# 1

# PUBLIC RELATIONS GOES DIGITAL

The digital age has profoundly changed the demands placed on public relations professionals and the ways they do their work. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the digital age has profoundly altered the nature of the public relations profession itself.

With the media now fragmented into thousands of communication channels, high-level public relations advice and planning are more critical than ever before, as companies, product marketers, and organizations all compete to develop, enhance, and project positive public images.

Effective public relations writing forms the core of nimble, innovative marketing made possible by digital technology. Today, businesses and nonprofit organizations use digital communications, as well as traditional PR tools, to reach target audiences, communicate with customers, and expand audiences. E-mail, Web sites, digital newsletters, blogs, viral marketing, search engines, live conference calls, RSS, and podcasting are just some of the tools now available to PR professionals. And almost every communications effort requires writing.

This book provides a road map for writing effective public relations copy for both traditional and innovative public relations initiatives. Each chapter offers clear, step-by-step advice and positive models to use when creating effective copy suitable to specific situations and needs.

Mass communications—broadcast and basic cable television, radio, newspapers, and major magazines—still reach vast

audiences, but not as vast as in the recent past and not as reliably. The media that can cover your company's story now include hundreds of niche cable channels, high-definition split-offs of radio stations, thousands of online publications, and millions of blogs. Neither a few well-placed advertisements nor even a comprehensive, multimillion-dollar advertising campaign in broadcast and print can dependably reach the majority of consumers these days. Finding conventional advertising less effective, companies increasingly are turning to public relations for new ideas. In fact, "public relations spending is growing at almost double the rate of advertising," this according to Veronis Suhler Stevenson in New York, a private equity firm that targets media industries (van der Pool, 2006).

Companies are experimenting and diversifying their approaches to reach niche audiences, and they are using public relations to achieve their communications goals. Computers, the Internet, e-mail, broadband, and wireless all increase the ease and decrease the cost of researching, writing, publishing, printing, and, especially, distributing written materials, as well as producing graphics, short videos, audio downloads from the Internet, and multimedia presentations.

Public relations professionals have found themselves on a sharp learning curve as they discover more uses for digital tools. The first challenge of the digital age was learning to save money and eliminate time-intensive, repetitive tasks such as stuffing envelopes with press releases or faxing them to a hundred media outlets one by one by one.

The next challenge of the digital PR revolution is discovering how to go beyond saving time and money to create new methods of communicating effectively with customers, employees, investors, media, and the general public. Creativity and public relations training, combined with people skills and computer savvy, have enabled new ways of communicating a company's image, or a product's benefits, or an organization's community goals. The demands of this stage are to harness the potential

of e-mail, interactive communications, handheld devices, the convergence of computers with telephones, television, and digital music players to communicate "personally" with hundreds, thousands, or potentially millions at a time. You may be writing for a company Web site, a blog, a social Web site, a live chat, or the PR war room of a large company facing a public relations crisis. In every case, clear, persuasive written communication, the stock in trade of the public relations writer, is the core skill that can be leveraged by each new technology and technique.

Whether you are writing for newspapers, broadcast outlets, books, or public relations purposes, the basics of good expository writing remain the same and never go out of date:

- Clarity
- Accuracy
- Vividness
- Aptness of details, examples, and quotations
- Correct grammar
- A clear, varied style

The digital age, however, has put new pressure on the media, and therefore on public relations, for speedy responses and on companies for accessibility and forthrightness.

Today, news stories can be posted on the Internet around the clock. The mass media used to have specific deadlines: once a month (monthly magazines), once a week (weekly magazines), once a day (daily newspapers and network evening news), twice a day (local television news), or more frequently for radio and wire services such as the Associated Press that fed updates throughout the day. Having a deadline meant that media outlets and their sources knew the time by which details needed confirmation, so that the story was as complete as possible when printed or aired. Public relations writers and other PR professionals were well aware of the deadlines for the media outlets they covered. They knew how much time they had to write a thoughtful response

approved by upper management or to find a ten-minute gap in a top executive's schedule for an interview to present the company's point of view or set the record straight.

Now, many editors are pressuring journalists not just to complete the story for the next deadline, but also to post it immediately on the media company's Web site to beat the competition. More media Web sites now opt for a scoop on a partial story, with updates—and corrections—as new details are gathered, rather than waiting to file a complete, correct story after an in-depth investigation.

Traditionally, there has been a give-and-take between journalists and the public relations or information officers they deal with. PR people interact with journalists as sources, sounding boards, and restraints on the impulse to go to press too soon with too few facts. Many journalists have been saved from the embarrassing need to print a correction when they listened to a trusted PR source who said, "I don't think you have the full story. What's your deadline? I want to e-mail our new product fact sheet, and I think you should talk to one of our executives before you go to press with that rumor." That was then.

Now, companies are given less time to discuss a journalist's question, confirm the relevant facts, decide on a response, and prepare an official, company-approved statement or set up an executive interview. Journalists dial the organization, while simultaneously writing and posting, "The company had no immediate response to our inquiry."

In addition, thousands of rants and rumors are being written and posted on the World Wide Web by anonymous bloggers who have no particular interest in earning a reputation for accuracy or fairness. Not contacted by the blogger, the company learns about a rumor only as it gains traction and readers, and rises to become a page-one result on the major search engines. Some of the ways that companies and public relations professionals can deal with digital communications crises are covered in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen.

Both public relations and traditional journalism are challenged by the digital age. In addition to new deadline pressures, the way stories are structured is changing. To tantalize and tease readers, headlines used to employ sophisticated rhetorical techniques such as puns, word play, alliteration, and literary allusion. Now headlines must meet the demands for literal meaning of digital search engines, which are computer programs that crawl the Web aggregating keywords. Headlines for both Web stories and print stories that are simultaneously posted on the Web are now more literal and direct or have two headlines: a clever headline on the first page to attract a human reader and a literal, descriptive headline on the second page to attract Web crawlers (Lohr, 2006).

People responsible for Web pages that sell advertising, products, or subscriptions are all concerned about "keyword optimization, search engine optimization, search engine marketing, or page one results." All of these terms equate to finding a way for your company's Web site URL to appear on the first page of search results for popular search terms, either by your company's buying a pay-per-click ad or by appearing among the first five to ten listings after becoming one of the most popular choices of recent searchers.

Internet search engines such as Google find and post stories worldwide. The global exposure that stories, press releases, and Web sites can receive through search engines can result in new readers for publications and bloggers and new customers for products and companies.

In addition to competing with other media companies' Web sites, professional journalists now battle for scoops and readers with uncounted numbers of "citizen journalists" and bloggers who are posting stories, rumors, reviews, and their sometimes fevered speculations about what "shoulda, woulda, coulda, mighta" happened. Therefore, public relations professionals need to monitor what is said in the blogosphere and make quick decisions about which misstatements or allegations or rumors require a correction

or response to head off a viral rumor that can permanently damage the reputation of a brand, a client including a celebrity, or an entire hundred-year-old company.

The 24/7 deadlines, intense competition, and trigger-finger readiness to post an unconfirmed story—a rumor—all put pressure on public relations writing, companies, and the client approval process.

Both the media and the public have heightened expectations for accessibility and speedy response. Management and the media expect the public relations representative or official company spokesperson or public relations writer to be reachable at any time by PDA, cell phone, e-mail, or even instant messaging. At the same time, hastily written press announcements, official statements, Web publications, and video remain retrievable indefinitely by using search engines and electronic archives.

Media fragmentation means, for example, that there are hundreds of niche cable channels instead of three or four main broadcast networks; thousands of online forums and blogs in the computer industry versus three or four main trade publications; and millions of Web sites and blogs versus a few thousand local newspapers and local television stations. This fragmentation has decreased companies' reliance on advertising and increased the importance of public relations. A 2005 industry study concluded, "The value of PR as a resource to corporations, government and institutions has increased, based on the need to address complicated issues and fragmented targets." At the same time public relations initiatives need to be more nimble and creative because "a decade ago, only one or two different media channels would be used to reach targeted groups. In general, the message would be a full-blown, well-thought out, well-researched explanation." But now "there is a complex, chaotic environment of half-truths, whole truths. . . the wild, wild West," according to the Public Relations Global Network, an organization of independent PR agencies (Public Relations Global Network, 2005). In the old Wild West, the motto was, "Shoot first and ask questions later."

The new Wild West known as the blogosphere seems to go by the motto, "Post first. Correct later… if ever… whatever." It takes vigilant and nimble public relations and crystal-clear writing to keep ahead of today's fragmented media and an unruly blogosphere that confuses self-righteous opinions with facts.

## A Few Words About the Truth

Tell the truth or say nothing. Practice gracefully saying, "We have no comment at this time."

Never lie to the media. Even something regarded as "a little white lie" can damage your reputation with journalists and make you an ineffective spokesperson or writer for your company. For example, don't say, "She's not giving interviews," if the reporter is going to find an interview in his main competitor's paper.

Reasonable people can arrive at different interpretations of the same facts or circumstances. The image of public relations as a profession suffers today, however, because of the minority who have lied to the media or distorted the truth. The consequences of past lies include the disparaging terms and names by which some PR people have come to be known: spin doctors, flacks, hacks, mouthpieces. When you are tempted to lie, remember that in the governmental arena, the profession is called public information officer—not public misinformation officer! Also keep in mind that stockholders of public companies can sue, and the Securities and Exchange Commission can investigate and fine a company if public statements differ from what was known internally at the time.

As a professional, part of your job is to research the facts, know the truth, and advocate within your organization or with your client for being forthright and truthful to the fullest extent possible. If your supervisor or client ever suggests that you lie to a journalist or assumes that certain inconvenient facts will remain hidden while an investigative journalist writes a major magazine article, be prepared to articulate why a lie or attempted cover-up is not productive and probably dangerous and destructive.

A lie compromises your own personal relationships of trust with individual journalists, which damages your future ability to do your job effectively. Journalists talk to one another about the PR people they work with and who is, or is not, reliable and helpful.

A lie also destroys the company or client's relationship with the media in general, as the stories of lies and cover-ups and questions spread. Public relations writers must advocate openness even in crisis situations (see Chapter Thirteen).

## A Few Words About Grammar

Write in correct English, even in e-mail and other informal communications because people, especially trained journalists, recognize bad grammar and make negative judgments about people who are too careless, lazy, or uneducated to write correctly. Consider this e-mail (shown exactly as sent) from a college student to his professor: "where at on the page is the information about the show were suspos to write." This student neglected a "Dear Professor" opening and used no capitalization, no punctuation, and no proofreading or use of the computer's grammar and spell-check function. What would you think on receiving this e-mail? Could you stop yourself from having a negative prejudgment or prejudice as you prepared to read this student's paper? As a public relations writer, do you want your e-mailed pitch to a journalist to be the morning's big laugh in the newsroom?

Take time to figure out why your grammar and spell-check programs are underlining possible errors, and make corrections and changes. Proofread. When possible, ask a colleague to check your copy. Then take time to read your e-mail aloud to yourself to catch additional errors and awkwardness. When in doubt, check, double-check, and use references such as a dictionary, thesaurus, or Appendix B in this book. Remember that the quality of your writing represents both you and your organization.

### E-Mail Is Not Private; E-Mail Is Forever

You cannot fully delete, recall, erase, or conceal e-mail. E-mail you send or read from a company computer is no more private than a notice you publish in the company newsletter. So despite the lure and the illusion that an e-mail communication is between you and the recipient, don't be tempted to write and e-mail anything you don't want the world (your boss and the media) to learn about.

In addition, companies must retain business records for specified lengths of time, and a wide range of e-mail communications and instant messages sent on the company computer network are business records. Be sure to read and understand your organization's policies about e-mail and other digital communications.

### A Few Words About Style

Some people have more facility with language than others. Almost everyone, however, can learn to write in a clear, straightforward, readable style through practice, being open to editing and suggestions from others, and rewriting. These are the keys to improving, no matter how easy or difficult writing initially is for you.

As you work toward clarity and aptness of phrasing, remember a few basics:

- Whenever possible use action verbs (*go, work, decide*).
- Avoid overreliance on "being" verbs (*is, are, was, seemed*).
- Use the active voice of verbs ("She decided the outcome").
- Avoid the passive voice of verbs ("It was decided" or "It was decided by her," which is wordy but at least has the virtue of saying who is responsible).
- Vary the length and structure of sentences. Instead of "Dick ran. Jane ran. Sally ran too," try, "As Dick and Jane ran, Sally toddled after them."

- Since most people have heard English spoken much more than they have read it or written it, most people can benefit by reading their own prose aloud and letting their ear for the language pick out awkward sentences and imprecise or wordy phrasing.

- Have someone else read your writing aloud to you. If the reader stumbles, revise the sentence.

Any good writing is probably 20 percent writing and 80 percent rewriting. In public relations, expect 90 percent rewriting because a number of people will make suggestions and changes during the approval process.

You have to be willing to work toward clarity. Even with the pressure of instant deadlines, you must insist on making and then taking the time to create readable prose that achieves your communications goals. Then proofread, proofread, proofread! Once your writing is sent digitally into cyberspace, an error is forever.

When you become adept at writing newsworthy press releases, informative biographies, fact sheets, media kits, and stories that are specific to a newsletter's target audience, you will find plenty of new challenges ahead: speeches, multimedia presentations, broadcast scripts, event presentations and time lines, as well as Internet communications, editorials, opinion pieces, crisis communications, and official statements. This book provides useful models as you confront each new challenge, including how to write a complete public relations program or proposal and budget.

Whatever digital distribution channel you may be using—perhaps one not even invented at the time this book is published—remember your main responsibilities as a public relations writer:

- Clearly understand your product, client, company, or message.

- Know your target audiences.

- Write clear, engaging prose that effectively communicates your message to your audience.

## Chapter Recap

- Use the examples in this handbook as models for each type of public relations writing assignment you encounter.
- Work toward clarity, accuracy, vividness, and aptness of details, examples, and quotations.
- Tell the truth, or issue a graceful, "No comment."
- Use correct grammar.
- Remember that company e-mail is not private.
- Develop a clear, direct style that uses active verbs and varied sentence structures.
- Be ready and willing to accept editorial suggestions and changes during the approval process.
- Rewrite.
- Proofread more than once.
- Remember that in the digital age, an error is forever.