Features of Interactive Public Relations: Using Web 2.0 to Establish a Two-Way Communication with the Consumers

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Abstract: - The emerge of contemporary technologies provides public relations specialists with new opportunities to reach the public and targeted audience regardless of the geography, time and space conditions, together with the opportunity to establish a real interactive dialogue and exchange of ideas. At the same time, there are hidden risks in interactive technologies which have to be taken into account and properly addressed. Various interactive tools from blogs and web pages to e-mails and social networks are new fields of opportunities and potential failures for public relations managers. Public relations has deep roots in religion, in politics, in education, and even in military strategy. It also has intellectual roots in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science, communication theory and anthropology. Its practical roots stem from disciplines such as advertising and market research, as well as to the work and experience of social activists, advocacy groups and community organizers.

Key-Words: - Public Relations, interactive PR, internet, social media, Web 2.0, communication, consumers, consumer behaviour

1 Introduction

Public relations (PR) play an important role in any business that acquires customers and establishes a reputation in the market. Traditionally PR was presented in a form of sending press releases to journalists in order to gain publicity and credibility. This means the respective media industry will cover it. We are living in the era where the industrial manufacturing as basic organizational principle of society, is being replaced with the new technology, media, informational processors, entertainment and industry of knowledge [1]. With the growth and spread of the internet PR managers have exceeded this customary way of communication through messages by introducing an interactivity element into the process. Search engines, social media, web 2.0 technologies, blogs, online press releases, podcasting, webinars, etc. are available for today´s PR specialists. Apart from numerous advantages that these technologies bring in, there are some drawbacks they intrinsically have and some peculiarities which have to be considered before being implemented. There was a long dispute over a single definition of PR, though everyone agrees the PR is basically gaining publicity for the client in the media. Nevertheless, there are various sides and dimensions of the concept which turned into numerous definitions, only the most prominent part

of those will be presented here. During the first meeting of the World Assembly of Public Relations in 1978 the following definition of PR was offered: Public Relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization's and the public interest. In this definition one can see an attempt to enhance PR´s credibility by linking it with social science and claiming the scientific objective and basis for it. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UK formulated the following definition of PR: Public relations practice is the discipline, which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

Whatever definition is taken PR process always has at least two players: the organization and public who cooperate with each other to achieve the common goals. The focus of the present paper lies in the specific form of such communication namely in an interactive one. Interactive PR is the integration of digital media including combinations of electronic text, graphics, moving images and sound, into a structured digital environment that

allows managers to interact with the data to get the publicity. The digital environment can include the Internet, telecoms and interactive digital television, etc. Thus, this paper will introduce an interactive way of communicating PR message to the audience and discuss the differences this approach has comparing to the traditional one.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. After Introduction, in Section 2, brief discussion about features of interactive PR is given. Section 3 presents PR as a tool of using web to establish a communication with the consumers. Finally, Section 4 concludes this paper.

2 Features of Interactive PR

Innovations are an integral part of the development of each institutions, their complex systems, technologies and methods [2]. The terrain of PR practice is shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups. Information pours out of digital spigots and news now arrives astoundingly fast from an astounding number of directions and it is often free. Anyone with a computer or a smartphone linked to the Internet has the ability to publish information for potential global consumption and it is clear that the Internet is revolutionizing many aspects of PR research and practice. In order to survive and prosper in today´s competitive environment, the organizations have to communicate their products or services appropriately for their business using the available methods. Organizations with greater innovativeness will be more successful in responding to the customers' needs, and in developing new capabilities that allow them to achieve better performance or superior profitability [3]. Due to the gain in popularity, interactive communication is gaining popularity day by day. Contextual ads, search engine results, web pages, social networks, blogs, and e-mails also belong to these modern means of interactive PR. This is a fast developing and promising group of PR tools which is proven to be an effective instrument in marketing communications. There are distinctive features that make interactive media attractive to advertisers. The process of initiations is often conceived as a separate phenomenon that contributes to the competitiveness and development of the organization in different ways [3]. Namely, immediate information publishing with no geographic location or time boundaries, interactivity of online advertisements enables customers to

control the products, as well as various available animation forms. Online advertisements allow ads and content customization; for instance, AdWords, Yahoo! Search Marketing, and Google's AdSense enable advertisements to be shown on relevant pages or together with search results. Different forms of interactive PR will be illustrated below.

When one thinks about internet PR tools, web pages are perhaps the most conventional example which comes to the mind. Websites can be built for different purposes: it can be sales oriented, marketing or lead development oriented. Sales sites can be created using online software or by a professional, if some customization is needed. Customer´s information security should be a great concern for such sites. These kinds of sites have a very little success chances without marketing activities support. Marketing focused websites could primarily pursue one or two of the following goals: education, customer awareness or service management. Education focused sites deal with enhancing the comprehension of product or services the company launched on the market. Service websites or customer relation ones offer the follow-up help in a form of FAQ or a self-guided problem solvers, as well as direct communication via e-mail. Unlike educational site, these sites may publish some information related to lead development. It can include feedback from satisfied customers. There must be an opportunity to contact the company for additional information.

This is an era when Internet research tended to treat offline and online communication as dichotomous spheres of interaction [5]. Social networking is a powerful PR tool today, making it easy to build or break a brand. Social networking websites allow users to add content, like comments, feedback, rating, etc. Sometimes users can post ratings or even full product reviews. This is a customer-centric form of PR as the customer plays a key role even in minor communication. Most of the companies put a great value on social networks in order to get public recognition on the market.

Websites like Facebook or LinkedIn have great potential to involve the right people in the right conversation at the right time. Therefore, promoting brands via social media is becoming personal, precise, interesting, social, and interactive.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a natural way to ensure that the webpage appears on the top of the search. It aims at an increase in the number of visitors by ranking the page as high as possible using the keywords which describe the web content in the best way. SEO is the most important tool in the SEM (search engine marketing). An algorithm

of search engines is taken into account here as well as the goal of customer´s search in terms of customer – centered design, online customer value, and cost effectiveness. Another form of interactive PR has built its path through mobile devices, like smartphones, personal digital assistants, etc. This niche is growing at a rapid rate. It started in a form of SMS (short message services) and grew in mobile TV, music, web surfing. It has evolved from more business-to-customer domain, to business-to-business market as well.

Content Management systems also known as CMS is a computer software system which organizes and facilitates a collaborative creation of the content. It enables people all over the world to edit, organize and delete content. Despite Wikipedia being one of the largest examples of CMS, many PR professionals are looking for more focused and specialized CMSs, called "wikis" to meet their goals of online information spread and management. Wiki is a type of website that allows users to add, delete or edit all content both quickly and easily, sometimes even without registration requirement. These features make Wiki an effective instrument for collaborative writing. The term Wiki, comes from the Hawaiian native language, where it is commonly used to denote something quick and fast.

All mentioned above and other media instruments are extensively used in today´s PR reality to achieve its goals. Interactive PR can be also called Public relations 2.0 in order to emphasize the use of Web 2.0 media and communication in PR. One of the prerequisites of implementation of Web 2.0 is establishment of adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which was widely adopted in the United States [6]. Web 2.0 has had also an impact on library web sites making them more interactive with users, giving rise to the term Library 2.0 [7].

For Web 2.0 establishment, a SharePoint Server could be of essential component [8].

2.1 Function of PR

PR is more of PR practitioners gaining exposure in the society. PR is geared towards informing, persuading individuals to have certain thought about organizations. However, PR agent or specialists establishes a strong relationship with a certain individuals in the name of the organization. PR is more of managing the spread of information between individuals or companies. It is also more of communicating ones message and mediating to gain allies. However, PR practitioners are special in their

jobs because they try to establish a strong tie between individuals and companies. The evolution of PR is unbelievable from communicating to putting it in tactics and techniques as targeting the audience messaging and using social media and marketing.

3 PR as a Tool of Using Web 2.0 to Establish a Two-Way Communication with the Consumers

Contemporary PR theories support interactive, dialogic and collaborative approach. The Four Models of Public relations define the origin of PR in terms of propaganda but Broom considers it way oversimplified to define the modern practice of PR in terms of this approach [9]. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models emphasize interactivity which involves two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communication. The latter model was criticized because it denotes 50/50 co-orientation between the company and public which is seen as ideal. Murphy (1991) proposes a middle ground which involves a "sliding scale" of cooperation and competition where organizational needs must be balanced against constituent's needs but never lose their primacy". This idea led to the mixed model approach to the Public Relations which constitutes of the combination of information dissemination and persuasion matched by listening and responding to the public opinion. Grunig and Dozier (2002) made a revision of the two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models and came up with integrated contingency model that suggests that contingent decisions must be made with both the organization and the public in mind [10].

There are also strong debates over PR as management function against "boundary spanner models" and the implications of strategic communication [11]. Nonetheless, in all up to date communication interaction is seen as essential element. Kent & Taylor developed a dialogic model of public relations, pointing the central role of the dialogue in relationship building process which is perceived as a key outcome of effective public relations [12].

An interactive approach and co-orientation in public relations is dynamic and not controlled unlike one-way information spreading that aims to control the message and meaning-making. Within a specific practice of publicity and media relations this has been defined with practitioners that negotiated with journalists but were unable to control what they and

editors broadcast and publish. With this respect, public relations are distinctly different from advertising which is in most cases one-way transmission model where content and placement are fully controlled. There are risks and uncontrolled communication environment of social media. But public relations are used to working in an uncontrolled environment. It is its natural territory [13]. Public communication practices and Web 2.0 media come across some conflict and incompatibility.

New generations of media users are able to use such software as AdBlock on the internet to avoid intrusive advertising. Traditional forms of advertising are declining while interactive arise in a form of viral advertising and interactive rich media advertising [14]. Advertising has to relinquish some control and reject one-way message transmission to function effectively in the Web 2.0 environment.

Traditional advertising is declining not only because of changing technology. It declines mostly because of social and cultural revolution. The principles and philosophy behind one-way it was detected by some scholars that contemporary PR lacks such authenticity [15]. This approach can be understandable and appropriate for advertising, but inexcusable in public relations given the evolution and development of interactive media, which enables two-way dialogue and the widely accepted shift towards the interactive "social media."

Management tends are risk averse and sees a more open and interactive communication as a threat due to the ability of customers to criticize openly. But this risk comes along with new opportunities. The idea and philosophy of Web 2.0 which prompts public comments and even criticism can bring up new alternative ideas. While management is against such conversations they already happen somewhere else where it has no access to and cannot gain understanding therefore. As a result they cannot contribute answers to the questions, correct the information, and etc. By allowing such dialogues and conversations management has a chance to defend criticism, to harness support and endorsement, noting that Web 2.0 communication can also positively discuss the product and service which is offered by the firm.

The discussion above proves the need for top-down monologue is gradually diminishing in favor of interaction, collaboration, conversation and dialogue, which in turn became possible with the development interactive technologies and solutions.

All components of contemporary communication in the Web 2.0 era display a paradigm shift from controlled content and information distribution that have characterized mass media and public relation practice. PR needs to embrace these changes as relevant and effective in the media scope of the 21st century.

The emphasis on openness instead of control and negotiation instead of management is combined with the trend towards interactivity in forms of conversation and collaboration. The latter term is extensively used with regard to Web 2.0 however replaces the real conversation and negotiation with propaganda [16]. Authenticity is a fundamental element of interactive communication of Web 2.0. Authenticity is well recognized and detected on the internet; however, lack of authenticity is easy to detect which leads to the distrust of the online communication.

In the literature five characteristics that are considered to be authentic have been identified: honesty, accuracy, genuineness, empathy and "spirit of mutual equality" [14]. It means that communication process has to involve two-way interaction which facilitates the ability to hear and consider the points of views of others and even criticism without attempts to control interactive communication with customers for PR specialists. But the meaning of Web 2.0 technologies enables this interactivity to the best way and what differentiates digital media from traditional ones? There is no substitution between traditional and interactive media. They rather complement each other in order to reach their target audience in the most effective way. The key differences of these two groups are summed up below. Traditional media is seen or heard by immense amounts of people, but it often happens unwillingly, which means that this audience had no intention to perceive the message. Interactive media channels are seen only by those who have deliberately searched online and mostly by those who are interested in the information. It suits better for already known products and serves better when the attention should be attracted to something already familiar. Traditional media is good for new products and information or for stimulation of the demand for a specific brand. Digital media is more flexible when it comes to modify message and not very expensive to change required adjustments.

Bart Decrem, a founder and former CEO of 'Flock (web browser)', calls Web 2.0 the

'participatory web' and regards the web-as-information-source as web 1.0 (Wikipedia). Web 1.0 is static and is more of a place to find information than a forum for sharing ideas or creating new products together. Web 2.0 is a web in which people can interact and participate rather than just read. A good way to picture web 2.0 is as the world's biggest café, whereas the earlier web was the world's biggest library. A web 1.0 world is a world of simple transactions. A web 2.0 world is a model where you to go a blog, see what people are saying, leave a comment, check out links to other sites, leave a comment, compare user experiences, buy something, comment on the experience and then leave. Web 2.0 is messier. It is warmer. It is more human [17].

Traditional PR means on the contrary, are not flexible and it is hard to make changes especially in printed media. Traditional media is slower to alternate the message, copy and market positioning, while interactive media is easy to fine-tune the content for achieving a maximum response. In digital media exact click data is available for every ad and can be compared with sales figures. For traditional media such tracking data is nonexistent, making it hard to measure an effect of a single ad. In traditional media one always knows where to find an advertisement, and in digital media they sometimes appear randomly. For a fixed fee in digital media, a click through to the website is purchased. In traditional media a definite amount of print space or broadcast time is bought. The geography can be easily modified in digital media and it cannot be done in traditional media. In digital PR it is easy to adjust the campaign to the specific budget. Whereas in traditional marketing even fine adjustments are usually not possible. Digital advertising typically targets a younger and more affluent audience. However, traditional media does not specifically target anyone. One of the biggest challenges interactive public relations come across is the two-way communication. Namely, the possibility of open criticism is seen as a big impediment for some manages to address interactive PR tools.

PR managers transmit the message to the public, they bring up challenges of choosing an adequate tool to target the needed public and to achieve a maximum goal. Interactive PR technologies are more flexible in terms of their ability to adapt to the customer´s needs, but at the same time, campaign,

print, and broadcast media will handle the placement of the ad or spot.

3.1 Social Ranking

Today, whether it's PR 1.0, 2.0 or even those who discuss 3.0, it will always be PR. We are experiencing new opportunities as social technology has been uncovering expanded roles and responsibilities for professionals. Working in the field of PR today allows you to take a new approach to communications from the inside out. Social media changes the way we plan, work and develop communication, with a different mix of media, and ultimately how we deliver meaningful content and engage with the public to drive valuable outcomes for a business. The dissemination of information is two-way, transparent and collaborative where brands, by listening and being active in the conversations, can deliver more relevant information and be valuable resources.

With the goal of value estimation of the Web 2.0 technology, a social ranking indicator should be considered. Let's consider a user $\bar{u}$ who is interested in finding some content of interest. In a typical Web 2.0 scenario, $\bar{u}$ would submit a query $q_{\bar{u}}$ which consists of query tags $t_1, t_2, ... t_n$. Web 2.0 system that is responding to the submitted query, would rank results by employing the following two criteria: higher the number of query tags associated to the resource, the higher its ranking; and, the higher the number of users u_i who tagged the resource using (some of the) query tags, the higher its ranking. This scenario can be modelled with the following equation [18]:

$$R(p) = \sum_{u_i}(\#t_i \; used \; by \; u_i \; on \; p \,|\, t_i \in q\bar{u}), \; (1)$$

wherewe compute the ranking of paper p as the number of tags t_i that users u_i who bookmarked p used and that belonged to the query set $q\bar{u}$.

4 Conclusion

Despite the growing amount of theories, which favor two-way interactive communication, the key domains of PR remains bounded in the paradigm of one-way top-down approach. The change in technology is obvious and gains a lot of attention with fashionableness, whereas changes in viewpoints, culture and philosophy are more rigid

and deeply rooted. PR needs to adjust and adapt to the changing social and cultural paradigm whereas changes in communication technologies alone would not suffice. This does not change the tools and channels themselves however, changes public relation practices specifically in what PR specialists do and how they use interactive technologies. Nowadays, PR has an enormous chance to support true communication together with building relationships between the companies and their target audience.

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