

Tools that twitter and chat

PROs must keep up to date with emerging online tools and work them into the comms mix

A couple of years ago I was at a rainy football game at Craven Cottage with Chris Green, the editor of *IT PRO*.

He showed me this funky new application called Twitter on his smart phone. In the same way as Peter Kay talks about garlic bread, Chris said it was the future.

I checked it out later, had a play on it, but didn't really see the benefit. Twitter - blogging to a group of 'followers' in 140 characters or less - initially felt a bit too much like stalking.

Fast forward to 2008 and it seems that Chris was on to something. A few celebrities have (inevitably) cottoned on to it, and Twitter's popularity has exploded.

But when I speak to clients, prospects and fellow PR people, they don't seem as excited as me about it. That is, until they sign up, decide to follow Stephen Fry and find that he reciprocates.

The same goes for LinkedIn. Yes, to some people, it's just Facebook for grown-ups, or a way to look for a job by pretending it's networking. Essentially, it's like an interactive CRM system where everyone is customer and supplier. Why isn't this an essential piece of the agency or client-side PR's kit bag?

Third, social networking: important from a PR point of view or just a passing fad? Ask HSBC, which had to perform a U-turn after it decided to charge students for accounts and found itself at the wrong end of a Facebook campaign.

No wonder Paul Boutin from the IT magazine *Wired* caused a storm when he said the day of the blog was over. 'The blogosphere, once a freshwater oasis of folksy self-expression and clever thought, has been flooded by a tsunami of paid bilge,' he wrote.

I partly disagree with Paul. Blogs are a powerful medium for self-expression and are often ahead of the mainstream news agenda. Whether it's a new Apple laptop or coverage of the US elections, the problem for the media and PR industry is that the blogs get there first.



What does it mean for the PR industry? Can the industry learn from the more collaborative world of web 2.0 to revolutionise how it manages reputation? We recently asked more than 100 marketing decision makers what they thought of online PR. One of the most striking findings was that although most respondents acknowledge the importance of online PR, budgets dedicated to it are low. Some 30 per cent of respondents said that only 1-5 per cent of spending was online, and 21 per cent spent nothing online.

Reasons for not embracing online PR included lack of available budget, not having the right skills set in house and a lack of understanding of what it could do for their business.

The business case for online PR is yet to be fully understood, so marketing managers, and their paymasters, are crying out for hard numbers - not anecdotes. One of the key components in any online PR campaign is deploying a buzz

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monitoring tool. Essentially this allows you to track what people are saying about your brand across blogs, forums, social networks and online news media. Sentiment tracking is in its infancy but, as it improves, the business case conundrum will be solved.

The second main issue relates to skills. Online PR demands a broad skills base, from understanding search engine optimisation to managing relationships with bloggers. Most of all, PROs

need to keep up to speed with emerging tools and consider how they fit into the communications mix.

Essentially, PROs need to move from telling a story to having a conversation. And this doesn't necessarily happen through a filter - the media - any more.

Decision making in the consumer and B2B world is now more dynamic and buyers are sceptical of PR spin. Honesty, openness and maintaining a dialogue goes further than just sending a message to your audience.

There will still be a debate over what constitutes online PR and it is clear that it is more than building in-bound links. The real value is in creating compelling content, building relationships and managing reputation. And that's exactly what PR has always been about.

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