



Advocacy comes first

Digital PR is not a panacea for every brand challenge, and unless a communications strategy tells an organisation's story simultaneously through traditional channels, it is likely to fail

Organisations – and the agencies that support their communications – are becoming more comfortable with the opportunities provided by the use of digital media channels, and consequently are also becoming more sophisticated in the way in which they plan and execute digital programmes. But while digital has created a vibrant communications opportunity for brands, communicators need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

While it's true to say that the phenomenal growth of social-media techniques and technologies present a wealth of opportunities for brands to engage directly with consumers in fresh ways and monitor perceptions of their brands minute by minute, digital PR is not the 'silver bullet' of the communications sector.

It may upset dedicated digital agencies – and social-media experts in mainstream agencies – to accept that digital is just one of many media channels. Used in isolation or as the only tool for any given audience, a digital campaign will probably not succeed.

At Weber Shandwick, we believe in 'inline communications' – those planned and executed in such a way that an organisation's story is told simultaneously and seamlessly through digital and traditional channels.

The story, not the communications channel, must always remain at the heart of every campaign. Digital is an important platform, and becoming more important by the day. But in the rush to 'engage' and 'interact directly' with their stakeholders, some organisations have forgotten the basics: understand your audience, know how they are influenced and what is motivating them, and be clear about what you want to tell them.

Traditional PR, with much-maligned media relations at its



heart, still has an incredibly important role to play in setting agendas, addressing perceptions and driving conversation. But what we have learned is that a good, rich mix of channels must be deployed to most effectively reach your target audience with your story.

The key to success is in ensuring that the channels you use are appropriate to the audiences you wish to reach. The fact remains that, today, neither a digital or traditional media strategy alone can be seen as a solution to a communications challenge.

Brands should therefore be wary of focusing their communications strategy on the platform, rather than the story they want to tell. Good PR is underpinned by a great brand story that can be told across many platforms.

Digital can and, it can be argued, should be used in a complementary way to ensure the story is available to be discovered, shared and even retold by the audience.

In these chastened times, the internet plays a growing role in influencing choice. One of the key challenges facing consumer brands, in particular, is that consumers grappling with the recession are investing more time in researching products and services prior to purchase.

To offer brands a better understanding of this trend, Weber Shandwick commissioned research to determine which media channels help consumers make their purchase decisions, something we refer to as an 'inline profile'.

We asked almost 5000 over-18s across the major markets in Europe which sources of information were most important to them when they considered using or purchasing a service or goods. The results were extraordinary. Online recommendations were by far the most influential channel at 26%. Our old favourite, personal recommendation from friends and family, came second with 20%.

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However, traditional media also has its place, with magazines and newspapers (12%), and TV or radio (11%) still key influencers – collectively almost as many as the internet itself. Away from media channels, company websites are most influential to 11%, while shop staff were named by 10%.

While digital is a great opportunity, it is only one, and should not be the principal focus of any given campaign. That's not to say that having a positive presence online is an option for brands – it's not. But, it is also not necessarily the way to every consumer's heart.

Yes, anonymous cyber-buddies are continuing to become more persuasive. However, although traditional media are often, but not always, fully trusted by consumers, it would be a flawed strategy in the long run to ignore its sustained importance.

In today's conversation culture, brands that fail to engage with consumers are seen as tired and unresponsive. PR must not be underestimated as a vital weapon in the engagement armoury. Its ability to joust, argue and build advocacy is unsurpassed. Whether you believe we are seeing the green shoots of recovery, or that the worst of the recession is still to come, brands with a great story to tell, across a variety of channels, will always emerge the stronger.

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