

DIGITAL



Many deem 1999's launch of Blogger as a key event in the history of blogs

building relationships with – and correcting misinterpretations of – influential bloggers.

“When the mainstream media was looking at these particular cases so closely, I think a lot of big businesses... implemented some form of social media strategy within their communications,” Tocci says.

Soon, blogs seemed to affect everything: a Delta stewardess was fired for posting pictures of herself posing in her uniform; Plaxo hired someone who was fired from Google for blogging about sales meetings; and corporations like Dell, TiVo, Verizon, and Kodak started publishing their own blogs.

Blogs were also seen as a way to communicate directly with consumers without having to go through the media. GM launched the Fast Lane blog in 2005 to communicate with customers directly. Len Marsico, staff director of communications at GM, says his team also added video to its media site and developed a new media group within its PR department.

In 2006, Edelman had launched a blog for client Wal-Mart without disclosing its origins or funding. Mistakes are now fewer and far between as the industry has learned from case studies and PR pros have improved their digital media techniques.

“This [communications] economy is growing... mostly because of digital capabilities,” says Weber. “Our skill sets [are] around crisis... content... and persuasion. In a world where you are going to have a crisis a minute, [PR] should be all over this.” ●

TALENT
Bonin Bough, director of global social media, Pepsi
You will see a ton of corporate marketers poach senior digital talent from communications agencies, leaving a void of experienced talent at top levels in digital agencies

SEARCH ENGINES
Steve Rubel, SVP and director of insights, Edelman Digital
Google will become the most important global media outlet by 2010, because it will be the dominant way that consumers engage with the growing glut of online information

When *PRWeek* first began publishing in 1998, the digital environment was still in its nascent phase. Only a core group of PR pros truly understood how online communications would revolutionize the industry. In 2008, even the most traditional firm is touting its digital guru, in-house departments are racing to understand the environment, and the industry has an expectation that social media will be its greatest shot to increase the stature of the PR function. What a difference a decade makes.

Today, we think about digital communications as blogging, viral videos, social networks, and virtual worlds. But the movement began in the early 1990s, using less sophisticated tools.

“[Enthusiasts] were populating Yahoo groups, as well as creating their own Web sites and really using homegrown tools like Fusion,” says Brian Solis, principal at FutureWorks and PR 2.0 blogger, who had used the platform to market some of the first mainstream digital cameras.

Larry Weber, founder and chairman of W2 Group, was, at the time, chairman and CEO of The Weber Group (which eventually merged with Shandwick and BSMG). In the late '90s, he started allocating budget to teach employees about things like e-communities and organic search. Agencies and companies had started to use the Web to reach core consumers and media.

He tells *PRWeek*, “I didn’t understand the interactivity part of that until probably the late '90s, when I started to see search engines rise, started to see eBay and Amazon, and [I began to] understand this is also going to be a conversation.”

IN THEIR NASCENT PHASE ONLY 10 YEARS AGO, ONLINE TACTICS NOW SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE PR INDUSTRY. BY ALEXANDRA BRUELL

Much of digital communications today revolves around blogging, which gave consumers a powerful voice through simply set-up, easy-to-use publishing software. While blogging’s history has many unofficial start dates, the launch of LiveJournal and Blogger in 1999 accelerated the number of bloggers.

Donna Sokolsky, founder and senior MD at Spark PR, attributes the rise of digital’s importance to the post-9/11 economic downturn. Ad spending was down and influential reporters who were laid off turned to blogging, she says, lending it greater credibility. Until then, she adds, “most companies or business sectors were not forced to react.”

In 2004, one person claimed, in chatroom bikeforums.net, that he could pick Ingersoll Rand’s Kryptonite bicycle lock with a pen. Soon a video of that very action surfaced. The video spread through the Internet via blogs much faster than anyone could have anticipated. It went from a chatroom post to a *New York Times* story in one week, astonishing the PR industry.

Donna Tocci, director of Web and new media at Ingersoll Rand and former manager of media and external relations for Kryptonite, says that five months after the forum posting, the company began a year-long, brand-rebuilding process by



Alexandra Bruell

VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE

Alexandra Bruell, Web coordinator (PRWeek): What’s the next big thing in digital?

Curtis Houglund (Attention): Measurement. As more people communicate online, more data is created, which leads to greater measurability. PR pros will require greater technological and analytical skills to succeed.

Paul Bergevin (Intel): It’s dealing with video, user-generated in many cases. PR pros are trained to communicate verbally, and the world increasingly will process impressions visually.

Adam Keats (Weber Shandwick): Mobile. As more people seek to connect with others and [with] relevant content around them, it’ll become a more sought-after channel.

Jeffrey Moran (Absolut): Blogs. Everyone can say anything they want. It’s a way to get media more involved; it’s direct to consumer and it’s free speech.

Ryan Lack (Voce Communications): As more people communicate online, it will become increasingly important for us to learn how to harness the collective influence of communities.

Bruell (PRWeek): Will companies take on a greater role in producing media? And how will they compete with mainstream media?

Keats (WS): We don’t see social media competing with mainstream or new media, per se. It’s becoming a more integrated part of it. When CNN anchors are

Twittering live during a broadcast, when the *Chicago Tribune* is getting news tips through social media... social media intersects with mainstream media, it doesn’t compete with it.

Houglund (Attention): Media is media. They just have different attributes and benefits. By combining top-down media with bottom-up social media, you bridge awareness and adoption. They are not in competition, they are complementary. The real game-changer is how you cultivate word of mouth by allowing the channels to work together.

Lack (Voce): It’s about creating content to provide value to your consumers, [who] will always seek out the best, most accurate information from the “most” trusted source. In some cases, the company itself isn’t the most trusted, but I like to think that opening the direct channel of communication between a company and its customers in time can increase trust.

Bergevin (Intel): Media consumers harvest from a broad mix of sources. Cross-media influence suggests that these different media are not competing for the consumer’s attention, even if traditional media are threatened in their business models.

Krista Gleason (Kodak): It’s about integration, connecting with your customers, and building relationships and awareness.

The full version of this roundtable can be viewed at prweek.com/tenthroundtables.



Paul Bergevin
GM of global comms, Intel



Krista Gleason
Manager of corporate media relations, Kodak



Curtis Houglund
Founder, Attention



Adam Keats
SVP of Screengrab, Weber Shandwick



Ryan Lack
New media specialist, Voce Communications



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VP of corporate and brand comms, Absolut