

How the Web Has Changed the Rules of Marketing and PR

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The Old Rules of Marketing and PR Are Ineffective in an Online World

Several times in the past few years, I have thought about buying a new car. As with hundreds of millions of other consumers, the Web is my primary source of information when considering a purchase, so I sat down at the computer and began poking around. Figuring they were the natural place to begin my research, I started with the big three automaker sites. That was a big mistake. At all three, I was assaulted on the home page with a barrage of TV-style broadcast *advertising*. And all the one-way messages focused on price. At Ford,¹ the headlines screamed, “Model Year Clearance! 0% financing! 0 for gas!” Chrysler² announced a similar offer: “Get employee pricing plus 0% financing!” And over at GM,³ they were having a “72-hour sale!” I’m not planning to buy a car within 72 hours, thank you. I may not even buy one within 72 days! I’m just kicking the virtual tires. All three of these sites assume that I’m ready to buy a car *right now*. But I actually just wanted to learn something.

Although I didn’t know exactly what I wanted, I was sort of thinking about a compact SUV. Only GM offered a way to check out all of the company’s SUV models in one place. To learn about all the Ford products, I had to go to the Ford, Mercury, and other brand sites separately, even though each brand is owned by Ford. These individual sites were no better help to me, a person who was considering a new car purchase possibly many months in the future.

¹ www.fordvehicles.com/

² www.chrysler.com/

³ www.gm.com/vehicles/

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Sure, I got flash-video TV commercials, pretty pictures, and low financing offers on these sites, but little else.

I looked around for some personality on these sites and didn't find much, because the automaker web sites portray their organizations as nameless, faceless corporations. In fact, the three sites are so similar that they're effectively interchangeable. I want to know about the people behind the cars! I'd love to meet the designers and maybe find out how they chose that weird shade of purple for my latest GM rental car. What I *really* wanted to ask is this: "Are there any real people at these auto companies?"

At each site, I felt as if I was being marketed to with a string of messages that had been developed in a lab or via focus groups. It just didn't feel authentic. If I wanted to see TV car ads, I would have flipped on the TV. I was struck with the odd feeling that all of the big three automakers' sites were designed and built by the same Madison Avenue ad guy. These sites were advertising *to* me, not building a relationship *with* me. They were luring me in with one-way messages, not educating me about the companies' products. Guess what? When I arrive at a site, you don't need to grab my attention; you already have it!

Automakers have become addicted to the crack cocaine of marketing: big budget TV commercials and other offline advertising. Everywhere I turn, I see an automobile ad that makes me think "This has got to be really freakin' expensive." The television commercials, the "sponsored by" stuff, and other high-ticket Madison Avenue marketing might make you feel good, but is it effective? These days, when people are thinking of buying a car (or any other product or service), they usually go to the Web first! Hey, even my mother does it! When people come to you online, they are not looking for TV commercials. They are looking for information to help them make a decision.

Here's the good news: I did find some terrific places on the Web to learn about compact SUVs. Unfortunately, the places where I got authentic content and where I became educated and where I interacted with humans just aren't part of the big three automakers' sites. Edmunds's cool Car Space,⁴ a free consumer-driven social networking and personal page site with features such as photo albums, user groups based on make and model of car, and favorite links, was excellent in helping me narrow down choices. For example, in the forums, I could read more than 2,000 messages just on the

⁴ www.carspace.com/

Toyota FJ Cruiser. I could see pages where owners showed off their vehicles. This is where I was making my decision, *dozens of clicks removed from the big automaker sites*.

Since I first wrote about automaker sites on my blog, hundreds of people jumped in to comment or email me with their similar car shopping experiences and frustrations with automaker web sites. Something is seriously broken in the automobile business if so many people are unable to find, directly on a company site, the information they need to make a purchase decision. And it's not just automakers.

Prior to the Web, organizations had only two significant choices to attract attention: Buy expensive advertising or get third-party ink from the media. But the Web has changed the rules. The Web is not TV. Organizations that understand the New Rules of Marketing and PR develop relationships directly with consumers like you and me.

I'd like to pause here a moment for a clarification. When I talk about the new rules and compare them to the old rules, I don't mean to suggest that all organizations immediately drop their existing marketing and PR programs and use this book's ideas exclusively. Moreover, I'm not of the belief that the only marketing worth doing is on the Web. If your newspaper advertisements, Yellow Page listings, media outreach programs, and other programs are working for you, that's great! Please keep going! There is room in many marketing and PR programs for traditional techniques.

That being said, there's no doubt that, today, people solve problems by turning to the Web. (Just consider your own habits. How do *you* research products and services?) If your organization isn't present and engaged in the places and at the times that your buyers are, then you're losing out on potential business—no matter how successful your offline marketing program is. Worse, if you are trying to apply the game plan that works in your mainstream-media-based advertising and PR programs to your online ones, you will not be successful.

Ask yourself this simple question: How are my existing advertising and media relations programs working?

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Advertising: A Money Pit of Wasted Resources

In the old days, traditional, nontargeted advertising via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and direct mail were the only ways to go. But these media make targeting specific buyers with individualized messages very difficult. Yes, advertising is still used for megabrands with broad reach and probably still works for some organizations and products (though not as well as before). Guys watching football on TV drink a lot of beer, so perhaps it makes sense for mass-marketer Budweiser to advertise on NFL broadcasts (but not for small microbrews that appeal to a small niche audience). Advertising also works in many trade publications. If your company makes deck sealant, then you probably want to advertise in *Professional Deck Builder Magazine* to reach your professional buyers (but that won't allow you to reach the do-it-yourself market). If you run a local real estate agency in a smaller community, it might make sense to do a direct mailing to all of the homeowners there (but that won't let you reach people who might be planning to move to your community from another location).

However, for millions of other organizations, for the rest of us who are professionals, musicians, artists, nonprofit organizations, churches, and niche product companies, traditional advertising is generally so wide and broad that it is ineffective. Big media advertising buys may work for products with mass appeal and wide distribution. Famous brands carried in national chain stores come to mind as examples, as do blockbuster movies shown on thousands of screens. But a great strategy for Procter & Gamble, Paramount Pictures, and the Republican U.S. presidential candidate—reaching large numbers of people with a message of broad national appeal—just doesn't work for niche products, local services, and specialized nonprofit organizations.

The Web has opened a tremendous opportunity to reach niche buyers directly with targeted messages that cost a fraction of what big-budget advertising costs.

One-Way Interruption Marketing Is Yesterday's Message

A primary technique of what Seth Godin calls the TV-industrial complex⁵ is interruption. Under this system, advertising agency creative people sit in hip offices dreaming up ways to interrupt people so that they pay attention to a one-way message. Think about it: You're watching your favorite TV show, so the advertiser's job is to craft a commercial to get you to pay attention, when you'd really rather be doing something else, like quickly grabbing some ice cream before the show resumes. You're reading an interesting article in a magazine, so the ads need to jolt you into reading the ad instead of the article. Or, you're flying on U.S. Airways from Boston to Philadelphia (which I frequently do), and 20 minutes or so after takeoff, the airline deems it important to interrupt your nap with a loud advertisement announcing vacation destinations in the Caribbean. The idea in all of these examples is that advertising, in all forms, has traditionally relied on getting prospects to stop what they are doing and pay attention to a message.

Moreover, the messages in advertising are product-focused one-way spin. Forced to compete with new marketing on the Web that is centered on interaction, information, education, and choice, advertisers can no longer break through with dumbed-down broadcasts about their wonderful products. With the average person now seeing hundreds of seller-spun commercial messages per day, people just don't trust advertising. We turn it off in our minds, if we notice it at all.

The Web is different. Instead of one-way interruption, Web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a buyer needs it.

Before the Web, good advertising people were well versed in the tools and techniques of reaching broad markets with lowest-common denominator messages via interruption techniques. Advertising was about great "creative

⁵ http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2006/01/nonlinear_media.html

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work.” Unfortunately, many companies rooted in these old ways desperately want the Web to be like TV, because they understand how TV advertising works. Advertising agencies that excel in creative TV ads simply believe they can transfer their skills to the Web.

They are wrong. They are following outdated rules.

The Old Rules of Marketing

- Marketing simply meant advertising (and branding).
- Advertising needed to appeal to the masses.
- Advertising relied on interrupting people to get them to pay attention to a message.
- Advertising was one-way: company-to-consumer.
- Advertising was exclusively about selling products.
- Advertising was based on campaigns that had a limited life.
- Creativity was deemed the most important component of advertising.
- It was more important for the ad agency to win advertising awards than for the client to win new customers.
- Advertising and PR were separate disciplines run by different people with separate goals, strategies, and measurement criteria.

None of this is true anymore. The Web has transformed the rules, and you must transform your marketing to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.

Public Relations Used to Be Exclusively about the Media

I’m a contributing editor at *EContent* magazine, as a result of which I receive hundreds of broadcast e-mail press releases per month from well-meaning PR people who want me to write about their widgets. Guess what? In five years, I have *never* written about a company because of a nontargeted broadcast press release that somebody sent me. Something like 25,000 press releases have

been sent to me, resulting in no stories. Discussions I've had with journalists in other industries confirm that I'm not the only one who doesn't use unsolicited press releases. Instead, I think about a subject that I want to cover in a column or an article, and I check out what I can find on blogs and through search engines. If I find a press release on the subject through Google News or a company's online media room, great! But I don't wait for press releases to come to me. Rather, I go looking for interesting topics, products, people, and companies. And when I do feel ready to write a story, I might try out a concept on my blog first, to see how it flies. Does anyone comment on it? Do any PR people jump in and e-mail me?

There's another amazing thing: In five years, only a tiny number of PR people have commented on my blog or reached out to me as a result of a blog post or story I've written in a magazine. How difficult can it be to read the blogs of the reporters you're trying to pitch? It teaches you precisely what interests them. And then you can e-mail them with something interesting that they are likely to write about rather than spamming them with unsolicited press releases. When I don't want to be bothered, I get hundreds of press releases a week. But when I do want feedback and conversation, I get silence.

Something's very wrong in PR land.

Reporters and editors use the Web to seek out interesting stories, people, and companies. Will they find you?

Public Relations and Third-Party Ink

Public relations was once an exclusive club. PR people used lots of jargon and followed strict rules. If you weren't part of the in crowd, PR seemed like an esoteric and mysterious job that required lots of training, sort of like being a space shuttle astronaut or court stenographer. PR people occupied their time by writing press releases targeted exclusively to reporters and editors and by schmoozing with those same reporters and editors. And then they crossed their fingers and hoped ("Oh, please write about me . . .") that the media would give them some ink or some airtime. The

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end result of their efforts—the ultimate goal of PR in the old days—was the clip that proved they had done their job. Only the best PR people had personal relationships with the media and could pick up the phone and pitch a story to the reporter for whom they had bought lunch the month before. Prior to 1995, outside of paying big bucks for advertising or working with the media, there just weren't any significant options for a company to tell its story to the world.

This is not true anymore. The Web has changed the rules. Today, organizations are communicating directly with buyers.

Yes, the Media Are Still Important

Allow me to pause for a moment to say that the mainstream and trade media are still important components of a great public relations program. On my blog and on the speaking circuit, I've sometimes been accused of suggesting that the media are no longer relevant. That is not my position. The media are critically important for many organizations. A positive story in *Rolling Stone* propels a rock band to fame. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* brands a company as a player. A consumer product talked about on the *Today Show* gets noticed. In many niche markets and vertical industries, trade magazines and journals help decide which companies are important. However, I do believe that, while these outlets are all vital aspects of an overall PR program, there are easier and more efficient ways to reach your buyers. And here's something really neat: If you do a good job telling your story directly, the media will find out. And then they will write about you!

Public relations work has changed. PR is no longer just an esoteric discipline where great efforts are spent by companies to communicate exclusively to a handful of reporters who then tell the company's story, generating a clip for the PR people to show their bosses. Now, great PR includes programs to reach buyers directly. The Web allows direct access to information about your products, and smart companies understand and use this phenomenal resource to great advantage.

The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media. Blogs, online video, news releases, and other forms of Web content let organizations communicate directly with buyers.

Press Releases and the Journalistic Black Hole

In the old days, a press release was actually a release to the press, so these documents evolved as an esoteric and stylized way for companies to issue “news” to reporters and editors. Because it was assumed that nobody saw the actual press release except a handful of reporters and editors, these documents were written with the media’s existing understanding in mind.

In a typical case, a tiny audience of several dozen media people got a steady stream of product releases from a company. The reporters and editors were already well versed on the niche market, so the company supplied very little background information. Jargon was rampant. *What’s the news?*, journalists would think as they perused the release. *Oh, here it is—the company just announced the Super Techno Widget Plus with a New Scalable and Robust Architecture.* But while this might mean something to a trade magazine journalist, it is just plain gobbledygook to the rest of the world. Since press releases are now seen by millions of people who are searching the Web for solutions to their problems, these old rules are obsolete.

The Old Rules of PR

- The only way to get ink and airtime was through the media.
- Companies communicated to journalists via press releases.
- Nobody saw the actual press release except a handful of reporters and editors.
- Companies had to have significant news before they were allowed to write a press release.
- Jargon was okay because the journalists all understood it.

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- You weren't supposed to send a release unless it included quotes from third parties, such as customers, analysts, and experts.
- The only way buyers would learn about the press release's content was if the media wrote a story about it.
- The only way to measure the effectiveness of press releases was through "clip books," which noted each time the media deigned to pick up a company's release.
- PR and marketing were separate disciplines run by different people with separate goals, strategies, and measurement techniques.

None of this is true anymore. The Web has transformed the rules, and you must transform your PR strategies to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.

The vast majority of organizations don't have instant access to mainstream media for coverage of their products. People like you and me need to work hard to be noticed in the online marketplace of ideas. By understanding how the role of PR and the press release has changed, we can get our stories known in that marketplace.

There are some exceptions. Very large companies, very famous people, and governments might all still be able to get away with using the media exclusively, but even that is doubtful. These name-brand people and companies may be big enough, and their news just so compelling, that no effort is required of them. For these lucky few, the media may still be the primary mouthpiece.

- If you are J.K. Rowling and you issued a press release about, say, a new Harry Potter book, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If Apple Computer CEO Steve Jobs announces the company's new iPhone at a trade show, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie issue a press release about adopting another baby, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If President Obama announces his pick to fill a vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court, the news will be picked up by the media.

If you are smaller and less famous but have an interesting story to tell, you need to tell it yourself. Fortunately, the Web is a terrific place to do so.

Learn to Ignore the Old Rules

To harness the power of the Web to reach buyers directly, you must ignore the old rules. Public relations is not just about speaking through the media, although the media remain an important component. Marketing is not just about one-way broadcast advertising, although advertising can be part of an overall strategy.

I've noticed that some marketing and PR professionals have a very difficult time changing old habits. These new ideas make people uncomfortable. When I speak at conferences, people sometimes fold their arms in a defensive posture and look down at their shoes. Naturally, marketing and PR people who learned the old rules resist the new world of direct access. But I've also noticed that many marketing executives, CEOs, entrepreneurs, enlightened nonprofit executives, and professionals jump at the chance to tell stories directly. These people love the new way of communicating to buyers. Smart marketers are bringing success to their organizations each and every day by communicating through the Web.

Here's how to tell if the new rules are right for you. Consider your goals for communicating via marketing and public relations. Are you buying that Super Bowl ad to score great tickets to the game? Are you designing a creative magazine ad to win an award for your agency? Do you hope to create a book of press clips from mainstream media outlets to show to your bosses? Does your CEO want to be on TV? Are you doing PR to meet Oprah? If the answers to these questions are "yes," then the new rules (and this book) are not for you.

However, if you're like millions of smart marketers whose goal is to communicate with buyers directly, then read on. If you're working to make your organization more visible online, then read on. If you want to drive people into your company's sales process so they actually buy something (or apply, or donate, or join, or submit their name as a lead), then read on. I wrote this book especially for you.

