The PR and Digital Challenge – It’s Time to Focus

By Joe Walton, Consultant at Real Public Relations.

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At every workshop or conference about social media the same old slides come out. Facebook is bigger than Indonesia, 24 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, and Twitter now has over 190 million registered users.

Beautifully illustrated pie charts and line graphs explode on the screen. Excitement builds in the hovering social media gurus. From the back of the room you can hear the naysayers’ necks turn, creaking loudly against their long held convictions as they become enlightened to the power of the web.

Industry magazines, from law magazines to medical publications, are full of articles on the power and size of social media. They extol the size of web and potential of social media to their professional readers.

They are eye catching and stimulating but these figures are ultimately pointless and, at worse, damaging. A communications approach based on the sheer volume of users of the web and technology is at the heart of every misfiring social media campaigns and failed viral video.

We need an approach that is based on people not the tools themselves. This isn’t a new frontier for PR professionals. By focussing on the true social elements of communications the profession can take ownership of web communications.

All media is Social

Technology is, without doubt, changing the way people communicate but not fundamentally to what has gone before. Both new and traditional media are shaped by people.

At the heart of old and new media is the idea of a community, a group of people bound through an ideology, interest or other concept they gather around to share and communicate with each other.
Lifestyle publications to football fanzines all try to make a profit through engaging with a tightly defined group of people, evolving to satisfy their niche in the market. Trade publications are still at the heart of their professional readership.

For the traditional broadcast and news print media similar lines can be drawn on political grounds. A dedicated Guardian reader doesn’t read the Times because of a price difference but because the publication matches their ideology.

The distinction goes on inside mass market newspapers and TV channels. Publications learnt a long time ago that by dividing their books into sections, pullouts and magazines they can appeal to different types of people from public sector workers, to music fans and home cooks.

Online communications is no different. Networks such as Mumsnet, The Bake Space, Housepricecrash.co.uk, DeviantArt and countless others bring people together around a shared interest. Blogs interact with each other, sharing readers in a loose network. Even outside of the group and page functions of Facebook our network or friends will likely be defined by the educational institutions we attended and where we have called home.

The web, like TV channels and print media, isn’t a vast singular entity. It is made up of people building networks around a myriad of topics. Like traditional media beforehand, success for the owners of websites and networks is about creating content that appeals to a particular audience.

**PR as a social activity**

Communication and PR is defined by its place in a socially rich world. We act on behalf of clients or companies to hold conversations effectively with these groups through a chosen medium.

In the past, these groups congregated around broadcast or print publications. PROs pitched stories, worked on promotions, partnerships and features that would appeal to their readership. The defining characteristics of the audience determine which activities are most likely to be successful.

Nothing has really changed, we create websites, videos, audio, pictures, text or campaigns that can be communicated directly to these groups on the web as well traditional routes. Success is still determined by how relevant and interesting it is to a group of people. Where we once had journalists and editors as gatekeepers, the group acts as its own taste-makers by viewing, linking or commenting on what is, or is not, of interest to them.

A mass approach to the web cannot provide the insight or framework to create effective strategies and campaigns.
An opportunity for PR

As PR professionals we have been here before. Everyone working in communication has a tale of a client or boss who had unreasonably expectations or didn’t understand that a magazine aimed at the heart of their customer base was going to be more effective than a poorly thought out article in a mass-market publication (and harder to achieve as well).

As PR matured and the media landscape fragmented we became more adept at reaching these diverse audiences and educating clients about the benefits of focussed activity.

The problem is clients and bosses dazzled by the prospect of millions of potential leads don’t focus on the people who matter. A conversation with 1000 highly relevant people is worth far more than a passing mention by a 100,000.

By concentrating on distinct audience we can create a model for public relations that places the client or business, publications and stakeholders within real social networks existing both off and online. It can help make a decision about strategy. It also unifies the concept of reputation and aligns the role new and traditional media play in shaping it within a group of people.

Groups exist without the organisation. They will debate and discuss businesses and people if they choose to be present or not. Online the response to lack of engagement is faster and more visible but the reaction to silence is the same as before.

For proactive and reactive communications understanding group and their relationships is central to success.

In the rush for the social media marketing budgets, PR professionals should remember what we are good at; reaching out to the specific audiences through great stories and ideas.

The big numbers will always be there but a focus on diverse communities and business impact provides a platform for core PR skills to evolve and become central to success in the changing communications landscape.