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Schroedinger's Kitten

PR in the Online World

By Ian Lurie

Robert Heinlein once wrote about a kitten that could walk through walls, because it didn't know it shouldn't be able to. The point, I think, was that *not* knowing you *can't* do something is almost as valuable as knowing you can. The assumption behind the story is that the kitten, once grown into a cat, would bump into solid objects like the rest of us.

Many traditional and dotcom businesses looking to promote a new web site view and use PR the same way. My clients purchase PR only when all other options are played out, and only then because they don't know that it won't work. It's nearly impossible to convince them that PR is an excellent first option when promoting their web presence.

I would suggest that, while the Internet seems to compound old problems in justifying PR, the online world presents a unique opportunity to measure PR's effectiveness, and make it a far more attractive option for our clients. By using the Internet to quantify results of online PR, we can actually build a stronger case for using PR in all media.

THE PROBLEM: MEASUREMENT

As a web consultant, I guide my clients in promoting the online aspect of their business, and I favor PR over advertising as having greater staying power and legitimacy in a billboard and banner-saturated world. Why pay for a 1/3 column print in a magazine, or a 150 pixel wide banner on a web page, when you can have the pundits singing your praises in print or on the Internet?

Unfortunately, this logic is lost on most of my clients. PR has, to the outsider, long been something purchased not because you know it works, but because no one can prove it doesn't. But the Internet, with CPT and CPM tracking, lets web site owners see exactly

how much traffic a particular banner ad is driving to their site. This makes banner advertising seem far more attractive.

Mike Spataro, Executive Vice President of Weber Shandwick Interactive, points out that this isn't a new problem. Rather, the Internet has simply emphasized a long-standing problem with PR: "PR has always struggled with itself with respect to measurement. When it comes to the Internet, the issues relating to how we do this increase probably tenfold. The Internet is a much more difficult environment - if we couldn't figure out in the past 100 years how press coverage improved your company's brand and sales, the web only compounds the issue. At the same time that PR is harder to measure, the Internet has raised expectations of accountability."

Other experts agree. "PR is about building credibility," says Charles Lynn, Vice President of Media Relations at Appia Group – a New York-based full-service public affairs firm, "This is the age-old conundrum of PR -- its quantitative immeasurability."

It's not that the Internet has presented a new challenge. It just emphasizes an old one: When a company runs a television ad, they know exactly when their audience sees the ad, and can measure changes in buyer behavior. PR, on the other hand, has to propagate – it may be far more compelling, but the effect is more dispersed. On the Internet, if a buyer clicks a banner ad, the site owner immediately knows that that ad brought that user. Whether buyers come to a web site because they read an article generated by a press release elsewhere, however, is harder to establish.

THE SOLUTION: INTERNET MEASUREMENT

While the Internet emphasizes PR's primary weakness, it also represents an opportunity: Clients or companies can use existing technologies to measure the effects of online PR. Whenever a web surfer jumps from one site to another by clicking a link, the destination web site can grab and record the 'referrer' – the address of the original site.

So, if you send out a press release that links back to your client's web site, and I click that link, the address of the press release is stored in your client's server log. Log files, then, contain a list of every click from your press release to the client site. "They're the gold," says Mike Spataro. If you can get access to that file, and parse it for referrers that you know held the PR, then you can directly connect a visit to a web site with a specific press release or other piece. For the first time, we have a medium where you can measure PR-inspired changes in audience behavior.

Weber Shandwick started tracking results of online PR last year, and found that some PR campaigns, which generated online coverage from a press release with a link back to the client site paid off. "7-8% of all traffic" coming to their client's site "was generated by online PR." (which was significantly higher than much more expensive online advertising campaigns).

Appia Group takes a similar approach. Charles Lynn suggests "isolating advertising runs from PR initiatives to measure traffic if that's a priority. Put some time between the two types of promotional efforts and look at the results."

Measuring traffic in this manner is easy, if tedious.

First, be sure that press releases sent to online publications include a link to the subject web site. The HTML for the link is pretty simple – you can learn the code at a host of online sites, or write your press release in MS Word, type in the URL, and Word creates the link for you.

Next, contact the web hosting service for your client – if they host their site in-house, so much the better. Ask them what tool they use to measure site traffic, and if you can get access to it. Typically, the measurement tool reads the server log and generates a user-friendly report that includes a list of all referring sites and the number of ‘user sessions’ or visits from users, attributed to each referrer:



Now comes the tedious part – unless you have a programmer in-house who can automate this process for you, you need to click on each referrer and note which referring pages are actually instances of your press release, posted to another web site. Once you develop this list, you can total the user sessions coming from those referrers and match traffic to PR.

While this tracking method isn't 100% accurate (no click-tracking method is, for reasons that could fill fifty more articles), it will measure low, not high, and give you a clear picture of the relative effect of a specific piece of PR on traffic. Try that from a television spot...

MORE THAN THE MEDIUM

The measurement tools available to us online allow us to directly connect a single piece of PR with a visit to a web site. That means you can compare the effect of PR on user behavior with other promotional tools. The next step? Measuring behavior, says Mike Spataro, so that we know not only that someone came to a web site from a press release

and other online coverage and hyperlinks, but also how long they stayed, and what they did while they were there. The data is all there, right now, waiting to be mined.

And the payoff is huge – the Internet could finally present a quantitative proving ground for PR, where its impact and worth are established once and for all.

ABOUT PORTENT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dubbed 'The Mad Prophet of Information' by his staff, Ian Lurie has worked as an information architect and web designer since 1993. He started Portent Interactive, a web and information design consultancy, in 1995.