More about online PR

In recent years, we have seen power begin to shift from 'organisations' to 'individuals. This is being driven by technology and amplified by social media. While many in the business world see this as a threat, it should really be viewed as an opportunity.

With statistics from Netview, published in May 2009, showing that 73% of the UK's population were now 'online', the advent of social media means that individuals and businesses now have the chance to influence more people than ever before. Moreover, they can now do it directly and accurately.

Yet, while the balance is changing between offline and online communication tools, 'offline' is not completely dead. An effective PR campaign will need to encompass both basic approaches – perhaps using mass offline media to encourage the audience to access the campaign online – but a campaign will never succeed via either approach unless the overall strategy is both sound and properly planned. In the end, social media are tools just like any other. They need to be used appropriately – not just because they are 'new and shiny'.

One area where social media tools can be useful is via 'democratic consumerism'. Recent research has shown that 98% of consumers would definitely buy a product they had helped to evolve – which makes empowered consumerism one of today's key business concepts.

The empowered consumer offers an opportunity to improve and innovate. Consumers want the best from a product or service – and will be quick to point out any flaws in both supply and customer management.

Thanks to social media – such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter – consumers can not only provide this feedback but also make suggestions for improvements.

The empowered customer also acts as an advocate for the products and services that s/he consumes – even if the downside to this is that s/he will criticise when things go wrong.

Since businesses can't ignore this sort of thing, the best option is for them to embrace and encourage it.

The key to successful organisation-orientated online communities is that they are not just talking shops. Instead, they effect service change and product innovation. Of course, the real value of this is not just the value of the ideas that are generated but also the value of the process itself.

Getting started in online PR

Probably the best way to get started in 'digital PR' is to monitor what's already happening – if for no better reason than your organisation's brand is probably already being discussed online, so it's probably a good idea for you to find out what's being said about it.

If the gist of what's being said is positive, you should get involved in the debate, encourage it – and empower your consumers to give you feedback and make suggestions for ways in which you can improve your products/ services and your service to your customers.

If the gist of what's being said is negative, knowing what and where you need to change is half the battle.

Of course, the best way to get started in online PR is to talk to Bob Little Press & PR – but you knew we'd say that!