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Dialogue with Ross Dawson

Noted author and expert on business networks offers insights and thoughts on Public Relations

Ross Dawson is founder and chief executive officer of Advanced Human Technologies, based in Sydney, Australia, and San Francisco, and author of two best sellers, Developing Knowledge-Based Client Relationships and Living Networks. His blog, [Trends in the Living Networks](#), offers commentary on developments in today's intensely networked world – including new and traditional media – and how this world is coming to life. In a recent interview with Ketchum, Ross offers insightful thoughts about where public relations fits into this networked world.



On the growing need to develop knowledge-based relationships with our public relations clients:

Increasingly, our economy is driven by collaboration with deep specialist knowledge. (In public relations), the future is in collaborative relationships, working closely with clients as true partners to combine your expertise with theirs and add value. Still, many clients put their PR agencies in a black box, pigeonholing them as a commodity service that's price based, making it difficult to get to know clients better or apply your capabilities effectively.

In a knowledge-based relationship, the client is more open and gives you more opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of it – how the organization thinks and works, how it makes decisions, and how it views itself – until you may understand the client better than it understands itself. Gaining this deep knowledge of a client allows you to customize the way you work with it and to add greater value.

Dawson's Virtuous Circle of Knowledge-Based Relationships



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On the importance of “relationship leaders” who manage these collaborative client relationships:

The task of what I call the “relationship leader” is absolutely critical. This person must lead the client into a collaborative relationship and show the client why it is compelling to build this kind of partnership. He or she also must bring together the best resources of the firm, what (Ketchum) calls “best teams,” those specialists who are uniquely relevant to the client.

The best leaders are collaborative, with an open way of working, who can bring the right resources at the firm to the client, who can draw the client out to learn about them, and who are strategic thinkers. They must resist getting dragged down to the level of only delivering projects and, rather, pull themselves up to the level of thinking strategically about things, such as where the client and the relationship should be in three years, and how to create that by bringing together the most relevant capabilities of the firm.

The best relationship leaders understand a client’s business issues and serve as broad and trusted business advisors.

On the critical need of PR agencies to understand the rapidly changing media landscape:

We live in a networked world where messages – media and consumer messages – all flow through social networks. Today, communications technologies connect us. Remember that it was only 10 years ago when it was just becoming common to have a cell phone, an e-mail account and access to the Internet. These technologies provide the foundation for our deeply networked world of today.

There has been a strong rise in so-called “network science” – the science of understanding how networks work. Small-world theory, for example, examines the characteristics of highly connected networks,

illustrated by the “six degrees of separation” (or often far fewer!) between us and the people we meet. The blogging world provides a great example. There are very few blogs that are very highly connected with many links and readers. In fact, most have just a few connections. But together blogs form a highly connected “small world” in which the most important, relevant stories very quickly become visible. As a result, traditional media are taking notice of blogs’ importance. At the *Washington Post*, for instance, every online story provides a list of blogs that link to that story, which allows you to see which articles are the most popular, and what comments readers have made.

On the need to get clients to participate in the blogosphere:

It’s critical to get clients to participate. They have to engage themselves in this new world of media, and that requires great skill and understanding of the domain. Blogging is personal, it’s a true form of “citizen journalism”, and it is at the forefront of the changing landscape. A blog story is completely unlike a press release, which is static and completely unengaging.

We’re so swamped by information that we must engage in what I call “collaborative filtering.” We are collaborating to filter through this vast amount of information to find out what uniquely interests us. The blogosphere enables this. It’s the filtering mechanism where the most interesting things float to the top. As a result, the really interesting things will never be unrecognized again. It will be impossible to hide unpopular activities, as many organizations have discovered.

We’re just at the beginning of the blogging experience. But already it is where young people spend their time. If you look at the circulation trends of teen magazines today, they’re not very pretty. But the youth-focused social-networking site Myspace, recently bought by media mogul Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, already has about 12 million unique visitors and is a very richly interlinked space. If clients want to know what’s truly going on with this demographic group, they must interact with them – and honestly – in the blogosphere.

Still, it’s quite a journey to get clients to recognize this and to help them connect, engage, and interact.