

# SIX FACETS OF THE FUTURE OF PR

**Ross Dawson** looks at the future of the PR industry.

"PR has a PR problem," *The New York Times* quoted Professor Brenda Wrigley of Syracuse University as saying recently, when reflecting on how the industry is perceived. On the one hand, in a world in which society and business are largely based on the flow of information and ideas, there is a massive opportunity for those professionals who can help organisations get the right messages out. Yet the industry has been assailed by problems, ranging from the ethical to the financial. Despite its privileged position, it is generally not seen by senior client executives as providing critical strategic advice or services.

The science and art of PR is about influencing perceptions. As individuals, we build perceptions of the world around us based on the inputs we receive. Those inputs include traditional media, daily experiences, conversations, interactions and more. The term 'public relations' is still more or less valid, as PR is ultimately about shaping people's relationships with organisations. Yet it is also misleading, as today PR entails being involved with every aspect of how people encounter information and make sense of it. It is far more about being engaged in the flow of messages through an intensely networked world than it is about formal communication. The traditional domain of PR is swiftly changing.

Just over 10 years ago, very few people had a personal email account, mobile phone or internet access. The graphical web browser with which we spend so much of our lives interacting didn't even exist until late 1993. Today, the nature of how information and messages flow, and people build perceptions of the world in which they live, is entirely different to how it was just a decade ago. And this is merely the beginning. Traditional media will soon relinquish its role as the primary source of our input about the world. Mass media is becoming relatively marginalised as our world becomes one of multiple and highly varied inputs.

Yet the underlying shifts cover far more than changing communications technologies. There are six fundamental facets of our rapidly evolving world that will shape the future of the PR industry.

## 1. CLIENTS EXPECT MORE

For the past decade or so, clients have become vastly more demanding in their dealings with their professional services providers. An entire industry has arisen of consultants that help companies to pin down their suppliers,

expose costs, cut fees and enforce accountability. In short, clients are seeing their PR agencies and marketing peers as readily replaceable commodities. The majority of PR agencies have, perhaps unwittingly, encouraged this by firmly positioning themselves as 'black-box' providers. Far too often, firms describe their services as 'outsourced PR' or similar, deliberately disengaging the client from the process. This makes it very easy for the client to replace them. The future belongs to those firms that can successfully engage their clients in true knowledge-based relationships that are based on deep mutual knowledge, and a high degree of collaboration in achieving outcomes. For example, since 2000, Ketchum PR has been using online collaboration spaces with its clients, enabling them to participate in the messy work of creating messages and achieving objectives.

## 2. MEDIA IS TRANSFORMED

Mass media will never disappear. Societies are bound together by having a common reference point to discuss and engage with. Yet at the same time, media is fragmenting into a multitude of channels and perspectives. The new wave of 'citizen journalism' includes blogging, as well as the active contribution of pictures, video, words and ideas to media by their audiences. Already the audience of the most widely read blogs, such as Boing Boing, Gawker, and Engadget, rival or exceed that of the major newspapers' online presence. Media has become a participatory sport, in which not just journalists, but literally anyone can provide their perspectives on what they are seeing and what is happening. If the content is interesting or they uncover something of note, they can quickly garner a significant audience. From a narrow pool of arbiters of what is newsworthy, is growing a vast array of deeply interlinked news sources and filters.

## 3. BUSINESS IS A CONVERSATION

The website-turned-into-best-selling-book *The Cluetrain Manifesto* contains 95 theses. The first, immensely influential, observation is that "markets are conversations". The authors' startling insight is that consumers are people, and they expect to be treated like people. Companies also happen to employ people. It is extraordinary that companies have always chosen to communicate with the formal, stilted, self-promoting language of the press release and corporate brochure. Would you like

someone you met who spoke like a press release? Why then is it surprising that people do not like companies that strive to be impersonal on every level? Running cool 'street-cred' advertising campaigns does not create a conversation. Organisations must enable human conversations, between the humans that work for them, and the humans who buy from them. While this is fraught with challenges, there is no question that customers will flow to companies with which they can have human interactions, and move away from companies that persist in presenting unassailable formal corporate faces to the world.

#### 4. INFORMATION FLOWS IN EVERY DIMENSION

Information flows used to be largely unidirectional. From organisations and their agencies to the media, and on to the masses. Now information flows in all directions. Many articles in the online version of *The Washington Post* now include a list of all the blog postings that have referred to that article. Increasingly, newspaper articles quote – sometimes exclusively – blogs as their sources. News Corporation bought the social networking site MySpace in July 2005, because that is where information is now flowing. By positioning itself in the interstices of the

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networks, it can continue to access the crucial 15 to 30-year-old demographic, which is rapidly switching off mainstream media. In addition, one of the most powerful trends is towards massive and widespread audio and video production and communication. From podcasting to mobile video calling to home video studios, and video screens soon to appear on every surface you can imagine, audio and video will predominate in our world. PR has traditionally been rooted in the world of words. While that will remain important, the new skills required to play in a world driven by other media forms will be critical.

#### 5. TRANSPARENCY IS A GIVEN

Do not expect to be able to hide anything. The old catch-cry of 'information wants to be free' remains true, and now it has the means to escape. Websites like *internalmemos.com* allow piquant corporate internal communication to find a broader audience. When news is interesting, word spreads like wildfire through the blogosphere, as Sony BMG found to its expense when a single blogger discovered dangerous copy protection software hidden on its CDs, flowing swiftly to global attention, and ultimately resulting in recalls of all those CDs, lawsuits and more. In this world, PR is not about hiding or manipulating the truth; it is about providing access, being open. Know and expect that the truth will come out. PR's traditional role is almost turned on its head. Even more than before, the role of PR must be trusted. Broken trust is not soon forgotten. The only way to gain trust, to be credible, is to be transparent. It is an immensely challenging shift to make, yet those who do not truly believe this will soon find a day when their credibility and livelihood disappears.

#### 6. INFLUENCE NETWORKS ARE AT THE HEART

As mainstream media becomes an ever-smaller part of our information input, organisations need to understand and get involved with the influ-

ence networks that really form decisions. People form opinions and make decisions primarily from the input of the people around them that they know well and trust, not from advertising and media. My company has recently done research for a global technology media company on the influence networks that determine how major corporate technology purchasing decisions get made. A number of major PR firms have launched services to identify and access key influencers in any specific domain. Information aggregator Factiva now has a service that provides information on key people in business around the world, and to whom they are connected. PR will become largely about how to identify, access and influence the key influencers, either individually, or by understanding how influence networks are structured.

#### EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PR PROFESSION

There is no question that the six facets of the future of PR pose pointed challenges to the profession. PR as it has traditionally been purveyed will not stand up to any one of these key drivers, let alone all of them simultaneously. Yet at the same time, these drivers offer some fabulous opportunities for the profession.

First and foremost, companies will need massive assistance to be able to engage effectively in a world built on dialogue and transparency. Shifting from a default policy of being closed and com-

municating by press release, to building genuine human interactions and conversations, is far from easy. Guidelines and parameters need to be established and communicated, senior executives need to be coached and technologies need to be implemented. Of all the professions, only PR has the core experience and understanding to be able to do this effectively. Yet practitioners also need to extend their capabilities into new domains such as technology and new media in order to be able to deliver on this.

As the role of perception becomes ever more central, senior executives must pay attention to these issues directly. Previously, PR executives rarely had access beyond the chief marketing officer, and often were managed by considerably more junior client staff. Those PR executives that demonstrate they can understand their clients' strategic issues, and engage at that level of the organisation, will have the opportunity to do so. Moving beyond the ever-more trenchant issues of reputation management and related spheres, agencies can extend themselves to work with clients on other critical and highly relevant issues such as customer-driven innovation.

One of the strongest trends today is increasing specialisation. A primary role of PR today is in accessing networks of specialists and experts in a particular domain. It is very hard to transcend commoditisation doing generic PR. When you can contribute to the perceptions of key players in deeply specialised fields, however, you are at the core of your client's business.

We are entering a world in which the flow of information and perceptions will drive much of the value creation in a highly networked global economy. The PR industry should be looking forward to a time of massive prosperity, in which it extends itself to play in entirely new fields of media and communication. Yet many of the existing participants will need to adopt a new stance and actively develop new skills to do this effectively. Those that re-conceive their role and potential impact, could well be masters of the universe. ■