

# **Meeting Change: Public Relations Planning in 2010**

*Preparations for the Unknown Unknowns*





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*"There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know."* - Donald Rumsfeld

Unknown unknowns. So said Donald Rumsfeld in a Department of Defense briefing to the media in February 2002.<sup>1</sup> Politics aside, and love him or hate him, Rummy was pretty good with the media and there's something PR professionals can take away from his style and sometimes colorful quotes.

Eight years later, that now infamous quote might also apply to PR planning for 2010. To say the changes in the media landscape, and by extension in the PR industry, have been extraordinary in the last 18 months would be an understatement. The change has been dramatic and for many, unanticipated. This leads us to ask the question – what's next?

The traditional yearly PR planning process takes into account an audit of goals, objectives, tactics and results from the previous 12 months. It analyzes and processes that information to lay out plans for the coming year. The purpose of this whitepaper is not to discuss PR planning processes, formats or philosophies, it's not an argument about strategies versus tactics, rather it's focused on ideas for creating a more flexible, dynamic and resilient PR program that's more adapted to meeting the uncertainty that will surely face the PR community in 2010. It's about ideas for meeting change.

### **Developing PR knowledge and skills for tomorrow**

It's impossible to plan for unknown unknowns. Arguably, the next best thing is to arm yourself with a bucket of tools and experiences that will enable you or your staff to better meet change. Here's a look at programmatic practices public relations professionals can implement for professional development and education to help manage change.

**Train to think differently.** Crisis communications work incorporates the management of rapidly emerging and unanticipated variables. Often crisis communicators rank high for intuition, according to Jonathan Bernstein, the president of Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc. Crisis communicators also gain valuable experience with each event

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<sup>1</sup> DefenseLink: [DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers](#), February 12, 2002



and subsequently develop systematic ways of thinking about crisis potential and ability to recognize leading indicators. Studying crisis communications can enable PR professionals to develop or refine this skill set and apply it to other aspects of PR work, such as managing the unexpected.

“If you teach the analytical skills of a crisis communicator, you teach the ability to anticipate crisis and see opportunity,” said Bernstein. “This improves situational awareness, develops adaptable skills and people learn to juggle more.”<sup>2</sup>

Bernstein points out that this concept is not all that different from media training. PR professionals often train clients or spokespeople on the best practices for handling challenging, and perhaps difficult, questions. People get better at it with practice, and perhaps this concept can also be applied to dealing with the uncertainty of change.

**Get the most from emerging social media.** Social media is the catalyst behind much of the change emerging in the PR industry – and that’s only likely to continue in the next year. A study by Deloitte, Beeline Labs and the Society for New Communications Research found that 94 percent of enterprises will maintain or increase their investment in social media.<sup>3</sup> Those investments are being used for savvy public relations applications; for example, there is evidence that companies are using blogging platforms to supplement the role of a public spokesperson.<sup>4</sup>

While there’s a plethora of studies and articles on using social media as a PR channel, there’s little substitute for hands-on experience. Many PR professionals have the basic knowledge – experience with Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn – however, there’s an entire ecosystem of social media sites all with uniquely different value propositions that can be integrated into the public relations toolkit. In fact, Traffikd, a social media and internet marketing blog, has categorized a list of hundreds of social media sites.<sup>5</sup>

Veteran marketer Al Krueger wrote on the *Comet Branding Blog* that a “working knowledge of social media distribution platforms” is one of the top 10 PR skills of tomorrow needed today. “Thankfully, applications for social media publishing continue to evolve and distribution platforms like [Shoutlet](#) are coming to the forefront to help communications pros distribute content across many channels (email, Twitter, Facebook, widgets, etc.) instantaneously. We all need to know how to use these tools because they put the true power of the social web at our fingertips.”<sup>6</sup>

Given the explosion of social media sites – or the rapidly developing influence of existing sites in the last few years – staying on top of the new developments will continue to be challenging in 2010. Planning new programs using existing resources can be a cost-effective approach to keeping abreast of new technologies and will challenge your staff to think big picture.

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<sup>2</sup> Phone interview, Jonathan Bernstein, October 16, 2009

<sup>3</sup> *eWeek*: [Study: 94% of Enterprises Will Invest in Social Media Despite Recession](#), October 7, 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Dow Jones News Wire*: [Companies Increasingly Looking to Blogs as Spokesmen](#), October 12, 2009

<sup>5</sup> *Traffikd*: [List of Social Media and Social Networking Sites](#), undated

<sup>6</sup> *Comet Branding Blog*: [Why wait? Ten PR skills of tomorrow that are needed today](#), July 13, 2009



For example, consider creating a professional development program that's akin to a modern day book club. Assign staff to examine one new social media site every month or every quarter and report back to the team on its potential applicability to your organization's public relations efforts – perhaps brown bag session style. Experiment with newer or lesser known sites noting the differences and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

**Develop fluency in new PR skills.** Basic research, presentation and writing skills will continue to be prerequisites for effective public relations professionals, but PR professionals also need a fluency in new skills in order to be ready to adapt to changes in 2010. However, the dynamic nature of the Web and increased capacity for the use of multi-media means PR professionals need to have some fundamental knowledge of new media, including the following:

- **Basic HTML:** Public relations professional Arik Hanson wrote on his blog, *Communications Conversations*, that basic HTML and Web coding skills are part of the evolving skill set.<sup>7</sup> Such a skill is useful not only for being able to understand the language of Web designers, but also for routine PR tasks. For example, the ability to hyperlink words when commenting on blogs, as opposed to leaving a sometimes messy-looking URL, is an example of HTML skills PR people can use every day.
- **Web video production:** "Pictures are worth 1,000 words, but video is worth a million," said Amy Mauzy, public relations manager for [Malibu Boats](#).<sup>8</sup> Video can be a powerful and complementary medium for demonstration and for reinforcing a call to action. In fact, one study found that 52 percent of viewers exposed to an online video took some sort of action – such as clicking on a link or visiting a Web site.<sup>9</sup> Many sites on the Web, like YouTube, provide easy resources to integrate video into mainstream PR communication channels including blogs, online news releases and landing pages tied to campaigns. Despite the advantages, video appears to be a little-used tactic. A PRWeb survey of 1,817 respondents found that 94 percent see value in including video with news releases but only 12 percent have ever included video in news releases they've distributed.<sup>10</sup> Part of the reason for this disparity is that PR professionals need to become familiar with basic video production design, capabilities and [online news distribution](#) channels that can seamlessly integrate video.
- **Search marketing and SEO:** Dave Fleet, a PR professional in Ontario, lists Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, as one of eight new skills PR

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<sup>7</sup> *Communications Conversations*, [The Evolving Skills of Tomorrow's PR pros](#), July 8, 2009

<sup>8</sup> [News release: PRWeb Survey: Many See Value in Integrating Online Video with News Releases, but Few Have Actually Tried](#), October 7, 2009

<sup>9</sup> [ReelSEO.com: How to Optimize a Press Release with Video](#), October 14, 2008

<sup>10</sup> [News release: PRWeb Survey: Many See Value in Integrating Online Video with News Releases, but Few Have Actually Tried](#), October 7, 2009



professionals need to perform their jobs.<sup>11</sup> Fleet is right because search engines are a primary way readers find the information for which they are looking. Sarah Evans, a PR and new media consultant, might agree. She wrote that SEO techniques allow PR professionals to “garner media coverage,” “create quality keyword anchor backlinks for your website,” “rank in Google and Yahoo News for your keywords” and “bring content to your audience.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most important reason why PR professionals need SEO skills are the tangible results that can be achieved. SEO-PR, a boutique search and public relations agency, wrote that news releases optimized for search produce measureable results -- \$2.5 million in ticket sales for Southwest Airlines, \$200 million in qualified leads for Symmetricom and 1.3 million searches for the word “florist” on SuperPages.com.<sup>13</sup>

- **Business skills:** PR is often known for its creative flair – but the increasing focus on outcomes, especially business outcomes, means PR professionals need to have a fundamental fluency in the language of business. PRSA’s Measurement Working Group released a set of proposed measurement metrics for public comment in September 2009.<sup>14</sup> One of the first suggested metrics is “PR’s Impact on Financial Performance” – and specifically the impact on revenue, sales and profit. To follow such guidelines, a basic understanding of standard business metrics like operating and profit margins, along with a familiarity with common financial reports such as income statements and balance sheets, would be inherently valuable.

### **Doing more with less**

The media landscape has taken the PR professional by storm. Communicators now have the responsibility for not only their routine tasks — be it planning, pitching or analysis — but they also have a wealth of new channels that require additional content. In essence, the amount of work to be accomplished in a given day has increased dramatically. For example, consider the following:

- Near daily changes in reporting beats and coverage of known reporters
- A dramatic increase in blogs and other new media outlets and contacts with which to research and initiate relationships
- A variety of platforms to monitor and analyze for coverage and reputation
- All the above compounded by a learning curve

It’s probably not possible for PR professionals to do it all – at least not profitably. Therefore it seems logical that the solution has to be working more efficiently, and below are several considerations to that end.

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<sup>11</sup> *Davefleet.com*: [14 Key Skills & Attributes For New Public Relations Professionals](#), August 25, 2009

<sup>12</sup> *PRSarahEvans.com*: [Top 4 New Skills All PR Professionals Must Have](#), March 19, 2009

<sup>13</sup> *SEO-PR.com*: [Why the optimized press release and video optimization work](#), undated

<sup>14</sup> *ComPRhension*: [If You Can't Measure It, It Doesn't Count](#), September 14, 2009



### **Reprioritize goals, tactics and techniques.**

Are the goals that were important yesterday still relevant today? Which tactics, techniques or procedures are most effective in helping PR professionals meet their goals? What might have been effective before might not be as effective tomorrow, or even today. For example, some companies have used their blog to announce new products when previously a press release was considered the best announcement vehicle. The nature of blogs, especially with opt-in features like RSS, means that content published to blogs is often syndicated quite rapidly across the community that cares the most.

### **Analyze and refine processes.**

The process of how work is accomplished may be a prime target for finding new efficiencies. Social media venues like Twitter often have overlapping interest from functions throughout an organization. If a customer Tweets dissatisfaction with a product, is it most appropriate for PR, support or product management to respond? The answer to that question is clearly dependent on the context and relevancy to each function. Dissatisfaction might be easily rectified if support personnel shows the user how to customize a feature for personal preference. Product management might find a suggestion to be worked into the next product release cycle – and PR, if able to persuade on the merits of a company's product, might win a new and vocal evangelist. The key is to identify efficient processes for determining who owns the responsibility.

### **Think programs and packages.**

The last couple of years, and particularly 2009, have been a time of experimentation as organizations have tapped social media as an extension of marketing and public communication. Case studies have emerged on organizations, such as Southwest Airlines, that have excelled in the social media sector. For the most part, however, PR practitioners have used social media as a one-off tactic. In 2010, as an industry, PR should consider how to turn these uses into refined, repeatable and more effective programs (or perhaps packages, in the case of PR agencies).

One starting point is in analysis. For organizations that have monitored social media, they should review what has worked, identify why it worked and consider how the technique might be improved or programmed into the PR plan for next year. For example, what events or announcements drove chatter on Twitter? What was the overall tone of that chatter? What was the impact on organizational goals? Was a perception changed? Was a new product or service offering conceived? Did the engagement result in increased Web site traffic, or better still, a new customer?

### **Integrate with other functions.**

PR personnel do not have to master every new tool or skill; a working knowledge might suffice where PR can find ways to work more effectively with other specialists in their organization. For example, a common role in any marketing department is someone with a dedicated responsibility for SEO. This person (or people) might provide a list of key words to PR professionals to keep in mind when writing a news release – and might



provide a review of the content prior to distribution to ensure the links or key words they are currently working to optimize are displayed appropriately. Such integration might be easier for PR professionals working in-house; however, it should not be overlooked by agencies: improved optimization can increase the chances that journalists will also find your material when searching for credible information for news stories. A survey in June 2009 by the B2B technology firm Arketi found that 95 percent of journalists in their space are using search to find content.<sup>15</sup>

### **Adjust staffing and resource allocation.**

Beyond staffing levels and flex-time, the social media world is truly 24/7. A crisis that emerges on Twitter in the evening can emerge into several blog posts by morning. PR managers should consider staffing and resource allocation, and how those resources are deployed. Is a midnight shift necessary? Maybe not, but having staff work overlapping hours so someone can monitor and respond early in the morning or later in the evening might be a worthwhile consideration.

### **Invest in technology.**

The promise technology provides is new efficiencies or in the analysis of data to make better decisions. Efficiencies are relatively straightforward – the automation of routine tasks like news monitoring or social media monitoring. However, better decision making is also an important value proposition. For example, one Vocus customer developed a “mindshare” chart of coverage in specific cities in the United States. This enabled the PR team to show regional business leaders how much news coverage they’ve received as compared to their competition. In addition, they correlated coverage to their customer retention rates for each city. As a result of tangible measurement of PR results, the regional leadership made a conscious decision to increase the PR budget for the next year. This led to a number of planning considerations, such as the identification and (media) training of spokespeople in those specific cities, along with the more common considerations such as the strategies and tactics to drive coverage.

### **Conclusion**

What unknown unknowns will become more known in 2010? By definition no one knows. Or in the words of Donald Rumsfeld, “I would not say that the future is necessarily less predictable than the past. I think the past was not predictable when it started.”<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, we can prepare by providing ourselves and our staff with a bucket of skills, processes and tools that will provide the best opportunity to recognize the indications and respond to change as it occurs.

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<sup>15</sup> Press Release: [Social Media Tools, Online Search Key for Business Journalists According to Survey By BtoB PR Tech Firm Arketi](#), June 15, 2009

<sup>16</sup> [DefenseLink: DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers](#), April 3, 2003



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