

17 Using the internet effectively in public relations

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Chapter aims

This chapter, maybe more than any other, has required extensive revision since the first edition. Dealing with fast-moving developments in the electronic medium via a printed medium illustrates one of the major differences and challenges for public relations practitioners. In addition, several specialist texts have been written to address the area, and this chapter can only give a brief overview of areas to consider. The characteristics of the internet and how messages are transferred in cyberspace are discussed. Elements of attracting audiences on the web are examined. The issue of activism and rogue websites is raised. The main tools of electronic public relations are listed: websites, interactive discussion groups of several kinds, virtual press offices and email. Lastly, monitoring an organisation's presence on the web is recommended. It is now important that every PR practitioner in every field of activity should be competent with new technology.

In 2001, the IT sector was a growth area in the UK PR industry, in terms of stature and earnings. According to *PR Week*, during 1998 the UK's top 150 technology sector PR agencies generated a combined fee income of £86 million, accounting for 19 per cent of the PR industry's total fee income that year. Once perhaps considered the unglamorous preserve of specialist business-to-business agencies, the IT sector is forging ahead in terms of attracting clients from the lucrative internet and new media marketplace. With computing and the internet becoming increasingly mainstream, IT companies were asking PR agencies to reach general audiences alongside the 'traditional' publics of PR analysts and the press, while many consumer campaigns included an internet/web component. As a spokesperson for *PR Week* pointed out during late 1999: 'There's a lot of "dot com" [website] business around, and the technology agencies are benefiting'.

However, the dot.com bubble burst, and along with it the client base disappeared for many PR agencies specialising in technology. At the time of writing, there seems to be light on the horizon for the technology sector, although *PR Week (US)* reported a 'wait-and-see attitude' to spending on PR by technology clients (2002, 2003). A survey by Golin/Harris International in 2002 expected that PR spending would remain flat during 2003.

However, the need to use online media effectively is now integral to every sector of PR, and practitioners are having to adapt accordingly. Mark Pinsent of technology

specialist agency Text 100 suggested during 1998 that the ability for PR practitioners to provide clients with internet-based services would be 'absolutely crucial', and agencies that could diversify into more generalist sectors would be 'on to a winner'.¹ Commenting on the pace of change within the communications environment at that time, Wendy Richardson of the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA), predicted during 1999 that 'no PR firm will be in business unless it embraces new technology'.

The internet as a mass medium

Back in 1995, Warren Newman, an ex-president of the IPR, commented: 'the internet is public relations' – but, at that time, the net was ranked seventh as an issue of importance by PR practitioners. Today, in view of its audience reach, potential for propagating information and convergence with other media (consider webcasting, internet radio, interactive digital TV, wireless application protocol aka WAP) the internet cannot be ignored by anyone operating within the PR industry. According to Cyberatlas (www.cyberatlas.com), by February 2003, the total worldwide internet population was estimated to be around 580 million. The same survey suggested that British internet users numbered around 29 million, although the *Which? Online* annual internet survey for 2002 put the UK population at only 19 million, with a slow down in the rate of increase. In fact, CNET News flagged up a decline in the number of households connected to the internet in November 2001. However, *Which? Online* suggested that even though new users were declining, the more experienced user population was spending longer online, encouraged by switching to unmetered packages. Confidence in e-commerce continued to grow with nine million UK consumers making an online purchase in 2002 (*Which? Online* 2002) and technologies such as WAP which brings internet content to mobile phones expanding access and usage.

The role of free ISP services, initially taking their lead from Dixon's 'newbie'-orientated Freeserve venture (www.freeserve.co.uk), was significant in encouraging widespread internet use, bringing people on to the net who might not have been interested otherwise. Research by NOP suggests that free service providers attracted a new type of internet user – generally older and from the C2DE social groups – where previously users were from predominantly younger age groups and ABC1 social rankings. Market competition and the somewhat problematic unbundling of the local loop (the copper wire between household and exchange) from BT resulted in the introduction of broadband services, such as ADSL, which carry data faster than modems and copper lines. As an alternative to ADSL, cable companies such as ntl started offering affordably priced broadband services ranging from 128kbps to 1mbps through cable modems or customers' set top boxes. A typical modem plugged into a copper line operates at 56kbps. However, *Which? Online* (2003) found that broadband connection did not make financial sense for most internet users.

The USA represents the largest number of users, or 29 per cent of the global internet population (www.cyberatlas.com). Greenspan (2003) found that while users had become evenly balanced in terms of gender, the average American user was still young (29 per cent between 18 and 29, 47 per cent between 30 and 49), white (77 per cent), employed (44 per cent with more than \$50,000 yearly household income), educated (37 per cent with college degree) and suburban (52 per cent). A Bigreasearch survey (www.bigreasearch.com) in December 2002 identified the growth of simultaneous media usage, or watching television and using the internet at the same time, with 50 per cent of the US internet population doing this on a regular basis. In fact, contrary to the initial

demographics of internet usage, 31 per cent of women said that they went online while watching television, compared to 24.3 per cent of men. In the UK, more hits were received on the *Big Brother* websites during broadcasts.

Even though the UK is still playing catch-up, the net is increasingly being used as a means of accessing information for a wide range of purposes. For example, in the four weeks preceding the March 1999 NOP survey, a significant number of the respondents had used the web to:

- search for information on a particular company (2.9 million people)
- read newspapers online (1.9 million people)
- locate travel information (1.9 million people)
- search for financial information (1.3 million people)
- shop online (1.3 million people)
- search for employment (1.2 million people).

In October 2002, using email was the most common activity on the web, with 76 per cent of users, but finding information about goods and services was still highly significant, with 71 per cent of users engaging in this. Phillips research (2001) showed that 43 per cent of respondents had bought something as a result of information found on the web, compared to 41 per cent who responded to magazines and 29 per cent to newspapers.

The PPA (www.ppa.co.uk) has been reporting the internet's increasing significance in business decision-making for some years. While business publications were the medium most widely used, with 87 per cent of decision-makers using the medium regularly, 71 per cent said that they used websites.

In 2000, the total online population represented around 30 per cent of the UK adult population (source: Continental Research). In comparison, approximately 99 per cent of UK adults listen to radio, 98 per cent watch TV and 64 per cent read newspapers daily. There is evidence that the internet is a significant adjunct to traditional media. 'The latest annual government internet survey showed that downloading news was a purpose for 28 per cent of users', says Phillips. 'This means that 6.3 million people used the internet to source news in the UK.' A survey commissioned by Freeserve.com in July 2002 revealed that people in the UK spent three times longer surfing the net than they do reading newspapers.

Characteristics of the internet

Gregory (in Phillips 2001: 49) sets out three phenomena of the internet that practitioners must take account of:

- Porosity -- the passage of information from internal to external audiences means communications cannot be exclusively directed to one public.
- Transparency -- opening internal systems to scrutiny from those external to the organisation, such as delivery tracking systems.
- Agency -- transforming messages and images as they are passed from one person to another, such as the many examples of manipulating images on 'suck' sites (see below, discussion of rogue sites).

Horton (2001: 7-10) maintains that communication on the web should obey the same principles as all other corporate communications:

- Simplicity -- focused on the themes that support corporate success.
- Timeliness -- providing information when needed. Online communication increases the pressure to deliver information quickly.
- Openness -- access to information.
- Definition -- ensuring that key audiences receive information.
- Flexibility -- using the relevant media for the message.
- Individuality -- persuading one person at a time. Online communications enable users to personalise how they want to receive information.
- Meaningful -- making sure that messages are clear to the recipient.
- Measurable -- determining 'whether a message contributes to or detracts from an organisation's ... success'.

Holtz (1998: 16-21) suggests that communication has been changed fundamentally with the advent of online media. In moving from an industrial economy to an information economy, communication must change from the hierarchical, top-down model (the broadcast paradigm) to a networked, accessible system (the network paradigm). Expectations have shifted from pushing out a huge quantity of messages to improving their quality and relevance by customising communication through email and discussion groups. As a massive volume of data has become available to organisations about their customers' preferences and desires, products and services are now customer-driven rather than producer-driven. In addition, whereas organisations and media owners used to set the agenda, now individuals can set up their own websites to express their opinions. People with similar interests can form virtual communities unlimited by geographical considerations. The internet is a 'pull' medium as users go to a website because they have a specific information need, compared to print media which 'push' information at the receiver whether they want it or not. Holtz cautions that while making information available on the web is a necessity, messages still need to be sent via an integrated mix of media, as not all individuals are internet savvy. Indeed, Greenspan (2003) states that 'nearly one-quarter of Americans experience life unplugged'. Holtz also sees the task of communications no longer as distributing information to every member of the target audience, but to 'entice each individual, one at a time, to your site'.

IT sector skills requirements

Are specialist skills required in the IT sector? Do practitioners have to become experts in web design as well as words? When asked to name the concern voiced most frequently by IT sector PR agencies, a spokesperson for *PR Week* answered 'recruitment'. He elaborated that 'getting people who have specialist technical knowledge can be difficult'. Although the 'anorak' image of IT-related roles has diminished, and interest in the internet is no longer considered socially undesirable, industry entrants may consider the technology sector less inviting than 'glamorous' consumer PR. This is despite the fact that career progress within IT agencies can be rapid. Are PR skills more important than technical knowledge, or vice versa? Mario Tilney-Bassett, a new media specialist, has worked within both the IT and the consumer PR sectors. He comments:

The technology sector needs PR generalists who are capable of grasping technology or at the very least what the technology means to the end user. For example, you do not need to know how television works to explain the difference between a colour and a black and white set.

He adds that technology specialists 'tend to get bogged down in technical issues and can overwhelm the listener with jargon', while claiming that many PR practitioners are 'technophobic'. Esther Kaposi counters, 'It is quite easy to argue the opposite and say that all clients in all sectors should be able to expect computer skills, while PR is partly intuitive and difficult to learn.'

Lyle Closs of Ogilvy Public Relations said in 1999 that there was a need for people who understood and liked technology. He commented: 'Clients expect practitioners to understand their business. For technology PR people, a good computer studies degree is preferable to a PR qualification. PR skills can be taught, but a fascination for and love of technology is harder to teach.' Closs emphasised the need for public relations practitioners to adapt their skills: 'Outside the IT sector, considerable ignorance exists ... consumer and business-to-business PR people will have to learn fast ... or find themselves out of business in a few years' time.'

Taking a similar view during 1999, Dave Bennett of Manning Selvage & Lee believed technology sector practitioners should have a broad skills set, especially as campaigns were becoming more mainstream: 'Some 90 per cent of our accounts are multi-faceted, in that they include some sort of non-IT characteristic. In five years' time, there will be no such thing as a wholly IT account, dealing exclusively with trade media and analysts.'

'The technology sector is now almost a side show compared to the internet mediated activity needed in the communications industries', says Phillips. 'Consumer, financial, B2B have to use internet capability. In any one day upwards of 1,000 press releases are made available through organisations such as PressBox, PA and Waymaker.'

PR practitioners must be able to find their way round the internet and use email effectively. The figures look encouraging: a survey of 180 of PRCA members conducted back in April 1999, covering all sectors, found that 100 per cent had email and internet access, while 88 per cent had a website and 62 per cent had an online newswire (such as Reuters Business Briefing) (Figure 17.1). These figures suggested that, even a few years ago, practitioners were eagerly embracing new technology.

As more and more qualified graduates enter the profession, the technology skills level of general practitioners should rise. The IPR's insistence on approved courses having sufficient coverage of new technology means that the 'technophobic' level amongst new entrants will fall. This may mean that senior level practitioners will know less about new technology than their account executives. Technologically challenged practitioners will feel increasing pressure to update their IT skills at the demand of clients, colleagues and the press. As technology moves ahead, many may take their example from the IT sector. Holtz (1998) believes the IT sector set a precedent for the PR industry's adoption of new technology:

Practitioners working in the technology sector face a particular challenge – to lead the way by introducing new concepts that apply all the rigorous principles of effective, ethical communication. As representatives of the companies that are developing the technologies that make dynamic, many-to-many communication possible, public relations practitioners have no margin for error. They are expected to embrace and understand the capabilities of the technologies they promote, along with traditional communications. Even other communicators expect to follow the leads of the technology community.

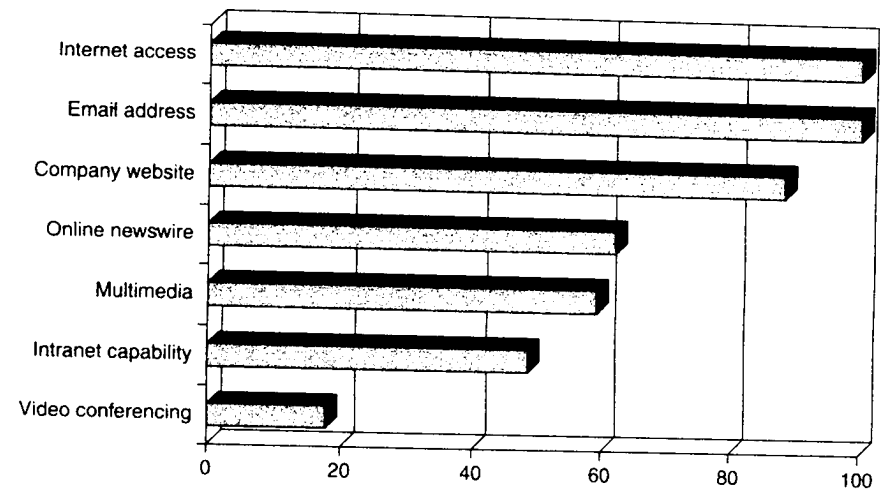


Figure 17.1 Technologies used by UK PR agencies – April 1999

Source: PRCA benchmarking study

During 1994, John Pavlik (of Columbia University, USA) had a vision of the PR industry moving towards virtual teams with flat structures, helped by online communications. He predicted that virtual offices would exist, with clients and PR people communicating via email. He also said there would be a shift towards two-way communications, with PR people targeting virtual publics (that is, special interest groups that exist on the internet). Pavlik's visions are coming to fruition, in the IT sector at least. Virtual teams exist at many agencies, as individuals based in different locations can share information easily using email and intranets, as if seated in the same office. For this reason – and because the need for costly facilities provided by the employer is avoided – the use of hot-desking and freelancers is growing. Taking an industry-wide view, PR practitioners can easily share ideas and contacts using online industry forums such as UKPress (www.ukpress.org), a networking resource for communications professionals that launched in early 2000. Meanwhile, the internet makes tasks such as day-to-day research much easier and faster than before.

The diversifying IT sector and its audiences

A few years ago, technology sector PR largely spent their time communicating the benefits of products and services to IT managers, by targeting the publications read by these people. Popular (if unexciting) themes such as cost-efficiency, flexibility, reliability and robustness were used to encourage IT managers to invest in hardware, software and networking products – while enabling them to justify their purchases to finance directors and board members. IT messages and audiences were not exactly diverse.

Suzu Frith of IT specialist agency Citigate Technology described in 1999 how the situation had changed:

For many years, vendors of IT services and software found communication easy. Their only audience was the IT department and the only relevant medium was

specialist IT magazines. Now the picture is more complex, as IT has come out of the back office and drives virtually all business processes. So, IT vendors still need to sell to the people who make technology work – but they also need to gain the confidence of the board, business managers and users. They are having to think again about external communications in a highly competitive market in which reputations can be destroyed by ill-chosen words and behaviour.

At the time, Frith believed IT companies were immature in their thinking, and consequently needed help from PR people to focus on markets, avoiding the previous tunnel vision on technology. In particular, Frith suggested that PR people must help IT vendors to:

- realise that the single audience model (targeting just IT managers) is no longer effective
- develop strong brands
- identify and segment target audiences
- create market propositions
- 'develop what they say and how they say it, because communications is not their core business'.

Dave Bennett of Manning Selvage & Lee believes the main industry stakeholders – whether these are small businesses, public sector bodies, finance directors or end-users – can be targeted by 'having a sound proposition, focusing on the benefits rather than the technology, and being *creative* about it'. Public relations is at its most effective when used as part of an integrated corporate communications programme. The following case study demonstrates how a campaign for a purely 'techie' product can reach multiple audiences successfully, by using a different message for each type of target press.

Case study one: EVUS launches Cambridge Silicon Radio

Cambridge Silicon Radio (CSR) launched in May 1999 – a nine-man team spinning out of Cambridge Consultants Limited (CCL) – with \$10m of venture capital funding and some very big ideas. CSR is a 'fabless' silicon chip manufacturer, a very techie business, but with some hot technology. CSR's specialism is building short-range radios onto silicon chips, and the team's expertise had been used in a number of bespoke applications. However, the announcement of the Bluetooth short-range radio technology specification by Ericsson, IBM, Intel, Nokia and Toshiba presented an enormous market opportunity for the team. CSR's ambition was to be the first to market with a single chip Bluetooth radio – a position that could see it quickly becoming a billion-dollar company.

As with any start-up, besides CSR making an impact in the electronics industry, the chief barriers to growth were lack of money and lack of people, and these key objectives needed to be addressed in the company's PR launch. A further objective was to position CSR as one of the drivers behind the development and adoption of Bluetooth technology – the success of which would largely be driven by consumer adoption.

A launch strategy was developed by EVUS, which involved positioning CSR within the key financial media as a well-funded UK start-up, within the electronics press as a

technically innovative company, within the local Cambridge media as an excellent employment opportunity for technical professionals and, where possible, within consumer media as a British company bringing an exciting new technology to market.

The *Cambridge Evening News* was briefed under embargo to run a story on the afternoon of Tuesday 11 May 1999, the objective being to secure a launch story in the *Financial Times* on the morning of the same day. The launch release would be distributed to the trade press on the Tuesday. The strategy worked to perfection – although not without the odd drama. The *FT* ran a positive story on page 2 of its 'Companies & Markets' section, the *Cambridge Evening News* ran a large story under the headline 'Spin-off predicted to be world beater' and the key industry title, *Electronics Times*, carried a front-page story with the headline 'Billion-dollar Bluetooth bid'. In addition, a number of national titles, including *The Times* and *Observer*, picked up on the consumer applications of Bluetooth technology, strongly tying CSR to its development.

Although, at the end of the day, CSR's success will be based on selling millions of silicon chips, its ability to do so relies on many different factors. CSR's PR objectives continue to be multi-focused, with campaigns running in the technology, business, national and consumer-orientated media.

Case study provided by Mark Pinsent of EVUS, a division of Text 100

Targeting consumer audiences

Increasingly, technology companies are using mainstream media to reach a wide audience. Technology companies such as Cisco, which manufactures routers (an essential component of data networks), and IBM, which targets the corporate market with 'solutions for a small planet', advertise on prime-time TV. After all, countless business managers and end-users will be watching and may influence their company's procurement decisions. Similarly, internet ventures now promote themselves through every given medium. Whether consumers are viewing a TV advertisement for a major search engine or a billboard advert for a cut-price travel site, they simply cannot escape the dot.coms.

Caraline Brown of Midnight Communications, a technology sector agency that targets consumer and other audiences with creative campaigns, believes the secret of PR success is to 'keep it simple'. Brown does not believe in focusing just on the technology – rather, she thinks an IT product or service must be seen to have real benefits. In 1999 she commented:

People want to know how a particular technology will relate to their everyday lives. While technology for technology's sake at one time generated news stories, this is no longer true in a sector where audiences are becoming increasingly savvy. In the old days, the press loved the fact that a product or service had launched on the internet, and that alone would be worthy of coverage. Today, with the high speed of technological change, good PR coverage depends on coming up with an idea that brings the technology alive.

Brown pointed out that the computing and technical press had undergone a 'radical' facelift:

Early publications tended to focus on high-end technology users – industry players and computer experts – rather than the person on the street. However, there has been

tremendous expansion in the computing and high-tech media, and we are now seeing internet magazines carrying front covers that compete with the likes of *Maxim* and *GQ*.²

She added: 'When you consider that everyone from pensioners to under-fives are embracing the internet with equal enthusiasm, there has never been a better time for IT sector PR practitioners to make an impression.' In addition, many publications which launched during the dot.com boom closed during late 2001 to early 2003 because of decreased advertising revenue.

Technology PR is definitely moving towards emphasising the lifestyle aspects of products. 'It's no longer about speeds and feeds', says Andrew Gordon (2002). 'It's about the benefits. Style is emerging as the latest means of hyping hi-tech, particularly for mobile phones.' He also quotes Tom Shay, director of corporate communications for Fuji, who says, 'Consumers don't care about how digital cameras work, they just want it to be easy to use and take good pictures.'

Lydia Whitefield, VP of corporate communications at Avaya, agreed. 'You have to say what the technology can do for you.' She also feels that the downturn in the economy has made technology firms more cost conscious, so that PR is becoming more important as it is more cost-effective than advertising in reaching decision-makers.

Dealing with the public online

Holtz (1998: 61-7) points out several differences when communicating with audiences online. Whereas print communications are linear, publics can enter web pages at several different points. On the one hand, no assumptions can be made that someone will start reading at the beginning and continue to the end. On the other hand, organisations must anticipate why someone might visit their site and ensure that the navigation and content can provide the desired information. Reading information from a screen is different from reading a book. Readers must be enticed to scroll down, rather than leaving the site because what they want is not immediately available. The navigation system should lead people where they want to go without too many distracting clicks. People scan text rather than read it, so text on web pages needs to be succinct. Holtz also maintains that web communications are narrowcasting rather than broadcasting, that a 'one-size-fits-all' website will satisfy no one. He quotes the example of Disney, which not only has a corporate site, but also individual sites which deal with each movie and how to get hold of the related merchandise.

Tools of online public relations

Websites – what works and what doesn't?

PR practitioners, including those outside the IT sector, are being asked to consult clients on setting up websites and running internet-based campaigns. Some agencies have created specific new media divisions to meet clients' needs in this area. Websites are important because they represent a company's image and brand values online, and can be used to communicate cost-effectively with many audiences, when compared to other elements of the marketing mix such as advertising and printed literature. Communication through websites may be:

- business to business – reaching third parties, shareholders, potential investors, industry bodies, analysts, trade media, etc.
- business to consumer – reaching customers (existing and potential) or general 'surfers' through information resources, e-commerce systems, entertainment sites, portals, etc.
- internal -- providing tailored information to staff, clients and affiliates using intranets, extranets (inter-connected intranets) and password-protected areas on corporate sites.

According to a study by the *Los Angeles Times*, based on various internet statistics, including those from specialists Media Metrix, the web is shrinking despite continued growth in the number of sites. People are spending less time on general surfing, relying instead on a small selection of trusted sites (in the UK leading sites include the Google.com search engine). More than a third of most people's online time is spent at the 50 most popular websites. The study also suggested that word-of-mouth recommendation, known as 'viral marketing', was becoming increasingly important as a means of securing an audience for a website, although saturation in this area means it is increasingly difficult to make an impact with a viral campaign. This format was used successfully to promote the *Blair Witch Project* movie, which soon became the topic of conversation on bulletin boards across the world. Conversely, a website's reputation can be destroyed by negative visitor opinion. Boo.com, the internet fashion retail venture that failed during May 2000, floundered from the start when UK new media experts voiced their collective lack of faith in its design and functionality, as well as the fact that the owners had a lavish lifestyle before they showed any decent results.

A successful website should have the following features, according to Kirsner (1998):

- a 'What's New' section – so users can identify the latest content and go directly to it
- a search engine or site map – to ensure all content is straightforward to locate
- a feedback mechanism (an online form or email address), so users can comment about the site and suggest areas for improvement
- consistent navigation (a uniform navigation system should appear on each page)
- security information (this is particularly important if the site has an e-commerce system where users are asked to enter their credit card details)
- linking instructions – to encourage reciprocal links with other sites
- a privacy policy – if users provide their email address to join a mailing list, they need to be reassured that it will not be passed to third parties without permission
- location and contact details.

A survey conducted in the UK by Redsquare revealed that internet users actively dislike:

- 'Data speeds too slow'. Website visitors will feel frustrated if pages do not load within approximately 30 seconds. This is especially true of people who are using modems at speeds of less than 56k.
- 'Disorganised mess'. Many sites are inconsistent in their approach to visual identity, navigation, layout and the structuring of information.
- 'Substandard design'. Poorly designed websites are no more acceptable than sloppy examples of corporate literature.
- 'Slow response'. If a website has a feedback mechanism, it is unacceptable to ignore enquiries, or even to take a few days to reply.

- *'Too much information'*. The most effective websites provide succinct, relevant punchy content.

It is important for websites to be user friendly and straightforward to navigate – otherwise a proportion of the potential audience will be lost. In new media forums, a debate has emerged about the use of Macromedia's Flash – which creates animated, multimedia content for websites – on general consumer sites, as users who do not have the latest browser plug-ins (helper applications) are forced to download the software or skip the content. As a general rule of thumb, Flash is considered inappropriate on e-commerce sites, information sites (such as search engines and directories) and anything aimed at a predominantly new user audience. The use of superfluous Flash content – among other unnecessary adornments – was a major contributory factor to the failure of Boo.com. However, Flash is appropriate for entertainment sites, music resources, online advertising campaigns and digital art. It can be the role of the PR person to advise clients on best practice.

The PR person should, from the start of a website project, ensure that there are set sign-off stages for the design (including the precise structure of the navigation system) and the content. A site plan should be drawn up in conjunction with the developers so everyone is working to the same 'blueprint'. Designs should be signed off as mock-ups created using just imaging software before any coding or further development starts. It is important to allow sufficient time for beta testing the site before it is unleashed on the public. It can be damaging to a company's image to launch a website that is full of oversights and errors.

Website follies can be avoided when technical experts, designers and marketing communications people work together as a team and listen to advice from industry veterans. According to Gusterson (1999), both technical and communications expertise is necessary to create an effective website. He suggests that PR practitioners who understand the web are well suited to assuming ownership of site content and liaising with technical staff over presentation. He also points out that practitioners must adapt their writing style, as the web requires something different from the traditional paper-based writing mode. People rarely read web pages word by word, instead scanning the page and picking out individual words, sentences and graphics.

PR people should certainly be aware of how to edit material for the web. Suggestions for formatting web page content include:

- keep the word count to around 400 per hypertext page, as information is less easy to read on a screen than on a printed page
- break up body text with sub-headings
- link from a feature or opinion piece to other sites that display relevant information
- include references to other sites as hyperlinks
- include an email address, in case the viewers require further information
- remember that your potential audience is global, even if the site has a local focus
- be sure to remove references to printed material from the copy, such as: 'On page three of our brochure you will find ...'

Horton suggests that web page design is 'equal parts science and art' (2001: 154). He recommends setting up a site map so visitors can get where they want to be in no more than three clicks (aka click thrus, which emphasises the need for good navigation links). He also suggests that a home page should always have links to a site search engine and map, so that if information is not immediately apparent, visitors have a

chance to conduct a personalised search for what they want. A feedback or 'contact us' button is another must.

Phillips (2001: 124) adds that practitioners must pay attention to the needs of site visitors to feel that the information is trustworthy. As anyone can set up a website, organisations have to demonstrate that their site contains bona fide corporate and product brand equity.

As might be expected with such an interactive medium, developing a website is a continual process. It is not good enough to simply set it up and leave it sitting on the web server. Web users are impatient with out-of-date material, which reflects on the reputation and trustworthiness of the organisation. As the web is a pull medium and users have to be attracted to an organisation's web site if they are to visit, sites must be promoted effectively. Tried and tested methods include:

- printing the URL (aka site address) on all company literature
- targeted promotions and competitions that encourage repeat visitors or entice people to join a mailing list
- viral marketing
- reciprocal linking with other sites
- referral schemes – for example, e-commerce sites may pay third parties who send visitors their way a percentage of the sales relating to those visitors
- search engine placement and the buying of 'key words' on major search engines.

To draw visitors, it helps if the content includes current news and information, so that the site becomes a resource. Dysart (2003) suggests on-site polls as a way to increase visitors and to provide news stories. He cites the Computing Technology Industry Association (www.comptia.org) as a good example. Surveys are conducted on such related topics as web security, software buying and what computer industry visitors look for in an application's service provider. Survey results are then provided to the media in an easily downloadable form. Conducting surveys establishes the organisation as an expert in the field, and also allows a dialogue with visitors about what they are interested in without a hard-sell pitch.

Search engine placement should not be overlooked. As content on the web is organised in an anarchic fashion, users normally search for information using their preferred search engine or directory. These may be indexes like AltaVista or Google, which use software called spiders to gather information from the web based on words contained in web pages, or directories such as Yahoo!, which employ website developers to catalogue and update information according to a list of topics. When a user types a word into the search engine, a list of websites where the word or phrase appears will be returned. Users then scroll down to see whether there is a site that relates to what they are looking for. When designing a site, meta tags can be inserted into the HTML code at the beginning of the page to identify it to search engines and help classification. Keywords describe the content and summarise what the site is all about. Horton (2001: 128) lists various tricks which may help sites to improve their search engine ratings, that is, come nearer the top of the list in a user search for particular terms. It is also possible to buy keywords on major search engines such as Google, which improves a site's visibility when that particular word or phrase is entered by users. Search engine placement should be conducted at least quarterly if it is to be effective. As it is something of a 'weird science', it should ideally be outsourced to a freelancer or agency that specialises in this field.

As with all forms of public relations, measurement of website effectiveness is important. Holtz (1998) criticised the measurement process for websites, which has traditionally focused on the number of hits, visits and page impressions attained during a certain timescale. (For example, you could attract 12,000 visitors to your UK-focused women's portal – but is this *really* useful if 90 per cent are young male students living in the USA?)

The problem may be that many sites do not have a clear purpose. US-based author and PR consultant Dan Janal (1998) says too many companies go on the web without a set of goals. He suggests: 'Most sites fail because they don't have a strong call to action. There is simply no incentive to move people from being curious to being committed.' In some cases, sites have failed because they were launched before being fully tested – which is usually a recipe for disaster. PR people could help ensure that a site has attainable objectives, that the technical team works with the marketing people, and that live testing is not conducted on the public.

In many cases, PR agencies need to put their own sites in order. Mark Pinsent identifies various shortcomings:

[There is] a lack of appreciation of what visitors want to see – more commonly, they get what the company wants to tell them. There quite often seems to be a desire to get people off the site as soon as possible, with loads of links to other sites.

He advises against including material that should perhaps be confidential – such as information concerning specific client contacts and PR decision-makers. After all, most agencies do not wish to inadvertently encourage head hunting of their valued personnel. Nor do they wish to tarnish their reputations as professional communicators by uploading ill-thought-out content.

'Through using search monitoring, a practitioner can get instant feedback about the reception of their messages online', says Phillips. 'Brand messages and further information needs of publics can be monitored on an hourly basis. Reaction times from people, not intermediaries, can be obtained and messages changed in minutes. This can be tried out on www.wordtracker.com.'

The internet also allows webcasting, the streaming of audiovisual material from the web server which is viewed by end-users through plug-ins such as Real Player or Windows Media Player. This can be either live or archived, and can range from Powerpoint slides which could accompany a clip of a CEO speaking to an AGM, to awards broadcasts, seminars, music festivals and full-length pop concerts, sporting events and perhaps most famously Channel 4's *Big Brother* reality TV programme. Horton (2001: 167–8) advises practitioners to use experienced technical companies to set up the webcast. As with any public relations tactic, a webcast must have a clear objective and a specific target audience.

Holtz (1998: 235–45) suggests several ways of measuring the success of websites and integrated campaigns rather than hits (which he suggests is an acronym for How Idiots Track Success). A parallel can be seen in the development of evaluating media coverage in print by using column inches, with the current sophisticated methods of media content analysis (see Chapter 19). He starts by recommending sophisticated tracking, to monitor where visitors come from (for example, the referring sites that have sent them to your site) and which pages they visit once they have arrived. Another way is to associate unique URLs with particular directives that encourage people to visit the site. Like adding direct marketing or promotional coupon codes, this marks each query with its

origin and shows which activities are working. New customers can be asked to register, or provide postcode information so that they can be directed to retailers in their area. Retailers can then be asked to find out where purchasers found out about them. Depending on the objectives, other methods may be used. Is the aim to reduce the amount of time enquirers need to spend on the phone to an operator? If so, does phone traffic increase or decrease after the site is launched? Have callers first consulted the site before phoning customer services? Is it to save money on printed publications such as glossy brochures and reports? The IPR intended to stop printing its expensive annual members' list and replace it with an online directory. The latter would have the added advantage of being instantly updated, rather than being out of date virtually as soon as it was printed. However, members' requests meant that a printed register of members with names and job titles had to be reintroduced as some found this easier to navigate. Full contact details are still only available on the website, however.

Scherpereel and Skutski (2003) suggest a template for assessing an organisation's website, including whether messages to each audience have been defined and assessed by visitor feedback. A process for updating content should be in place, and a clear design applied consistently. Navigation considerations include download time and logical navigation aids. Content must not only be grammatically correct and free of typographical errors, but also, perhaps more importantly, current and relevant.

Virtual press offices

Before advising clients on best practice regarding websites, PR agencies should put their own houses in order. Too frequently, PR agencies' sites commit some of the cardinal sins of web design or fail to cater fully for the needs of key audiences such as the press. In an age when many journalists prefer to obtain information electronically, numerous net-savvy agencies and in-house PR departments have set up virtual press offices (VPOs) to provide specially tailored information to the press (examples can be found at www.midnight.co.uk, www.chapr.co.uk, www.whiteoaks.co.uk). The fact that journalists rely on the internet to source information, rather than using 'traditional' methods, is illustrated by Wilcox's comments (in Rainier PR 2003):

Journalists are lazy people. . . . Proof of this comes in an anecdote from a good friend of mine who is an editor of a major technology weekly. Wandering in late to the office, my friend was confronted with a team of reporters sat around chatting. Challenged by their editor, one young hack said: 'We can't do any stories, the internet is down.'

This was met with a firm 'Well pick up the bloody phone then!' from their editor.

Typical content of a virtual press office includes: company information such as backgrounders and biographies, product information, press releases, image libraries and contact details. Press releases should be searchable by client/product or key words and should be indexed in date order. All collateral should be easy for journalists to find, with the minimum of fuss. It is not ideal to ask journalists to register for a press area before they can access what should essentially be public domain information, as this tends to be an off-putting factor. According to Rainer PR (2003), a virtual press office should:

- inform journalists on the company's business, its products and services
- allow journalists to view all up-to-date news announcements and access relevant materials to support the development of news and feature articles, including photos and background information
- provide online and telephone contact information for local PR staff who are able to provide additional information and access to spokespersons
- be functional, both for the company and journalists concerned
- be linked to clearly from the home page of the website and not be easily confused with investor relations
- have consistent branding and a clear design
- be updated regularly.

If you do not have sufficient company news to keep a virtual press office fresh, consider including industry news – such as research statistics, white papers and round table transcripts – from your particular sector. Otherwise, a weekly industry round-up from your CEO might keep the content live. It is vital to have a streamlined process for updating a virtual press office. As soon as a press release is issued using the traditional methods, it should also appear on the VPO. Most VPOs are governed using a Content Management System (CMS) – ‘back-end’ software, usually bespoke, that indexes text, images, files, and so on within a database. Generally, users can upload text and documents, and so on by logging on to a simple administrative centre online (Figure 17.2). It should be



Figure 17.2 Firefly's searchable internet press centre

the responsibility of a designated member of a team or agency to ensure that the virtual press office is kept updated at all times.

When considering specific content for a VPO, certain rules apply. Press releases should be provided in text format and as downloadable PDFs – not as Word documents, which journalists fear may contain viruses. Images should be of a sufficiently high resolution to print in the target publications – that is, 300 pixels per inch (ppi) – and should be downloadable in both JPEG (Windows) and EPS (Mac) versions. Pictures should be searchable by person, event or product, and the picture library should, ideally, use an efficient indexing system.

A common grumble voiced by journalists who use VPOs is ‘the company has masked its contact details’. Journalists find it particularly frustrating to have their enquiries thwarted because there is no means of gaining further information or a spokesperson's comment. Enquiry forms are an extremely poor substitute for telephone numbers and email addresses of ‘live’ PR contacts. Too frequently, the enquiry forms found on the press sections of corporate websites go unanswered. At best, an auto-responder message saying ‘your enquiry has been received’ may come through, which is hardly useful when an answer is needed quickly. Generally, a lack of direct feedback will lead to journalists giving up and heading elsewhere for a story. Contact details should be made clear. Furthermore, with global sites, the stated contacts should cater for journalists who want to speak to someone in their own language and time zone. Healthcare journalist Rachel Newcome commented in an email interview with the author (2003):

The biggest failing in online press centres is not including any contact names, emails or numbers. I had a frustrating trawl around a medical charity's website the other week. I could not find a contact phone number at all! So, I gave up in the end and went to a rival organisation who had all the details at hand. Mostly I need to contact people at short notice, so with a looming deadline there's not time to hang around searching for ages.

Journalist Mary Branscombe is of a similar opinion, and lists the shortcomings of VPOs as follows (2003):

I dislike registration forms that take weeks to be approved and those asking for strange authorisation details I don't know how to provide. Other common failings include: lack of contact details, lack of photos, no dates on press releases, no contact phone number to publish for readers, impenetrable archives with no powerful search feature, no distinction between US and UK news when US products are different, maze-like navigation between US and international areas and specialised areas for key products that haven't been kept up to date or integrated with the rest of the press centre.

Before setting up a VPO, PR practitioners should plan the content and design carefully and solicit expert advice from those who have expertise in this field. Furthermore, pre-launch testing must be carried out thoroughly to ensure the finished product does not contain anomalies and truly does meet the needs of the press.

Virtual forums

Virtual forums are important to the PR person because unmediated comments – either positive or negative – about a product, entity or organisation can propagate widely on

them and can potentially be seen by thousands of people. Virtual forums include Usenet newsgroups, email lists, message boards and chat rooms. According to Phillips (2001: 81), a newsgroup is 'a discussion about a particular subject consisting of contributions written to one of a number of internet properties and redistributed through Usenet'. Consumers can use these virtual forums to find out about products and services from other customers. Groups have a strong sense of community and their own sets of rules (or 'netiquette'), and any inappropriate interjections can give rise to 'flaming', in other words, angry and insulting responses. Boardreader, a company that monitors online web-based discussion (www.boardreader.com), has identified 32 million users on the sites it monitors. It is fair to assume that this form of exchange is significant and growing.

Horton (2001) recommends care in using newsgroups for public relations purposes. First, a relevant newsgroup must be found, that relates to the product or service being discussed. He states that 'there are more than 50,000 newsgroup bulletin boards' (p. 135) and the first step is to assemble a list of possible groups based on area of interest. Time should then be spent assessing the quality and importance of discussions, and whether the site is moderated or not. He recommends using moderated sites, as the moderator is responsible for keeping discussion on track and policing the contributors. Permission to post information can be obtained from the moderator. Horton advises practitioners to be wary of cross-posting, or posting on too many sites, as this is regarded as the net equivalent of junk mail. Only sites where the participants would genuinely be interested in the subject should be posted.

Some companies 'seed' the discussions with favourable comments about their products and services (the online equivalent of a 'whisper campaign'). A number of companies are transparent about their activities in newsgroups, while others use surreptitious tactics to attack rival brands. These are known as disguised postings and if discovered can result in angry reprisals and accusations of web abuse, which can be counter-productive. Phillips (2001: 162) suggests researching topics of interest to the group and thereby gaining an expert reputation, rather than simply a corporate representative.

Another type of forum is the chat room. Horton (2001: 74-6) recommends using this only 'in a planned manner with specific objectives'. Chat takes place in real time, so is costly in terms of staff resources as someone has to be on hand to answer queries. He suggests that chat can be useful for customer relations, such as discussing why a product failed and what to do about it, or if a potential buyer has questions which will influence their purchase. He warns against the anonymous nature of chat, as participants can use aliases.

'A fast growing form of low cost website is a form of online diary called a web log or blog. These sites have content added to them on a regular basis and tend to have a niche following among friends. Some have considerable reach and others are commercially driven', says Phillips.

Using email effectively

The use of email in media relations has been discussed in Chapter 10. Phillips (2001: 149-56) suggests several other ways to use this technology. Email has the advantage of being delivered directly to a targeted individual. It is possible to tailor messages individually, if one has the time and resources, and to develop relationships based on which emails the recipient opens and reads. Practitioners can also use internet mailing lists to approach people who have signed up to receive information on specific subjects. Holtz (1998: 45-6) provides guidelines for producing email newsletters, a cost-effective way

of keeping in touch with targeted individuals. Cunningham and Greene (2002) point out that even though email is traditionally a spontaneous medium, standards of grammar and presentation must not be allowed to lapse. They advise treating text distributed in this way like any other business communication.

Speed of response is vital in managing email communication. Many companies set up an auto-responder device which lets the sender know their email has been received. However, if no follow-up is received, this can be viewed as a delaying tactic. Consumers have higher expectations about speed of response by email, whereas they would tend to wait up to four weeks for a reply by 'snail' mail. Cunningham and Greene also warn that 'There is no such thing as privacy in email', and that 'once you hit send, you never know who will end up receiving your message'. Emails can be forwarded in whole or part to unintended recipients. A notable example is the Claire Swire email saga that occurred during 2000. Ms Swire ill-advisedly used her corporate email system to send a message containing salacious sexual content to a partner. He forwarded the message to his friends, who forwarded it to their friends, and so on. Soon, the message had propagated around the world's mail servers - much to the embarrassment of Ms Swire.

Email can be used to launch a viral marketing campaign. This is a way of creating a buzz about a product, a kind of electronic word-of-mouth and is a cheap way to reach many more consumers than would be possible with traditional media. Horton (2001: 153) uses the example of Hotmail, which built its subscriber base to 12 million in just 18 months by automatically adding an advert about its free services to each email that was sent through its system. Viral marketing attempts to enrol recipients in passing on the message to their friends by offering free services and encouraging them to email pages from a website.

Internet reputation management

For communications professionals, a key issue concerning the internet is the interactivity between users and the fact that anyone can voice their opinions without constraint. Unlike other mainstream media, the internet allows two-way and many-to-many communication. Howard Rheingold (1994) described the network and broadcast paradigm. The network paradigm involves multi-directional communications between citizens (for example people holding discussions using email and online forums), while the broadcast paradigm involves the one-way (downwards) provision of information and entertainment (such as ntl providing video on demand). Rheingold accurately predicted that the big players in the internet industry would form alliances and focus on the net as a means of exploiting the broadcast paradigm, with an emphasis on piping entertainment into homes. However, the influence of virtual communities - the network paradigm - is perhaps more relevant to PR practitioners.

According to Phillips (1999), 'Internet Society' comprises thousands of communities who have their own agendas. Established internet users may be active in numerous online communities, and will frequently carry information (factual or otherwise) from group to group. Online communities use resources such as chat rooms, email lists, newsgroups and bulletin boards to discuss topics of interest. The anonymous nature of online resources, where people can assume any identity they choose, may lead users to articulate things they would not mention in 'real life'. As Phillips points out, the anonymous aspect of the internet changes the nature of 'stakeholder society'. Individuals can participate in many different stakeholder groups and may use interactive resources to influence events as never before, without the need to go through media gatekeepers (that is,

editors). In many cases, people will voice their opinions freely about companies and services - and these opinions can spread and prove influential.

Says Phillips (1999):

Once companies had control of what was said and believed about their activities. Now every stakeholder has, can and does provide knowledge and opinion freely. Anyone can create a website. Unacceptable practice attracts comment, criticism and active opposition. Companies have to fight for a place in internet stakeholder society.

Gusterson (1999) believes monitoring the internet enables companies to:

- formulate defence strategies against online attacks
- act early to contain a crisis
- monitor stakeholder opinion
- gather competitor intelligence.

In some cases, corporate reputations have been saved by diligently monitoring virtual forums. For example, during March 1999, complaints about Pioneer DVD players began to appear on newsgroups. Pioneer contacted complainants directly by email, and offered to fix their DVDs - an approach that contained the negative publicity, preventing it from reaching a wider audience such as the national press. Conversely, Intel chose to ignore newsgroup discussions about the now infamous floating point error in its Pentium chip. Eventually the story was picked up by the mainstream media and Intel had to spend millions repairing the damage.

The monitoring of virtual forums is especially important to publicly quoted companies. Investors are increasingly using message boards to discuss companies and share stock tips. AgriBioTech saw its stock fall by more than 20 per cent when negative messages were posted on a message board provided by the popular search engine and directory, Yahoo!

In some cases, newsgroup postings can provide a proactive PR opportunity. For example, a posting on the uk.local.london newsgroup during August 1998 suggested: 'If you want free PC banking, try FirstDirect. As for NatWest, I wouldn't bank with them if they were the last bank in the universe' (Figure 17.3). The discussion soon spread into other groups, taking the NatWest debate to a wider audience. Had NatWest spotted the postings and responded quickly, it could have reversed the adverse coverage and mentioned positive aspects of its service. However, after 24 hours had elapsed and nothing had been done, at best an issues management job could have been implemented. A missed opportunity existed for rivals of NatWest - especially First Direct - to respond and emphasise the benefits of their services. For the PR practitioner, there was an opportunity to act as 'internet guardian' and advise the companies on how to proceed.

Phillips (2001: 68-78) offers detailed advice about how to gain a clear picture of what is being said about an organisation on the internet. First, landscaping is the process of finding websites, discussion groups and chat rooms that contain information about an organisation. The data then needs to be audited, to assess preconceptions and opinions expressed on the internet and whether there are inconsistencies in information disseminated by the organisation and its publics. Phillips uses the example of BT announcing 3,000 redundancies in February 2000, when its online recruitment partner Monster.co.uk was advertising 1,000 jobs and the web page about corporate vision was down. While it is not possible to monitor the entire web, there are companies which

Author: Stuart Pearce
 Email:
 Date: 1998/08/23
 Forums: uk.local.london
[view for bookmarking](#) · [text only](#)

[author profile](#)
[email reply](#)
[view thread](#)
[post new](#) · [post repl.](#)
[subscribe](#)

>I was somewhat surprised to find out that the **NATWEST** does not provide
 >PC-Homebanking for individual accounts, only for companies. It is
 >otherwise a standard and completely free service in any bank here in
 >Denmark.

>
 >I will appreciate any response. Thanks in advance.
 >
 >Leo

If you want free PC banking, try FirstDirect. They're a telephone banking service, and a subsidiary of Midland Bank. I've never had any problems with them at all, and their service is free even if you go overdrawn. (Within limits, of course.)

As for **NatWest**, I wouldn't bank with them if they were the last bank in the universe.

Stuart

View Thread

» Thread Entry Point «

- **Natwest Bank - is it good?** - [Leo 1998/08/10](#)
 - [Aldre 1998/08/10](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/10](#)
 - [Tasin Baguley 1998/08/12](#)
 - [Adam Cherev 1998/08/11](#)
 - [dove99 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - » [Stuart Pearce 1998/08/23](#) «
- **Re: Natwest Bank - is it good?**
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Peter Foster 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Matthew M. Hurtbach 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - [kahunaaccidentale 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Peter Buchwald 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Penelope Wythes 1998/08/12](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/12](#)
 - [Terry S 1998/08/13](#)
 - [Jane Eten 1998/08/14](#)
 - [P D Stamford 1998/08/13](#)
 - [David Rees 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Will van Zwantenberg 1998/08/11](#)
 - [Penelope Wythes 1998/08/12](#)

Figure 17.3 Newsgroup postings: a potential PR opportunity for NatWest and First Direct, but a threat if ignored

now offer the means to monitor select web pages, newsgroups and online discussion forums. Once the information has been gleaned, an assessment should be made as to whether a response is necessary.

Crisis communication

While newsgroups are important to reputation management, websites play a vital role in proactive corporate communications. Websites are particularly useful in crisis situations – but if a company does not have a site that acts as an adequate information resource, people will seek (possibly inaccurate) comment from other sources. The Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace Study reveals that journalists are increasingly turning to websites for corporate information, especially during crises. It is advisable for corporate websites to provide online press kits that contain up-to-date background information. If a corporate website is successful in divulging the necessary details during a crisis, it can engender a sense of openness and honesty and help with damage limitation.

During October 1996, an *e. coli* bug contaminated the Odwalla juice company's products, resulting in the death of a child. The company decided to use the web as a third-party information resource, which gave the press and public a sense of openness. The site attracted more than 20,000 hits during its first 48 hours. When Swissair lost a flight off Nova Scotia in 1998, it altered the first page of its site within hours to provide information and phone numbers in three languages. In contrast is the case of TWA. When Flight 800 crashed, Boeing failed to provide information in response to the disaster, which resulted in the public turning to alternative internet sources for information about safety records.

Rogue websites

Just as the web gives corporations a voice, it gives consumers a voice too. In particular, disgruntled consumers may air their views about an organisation and its products and services through the creation of 'rogue' websites. Sometimes, a rogue site will use a domain name similar to the company it is attacking, while others take a more general approach. The following case study demonstrates how an individual can use the web to bypass media gatekeepers and challenge a large corporation over a consumer complaint – in this case, within the aircraft industry.

Case study two: Brian Corbett, British Scareways (www.aviation-uk.com)

Brian Corbett set up the British Scareways site during 1996, after he was dissatisfied with the repair work carried out by a BA subsidiary on his small aircraft. Corbett believed illegal documentation had been issued for the repair and refused to take the plane back, believing it could be dangerous. British Airways subsequently took Corbett to court and won the case. However, Corbett says: 'Eventually, through correspondence with BA and the Civil Aviation Authority, I received documentation admitting the original documents were wrong.' He believes this evidence prevents BA from starting legal proceedings against British Scareways. 'BA knows the site is there and leaves it alone, as I could prove my case.'

British Scareways has attracted 45,000 visitors to date and elicits material from disgruntled BA customers and employees around the world (Figure 17.4). 'The site has gone off on a tangent', says Corbett. 'It has become a clearing-house for other people's problems, rather than my own.' Corbett admits he would be willing to turn British Scareways into a consumer opinion mechanism if BA paid him to do so. 'I'm not trying to blackmail BA - I just want to recoup the money I lost', explains Corbett. 'I don't think BA is a rogue, although its subsidiary was. BA thinks it's big enough to ignore me.' A spokesperson for BA said:

We are aware that websites such as British Scareways exist and we take action against them where necessary. However, the airline has no plans to buy out the rights to this or any other site at present. BA has its own official website where customers can make contact with the airline and provide feedback.

Horton (2001: 60) advises that 'the worst mistake a PR practitioner can make is to ignore what is happening online'. Holtz (1998: 186-96) offers a variety of techniques for dealing with criticism online, depending on whether the attack comes from an unhappy customer or an activist group. Other sites can involve fans who appropriate and misuse copyright material. He states that legal action should only be used as a last resort, as such retaliation can fuel the grievances of the critic. Many companies now take the view that monitoring rogue websites can be useful in pinpointing issues which must be dealt with to improve customer relations. Indeed, the case of Nat West and First Direct quoted above provides an example of this.

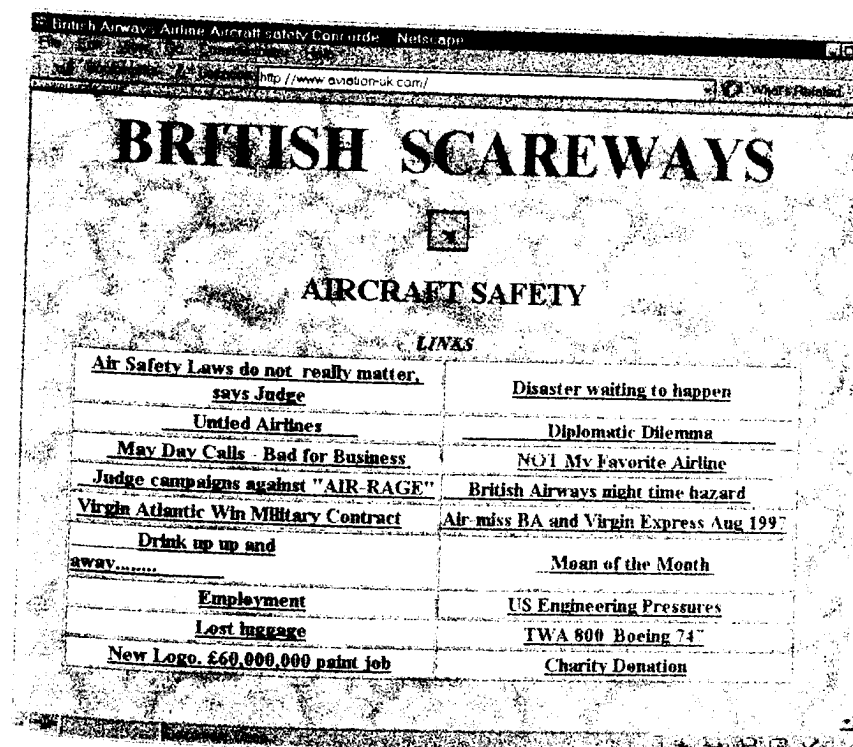


Figure 17.4 British Scareways site challenges BA over aircraft safety

Websites and direct action

While other rogue sites target companies such as Wal-Mart (www.walmartsucks.com) and the Ford Motor Company (www.flamingtowncars.com), the core of anti-corporatism online is the growing number of activism sites. A good example is the McSpotlight site (www.mcspotlight.org), which was set up to challenge McDonald's during February 1996, after the infamous 'McLibel' trial against two environmentalists from North London (the longest running libel trial in British legal history). The site, which generated 1.7 million hits in the first twelve weeks of its life alone, now runs a variety of campaigns for activist groups and provides leads to many other organisations. The 'Wal-Mart Sucks' site thrives as an independent forum for consumer opinion. The rogue Dunkin' Donuts (www.dunkindonuts.org) (Figure 17.5 top) was bought-out during 1999 by Allied Domecq and turned into a 'consumer opinion site' (Figure 17.5 bottom).

During the summer of 1999, the international June 18 'Carnival Against Capitalism', which publicised itself via www.j18.org, demonstrated how the net can bring together loose alliances, organise and motivate people and turn words into actions. In the UK, a large-scale demonstration ensued in the City of London. J18 was significant in that it brought together a disparate range of organisations with different agendas and turned them into an activist coalition against capitalism. Sites such as www.ainfos.ca, an anarchist site and www.urban75.com - a much less intense but quite aggressive site - also look to aid activists.

Mike Slocombe, who runs urban75 (Figure 17.6), comments:

The web allows campaign groups to publicise their actions and forge links in a manner that wasn't possible a few years ago, and attract more people to their cause. After J18, much of the popular press was painting a picture of the protest being almost exclusively attended by thugs, rampaging hooligans and shifty anarchists, with only destruction on their minds. As I was there and had gone for quite different reasons, I wanted to offer an alternative viewpoint, giving the chance for readers to see the other side of the story and make up their own minds. After putting up a photo report on urban75, I was invited to talk on mainstream radio and TV to offer my version of events, which struck me as evidence of how the web can be a powerful alternative reporting tool.

The future

What does the future hold for technology sector PR? With IT coming out of its box and into the mainstream, PR practitioners in all sectors need to understand online audience and the nature of two-way communication, and be able to offer consultancy on internet-related matters, such as website planning and development, internet reputation management and online press targeting. Other PR opportunities created by the internet include lobbying through campaign websites, online sponsorship opportunities and tracking internet coverage for clients. Virtual press offices and electronic distribution techniques are important to all PR practitioners, not just technology specialists. As Mario Tinley-Bass states:

Whether the internet will change PR for better or worse depends on whether you see it as a threat to established techniques . . . or an opportunity. The PR of the twenty-

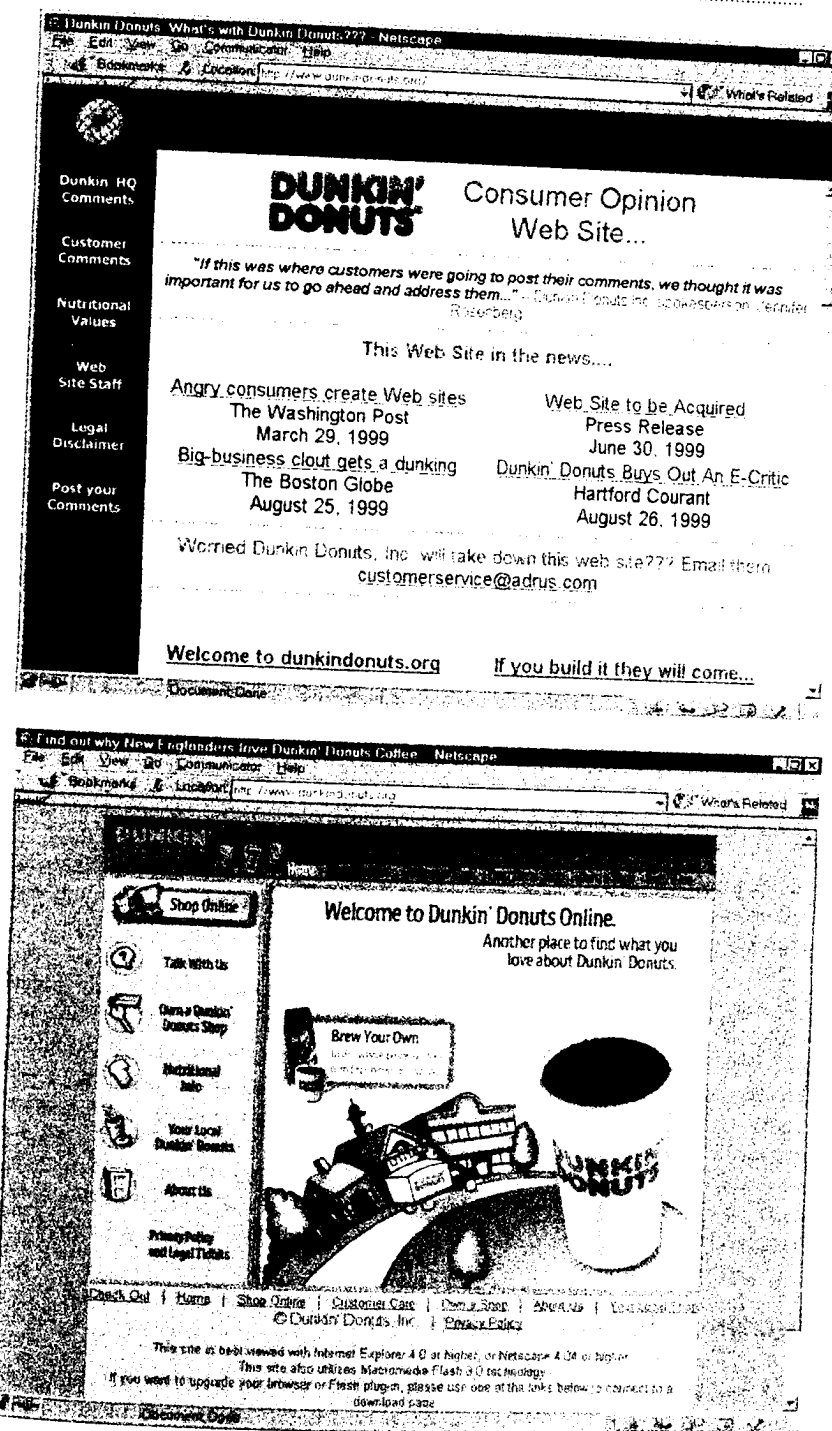


Figure 17.5 Allied Domecq bought out Dunkin' Donuts' consumer opinion site (top) and turned it into a customer resource (bottom)

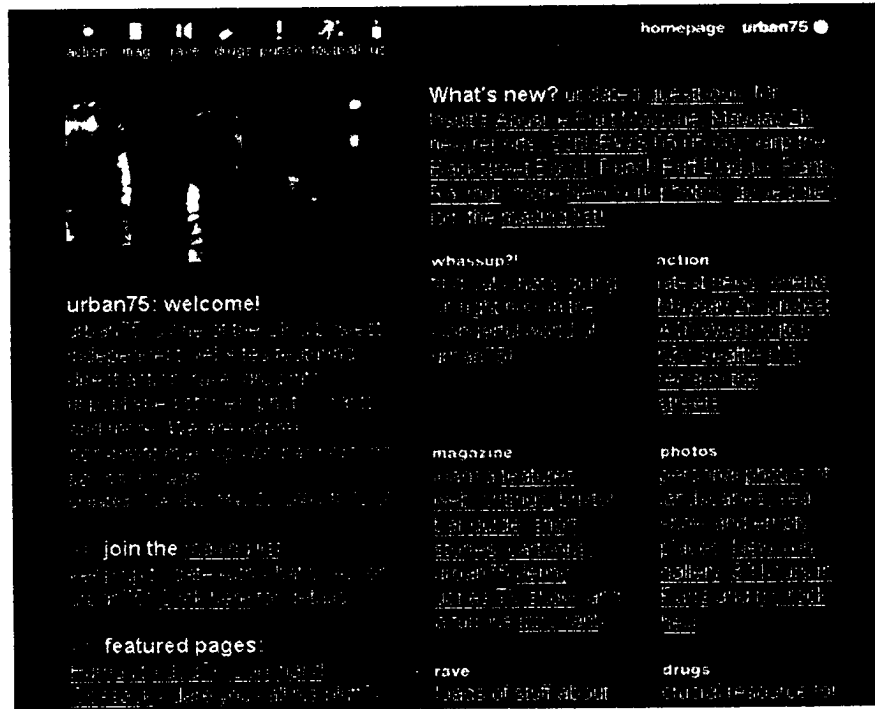


Figure 17.6 urban75 -- a Brixton-run site renowned for direct action

first century will grasp technology but not be overwhelmed by it. Ultimately, despite new methods of getting the message across, the human element cannot, and should not, be eliminated.

'The big technology issues for the PR industry will be in competing with communicators who can accept information and re-process it quickly', says Phillips. 'The use of technologies such as XPRL (extensible Public Relations Language) will change how press releases are distributed, PR evaluation is conducted and media clippings are provided. The long view has to be based on an internet that is many times faster than at present.' Phillips predicts that this will lead to always on mobile, 3D, multi-way communication with better-than-video quality within the next five years. 'It will supersede cell phone messaging which is already a ubiquitous form of communication. Mobile communication is already a big challenge for PR people still set in "push" mode.'

Questions for discussion

- 1 Do you agree with Holtz that the internet has completely changed the nature of communication?
- 2 Are IT or PR skills more important in dealing with publics via the internet?

- 3 Examine a website that you like. At which publics is it aimed? What are the objectives of the site? What elements make it a successful site?
- 4 Examine a website that you dislike. Does it contain any of the elements that arose from the Redsquare survey or not? What elements need to change to make this a successful site?
- 5 Was the British Airways response to the rogue website in the case study appropriate? How could they have responded more effectively?

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Esther Kaposi and David Phillips for their considered feedback on this chapter.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, quotes are from email and telephone interviews conducted by Jo Chipechase during 1998 and 1999.
- 2 However, the days of lifestyle-focused internet publications may be numbered, as the 'traditional' lifestyle press increasingly covers websites as a matter of course and the hype that has surrounded the internet diminishes.