PR News
Building the bridge between PR and the bottom line.
September 17, 2007 prnewsonline.com Issue 36 Vol. 63

▶ Contents

The Cyber-Asylum: Measuring Impact of Online Influencers

The inmates are running the asylum.

No, it isn't an epithet for Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," but rather an acknowledgment of a tough reality for communicators: Customers – once the passive consumers of brands, products and services – now are taking charge of corporate reputations by breathing fire in cyberspace, thus burning anything that comes into their paths. Of course, communications executives have tamed the wild beasts in many contexts by using digital platforms to build relationships with elusive stakeholders, but a significant challenge remains: measuring the impact these online influencers actually have.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Measuring online influencers' impact is among the most elusive capabilities for communications professionals, but before they can peg this skill, they have to know who their online influencers are in the first place. There are various strategies for doing so, including monitoring the number of comments on a blog, checking **Technorati** rankings and quantifying the number of links bloggers publish. Then, bookmark the Power 150 Top Marketing Blogs (www.toddand.com/power150/) - the list is as comprehensive as they come. (For a complete guide to identifying your online influencers, see PRN, 08-27-07.)

According to Phil Gomes, VP of **Edelman**'s me2revolution, "Your definition of 'influential' needs to change. 'Blogger' does not mean third-tier media. Your commitment to the medium must be sincere."

Another way to help define your influentials is to develop a map that visually depicts various influencers/affinity groups in relation to the digital platform they use to communicate (see graphic). This gives the team a top-down view of whom they should be reaching, and it diminishes the likelihood of leaving someone out.

WHO, THEN WHAT

Once you have determined who to look at, you have to settle on the "what" question – what are you measuring?

Page 6 ▶

(DID YOU KNOW?)

Seven Things You Will Learn In This Week's Issue Of *PR News*

1. Open-source programming platforms offer low-cost, high-return options for developing a Web site. (p.2)
2. 42% of surveyed marketing execs indicated dissatisfaction with marketing ROI definitions. (p. 3)
3. CSR reports help keep employees around the globe informed on corporate initiatives. (p. 5)
4. There are three types of victims: people, animals and living systems. (p. 8)
5. Creating a map of online influencers makes measurement efforts more comprehensive. (p. 6)
6. 55% of survey respondents said their marketing ROI goals were closely aligned with their company's overall corporate goals. (p. 3)
7. Third-party certifications help validate efforts to build sustainable brands. (p. 7)

Building Sustainable Brands: Do Third-Party Certifications Strengthen Your Story?

Sustainability has, thus far, proved to be more than a fleeting trend. Sure, documentaries like "Inconvenient Truth" and Hollywood's various "green" pet projects have given it a drawn out moment in the spotlight, but its longevity suggests that people aren't going to lose interest anytime soon. Businesses have acted accordingly, stepping up their CSR, corporate citizenship and sustainability efforts, and communicating said efforts aggressively.

But just as loud as the conversation of sustainability is that of greenwashing, or the act of advertising positive environmental efforts while practicing the exact opposite. Communications professionals, then, have a two-pronged challenge: communicating the company's healthy initiatives and, more important, proving their validity to the marketplace. But what is the best way to solve the latter problem?

When taking steps to build a sustainable brand, business leaders are increasingly looking to third-party certifications as a way of legitimizing their efforts. For communicators weighing the benefits of this, a number of questions exist: How valuable are third-party certifiers? Is one better than another? What are the benefits? How should news of a third-party certificate be communicated?

Steve Bolton, manager of business development for **MBDC**'s Cradle to Cradle, speaks to value of certifications:

"[Third-party certifications] give external value to the statements a company or client want to make," he says. "It's something tangible and concrete. A lot of people are doing the 'green thing' nowadays, but what does that really mean?"

Thus, third-party certifiers like Cradle to Cradle are devel-

Page 7 ▶

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Published weekly by Access Intelligence, LLC
4 Choke Cherry Road, Rockville, MD 20850
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▶ How To...

Design a Web Site for Optimum Usability

With all the bells and whistles now associated with online media, it is easy to "pimp" your Web site to the point that it resembles the aftermath of an all-night-rave: The colors are blinding, the audio is booming and the background is littered with content. This Electric-Koolaid-Acid-Test mentality might lure a handful of visitors who fall victim to visual stimulation, but the majority of your stakeholders won't appreciate the flashback. With that in mind, here is a guide for making a flashy (not trashy) site that is user-friendly and expressive of your brand.

- **Turn down the volume.** You've experienced it before: You enter a Web site, and you are immediately assaulted with music or audios that drown your senses. Your first instinct is to locate the "off" function, and this takes your attention away from the content. To avoid this instant turn-off, make the audio element of your Web site an opt-in experience. If a user does choose to listen to the accompanying music, make sure it is tasteful, and that is doesn't detract from the focus of the site. Anything overt or product-specific should be relegated to a video clip that has a distinct start- and end-point.

- **Banish pop-ups.** Often, communicators are tempted to draw attention to an announcement or product by creating a pop-up that dominates the screen once you enter a site. This is a bad plan for a number of reasons: First, pop-up blockers have a field day with this approach, meaning the intended recipient will never see your message. Second, if it does slip by the blocker, the reader likely will close out of it instinctively under the assumption that it's an advertisement.

- **Kill dead-on-arrival links.** It is essential to systematically check each and every link and shortcut on your site to make sure it doesn't lead to a dead page. Often, the IT department will take down a page that was supposed to be temporary without eliminating every single link that landed there, and customers won't be inclined to waste time in no man's land. To minimize the likelihood of dead-ends, resist having "vertical" pathways that go deep into the site but lead nowhere. Operate under a two-click philosophy: no more than two clicks to get in, or they'll opt out. There should be as few layers as possible, and every page should have a one-clink route back to the homepage.

- **Choose your color scheme wisely.** No one expects a communications executive to have the taste of an interior designer, but common rules should always be applied to Web design: Neon colors are almost never a good plan; dark backgrounds with light text are hard to read; flash animation that darts across the screen is distracting, so use it sparingly; and blocks of text are not Web-friendly, so opt for short sentences/descriptions with spaces between paragraphs. White space is a beautiful thing.

- **Be reachable.** Beyond having two givens – a site map and a search feature – every Web site should have a contact page that actually has contact information, including an e-mail address. Also, make sure there is a place for reader feedback and comments.

- **Open your heart, your mind ... and your source?** Open-source programming platforms (ever heard of **Linux**?) are becoming more mainstream, and they offer low-cost, high-return options for developing a Web site. Open-source programs such as **Ruby on Rails, Django** and **TurboGears** are great alternatives to expensive Web developers, and their easy-to-use features make them all the more appealing to technophobes.

- **Think outside the phonebook.** For agencies and corporations with deep pockets, Web design teams are likely in house and available to revamp sites whenever the need arises. However, for those less fortunate, the need to add new features and design elements doesn't necessarily disappear. In this case, don't start scouring the phonebook for freelance designers. Instead, turn to "crowdsourcing" to find low-cost talent that matches your site and brand's look and feel. Never heard of crowdsourcing? It's a relatively new Web concept that involves putting your task requirements and the price you are willing to pay online, and then sitting back and waiting for the samples to start rolling in. Browse the options to decide which one you prefer - you might end up finding a team of reliable freelancers while you're at it. In addition to getting fresh perspectives on your site design at a low cost, you are also bringing potential customers into the fold. Tapping into the brainpower of others never looked so good. PRN

Relevant Web Sites; E-Mail Superpowers; Marketing Accountability Anguish

► **10 Tips to Keep Your Site Relevant:** It's a good idea to re-launch your Web site every two or three years to make sure your structure, layout, content and technologies are up-to-date and follow the latest best practices. **Hot Banana**'s General Manager Krista LaRiviere offers these tips to consider when giving your site an overhaul:

1. **Strategy:** Keep in mind what you need your site to do for your business and how you will measure success, then design your site accordingly.
2. **Web site ownership:** Think about which department should manage the site. It generally makes sense to put marketing in charge.
3. **Phases & funding:** You can't do everything at once, so choose priorities based on business goals, and create a budget that takes into account the ongoing process of site maintenance.
4. **A Web partner:** Unless you have in-house specialists, seek outside technical experts with proven success, ideally ones who specialize in you sector.
5. **Content management:** Determine who, when, and how to manage content. Establish a content management system (CMS) that will allow non-tech people to make changes in 30 seconds.
6. **Content creation:** Keep Web writing clear and concise, and include keywords in content, meta data, outbound links, header tags and URLs.
7. **Usability and accessibility:** Use focus groups to test how visitors will navigate your site, and make sure your site renders on various devices and formats.
8. **Technology infrastructure:** Make sure you have at least 99.9% uptime and data backups, and check your Service Level Agreement.
9. **Landing pages:** Don't link everyone to your home page – send marketing-generated leads to pages that encourage them to take the action you want.
10. **Measure:** Use Web analytics to track visitors, where they come from, which pages they visit, and how many convert to customers.

Source: iMediaConnection.com

► **E-mail Marketing Superpowers:** Wendy Roth, Strategic Account Manager at **Lyris**, describes the five powers e-mail marketers need to avoid marketers' kryptonite.

1. **Understand the difference between e-mail and direct marketing:** E-mail is much more personal than TV, print or paper mail. This should affect how you compile names for your list, what you send, and how often. A complaint about an unwanted e-mail could badly hurt your results.
2. **Guard your data:** Your email database is your most valuable tool, so keep track of who has access, both inside your company and outside, and be careful about handing your data to rental bidders.
3. **Write a privacy policy and stick to it:** A good, clear privacy policy (not one written by your legal dept.) is your internal guide for handling data. Let your customers know you have one by linking to it at every touchpoint.
4. **Honor recipient preferences:** Send your customers what they want, and nothing else. Give them opportunities to tell you what, how often, and in what form to email them, and whether you can share their information.
5. **If they want out, let them out:** Under CAN-SPAM, unsubscribes must be honored. Besides, not every unsubscribe means a permanent good-bye.

Source: iMediaConnection.com

► **Accountability Anguish:** While marketing accountability programs have become an accepted business practice, a new study from the **Association of National Advertisers** shows rampant dissatisfaction with marketing measurement and internal accountability processes. Also, while 92% of companies surveyed have some form of accountability program, there is little consistency in who manages these and how:

- Of companies with formal accountability efforts, 31% are managed by the marketing dept. exclusively.
- 42% of marketing execs indicated dissatisfaction with marketing ROI definitions.
- 48% indicated poor organizational response to ROI data.
- 61% indicated some cooperation between marketing and finance when establishing metrics for measuring marketing ROI, while only 22% indicated full cooperation.
- About half of respondents said marketing and finance don't speak with one voice or share common metrics.
- Only 55% said their marketing ROI goals were closely aligned with their company's overall corporate goals.

Source: MarketingCharts.com PRN

Bridging the Digital Divide Through Philanthropic PR

Company: Sun Microsystems/ Sun Foundation
Agency: MWW
Timeframe: 2005-2006

Being a volunteer can be one of the noblest human endeavors. For Silicon Valley stalwart **Sun Microsystems**, volunteerism, both personal and corporate, is not simply a self-congratulatory conceit. Rather, it has been a critical component of their global outreach efforts. During the last decade, Sun staffers have spent 221,000 volunteer hours to myriad projects throughout the year, a sum total valued at over $3,378,000.

It was no surprise, then, that Sun Microsystems and its outreach offspring, Sun Foundation, made volunteerism the star element in their 2006 "Share the Opportunity" initiative, which hinged on the digital technologies that stratify communities around the world. Education also played a starring role in the campaign, as Sun volunteers fanned to several nearby elementary schools to teach children how to navigate the Internet and use computer technology to their advantage.

The undertaking was massive and worldwide, from organizing blood drives in India and painting underprivileged children's playroom in Scotland, to mounting hurricane relief efforts in Louisiana and stuffing care packages to the troops overseas in Virginia; because of this global reach, communications professionals had their work cut out for them.

The program got started when Sun, which has always made outreach a key part of their CSR (corporate social responsibility) mission, approached **MWW** Agency in April 2005. The goal was to bridge the digital divide while publicizing to the world the good deeds being performed on a regular basis by Sun employees, according to Caroline Rohrer, manager of strategic campaigns for Sun's global communications.

"Our first step was to really take a look at all the projects that were happening on an individual office level, on a countrywide level and at business unit level," she explains. "The corporate organization really wanted to capture that in one place and brand it all under the Share the Opportunity campaign."

MWW, which handles corporate communications and branding for Sun (**Bite PR** works on Sun products), got things rolling for the campaign by clarifying the prime objectives:

- Generate publicity throughout 2006 for Sun/Sun Foundation mission
- Catapult Sun CEO Jonathan Schwartz's role as president of Sun Foundation into public prominence;
- Increase visibility for Sun's Worldwide Volunteer Week (April 23 – 29, 2006);
- Promote Sun Microsystems' Back to School campaign and the company's commitment to education with the key, "Sun empowers the education community with tools that enable the Participation Age."

Sun Microsystems CEO and President, Jonathan Schwartz (left) and United Nations New York Director Djibril Diallo at JavaOne, in San Francisco in May 2007.

Schwartz kicked off the campaign by making a trip to Blacow Elementary School in Fremont, California, to teach students about the Internet and computer technology. Blacow Elementary School was one of five Bay Area schools to receive a grant through the Sun Foundation's Open Gateways program, which gave out $500,000 per school over a three-year period. Grants consisted of three Sun servers, 31 SunRays for the school's lab and up to five SunRays for each of the five grant-winning school's 40 classrooms.

Next up, Sun staffers followed their boss's lead by participating in numerous volunteer projects. From March to April 2006, with a special emphasis paid to Sun's Worldwide Volunteer Week (April 23-29, 2006), the first part of the campaign (with the second phase being the Back to School campaign) was underway.

Boston employees were the first to be mobilized. From March to April, they conducted a month-long Toiletry and Personal Care Products Drive to support women and families in need in the Boston area. Among the 3,000 products donated to four local non-profit organizations (Community Teamwork, Inc; People Helping People; Northborough food Pantry; and Bridges) by employees were shampoo, conditioner, soap and body wash, toothpaste and toothbrushes.

During Worldwide Volunteer Week in Colorado, Sun employees immersed themselves into several Habitat for Humanity projects. Volunteers landscaped homes, put up sheetrock, built foundations, helped prepare homes for concrete flatwork and completed final property tasks before leaving the domiciles ready for their new owners. Volunteers were left with a huge sense of accomplishment at how they spent their time.

Also during Worldwide

Volunteer Week (April 23 – 29, 2006), the New England contingent go into the act as eight to 12 Sun employees from Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts teamed up to clean up a state park, the Sandy Point State Reservation in Ipswich.

And on April 27, 2006, staffers from the Human Resources group at Sun Microsystems did their part, too. They spent more than two hours at the Community Food Share (CFS) in Denver, sorting large bins of food into labeled cartons. Smaller knots of people picked up food from various locations and unloaded 1,000 pounds of eggs at the CFS's loading dock.

Other projects that also took place during this milestone week were:

- Sorting food at San Francisco Food Bank and Second Harvest Food Bank;
- Stuffing care packages for the troops overseas in Virginia;
- Supporting the American Lung Association of Texas and the race to find a cure for asthma;
- Providing orphans and impoverished neighborhoods in India with food, entertainment and gifts as well as organizing blood drives;
- Repairing and building a baby deer pen at the Wildlife Hospital and Rehab Centre in Woodbridge, Canada; and
- Working at the Linlithgow Local Community Center in Scotland.

The next phase of the campaign was entitled Back to School. Here Sun wanted to ensure that students would return to school with the supplies they needed. From Sun's Burlington, Massachusetts' office to those in Nashua, New Hampshire and the Atlanta region, a virtual cornucopia of items was donated in the drive. They included backpacks, book bags, markers, pencils, crayons, pens, erasers, highlighters, scissors, calculators, protractors, index cards and notebooks.

To summarize the Share the Opportunity activities, Rohrer and Meghan Fintland, account supervisor of MWW Agency, created a CSR report (www.sun.com/aboutsun/csr/2006report.pdf) that was released in January 2007 and posted on the Sun Web site. In addition to recapping the philanthropy on the part of Sun staffers, the report also gives operational updates from the company as well as thoughts from "eco-responsibility" pundits.

The chief highlight for both Rohrer and Fintland was working with the **United Nations Office of Development on Peace**. One program, in which Sun acted as the corporate sponsor, involved youth leadership summits, where young men and women, ages 18 to 35, from every UN nation participate.

Sun also aids the UN in another crucial way. "We help the UN by building a really robust Web site for them where all these delegates from these 192 UN countries get together and share ideas and ask questions to one another," notes Rohrer.

Another UN program that falls under the Share the Opportunity initiative was launched last fall. It centers on mentoring.

"We paired some executives with the youth delegates who were interested in growing their business skills and learning more technology or more about leadership, even writing presentations for financial support," says Rohrer. "Whatever they desire to learn from their mentor, we help establish these relationships that go on between the mentor and mentee."

The interaction has been highly synergistic for both, with the mentees getting invaluable assistance and support and the mentors "getting super invigorated, learning more about what's happening in different parts of the globe."

The main challenge of the campaign was "figuring out all the stuff Sun was doing around the world," says Rohrer. "I still find out things out all the time, such as that we helped establish elementary schools in China. It's just that kind of knowledge management—I ask around and then it filters down to me. Then I talk to Meghan and her team and we figure out how to promote this."

Another key point was "how to brand [the "Share the Opportunity" initiative under one umbrella," adds Fintland. "Whereas before, everyone was kind of on their own. Here it was how to team up and put this all under one CSR Report, as well as highlighting employee stories to see what the most newsworthy ones are."

More than 40 projects, either completed or currently in progress, have been touched by the Share the Opportunity initiative. Though Sun's outreach programs may vary year to year, its community impact is incalculable..

Some of the top publications that covered the campaign were Boston Globe, CNN Money, Reuters, USA Today and Washington Post. Regional and local coverage appeared in the Atlanta, Boston, Colorado and SF Bay Area markets.

As with many successful campaigns, both agency and client enjoyed a productive, symbiotic relationship. "I think for Sun being able to measure the impact of our program through media coverage has been really helpful," says Rohrer. "I think it underscores for the decision makers of the company that is continuing to invest time and money in these programs that they really are important and they pay off."

Budget for Share the Opportunity is between $60,000 - $80,000 a quarter. This is for PR and agency work, not for the investment for working with the U.N. or creation of the CSR report. PRN

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CLEARING HURDLES

Sun Microsystems' "Share the Opportunity" campaign is representative of the ongoing challenges associated with philanthropic PR on an international scale. However, philanthropic or not, the context of the initiative – global outreach to multiple audiences through multiple platforms – can apply to any organization. Consider the following potential pitfalls when thinking globally:

- **Coordination:** Getting employees from different outposts around the world on board with a global initiative is tough, especially when that initiative consists of several moving parts. Digital communications platforms are the best tools to leverage when coordinating communication, as they can bring together employees who are scattered around the world. Think along the links of building an extranet site that is constantly updated with campaign-related strategies, processes and contact information. E-mail newsletters and video podcasts from a senior manager also help keep everyone on track.
- **Consistency:** With so many people in so many countries involved, it's difficult to keep everyone singing from the same hymnal. Given this reality, hinging the initiative on the brand's core values (which should not differ across various offices) defines a benchmark for the tone of all messaging, and for the intended goals. Sun's strategy of summarizing their effort in a CSR report succeeded in recapping the philanthropy of the company's staffers, giving operational updates and offering thoughts from "eco-responsibility" pundits.

Measuring Online Influencers

► *Page 1*

"The first reality is that there are two completely different tasks involved in measuring social media: Measuring the effectiveness of a corporate blog, and assessing what others are saying about you," says Katie Paine, CEO of **KDPaine & Partners**. When tracking your reputation in the blogosphere, she recommends homing in on the following criteria:

- Subject, tone and dominance;
- Depth of coverage;
- Positioning on key issues;
- Nature of the posting; and,
- Number of links.

EYEBALLS VS. VISITORS VS. AUTHORITY

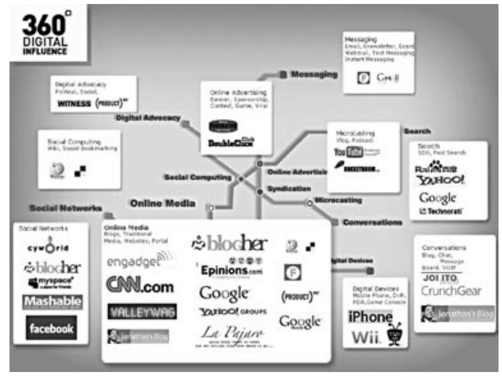
Whether it's a blog posting or a **YouTube** video, the key in measuring social media is understanding the different levels of influence. Just as in traditional media, counting the number of mentions is irrelevant in quantifying the outcomes those mentions had on your brand's reputation. One challenge central to the new media measurement debate is differentiating between the number of visitors to the site as compared to the number of "eyeballs;" in other words, the number of visitors are hugely overstated.

Organizations such as **ComScore** and **Nielsen** are working around this issue by using software to track consumer behavior in terms of engagement.

"While it is certainly an improvement over page views, the focus of this metric is on Web sites, not blogs," Paine says. "As far as comments go, they're not even a glimmer in anyone's eye."

And then there is the question of authority. You may have identified your online influencers in terms of their ability to impact audiences' options, but what is their authority over those audiences' behaviors? Technorati is an accepted tool for finding blog rankings based on number of trackbacks, links and comments, which the platform then converts into an authority ranking. But how does this long list of nearly every blog in cyberspace correlate with your niche marketplace? Good news on that front: Kineda (kineda.com) has taken the Technorati technology to the next level by letting users type in a blog URL and then spitting A-, B-, C- or D-list categorization of the blogger in question. Its system is simple (for other glimpses into the future of measuring authority, see sidebar):

- A-list (very high authority) = 500+ blogs linking in the last six months;
- B-list (high authority) = 100 – 499 links;
- C-list (middle authority) = 10 – 99 links;
- D-list = 3 – 9 links.



This map of online influencers gives you a comprehensive view of the audiences and platforms you need to reach and measure. *Source:* Ogilvy

Courtesy Ogilvy PR

USER BEWARE

Despite the ground gained in the new media measurement race, communications professionals must understand the limitations current tools have in delivering high-impact results. For instance, many of the measurement criteria cited above have inherent problems, as identified in the "Measuring Blogger Influence" 2007 white paper:

- **Number of links:** Could be all from one source that doesn't have any influence.
- **Number of sites linking in:** Again, this assumes that all sites have equal influence.
- **Volume of Web traffic:** Traffic in relation to what? Visitors could be important or completely irrelevant.

However, while acknowledging these pitfalls, the white paper also offered a case study that speaks volumes on the power of online influencers on brand reputations (something few people doubted in the first place). For **Dell**, the dagger came in the form of Jeff Jarvis' blog **Buzzmachine,** on which he lambasted the company for a customer service meltdown. In doing so, he created a community for other dissatisfied Dell users, and analysis revealed that bloggers were turning to each other for news and commentary.

So what's the take-away for communications executives? When measuring influencers' commentary, it is best to do so in the context of one "control topic" for the sake of consistency. Then, if a new issue emerges – a crisis, a product launch, etc. – you can benchmark online coverage and tone against that control. But always keep this in mind: As tends to be the case when the "inmates" take control, adaptability is key – it's hard to say what they'll come up with next.

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SITES TO KNOW (AND MAYBE EVEN LOVE)

Clearly, there is no panacea for new media measurement, but there are a growing number of online features and services to give you a vague idea of your online influencers' impact on your brand. Keeping tabs on the following sites will give you a picture – albeit a foggy one, but a picture nonetheless – of how things are shaping up in cyberspace. (This is not a comprehensive list of every measurement vendor or provider; rather, it is a sample of the various offerings that exist to make your life a little easier – as far as measurement goes, anyway.)

- **Technorati.com:** The go-to site for blog rankings.
- **Kineda.com:** Gives a breakdown of blogger authority based on the number of links in the past six months.
- **Marketsentinel.com:** Offers services for both stakeholder analysis relative to your brand and a net promoters index, which measures how positive consumers are about your brand over time. The plus: It benchmarks these results against competing brands.
- **Biz360.com:** The vendor's Media Signal tool was used by the likes of **Sun Microsystems** to segment influential bloggers and track them over time to see what messages drive revenue.
- **Alexa.com:** Computes traffic rankings by analyzing the Web usage of Alexa Toolbar users. The upsides: Looks at more than just blogs and calculates traffic trend graphs. The downside: Only considers Alexa Toolbar users.

Third-Party Certifications

► *Page 1*

oping strict criteria and standards that determine whether or not a brand, product or service is legitimately sustainable. Certification processes can be long and complex, but many argue that they give consumers the assurance that they are investing in an eco-friendly brand.

"Certification is a mark that lives with the product, but it can be used in broader PR as well," Bolton says. "We advocate the idea of looking at your target customer and how he/she is trying to build a brand in the market."

WHO'S WHO?

As far as the smorgasbord of certifiers, it is tough to differentiate which one is best for your brand. Arthur Weissman, president and CEO of **Green Seal**, described his company's process to healthcare publisher **Medquest Communications**:

"As for developing the criteria and the standards, we start with research into the lifecycle of the product and any significant environmental impact of the product category. We use experts in the field – for example, from universities, public interest groups … Then we try to put it all together and come out with a proposed standard based on these evaluations, and we publish that as a draft stand for comment from all stakeholders."

While every certifier has their own process, the result is much of the same: Confirming that a company is a leader (or at least a devout follower) in the sustainable brand race. Plus, certifications that go on product labels must meet very specific guidelines set by the **Federal Trade Commission**, especially in the environmental marketing arena. Before ever deciding on a certification to pursue, ample research should be done to ensure that the provider is legitimate and meets government standards. Also, check to see if they have a patent with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office - this means the certification is a brand in and of itself, which never hurts.

TO-DO LIST

Communications professionals should consider certifying their company/client's efforts to gain credibility in the marketplace, but in doing so, they must consider the following things:

- **There is no one-size-fits-all certification.** "There are different certifications for different purposes and different industries," Bolton says. "Certifications can overlap and complement one another." With that in mind, research the certifications that are most relevant to your business: fair trade, material health, etc. Then pursue the ones that, when combined, will give your brand the strongest validation.

- **Consider the corporate vision first and foremost.** "Everything depends on what vision the company is trying to pursue," Bolton says. "I would argue that external certifications have more value and industry certifications. There should be as much defined criteria as possible."

- **Think in terms of leadership.** "The concept of a leadership level is key," Weissman says. "Certification is no exclusive – a number of products in the same category can be Green Seal certified, meaning that they have met the standard. However, not many products will be certified overall because … only the cream of the crop will qualify."

- **Understand the difference between a product and brand certifications.** "We have product criteria and company criteria," Bolton says. There is a difference between guaranteeing a product is sustainable and guaranteeing a brand is sustainable. Depending on the company and its variety of products/services, one may be more valuable than the other.

- **Inform the public, but don't assume a certification does your job for you.** If and when you receive third-party certification, let the public know what this means. Don't go through the drone of the specific qualifications; rather, just let them know through a logo or "stamp of approval." Beyond that, you must still communicate the brand's sustainability through actions, which, as all good communicators know, speak louder than words. PRN

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BY JIM LUKASZEWSKI

How To Identify and Assuage Victims

What is the single most powerful component of bad news? Is it conflict? Is it confrontation? Is it complexity? Or controversy? The crucial ingredient in bad news is the creation of victims and the failure to respond to their concerns - in other words, continued or ongoing victimization.

There's lots of "stuff" on television, on the radio, and on the Web, but most is information and filler. The real news is about victims. There are three kinds of victims:

1. People;

2. Animals; and,

3. Living systems (somebody's rainforest, somebody's animal species, somebody's backyard – maybe yours).

Fail to understand victims and their emotional state, and you'll fail to fix your bad news. Thus, understanding the characteristics of victimization is essential for any communications professional.

► **Victimization is self-designating.** This means that those who actually become victims choose to act on their circumstances against the perpetrators.

► **Victimization is self-maintaining,** because victims get to remain victims as long as they choose to be, or they feel their victimization continues. No insurance company, attorney, or court of law, for that matter, can set limits on the feelings of victimization.

► **Victimization is self-terminating.** When those who feel victimized choose to move on, it's a decision they make on their own. Studies have actually shown that victims who gather together to share their pain and suffering take far longer to recover and move on than those who recover alone, resolve their issues, and get on with their lives.

The vocabulary of victimization is totally recognizable. You can identify a victim by their words:

- Betrayal;
- Disbelief;
- Dread;
- Fear;
- Frustration;
- Powerlessness;
- Helplessness; and,
- Hopelessness.

Their emotions are incredibly powerful, they feel and talk about their inadequacy, of walking but feeling wounded, of being in agony, and of being alone.

Victims suffer from three identifiable conditions:

1. Intellectual deafness. This is due to the constant replaying of their pain and suffering in their minds, and while talking about it at the same time. This condition precludes effective intake of information.

2. 24/7 behavior. Being a victim is an all day, all night, every day, every week situation until the victim begins bringing their emotions under control.

3. How the victim's life is consumed by questions: why me, why now, who chose me, who is responsible, couldn't this have been prevented, why didn't they know it was going to happen, and who's going to pay for my pain, suffering, and loss? You can have what seems to be a wonderful conversation with victims in the morning, yet they hold a press conference blasting and blaming you at 2:30 in the afternoon. They are simply intellectually deaf for the better part of their victim experience.

What victims need to begin recovery has been well documented. There are four needs, including a couple of surprises:

- **Validation:** First, victims need validation (preferably by the perpetrator) that what they're feeling, experiencing, and suffering is real. Fail to acknowledge and validate these emotions forces the victim to find confirmation elsewhere – a television station, support group, newspaper, plaintiff's attorney, maybe a whole community, or sometimes an entire nation.

- **Visibility:** Second, victims need visibility – a platform on which they can describe their pain and warn others about you. Understanding victims means you recognize that this visibility is really about them and their suffering. Help victims talk about their pain and suffering. Help them tell people where the harm came from, and warn others from getting the same pain, even if the injury came from you and your organization. If you fail to do this, victims will find another way to get this job done.

- **Vindication:** Third, victims need vindication, actions, and decisions by the perpetrator that prevent additional victimization under the same circumstances. You hear in their language, which is often along the lines of: "I'm not doing this for myself, I'm already suffering," or, "I'm doing this for you, so you won't have to suffer."

- **Apology:** Finally, victims need an apology from the perpetrator. Apologies are the atomic energy of empathy. On the one hand, attorneys and managers often advise silence for the perpetrator, but silence is the most toxic of behaviors. It's always toxic to the perpetrator. Apology is a proven litigation reducer and emotion mitigator. Again, you hear it in the victim's language, "I don't want any money from this. I just want to hear them take responsibility for their actions, say they're sorry, help everyone who's afflicted, and make sure it never happens again."

It takes two powerful strategies to end an apology crisis. First, stop the production of victims, and then, manage the victim dimension. Doing this will meaningfully reduce or eliminate the perpetrator's visibility and news value. This is also the strategy for behaving appropriately, with empathy and integrity, and rebuilding trust. PRN

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