

IS CONTENT MARKETING A NEW PUBLIC RELATIONS DISCIPLINE?

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GOOD MESSAGING CAN GAIN TRACTION QUICKLY, AND SPREAD VIRALLY ACROSS NETWORKS OF PEOPLE CONNECTED BY COMMON INTERESTS.

Is content marketing really PR? The immediate answer is “No,” but after a moment’s reflection, that answer may start to inch toward “Maybe.”

The practice of public relations is about influencing public opinion and guarding reputation. Content marketing is focused ultimately on outcomes like lead generation and sales. In terms of the old marketing funnel describing the different stages in the buying cycle (awareness, consideration, preference, choice) construct, PR is arguably more “upper funnel,” because it builds awareness and reputation. Content marketing is positioned deeper within the cycle, in the realms of consideration and choice.

But if you look at the marketplace for audience attention today, the tables have turned on the communicator. As we all know, today’s attention markets are always-on, real-time, and operate according to each individual’s needs at that moment. Our customers buy and our stakeholders act according to their own time frames.

This is why content marketing and public relations are suddenly finding themselves elbow-to-elbow in the communications mix, and the strategy. Both rely heavily on publishing messages with the goal of influencing opinion and generating specific outcomes.

Both disciplines also benefit mightily from the connectedness of our audiences via social media, as well as the new weight search engines are placing on fresh content. Good messaging can gain traction quickly, and spread virally across networks of people connected by common interests.

It’s important that we step back for a minute, and think about the different audiences for our messages. Content that is published digitally is very likely to be read by an assortment of people, not simply our target audiences. We know, for example, that consumers read press releases and seek out the media sections on company web sites. They perceive that messages for the media contain more hard news, and less marketing spin. So, we need to write press releases that appeal to a variety of publics, not just key media. Because those other publics are in fact consuming the news we publish. And vice-versa. Professional media are keeping an eye on broader company messaging.

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SO WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN TO COMMUNICATORS?

ELIMINATE SILOS

First and foremost, we have to eliminate silos. All groups within the organization who are creating content for public consumption need to be hand-in-glove. Coordinating efforts can create search engine lift and a calendar of consistent messaging that delivers a cumulative effect. The alternative – i.e. unrelated, scattershot efforts – are at the least inefficient, and at worst, confusing to the audience. (Read more in our free white paper, “Modern PR: The Art & Science of Integrated Media Influence.”)

PUT THE AUDIENCE FIRST

The second take-away for communicators is the vital necessity of adopting an audience-first approach to designing communications. Simply put, this means asking ourselves tough questions about the content we’re drafting, such as:

- > What about this content is interesting and useful to our readers?
- > What key customer problems does it address?
- > Why should anyone care about this message?

Putting our messaging under this type of microscope can feel a bit uncomfortable, but in today’s competitive arena, in which we’re vying for the attention of our audiences (including journalists!) with streams of other data and information, our success absolutely rests upon our ability as communicators to create the sort of content people value.

SHARE PLAYBOOKS & TACTICS

Content marketers are really good at finding interesting ways to slice, dice and deploy content. The PR crew owns deep relationships with key influencers and understands the mechanics of public sentiment. Sharing tactics and intelligence between the two disciplines can create undeniable value for the organization.

In times of change – and we’re smack dab in the middle of such a time – adaptive thinking is crucial. Instead of protecting turf (or budgets, as the case may be), advocating a new approach for the organization may be the best way to promote the brand, deliver results and grow the professions of public relations and content marketing. While they’re not one and the same, the two practices are definitely better together.

Originally posted on August 22, 2012 on Beyond PR by author Sarah Skerik. Skerik is PR Newswire’s vice president of social media and is the author of the free ebook *Unlocking Social Media for PR*.

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