



# Book Putting the Public Back in Public Relations

## How Social Media Is Reinventing the Aging Business of PR

Brian Solis and Deirdre Breakenridge  
FT Press, 2009  
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### Recommendation

Although changes in the media have always challenged public relations professionals to stay up-to-date, individual PR practitioners’ credibility and solid relationships still define their success. This means that tech advocates may be somewhat overstating when they claim that “Social Media” outlets will radically alter public relations, though they certainly add many more tools to the mix. Even if Brian Solis and Deirdre Breakenridge tend to inflate the extent of the digital revolution, their book is helpful and worth reading. You’ll have to be comfortable with some Web-jargon to understand their tech-centric thinking, but PR professionals do need to know how to make the most of social media – blogs, social networking sites, “micromedia” and the like – and how to best channel its unquestionable potential and impact. For that purpose, *BooksInShort* recommends this handy overview. In terms of details, its most hands-on, useful section is the appendix of social media links.

### Take-Aways

- Public relations (PR) must be reinvented to interact with online social media forums.
- The new generation of PR (“PR 2.0”) must acknowledge that customers both influence and are shaped by online conversations.
- People form associations and relationships based on mutual beliefs and allegiances built around particular objects, ideas, products and services.
- Corporations can no longer control public perceptions and events.
- Corporate blogs are an exceptional medium for direct conversations with customers.
- More than 112 million blogs are online, including corporate outlets that Dell, Sun, General Motors, Whole Foods and Southwest Airlines operate.
- Half of all Internet users go to video-sharing sites, which offer a ripe PR opportunity.
- By 2011, more than 60% of consumers will watch one video per month.
- Corporate blogs should feature openness, expertise, competitive superiority, and prompt responsiveness to customers’ complaints and questions.
- More marketers use psychographics, which explains consumers’ attitudes, personalities and lifestyles, to reach influential online users.

### Summary

#### Reinventing Public Relations

The public relations (PR) business is in trouble. Many people believe it cannot produce measurable results, or that it relies on “spinning” facts and manipulating reporters. Since Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee created the profession in the early 1900s, businesspeople have seen it as just an extension of management. Corporations generally turn to PR to shape public opinion, and create interest and understanding. Yet, too often businesses use PR to manipulate marketplaces rather than to inform or influence them. For example, in 2000, public relations professionals touted dot-com companies that lacked viable business plans; such poor practices inflated the

Internet bubble.

“Social Media will help us put the public back in public relations.”

The new “Social Media” of online communities and Web sites abets PR’s traditional goal of connecting with individuals. It offers tools for a fresh form of PR, called “PR 2.0.” Social media is part of a “completely new culture of online behavior,” which is reshaping professional and personal communications. Although writing an obituary for the traditional media would be premature, Internet technology gives PR people far easier ways to have direct conversations with consumers. These conversations both influence customers and are shaped by them, though corporations must understand that they no longer control this give-and-take. Corporate representatives must now realize that conversations about their firms are happening continuously. Your customers, suppliers and competitors are all talking, so you might as well participate.

“New PR is about people and relationships, not just new tools.”

PR 2.0 was born in 2004 as part of a conference for online technology innovators. As people shared ideas and developed new Web communities, the potential for practicing PR through the burgeoning social media emerged. In this environment, PR professionals must understand what brings people to online communities. Then, they can engage customers there with new ideas and viewpoints. However, this engagement does not include entering online communities to sell goods. PR 2.0 is based on building and maintaining relationships, having meaningful conversations, and condensing messages to make them suitable for use online. To be effective within this changing, person-to-person environment, PR messages should be devoid of hype. Instead, capitalize on the Web’s capabilities by encouraging advocates who use your products to promote them as they participate in online communities.

“Monologue has changed to dialogue, bringing a new era of public relations.”

Effective social media participants must be active and well-informed to become welcome, accepted members of online communities. Newcomers should listen to, read about and observe the community they want to reach before they participate actively. Learn its etiquette, and assess its credibility and sophistication.

“Everything you do online today, whether it’s personal or on behalf of a company you represent, contributes to public perception and overall brand resonance.”

Sociology, the study of groups and social institutions, teaches that people form associations and relationships based on shared beliefs or allegiances to particular objects, ideas, products or services. This means you can create bonds through “conversational marketing,” that is, participating in online conversations as a form of outreach and providing material for an online community to discuss. PR 2.0 professionals can influence this new channel directly. Given the Web’s unprecedented interactivity, the one-way monologues of traditional PR have become two-way dialogues.

“In the realm of Social Media, conversation is king, and only active engagement and listening can lead to meaningful relationships.”

PR 2.0 focuses on talking to people who share each other’s interests, recognize the company’s expertise and advocate for your organization. The net effect of empowered individuals forming online communities, contributing insights and reinterpreting information is revolutionary, tantamount to an online “Industrial Revolution” on a global scale. This digital revolution can change many elements of your public interactions, from brand development to customer loyalty.

“Everything starts with information and the empowerment you gain from being informed.”

In the early days of the Internet, having a good customer service department was the mark of a responsive corporation. With the emergence of social media, these departments now have to work with PR, marketing, sales and advertising to handle inbound and outbound customer relations. To respond, some businesses are creating new departments or positions, for instance, naming social media managers or evangelists, brand ambassadors, community advocates, vice presidents of social media or chief social officers. A community advocate, for example, would represent the customers’ interests, monitor consumers’ conversations with the company, learn what customers want and solve their problems. This person would need to understand the jargon and shorthand used in the various online communities, and develop messages for them.

## The New News Release

As fresh methods emerge, the marketing techniques used in traditional PR are changing. However, with a few modifications, the basic press release will still work for online use. PR 2.0 releases should include:

- **Optimized search engine words** – Increase your visibility. Certain releases might require search engine optimization to boost their online pickup and exposure.
- **Objectives** – Explain the goals and benefits of your goods or services.
- **Media links** – Make it easy to contact your resource person. Provide links to other relevant sites and blogs, including social media sites.
- **Stories** – Write your release in readable, feature-story form. Discuss the “social assets” of your material. Help customers identify with your company, see the value of your information and understand how they can use it. Sharing positive stories from customers about your products and services is a good way to enlist support. These stories resonate with other customers and work well on social media platforms.

“The evolution of PR 2.0 requires you to participate at a more informed and human level.”

To reach bloggers and customers, as well as reporters for traditional media outlets, send “social media releases” (SMRs). This kind of press release, which should be less than 400 words long, relies heavily on keywords, phrases and embedded Web links to make it more visible or “findable” on search engines like Google. Adding useful links and tools like keywords to your SMR helps your audience use, share and expand your information.

“When enough individual voices pool together, the whisper becomes a roar – transforming micromedia into macro influence.”

Distribute your release in various formats to reflect your product, purpose and audiences. To provide information for radio, television or Web sites, incorporate

additional forms of media, such as audio and video in your release. "Video news releases" (VNRs) appeal strongly to video social networks, such as YouTube, blip.tv, Metacafe and Veoh, which people can explore via iPods and cellphones as well as computers. A 2008 study found that half of all Internet users visit video-sharing sites. It reported that, by 2011, more than 60% of consumers will watch at least one online video per month. Another study found that U.S. Web users viewed 64% more videos online in 2008 than in 2007.

"Social Media is much more than user-generated content."

Companies can reach wider audiences by distributing press releases on the Web. Southwest Airlines discovered how well this works when it offered a new fare online and included a link to a press release that told customers how to get the discounted tickets. This effort produced more than \$1 million in sales due to the press release alone. For special events, companies can build landing pages to promote the program, collect RSVPs, solicit customer data and measure traffic.

## Corporate Blogging

Blogging is genuine "citizen journalism" that allows a wide range of individuals and organizations to post news and opinions for the Internet audience. To encourage reporters, pundits and other influential bloggers to disseminate your information, build relationships with them based on respect. Distribute valuable messages that convey demonstrable benefits to people, particularly consumers. Blogs are exceptional platforms for direct conversations with customers, but not for advertising or product promotion. The Web now has more than 112 million active blogs, mostly owned by individuals who use them to post opinions, stories and news.

"Bloggers are gaining recognition as industry authorities, earning the same (and sometimes more) respect and reach as traditional media (and sometimes surpassing it)."

Many companies also operate blogs, including Dell, Sun, General Motors, Whole Foods and Southwest Airlines. Corporate blogs should demonstrate openness and expertise, highlight a company's competitive position, and offer quick responses to customers' complaints and queries. To develop a corporate blog, first identify qualified in-house participants. Draw from executive communications, business development and Web support, as well as sales, marketing and PR. Build a schedule, create goals and line up key contributors' time commitments. Set up the blog's guidelines with input from the legal team and internal corporate communications. Ask people in sales and customer relations for information about consumer and business issues to discuss on the blog. Your public relations goal is to use the firm's blog to create a dialogue with customers for the purpose of improving how they use the company's products and services.

"Social Media is changing the PR outreach paradigm from pitching to personalized and genuine engagement."

Once your firm's blog goes live, expect positive and negative comments. People will question your motives and will post unrelated (and sometimes even unfriendly) comments. That is a routine facet of using social media and it highlights the need to strengthen the public's perception of your firm. In the process, you can make your customers extensions of your sales force if you work within the norms, concerns, principles and manners of their networks. Online corporate bloggers should interact and provide information devoid of marketing slogans.

## Less Is More?

Micromedia is a social networking mechanism, like Twitter or Plurk, for conveying text, video, voice or graphic messages. It provides updates limited to a tight 140 characters or less, so the content must be very specific to the topic and the reader. Bloggers use these micromedia outlets when they do not want to post full releases or just want to connect quickly. From a marketing perspective, these small bursts of information can play a solid role in an overall sales strategy. For example, the H&R Block tax preparation service used Twitter to answer its clients' questions during tax season. Similarly, JetBlue, Dell, Southwest Airlines, Comcast and Zappos use Twitter to address customer concerns.

"Essentially, Social Media empowers customers to effectively sell and represent your brand as a powerful and influential surrogate sales force."

Leading bloggers are a prime target audience for your information, releases, and stories, as are reporters, analysts, and other influential people, such as early adapters. Online communities recognize these tastemakers as opinion leaders who are the first to know about trends and styles. Marketers now use psychographic data to reach these opinion makers. This kind of detailed information helps companies understand consumers' and tastemakers' interests, attitudes, opinions, personalities, values, and lifestyle.

"The moral of the story is to be the person you want to reach, regardless of the technology you use to get there."

For example, BMW referred to psychographics when it created a fake mini-documentary as part of launching its new I-Series. Its marketers based their online documentary spoof on a mythical town that hoped to solve its financial problems by building a ramp that would allow someone to drive a BMW over the Atlantic Ocean. The spoof attracted millions and created buzz for the car. A digital photograph company, ACDSsee, employed social media to study how its customers used its software. Its community manager monitored online conversations, identified loyal customers and encouraged them to visit other social media outlets to talk about how they liked the firm's products. The company posted educational videos, tutorials and frequently asked questions. It used instant messaging to provide technical support, and asked customer evangelists to test new products and communicate with other user groups.

## Measuring Success

Quantifying the success of PR 2.0's social media efforts is difficult, since they may not produce direct sales. However, over time, companies can measure the number and length of the conversations they create, defining a conversation as a video hit, message, blog post, podcast, tweet, photo, meeting or news story. Companies track these conversations by using keywords to measure their frequency, tone and location. Use your first assessment to create a benchmark and conduct subsequent keyword comparisons regularly to measure increases in use or traffic. Users can automate these functions with such programs as Google Alerts, BuzzLogic, Radian6 or Nielsen BuzzMetrics, and their own Web traffic reports.

## About the Authors

**Brian Solis**, a principal in the FutureWorks PR and new media agency, co-founded the Social Media Club and the Media 2.0 Workgroup. He blogs about the future of PR and marketing. **Deirdre Breakenridge**, president of PFS Marketwyse, leads brand awareness campaigns. She wrote *PR 2.0*, *The New PR Toolkit* and *Cyberbranding*.

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