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Passport to World Citizenry



Social media is blurring national borders and exerting pressure on the scope of communications mandates. **Martin Waxman** considers how PR practitioners should respond.

A few weeks ago, I received a request from a hair care blogger who asked to be included on our media distribution list. I had to say no. But not because I'm against blogger relations. Far from it. It's just that other factors came into play. Let me explain and you'll understand my response.

I own a Canadian PR agency and one of our specialties is beauty PR. So we often receive requests like this from citizen journalists and are usually happy to comply. However, in this case, the blogger was U.S. based. And we were hired by a large U.S. company to tell its stories in Canada. (I did offer to connect her with the American agency that handles the brand.)

Now this situation doesn't necessarily hold true for Canadian companies, who might be happy if their local agency generated interest south of the border. Yet for multinational clients in our all-Google world, it's something that's starting to happen more and more. And if I can redefine a word coined by Canadian poet and writer, **bpNichol**, I'd like to call it *borderblur* – an occurrence where traditional boundaries no longer apply.

That's a challenge for everyone these days from writers and artists to programmers, corporations and entrepreneurs – and now Canadian agency folks who are handling country-wide communications for a global brand.



Outside a mandate

So what do we, as PR professionals, do? How can we employ our best practices in a jurisdiction that falls outside of our mandate? Yes, our story may be sparking attention far and wide, but is it reaching its intended audience?

I don't believe our industry anticipated this scenario around the time I started to get interested in social media a few years back. Yet it's an example of how quickly we're evolving. We have to get used to the fact that like it or not, we now have the potential to play on a world stage. And we 'smaller markets' had better be ready for it.

I feel we can learn a lot about how to start managing the situation by going back to the basics of PR. That is, being polite, honest, helpful and quick to respond. While the technology may be complex, the way we react needn't be.

The difference today is the speed and ease with which a person can become a publisher, broadcaster or community builder. Almost anyone can be catapulted onto the world stage by posting their thoughts or rants, regardless of where they live. Couple that with the fact that blog links are based more on shared interests than citizenship.

It's important for communicators to determine who and where the most credible citizen journalists are and how best to reach them. That may mean adapting the rules of engagement so they extend beyond traditional borders.

I think we agencies in the 'boonies' have a great opportunity to take the lead in creating different kinds of programs that are both 'social' and international in scope. We need to alter the way we develop new media strategies to ensure we've considered outcomes beyond our national PR mandates.

Educating clients

It will be up to us to educate clients about why social media doesn't always adhere to geography; that the potential as well as the pitfalls involved can extend farther than our own backyard. And while we're at it, it's a chance to demonstrate our knowledge and relationships, and showcase the fact that an effective online agency can be based anywhere in the world.

But to do that we need to become connectors; forge meaningful long-term relationships with bloggers and influencers who may not fall into our constituency at the present time. We need to keep up with the latest technologies and developments, experiment, become early adopters, understand and embrace the change.

In the meantime get used to the fact that we no longer operate in a walled-city. You can say something in Winnipeg that resonates half-way across the world and back. And if there's an international misunderstanding or crisis, the speed at which it will spread can only be counteracted by the speed at which we engage, listen and converse in an honest and open way.

Don't get me wrong. There will always be a need for traditional mainstream media and stakeholder relations targeted to a certain locale. That's still the core of our business. But there's a new order too.

As for me, from now on whenever I distribute a news release, I'll be sure to carry my passport.

The Author's Details

Martin Waxman, APR, is the co-founder and president of a Toronto based PR agency, Palette Public Relations Inc. He is the first vice president and accreditation committee co-chair for the Canadian Public Relations Society (Toronto), a member of Counselors Academy and serves on the Humber School of Comedy Advisory Board.

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