

# Sitting comfortably? Let's retell your story

As social media continues its meteoric rise, Peter Boyes believes PR can help businesses master the new marketing universe.

The age of the Twittiverse has dawned. You'd have to be a hermit not to have realised by now that the way we do business and the way we market our companies has changed beyond all recognition.

The media has been fundamentally transformed by the Internet and the immense proliferation of choice that has opened up. Marketing today is no longer about using mass media through blanket advertising, especially on television, to deliver a brand message. The Washington based Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reports that every day the average informed person reads or listens to seven sources of information. It's like a crowded noisy party with a barrage of competing voices where everyone is struggling to be heard. Standing out from the pack means being nimble and responsive to what is most important in that on-going discussion.

The rise of social media through the Internet means that every company has the potential to be a media company. But to do that successfully means cultivating originality, honesty and transparency in your communications. It's not just about getting noticed, it's about being heard and that's tied crucially to being credible in what you say. This is where public relations is uniquely placed to help you master the new marketing universe.

Public relations provides a credibility halo effect because the information it channels is endorsed by the media, bloggers and independent third-parties who retransmit it. This makes it the ideal vehicle to deliver an effective social media marketing campaign. Work by Forrester Research in the US shows that nine out of ten people do not trust advertising, but nine out of ten people do buy on the basis of personal recommendation. American PR giant Edelman reports a substantial rise in trust in opinion leaders across nearly every one of the 18 markets it surveyed in the past two years, which it attributes to; the rise of social media; increased consumer-

generated content in mainstream media and easier access to media through new technologies.

You will already have a website. But is it ready for social networking? You can't just add a few links to your home page and wait for the traffic to pour in. The key to social networking is interaction and involvement.

It does take time, but so does talking to any customer the old fashioned way. Look at the cost of not being involved with the benefits of being there. There are a handful of big networks which are essential, Twitter and Facebook perhaps for direct to consumer messages, LinkedIn for business to business. Others such as MySpace, Bebo or KiwiPulse may suit your particular business.



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Using a person's name to represent your business in these social networking communities is helpful. In the online context people prefer to interact with a personality, not a brand. But remember this is a real interaction. Treat everyone as if you are meeting them face to face. Keep everything professional and businesslike, and above all steer clear of negative comments. A company can wreck its online reputation in a social network through a snippy remark or if someone lets loose at a difficult customer. The web has a very

sticky memory.

On the other hand, front up when there is an issue. Every business gets it wrong in the eyes of its customers sometimes. Social media gives you the opportunity to put it right quickly and effectively but it depends on owning up to what the mistake was and providing a remedy to fix the problem (just as it does in the offline world).

The primary rule with online reputation and social networking is to be personable, honest, and involved. So no fake reviews or asking a mate to say nice things. Potential customers rely on your reviews and once they smell a rat online, it's all over.

A well crafted PR strategy will also involve multiple stakeholders, not just customers, but investors, opinion formers and your employees. PR helps business to cultivate opinion formers so that they will tell your story for you; keeps your investors committed; and cultivates the hearts and minds of employees. Good internal communications is vital. Your staff can help to spread the word to friends and family but they can just as quickly leave you dead in the water if your corporate culture is a mess.

Ultimately we are interested in the bottom line and it's here that PR really scores. Businesses get a disproportionate return on investment from well executed PR initiatives.

Not only that, PR directs your message to the heart of that crowded public conversation and links it to the most important trends. It's an approach founded on listening to your customers, talking to them and adapting your behaviour as a result, which leads them from conversation to a decision to be part of your brand and your company's success.

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