

A *Salted Stone* EBOOK

BUILDING A MODERN PR STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL INFLUENCERS

Influencer Marketing for Modern PR



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Prior to the early 2000s, the roles and responsibilities of public relations professionals were relatively straightforward: build contact lists, pitch journalists, score inches, clip the hits, and distribute press releases.

But it's not the early 2000s anymore, and if there's one thing that's painfully clear to most PR practitioners today, it's that [the democratization of information](#) has eroded the once straightforward nature of the job.

This erosion can be attributed squarely to society being totally enveloped in and reliant upon the world wide web as the primary source for information and entertainment. The proliferation of blogging and social media—and the consequent democratization of information—has resulted in a complete reversal in direction by which “news” travels.

This reversal has created major expectation shifts for those charged with creating and maintaining a favorable public image for an organization.

THE VIRAL FAME ALGORITHM MYTH

I mean, let's be honest. In the old days, if you weren't a household brand name, it wasn't ever really considered in the realm of possibility that your PR gal (or guy) would be successful at landing your company a mention in a nationwide media outlet.

Unless you knew a journalist or on-air personality, or there was some freak occurrence in happenstance, you didn't stand a chance of grabbing national or global coverage for your company. But with the Internet, all that changed.

At least once a day some obscure random Jane shoots to Internet infamy by a still yet-to-be solved viral phenomenon algorithm. And with this loud and shiny phenomenon has come the (wildly unrealistic) expectation that a sound public relations plan will result in the same kind of instant, widespread coverage for whatever cause its effort gets behind.

Add to that the after-effects rippling out from the hyper-connectedness and “instant” nature of our now Internet-centric world, and it’s easy to see why so many people have a false sense that anything—even public relations—can be automated and pre-programmed to achieve guaranteed success, if only for the right price.

We’re all so accustomed to “on-demand” everything that this misinformed belief around the ability to run PR programs for the same budget (or in the way as was done last decade) is completely understandable.

THE FLOW OF INFORMATION DOES A 180

But understandable or not, these expectations are, on at least three counts, just plain ridiculous:

1. The volume of “information gatekeepers” has exploded.

Think about it. When the universe of media was limited to newspapers, magazines, radio and television, there was a somewhat tangible number of information gatekeepers to contact and connect with.

But now that the media universe has expanded to include every information pusher on the Internet, that tangible number has exploded exponentially into an unknowable and ever-growing number.

2. Audience reach for (the majority of) gatekeepers is on a much smaller order than the gatekeepers of media past.

The unending stream of choice related to where (or from whom) we choose to consume our information, is one of the reasons why it’s difficult for any one person or organization to secure and maintain top billing as a titan gatekeeper anymore.

That’s because, on the whole, with this new found abundance of choice, we are:

a. consuming media from a much expanded buffet of options

b. less likely to be loyal to one or two “voice of god” gatekeepers

This also means that the pie, instead of being divided into a few huge slices (think: CBS, ABC, NBC) has now been minced into tiny tastes (think: every blog, social media feed and news site you browse through every day).

This, in turn, means that the average PR person must build relationships with a larger volume of gatekeepers in order to have any chance of reaching a significant percentage of the target audience. Why?

Because this scenario also creates a secondary issue: *your target audience is dispersed throughout, and consuming information from, a massive array of outlets.*

3. Your audience is literally everywhere.

Think of this massive array of outlets in terms of fragmentation. Just as with a hall of mirrors experience at a carnival, you enter a reality where from any one vantage point it appears that you can perceive every reflection shown back to you, if only you stand in one spot and take time to absorb the visual data coming back to you.

You may feel for a moment that you have a handle on your perception of reality, but in the time it takes you to take a step and turn a corner in the maze of mirrors, an entirely new reality is presented in the reflections around you; a whole new wave of possibilities to contend with.



Now imagine that in your haste to escape the experience you accidentally shatter the glass around you. The result? An instant creation of new and separate reflections.

Well, it's the same with the fragmentation of media outlets. As new websites pop up by the second, your target audience spreads thinner and thinner over an unending array of choice in terms of where they'll decide to consume their information.

So in the face of this total shift in how information flows and is consumed, how do you build a modern PR strategy to successfully reach the top of the Media Mountain?

I say, you aim for the middle.

BATTLING FRAGMENTATION: AIM FOR THE MIDDLE

Shooting for the stars may be the way to go for inspirational bloggers, but when it comes to public relations, aiming for middle atmosphere proves to be the better bet. This is because the most influential gatekeepers crowd source their content from mid-tier gatekeepers.

Think of the more popular websites in the world: Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. These sites are driven by UGC—user generated content. And while news aggregation sites such as the Huffington Post do produce original content, that original content is but a very small portion of the total portfolio that is published on its domain every day. Most of the material you see on a site like the HuffPost is sourced directly from independent writers and [mid-tier bloggers](#).

We're now operating in a media model that flows [bottom-up instead of top-down](#)—which is a complete 180 from how news and information originated and was disseminated in the past. This new reality offers both an opportunity and a challenge for PR folks.

First, the challenge. How to forge relationships with mid-tier content creators who have publishing access with larger media outlets? Within our current media system model, it's possible to land coverage on high-traffic / high-engagement sites by building relationships with the independent, mid-level content creators who are featured regularly.

By researching who is consistently contributing to the largest gatekeepers, you can gameplan ways to drive mutual value for your organization, their business and the media outlet's site visitors.

The upside to this equation? It is, in some ways, more reasonable to expect that with the right strategy you'll be able to see your message make it's way to the big leagues. It all starts with penetrating the layer of middle people who are essentially trading their way up the media pyramid to be syndicated by, or featured on, larger gatekeeper sites. By tailoring your message to meet the needs of these contributors, you can find ways to have your organization included in the original content these mid-tier gatekeepers create for the bigger sites.

IT TAKES AN ARMY: INFLUENCER MARKETING



If it isn't glaringly obvious by now, building out an efficient and effective public relations program goes beyond compiling press lists, rubbing elbows with journalists, and publishing one-and-done press releases.

A comprehensive PR program also takes into account how to nurture and leverage an [influencer network](#) to assist in the spreading of information from your organization to the public.

Your PR team now needs to be thinking in terms of mutually beneficial value. How do you help drive value for content-creating influencers? What story ideas, information or content can you offer in exchange for their advocacy?

Keep in mind, influencers seek opportunities that allow them to leverage another site's traffic volume in order to re-direct some portion of that traffic back to their owned web properties (via bio profiles, CTAs and hyperlinks).

So, where do you start? The first step goes into researching the content creators in your space and building a network. This means investing time and energy into discovering the influencers that make the most sense for your brand.

There may be 50 influencers who write about the general topic that relates to your organization, but after digging into the content they produce and uncovering the angles or storylines they care about, you may realize that only 12 of those 50 really make sense for your brand.

Once you've narrowed in on those 12 influencers, your task shifts to be one of creative connection—discovering and communicating the cross value that teaming up on content will bring to your targeted influencers.

This is the part of the process that is crucial to program success because it's easy for a PR team to start losing the plot here. It must be kept top of mind that a blogger or influencer in your industry will only be interested in helping you get the word out about your organization if it drives value for their brand and their readers in a significant way.

Remember, these influencers have already done the work to build up a captive audience—they don't need anything from you. So it's your job, as the PR person, to find an arrangement that 1) drives mutually beneficial value for their brand and yours; and 2) fits seamlessly into both of your brands' content stream.

INFLUENCER ENGAGEMENT: LEVERAGING A NETWORK EFFECT

According to a [2014 McKinsey study](#), “marketing-inspired word-of-mouth” generates more than double the sales of paid advertising, and these customers have a 37% higher retention rate. So building a relationship-based network of media outlets and influencers that assist in distributing your organization's message to their networks creates a multiplier effect. Which is why engaging influencers is key to leveraging a network effect to spread your message and gain awareness across your target audience.

Starting with a comprehensive social analysis (in order to identify relationship-based connections), you can begin to gain a deep understanding of your audience's nuanced affinities. This research also uncovers the influencers—the people and outlets that members of your audience turn to for information, education, and entertainment.

From there, campaign initiatives should blend all aspects of modern public relations—media, influencer and analyst relations, as well as social media, earned and paid media—into one integrated communication process.

Influencer relations are built on a foundation of trust and organic connections. And from this foundation, you can strategize ways to reach your audience through the influencer's owned media properties in a way that is helpful and/or entertaining for your target audience.

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