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

As I write this, I am considering buying a new car. As it is for billions of other global consumers, the web is my primary source of information when I consider 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 some major automaker sites. That was a big mistake. I was assaulted on the homepages with a barrage of TV-style broadcast *advertising*. And most of the one-way messages focused on price. For example, at Chevrolet, the all-capital-letters headline in a huge font that took up most of the page screamed, “0% APR FOR 72 MONTHS ON SELECT POPULAR SUVs WHEN YOU FINANCE WITH GM FINANCIAL.” Dodge announced a similar offer on their sales event: “NO MONTHLY PAYMENTS FOR 90 DAYS.” Other manufacturers touted similar flashy offers.

I’m not planning to buy a car now, thank you. I’m just kicking the virtual tires. These sites and most others assume that I’m ready to buy a car *right now*. But I actually just wanted to learn something. Sure, I got graphics and animation, 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 websites portray their organizations as nameless, faceless corporations. In fact, the sites I looked at are so similar that they’re effectively interchangeable. 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 car TV ads, I would have flipped on the TV. I was struck with the odd feeling that all large 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 automobile ads that make me think, "This has got to be really freakin' expensive." The television commercials, the "sponsored by" stuff, the sales "events," 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. Even my 87-year-old 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 cars. Unfortunately, the places where I got authentic content and where I became educated and where I interacted with humans weren't part of the automakers' sites. Edmunds Forums is a free, consumer-driven, social networking and personal pages site. It features photo albums, user groups based on make and model of car, and favorite links. The site was excellent in helping me narrow down choices. For example, in the forums, I could read hundreds of messages about each car I was considering. 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 have jumped in to comment or email me with similar car-shopping experiences and frustrations with automaker websites. And while I certainly recognize that the automakers have improved their sites since I first wrote about them, the focus is still on advertising. Something is seriously broken in the automobile business if so many people tell me they are unable to find, directly on a company site, the information they need to make a purchase decision.

But it's not just automakers.

Think about your own buying habits. Do you make purchase decisions based on your independent research, via information you find with search engines like Google? Of course you do! Do you contact your friends and colleagues via social media like Facebook and ask them about products and services you're interested in? If so, you are not alone. And yet many sellers fail to reach you in this process.

In the years before she headed to college, my daughter researched appropriate schools by searching online and connecting with her friends. Over the course of her high school years, she carefully narrowed her choices down to a handful of schools that were a good fit for her. When applications were due, she was all set.

Yet in the months leading up to the application deadline, she received hundreds of very expensive direct-mail packages from universities around the world. Many sent large, thick envelopes containing glossy brochures with hundreds of pages. These efforts were completely wasted, because my daughter had already made up her mind by doing her own research on the web. This huge investment in direct-mail advertising simply didn't work.

Before the web, organizations had only two significant options for attracting 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 should 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, telephone directory listings, media outreach, 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. I'm sure you do too. Just reflect on your own habits as you contemplate a purchase.

Consider another form of marketing, the art of finding a new job. Several times per month, I receive email or phone calls from people who are searching for work. They usually send their resume (CV) to me and want to network with me to find a job. What these people are doing is advertising a product (their labor) by sending me an unsolicited email message. Like the auto companies and the universities, the typical job seeker is advertising a product. Yet the vast majority of these people are not positioning themselves to be found on the web, because they don't have a personal website, they aren't blogging or creating online videos, and, except for maybe a Facebook or LinkedIn profile, they aren't active in social networking. They are not creating the content that will help an employer to find them when a company needs new staff.

If you aren'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 whether you're looking for a job or marketing your company's product or your organization's service. Worse, if you are trying to apply the game plan that works in your mainstream-media-based advertising and public relations (PR) programs to your online efforts, you will not be successful.

So take a minute to ask yourself this simple question: *How are my existing advertising and media relations programs working?*

Advertising: A Money Pit of Wasted Resources

In the old days, traditional, nontargeted advertising via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and direct mail was the only way to go. But these media make it very difficult to target specific buyers with individualized content. 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 customer base to do so). 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 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 those 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. A great strategy for Procter & Gamble, Disney, and a 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 information that costs 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 complex 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 an ad instead of the article. Or you're flying on American Airlines (which I do frequently), and during the flight, the airline deems it important to interrupt your nap with a loud advertisement announcing its credit card offer. The goal in each of these examples is to get people to stop what they are doing and pay attention to a message.

Moreover, the messages in advertising are product-focused, one-way spin. Advertisers can no longer break through with dumbed-down broadcasts about their wonderful products. The average person now sees hundreds of seller-spun commercial messages per day. People just don't trust them. We turn them off in our minds, if we notice them at all.

The web is different. Instead of one-way interruption, web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment a buyer needs it. It's about interaction, information, education, and choice.

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 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.

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

For nearly a decade, I was a contributing editor at *EContent* magazine. I occasionally write for the *HuffPost*, contribute guest articles to many other publications, and maintain a popular blog. As a result, I receive hundreds of broadcast email press releases and pitches per month from well-meaning PR people who want me to write about their products and services. Guess what? In 10 years, I have *never* written about a company because of a non-targeted broadcast press release or pitch that somebody sent me. Think about that: tens of thousands of press releases and pitches; zero 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 write about, and I check out what I can find on blogs, on Twitter, and through search engines. If I find a press release on the subject through Google 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 email me?

Here's another amazing figure: In more than 10 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 a story I've written in a magazine. How difficult can it be to read the blogs and Twitter feeds of the reporters you're trying to pitch? It teaches you precisely what interests them. Then you can email 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 month. 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 an astronaut or a 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 that the media would give them some ink or some airtime ("Oh, please write about me!"). The end result of their efforts—the ultimate goal of PR in the old days—was the press clip, which 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.

The web has changed the rules. Today, organizations are communicating directly with buyers.

Yes, the Media Are Still Important

Allow me to pause again 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 all these outlets are important aspects of a larger 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 of 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 companies make great efforts 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. These days, 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 their "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.* 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.
- 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.

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 issue a press release about a new book, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If Apple Computer CEO Tim Cook announces the company's new iPhone, the news will be picked up by the media.
- If the president of the United States announces a 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. It means that to be successful, they need to learn new skills. And change is not easy.

But I've also noticed that many enlightened marketing executives, CEOs, entrepreneurs, nonprofit executives, and professionals jump at the chance to tell their stories directly. These people love the new way of communicating with buyers and are eager to learn. 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? 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 and entrepreneurs 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 names as leads), then read on. I wrote this book especially for you.