

PR waking up to Blogosphere

By Rashi Sharma

Before the University of Michigan reported that Dell's customer satisfaction had plummeted in its American Customer Satisfaction Index, word had already gotten out thanks to Jeff Jarvis.

Jarvis is an influential blogger. His blog, Buzz-Machine, receives more than 5,000 visitors a day. When Dell refused to replace or fix his broken computer, he let everyone know about his struggle with Dell's customer service in a series of posts titled, "Dell Hell." His open letter to Michael Dell, chairman, Dell Computers, and Michael George, chief marketing officer, was the third-most linked-to post in the blogosphere on August 17, 2005, according to Intelliseek's BlogPulse.

In earlier times, Jarvis might have been just another disgruntled customer. But today, he is not alone. His posts led hundreds of bloggers and commentators to publicly complain about the service, or lack thereof, they received from Dell's technical support staff.

The lesson from this story is two-fold and clear. First, blogging is here to stay. Secondly, main-stream corporations haven't figured out how to cope with blogs.

"Blogs have given power to people. It is what we in public relations have always preached and believed in – two-way communication," said Jeff Roach, President of Toronto-based Jeff Roach & Associates.

"Blogs are personal and allow participatory conversation. The message is now being controlled by the customer and not just by corporations," said Shel Holtz, principal, Holtz Communication + Technology.

Now is the time for corporations to take blogs seriously. According to the recently released report by Technorati "State of the Blogosphere," about 80,000 new blogs are created every day.

"What makes blogs so intimidating is that they are subversive and can't be controlled," said Roach. "Anybody who has a computer and an opinion can start a blog." Lack of accountability, accessibility and speed make it easier for negative information and rumours to get started and circulated worldwide. This is what makes blogs a threat to corporate reputations.

But it is not all negative. "Blogs provide an unprecedented opportunity for an organization to connect directly with customers and other audiences," says Holtz.

So where does public relations fit into this picture?

On his blog, Micro Persuasion, Steve Rubel, vice president, client services, CooperKatz & Company writes: "PR professionals will increasingly need to not only serve as an organization's mouthpiece (one of them at least), but also its eyes and ears. The best PR pros have done this for years. Blogging just makes it easier to keep our finger on the public pulse. This is how we operate at CooperKatz. We monitor the blogosphere for all of our clients. If we spot a customer issue, we route it to the right party to manage. Occasionally, we also reach out ourselves to begin the dialogue."

"Monitoring the blogosphere should now be an integral part of a public relations practitioner's job. Corporate reputation is going to be the greatest victim if practitioners ignore blogs," said Holtz. This is a lesson public relations industry should have learned from the Kryptonite and Kensington cases.



Betty Alexander, President of Toronto-based XposurePR, agrees, “Anticipation coupled with constant monitoring is the key. It is always better and cheaper to be proactive than reactive.”

“The key is to identify the influential bloggers who write about clients. Not all bloggers are the same,” said Roach. Once PR practitioners have identified these influential bloggers they have to learn how to pitch stories to them, send them relevant information and build relationships with them.

One of the reasons public relations has been slow to embrace blogs is because practitioners themselves are not familiar with the technology. However, there are various resources available to get started. “Technorati, PubSub, BlogPulse, Bloglines are all great resources to start with. Another comprehensive resource is the new wiki site www.thenewpr.com,” said Holtz.

Corporations are acknowledging the power of blogs and listening to bloggers. When Dan Entin recently complained about not being able to find his favourite deodorant (Degree Sport) on his blog, called Two Percent Nation, Unilever listened. They not only promptly suggested ways he might find the product at retail using the Unilever website but also sent him a year’s supply.

“It is still too early to fully understand and gauge the impact of blogs on public relations. But one thing that is for sure is they will soon be mainstream and change how we practice public relations,” says Alexander.

Corporations that underestimate the power of blogs and don’t join the band wagon are going to feel the heat. “Really, there is no choice,” said Holtz. A lesson, hopefully, Dell has learned.

According to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>), some definitions of the lingo used by communicators in the blogosphere include:

Wiki: A wiki is a Web site that allows users to add content, as on an Internet forum, and also allows anyone to edit the content. The site, www.thenewpr.com is such a site where veteran PR practitioners voluntarily post and edit content.

The Doodle: The entire body of pages on a wiki site, which are usually highly interconnected via hyperlinks.

Wiki page: The opposite of the doodle, a wiki page is a single page within a wiki site.

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