

Jack-of-all-trades and master of most: Age of the instant expert

By Peter Granat

Over the past several decades, the market has increasingly rewarded PR specialists. Those who knew the ins and outs of a single area of expertise — high technology, health and medicine, automobiles, food or dozens of others — got the best and most lucrative assignments in their field, rewarding their distinct competence.

But today, we are seeing a new trend. Clients still require specialists, but, increasingly, PR professionals must have expertise in multiple domains. The proliferation of mass and trade media titles, along with the explosion of Web content, has created thousands of experts in the media who are eager to carry your message. PR professionals must have the expertise to deal with all those experts on their own terms.

Welcome to the age of the instant PR expert — the jack-of-all-trades who must master many or all. Today's PR professional needs to be a quick learner, diving deep into the minutiae of multiple markets and fields of interest the client is entering, while at the same time maintaining a broad "forest-through-the-trees" perspective on why the story matters to general audiences.

PR professionals who fail to learn how to deal with this new complexity in the real-time world of today's media will rapidly fall behind. But there are new tools available to ease the way. And the rewards are rich for those who master the ability to quickly become an expert in multiple industries.

More than a mobile phone story

Apple's iPhone launch is a great example of the new breed of instant experts at work. Coverage ranged from consumer media treating the device like a pop-culture phenomenon all the way to semiconductor journals discussing why the battery cannot be easily replaced. Successful PR planning required consumer and brand marketing expertise, consumer technology expertise, high-technology expertise, telecommunications and regulatory expertise, and channel marketing expertise, to name just a few. The iPhone's PR success wasn't a fluke; it was due to a team that knew how to dive deep into the expertise of numerous audiences while maintaining a consistent overarching story line for the general-interest media.

Sports marketing is another exam-

ple of the new need for PR professionals to develop expertise in areas beyond the most immediate concerns of their clients. In decades past, sports publicity mainly required relationships with beat reporters from daily newspapers, a few magazines, and, if you were lucky, some broadcast media. Only a few of the top athletes made news by signing big salary contracts or endorsement deals. Even fewer distinguished themselves with headlines for exceptionally good or bad behavior off the field.

Today, the situation in sports is reversed. The media are often more interested in the personal lives of athletes as celebrities, with more paparazzi following their every move in and out of nightclubs than sports photographers covering their games. A speeding ticket can make a bigger headline than a home run. Athletes have their own blogs and are asked to comment on everything from politics to religion. In addition, endorsement contracts for consumer products and services that often have little or nothing to do with sports can be 10 to 100 times more lucrative than what players get paid for their day jobs playing sports.

For instance, after the Miami Heat won an NBA championship in 2006, superstar Duane Wade made headlines not just for the size of his contract to endorse a custom version of the T-Mobile Sidekick phone, but also because he took an active role in helping the company design it. Some savvy consumer PR expert was behind that story. PR professionals who represent athletes need to become instant experts in financial communications, celebrity promotion, crisis management, legal and litigation PR counseling, and consumer marketing. And they still have to know something about sports, too.

Even in the traditionally staid realm of corporate communications, things have changed rapidly and dramatically. Corporate and financial public relations used to mean getting to know a limited number of financial analysts and financial reporters. Today it means becoming an expert in the multiple realms of corporate social responsibility, the green revolution, and corporate and private philanthropy; of Sarbanes-Oxley disclosure regulations and a slew of other federal, state and local regulatory environments; of a multitude of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) advocating for or against you or your

industry; and of the celebrity-culture mavens and paparazzi who may decide to stalk your CEO.

New tools for instant experts

The good news is that PR professionals have an arsenal of new tools available that will arm them with the knowledge they need to get up to speed quickly on virtually any subject and be ready to effectively manage all the media and others who will influence the story, no matter what direction it may go. These tools fall into four general categories:

Searchable databases: During the planning stage of any communication program, PR professionals will find numerous high-quality proprietary media databases available providing detailed information on all the contacts needed to be made in a particular field. These research databases are increasingly deep and specialized, with multiple industry-focused lists integrated into master databases that are accessible through a single dashboard. The new class of public databases available on the Internet are important too: for instance, Wikipedia is a good source of general knowledge that quickly orients you in a new field of expertise and points you to other sources available on the Web. Search engines for both public and private databases are also getting increasingly sophisticated and able to get you caught up quickly in a new discipline, no matter how arcane.

Distribution technologies: With e-mail distribution services linked to high-quality media databases, you can connect with the most influential media in a particular field much more quickly, easily and accurately than in the past. Because the research databases enable you to learn everything there is to know about what the contact knows and how he or she wants or doesn't want to be approached, you can learn quickly and avoid mistakes or wasted time in the contact process. You can also personalize the connections quickly and create relationships where you provide useful information that helps your contacts do their jobs better, resulting in the kind of coverage you want.

Monitoring and analysis tools: The real-time monitoring of print, online and broadcast coverage enables you to be on top of everything the

media has published about your story. Ready access to what's been written or broadcast gets you proficient as an instant expert and enables you to relate to your contacts on their own terms with the knowledge you need to add value as you go. Analysis tools enabling you to rate quality of coverage and determine positive or negative bias in stories can also be valuable in proving your expertise in a given field, as you quickly become knowledgeable about what the most important issues are and where major influential media stand on them.

Application Integration:

Research, distribution, contact, monitoring and evaluation applications can be integrated to enable individuals to manage the entire process and to allow teams to collaborate effectively. Accessing a common database and utilizing common conventions for communicating with media in multiple areas of expertise enable you to play the role of instant expert in multiple fields. At the same time, the common database and integrated applications make it possible for experts within your organization to communicate with each other and bring each other up to speed rapidly.

For instance, access to multiple in-house experts on legal issues, legislative testimony, financial communications, celebrity management and crisis communications is important when you are a sports publicist with a baseball-star client in jeopardy of losing endorsement contracts because a book by another player has mentioned his name as part of the steroid scandal, while a congressional committee is asking him to testify at a hearing.

Like it or not, the age of the instant PR expert is here. How you manage the process of making yourself an expert in whatever field your clients need, whenever and however they need it, will help you succeed. Managing this complexity is tricky, but possible if you know what tools to use. Once you do master the art of becoming an instant expert, you will be able to meet your goals even as they expand in rapidly changing markets. **T**



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