PR: What to Do When the Public Does Most of the Relating

John H. Bell
Managing Director/Executive Creative Director
360° Digital Influence
Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide
john.bell@ogilvypr.com

John heads up Ogilvy PR's global digital practice, 360° Digital Influence, designed to manage brands at a time when anyone can be an influencer and we are all influenced in new ways. John, and the Digital Influence team that he works with in EMEA, have completed projects for clients as diverse as Lenovo, Unilever, Intel and Save the Children.

Contact:

John H. Bell
Managing Director/
Executive Creative Director
360° Digital Influence
Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide
Tel: 202 729 4166
john.bell@ogilvypr.com

Public Relations Is Changing

You've probably heard about it. It goes something like this:

The consumer is in charge. Trust in media falls. Trust in word of mouth rises. Now there's *traditional* media, *new* media and *consumer-generated* media. Media explodes. Every day, 50,000 blogs are created and social networks connect millions from China to Charing Cross. People are watching less TV. Reading fewer newspapers. And Internet usage grows. Now there are *traditional* influencers and *new* influencers. One's a business leader in NYC. The other is a momblogger in New Mexico. Conversation is more important than messaging. And search engines change the game.

Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide

Hype or Truth?

The truth is that our definition of "media" has exploded. Our idea of "influencers" has expanded. And effective communications has as much to do with building relationships through conversations and word of mouth as it does with marketing campaigns and message delivery.

How do we create effective communications programs when peer-to-peer recommendations are the new form of "earned media"?

The Rise of Digital Word of Mouth

If most word of mouth activity occurs offline (80%)—at the pub, on the Metro, in the checkout line—then why focus on digital word of mouth? What happens online doesn't stay online. Online discussions about sustainable energy, the stresses of being a parent, candidates for election, and even the right car to buy bleed over into our daily terrestrial lives. They also fuel traditional media as journalists seek story angles and "the voice of the people" online every day.

In the online world, word of mouth gets amplified, channeled and, ultimately, measured. The conversations are not all about consumer brands, and there is plenty of discussion around B2B products and services, issue advocacy, and public affairs and across most areas of interest from health to technology.

The explosive growth of social networks, blogs, virtual communities, product review wikis—all create more access to conversations both for people as well as brands. We can now listen to what customers are saying, and we can engage them in conversation through cost-effective, nonintrusive means. We can build positive relationships with customers and constituents that lead to loyalty and advocacy.

Some say that word of mouth has impact only in "mature" mass media markets like Europe and North America—places where there is a decline in trust in media at the same time there are new ways for individuals to communicate online. Not true. Word of mouth will be just as relevant in emerging media markets like China, India and Russia. Places where there are other reasons for conditional trust in societal institutions.

We've discovered[1] four principles to building successful digital programs that amplify word of mouth to influence people positively.

1. Listen First

Seems obvious. We hear about the value of listening to customers every day. It is common sense. Still, many organizations find it hard to do this outside the research function. Listening used to be focus groups and surveys. Now, it happens in real time every day.

We start every program by finding the conversations going on out there in blogs, message boards, social networks and review sites. We pay attention not just to what people are saying and how they say it but also to those who appear influential in a conversation. We use both syndicated monitoring tools and a clever combination of existing Web 2.0 applications to find conversations and influencers.

Case In Point:

How can bloggers and marketers work together? We wanted to find out how Ogilvy could work authentically with bloggers on behalf of our clients. We did something radical. The Belgium and Dutch team led the way by inviting some of them over for a picnic. Actually it was a **"Blogstorm"** and was attended by some of the most influential bloggers in the Netherlands. A full day of activities uncovered the best ways for marketers and bloggers to work together through both paid and earned media—lessons useful across Europe. And we built long-term relationships based on our willingness to listen and learn.

---

[1] In the three years that we have been developing digital influence programs, we have learned a lot from actually deploying programs. We've discovered these principles from both our successes and our failures.

## PR: What to Do When the Public Does Most of the Relating (continued)

Case In Point:

Through comprehensive monitoring of consumer-generated media (cgm) on pandemic flu for the **Department of Health and Human Services** (HHS) in the U.S. federal government, we connected with a community of pro-am (professional and amateur) people who self-identify as "flubies" and part of "flublogia." They later became important allies in helping raise awareness and relevancy of the threat and, as we launched the first blog (blog.pandemicflu.gov) from HHS, of the Secretary himself.

2. Offer Deepening Ways To Engage With People

Engagement is the "search for the 21st century gross rating points." So says The Advertising Research Foundation (www.thearf.org). "Engagement" means interaction, participation and spending time with a brand or issue. Engagement goes where impressions and media hits cannot easily go—toward loyalty and advocacy.
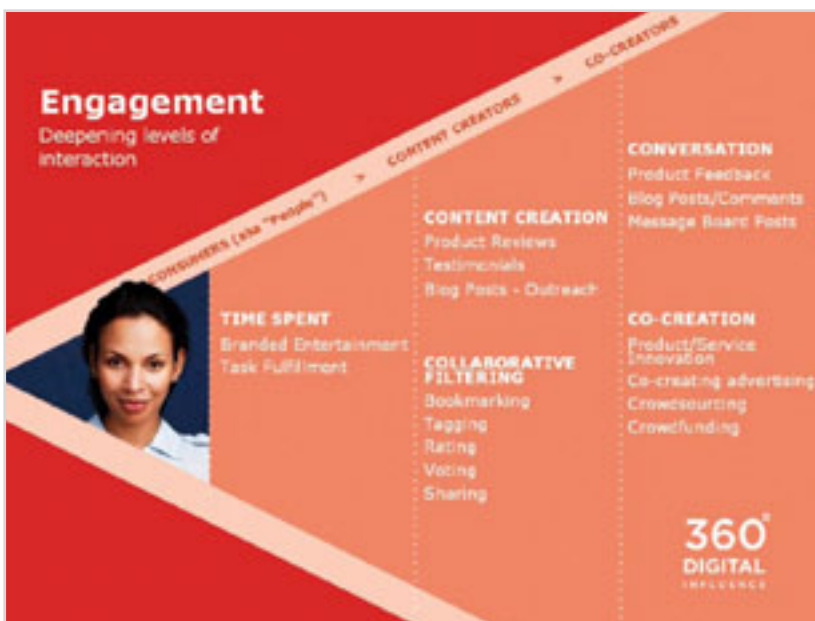
If we can offer meaningful ways for people to engage, they are more likely to discuss that experience with friends and family. A clever Flash game can be as engaging as branded entertainment. A company blog can engage people to share comments. Asking people to review products through Digg-style (www.digg.com) ratings or narrative reviews like those found in Trusted Opinion (www.trustedopinion.com) is asking them to engage even deeper. And the deepest level of participation happens when you invite your customers in to cocreate products and services. When we create something or spend time doing something, we become invested. We start to develop loyalty, provided the experience is positive and the underlying product or service is worthy (not a trivial caveat).

Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide

Content creation is not a fringe activity. Due to simplified publishing platforms like Typepad or those inside Facebook and because of the new simplicity behind Web 2.0 design aesthetic, people can create content infinitely more easily today.

- One half of online users are readers or creators of social media[2]

- 30% of online users have created content by updating Web pages or blogs, posted comments or contributed to forums

- 75% of online consumers ages 18–24 "use" user-generated content, and 84% of them are content creators

Case In Point:

When we produced the live blogging and "vlogging" (video blogging) for the **Corporate Climate Response conference in London** (www.climateresponseblog.com), we didn't just cover the event with our own blog/vlog staff. We invited key bloggers from the "green" community to attend the conference and blog about it themselves. We linked to their blogs from the live event site. We could not control what they said. We simply wanted to get them involved and engaged and help them spread the word about the conference.

Case In Point:

We wanted to engage a younger audience with **UK-based Save the Children**. But we wanted to do more than simply reach them with a message, we wanted them to get deeply involved. The Save the Children "Yak Shack" opened in the popular virtual world, Second Life (www.secondlife.com) in December 2006, where for £1.75 you could purchase your own virtual yak (equivalent to 1,000 Linden Dollars). You could ride it, milk it, knit a woolly jumper from its hair and even customize it yourself. We invited all yak owners back to the Shack for the 24-hour "Yak Show" on December 16th, providing a forum for them to show off their individually customised yaks, compete, meet each other and meet us. Hundreds of avatars turned up. It was covered by our network of virtual news agencies and very quickly became a "hot" news story in traditional national media because involvement on Second Life was a first for any charity.

---

[2] Pew Internet & American Life Project

3. Build Relationships Not Just Campaigns

Building word of mouth programs sits outside the narrow description of most marketing disciplines. It is closest to public relations, but even we have to adopt some different behaviors to make it work well.

Public relations professionals are used to communicating through trusted third parties. For years now, the trusted third party has been traditional media. But it has also been other groups at the community level—patient advocacy groups, grassroots coalitions, trade groups, and more.

We were trained to craft messages and deliver them through military-like campaigns. Running a campaign that lasts three months to a year is based upon our historical use of paid and earned traditional media. With our new influencers, it doesn't work the same way. Today we must move from short-term campaign thinking to long-term relationship and community building. And we must move away from trying to control the message to convening a conversation.

The definition of "media" now includes mombloggers like LaPajaro.com (www.lapajaro.com) and product communities like thinkwiki.org (www.thinkwiki.org). While there are plenty of journalist bloggers and even citizen journalists who may behave very similarly to the traditional media from 1999, there are so many more—millions—of people who expect something more. They crave an open, transparent dialogue and cringe at the site of a press release.

Many companies and organizations worry about giving up control of communications when they engage through conversations. What we have found is that most times the fear of negative comments is overblown, and brands get relationship points for being open to criticism. All of the truisms about relationships are, well, true. It's a two-way street and is built on trust.

We need to build relationships with customers, constituents and influencers in a million different affinity groups. That requires long-term thinking beyond the campaign that starts in April and ends in May.

Case In Point:

Select Comfort® makes the Sleep Number® bed. When we listened online, we discovered a vocal cadre of customers who were passionate about their Sleep Number beds. We wanted to engage them at different levels and build a relationship. Beds.

com (www.beds.com) became the home of "Sleep Conversations"—a collection of what people were saying on blogs and message boards about the product and about their approach to getting great sleep. People who blogged about the product would find their posts pulled into Sleep Conversations inviting them into a conversation with others about the brand. Customers could put a customized badge on their blog featuring their Sleep Number. And whereas the ad campaign came and went, this resource has no timetable. We will continue to build our relationships with customers while demonstrating the openness of the brand by hosting the unfiltered conversation.

4. Measure Performance Now

Digital word of mouth (WOM) is both invaluable and measurable. Peer to peer recommendations are the most powerful marketing tool on earth. Each of us can identify personal experiences where a friend's recommendation drove us to purchase a product.

Still, there is no standard of measurement. While the established advertising community touts reports featuring reach and frequency, and Web metrics document site traffic, click-throughs and email opens, we are still searching for a standard to measure WOM.

Two things: a standard will happen soon and you don't need to wait. We have crafted a set of ingredients for custom measurement "recipes" for every program. We must have a way to measure performance before, during and after a program. Our budgets are getting larger for WOM programs, and we must have meaningful metrics to justify the diversion of funds from traditional marketing.

The List of Measurement Ingredients Includes

- **Word of mouth:** We measure mentions or WOM units as the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) refers to them. How many mentions, what's the tone, comments versus posts, pure recommendations—all of these have brand value and can even drive sales.

- **Reach:** While the name of our game is activating influencers and therefore is not about a TV-sized "reach," we use Web metrics like visits and unique visitors to understand how many people we are reaching during any part of a program.

- **Engagement:** How much time does someone spend, how many interactions, what are the number of content submissions—all indicate degrees of engagement.

- **Search visibility:** 80% of us start our online session with a search. We don't go to Web sites anymore, we go to Google results. If we can add content to the first two pages of search results whether it's Google or Baidu, we can have a business impact. And if some of that content is from third parties supporting our product or position, even better.

- **Earned media:** Do journalists get leads from the Internet and cgm? For most it is probably the number one source. If we drive earned media mentions online or offline, our program is delivering additional value.

- **Research value:** In customer engagement programs and monitoring activities, we learn a lot from our customers. This goes beyond the value provided by focus groups and surveys. This value is icing on the cake of any word of mouth program.

Is a personal recommendation on a Sleep Number bed more valuable than an advertisement impression? Absolutely. By how much? That's where things get fuzzy. Some say a recommendation should be worth 10 times an ad impression. There is ample reason to believe it may be far more than that.

We will create a simple standard for measuring word of mouth. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) is on it. Another emerging model, the Net Promoter Score (www.netpromoter.com), is being adopted by CMOs in major corporations right now. It asks a single question—"Would you recommend us?"—and from there can factor a meaningful score on the overall performance of a company.

You can create a measurement recipe today that can guide strategy and help make budget decisions on where your marketing and communication dollars can be spent. The return on investment of word of mouth is too obvious to put off.

What is 360° Digital Influence?

We created an organized way of planning and deploying digital word of mouth programs that effectively reach client business objectives at a time when anyone can be an influencer and technology has made the world flatter. For each client, we design a complete digital strategy that uses social media, influencer marketing and word of mouth to build stronger bonds with customers and constituents.

And we had to do it globally. These changes are happening throughout our clients in Europe, Asia, South America and in North America. It's just happening differently in different markets.

We created a new public relations practice: 360° Digital Influence.

Part Digital PR consultancy, part Web 2.0 design-and-build studio, we learn from doing. Because we execute what we plan, we become better planners. And as members of the WOMMA (www.womma.org), we are evangelists for the rising power of one person's recommendation to another.

Public Relations Is Changing

You've probably heard about it. It goes something like this:

The value of press releases sink while personal outreach soars. Regulated industries like pharmaceuticals launch product blogs (e.g. alliconnect (www.alliconnect.com)) to build relationships. The World Bank turns from crafting the message to helping its staff communicate via social media (PSDblog (psdblog.worldbank.org)). MySpace changes the music business just as Joost (www.joost.com) and broadband video changes how we "watch." Mobile communications explode with 3G and bigger bandwidth. And cocreation and crowdsourcing are the new innovations from the outside in for Fortune 500 companies (www.ideastorm.com). Conversation is the new "control," and our job is to make it happen.

Now, it gets interesting. Stay tuned…