimble PR program contributes to improved awareness among important constituencies (including the media and investors) and higher profits. Increasingly, major companies are promoting products with wired strategies. For example, General Motors established a Web site to sell all cars, not only its own brand.

"A company's corporate investment in public relations buys it customer loyalty, awareness and positive buzz, which sometimes results in deferred revenue coming down the line."

Public relations itself has changed greatly. It started as an adjunct to entertainment, so PR people were associated with flackery and hucksterism. For instance, a theater producer would promote a show by hiring a bikini-clad model to hand out free tickets. However, PR people have become increasingly professional in their approach and even multinational corporations have begun using PR as a communications strategy. The Internet Age has demanded even more professionalism and, now, credibility is critical.

Business Changes to Adapt to the Internet

The Internet has sparked five new business communications trends:

1. Speed and agility - Companies must react quickly to product or corporate challenges. PR can react rapidly to interject your firm's response in the current or very next news cycle. This immediate, focused response is critical to protect your company's image, whether or not the initial attack is based on false information. This need for speed also means you can't do long-term planning or use in-depth research studies. You have to be ready to revise your plans weekly, even daily when events take place in Internet time.
2. Access to top decision makers - Given the need for quick and effective PR, public relations professionals have more access to the CEO and other top executives than ever. They don't just communicate for the company, but increasingly play a role in advising top executives. They even advise lawyers about crisis communications.
3. New rules of interaction with new audiences - PR people don't just deal with the media, but with any business' most important constituencies: industry analysts, venture capitalists, individual investors and the general financial community. They help promote customer loyalty and employee retention.
4. Brand redefinition in a new era of branding - One big change has been the increased need to communicate branding by showing market demand and the clear differentiation between your product or service and your competitor's. Flashy, clever graphics and cool slogans are not enough any longer, so PR people are in a better position to provide this positioning than ad agencies. Even a traditional brand must create "cachet" - a sense of being hip and with it that employees, the media and the public perceive and connect with, to your advantage. PR has to create integrity and credibility for your brand.
5. Turning public relations into Internet currency - PR has become a major selling point for new companies trying to get funding. Business plans turn PR into "currency" in that good PR planning shows that the company has a firm understanding of the marketplace and an effective communications strategy for reaching it and responding quickly. Many venture capitalists and investors want a solid PR plan as part of a prospect's business plan, since good PR contributes to customer loyalty, awareness, and a positive buzz, which helps profitability.

The Power of Public Relations

The Internet allows you to measure the power of PR. After a story appears in a newspaper or magazine, you'll see a spike in traffic on your Web site. PR is also a much less expensive vehicle for marketing in today's fast-moving age, and it is necessary, since you have to do more to shape your public image. Stories in the media do this more effectively than advertising. An important way to generate such stories is to reach out to journalists personally and get them interested in your products or company so they'll write a

story. Don't just use news releases to attract this interest. The Internet also plays a part in spreading information as well as rumors. About 75% of all journalists go online now for information, and you can contribute to the information they get through your Web site or by getting your information to other sites, such as trade associations and newsgroups.

The Internet World's Rules of Communication

If your business is new to the dot-com world, you face four major issues:

1. Legitimization - You have to act like an established leader to be taken seriously.
2. Sustainability - You have to show you're more than just another "me too" business.
3. Education - If you're in a new business or category, you have to explain its nature.
4. Leadership - Show you understand the issues of Internet responsibility, privacy, security and customer care. Customers need to know their privacy will be respected.

“Essentially, public relations has been impacted by five important business communications trends catalyzed by the growth of the Internet: speed, access, new rules of interaction, brand redefinition and business partners as currency.”

Look for ways to differentiate your product. CareerExperience.com, an online career counseling firm, managed to stand out amid many competitors by highlighting its career assistance in unique ways, such as sponsoring an ongoing contest that enabled winners to experience their dream jobs for a day. One winner (dream job: golf pro) got a new set of clubs and an invitation to a Pro-Am event. Another way to stand out is to hire a celebrity to promote your product, which worked well during the dot-com boom when Flooz.com hired Whoopi Goldberg and Priceline.com hired William Shatner.

“Any response that isn't immediate and focused gives opponents - real and imagined - an advantage that can damage a company's image. We now live in a global information age, with Internet news outlets, worldwide broadcasting and instant analysis.”

Seek ways to combine Internet and offline promotions. American Express invites consumers to get rewards information online, obtain bonus points online, and spend points earned offline by shopping online. Your strategy should follow these rules of communication:

1. Move fast in getting information out - Whether you are communicating to the media, customers or your business partners, show you can adapt and change plans quickly.
2. Think like an entrepreneur or venture capitalist - Use a number of different strategies like a well-rounded portfolio.
3. Use adaptive branding - Be flexible like a chameleon. Present yourself in different ways to different sectors. Use a combination of planning based on 120-day cycles, where you do research and develop message points. You should also immediately respond to events, such as sending out press releases and contacting the media with reaction to daily events.
4. Be credible - Consumers have to believe they are getting what they expect when they buy something. One good way to establish credibility with journalists is to develop personal relationships with them, so they come to know you as an honest person.

“No company has ever been successful in transforming its communications practices without the commitment of key management.”

In your public relations strategy, think beyond just reaching the media and consider other audiences. Individual and institutional investors are especially important targets. In fact, even if a press release doesn't result in a news story, you can add it to the archives on your company Web site or news release database (i.e. PR Newswire, BusinessWire). PR is a good way to reach innovators and early adopters by generating stories in specialty publications and Internet news groups.

Public Relations vs. Advertising

Instead of debating the virtues of advertising and public relations, try to view them as separate skills, in that PR people talk to journalists, while advertisers communicate with customers. In PR, you want appeal to a highly educated audience and break through the clutter in a targeted way. Advertising can break through whenever you spend enough. In PR you depend on having a captivating story.

“Branding today is often better communicated through demonstrating market demand and clear competitive differentiation than with flashy, clever graphics and hip, smart one-liners.”

However, advertising can be less effective and more costly, since it generally appears in mass-communication media rather than niche media. PR works much better than advertising on the Internet, which is a niche medium, whereas advertising is more ideal for mass media, like TV. So far, advertisers haven’t been successful online, although they have tried different approaches, such as banner ads. Ads don’t dominate the Internet screen as they do on TV, and consumers have many options, so they can ignore Internet ads or quickly click away. Another advantage of PR is that you can immediately measure success by the calls to your 800 numbers and increases in e-commerce and site visits. Most ads don’t have that immediately measurable effect.

“To accelerate the transition from yesterday’s enterprise to tomorrow’s Internet-worked organization, a new breed of public relations practitioner has arrived, one that blends traditional public relations with online communications to create proactive, integrated and groundbreaking campaigns for clients - the e-communicator.”

Effective PR requires interesting story angles. For instance, doing original research can open the doors to speaking appearances and news stories on the results. You can provide in-depth information about a subject in the news, such as when Microsoft put the latest news about its trial on its Web site, whether it was favorable to Microsoft or not. If your company does something for charity, that can be the focus of a story. For example, Bill Gates set up a foundation for charitable giving. Think of different angles - setting up one exclusive story as a technology story, another as a business story, a third as a personality story. Try to earn stories in established daily newspapers as well as business publications and, ideally, try to get into the big five business publications. Articles in BusinessWeek, Fortune, Forbes, The Wall Street Journal or The New York Times earn awareness and credibility.

“The old ways of doing business in this field are dead and a new set of e-communication rules exists.”

Think about ways to use PR to support branding and measure the results in terms of:

- Leadership - Being the number one brand in your area.
- Financial relevance - Knowing that you will continue to make money off the Internet.
- Cachet - The sense that your company is cool.
- Status - Your power as a clear market leader.

“No matter how good the public relations, no matter how good the advertising, your long-term sustainability won’t happen without a product that has a clearly understood value proposition that people will come back to time and again.”

PR should support branding, but remain separate from advertising, since in PR you want to emphasize the logic of the brand in context, provide information and convey a story targeted to journalists and particular stakeholders. By contrast, advertising emphasizes the emotion of the brand and uses frequency and visual elements to tell the story. PR is more immediate, whereas advertising is more long-term, often set up weeks or months ahead of time. The digital media - posting information on your Web site or combining any digital PR with other communications - is only one way to get your story out. The Internet is simply another communications medium, not a replacement for other media. People still look to journalists to provide information from a credible, reliable source. A good PR person will work to facilitate the journalist’s efforts to get the story.

“The secret to the company’s (Amazon.com) success in public relation has been speed, the ability to change plans on the fly and the talent to make those plans understood by the public and investors.”

Respond to misinformation immediately, with press releases, press conferences or personal contact with journalists to get the story straight. The Internet is often a source of corporate sabotage from disgruntled employees, competitors and angry customers. Keep up with online intelligence, quickly address the issues and get the correct information out to journalists.

About the Author

Don Middleberg is the chairman and CEO of Middleberg Euro, the fastest-growing public relations agency in the U.S. for the past two years, with offices in New York, San Francisco and Boston. A noted author and lecturer, Middleberg is an expert in digital public relations. He is co-author of the *Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace Study*. He is regularly called upon for commentary by

numerous magazines and newspapers and has appeared on CNBC, C/Net, CNN, and National Public Radio talking about PR techniques and trends.
