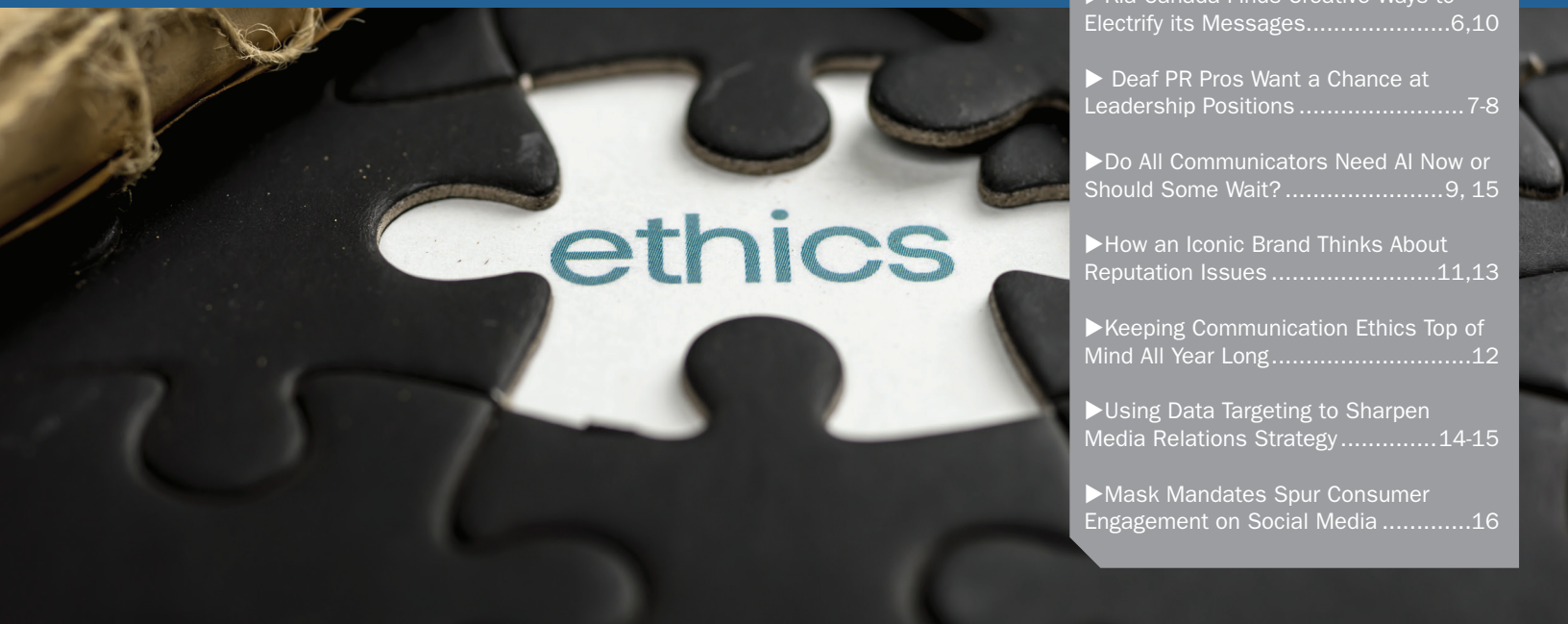


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## STORYTELLING

# The Content Studio Model is Propelling Holistic Approach in B2C's Digital-First PR Push

It's not a surprise that digital platforms, including social media and video, went [through the roof](#) last year. COVID-19 provided the quintessential captive audience, including weeks or longer of forced lockdowns and prohibitions on gatherings. Though digital PR advocates eschew the pandemic, they admit digital platforms were huge beneficiaries.

Though digital video was established as a PR growth industry several years after social media arrived, video began booming in the PR space well before the pandemic. Nearly half of 700 marketers in a **Biteable** survey report they [began using video](#) one to two years ago, or more.

Though it's rare for companies and PR pros, especially those in the B2C space, to be without a digital PR [or video](#) effort, some communicators view digital PR as a storytelling supplement only. They add video, podcasts and other social media tools to the communication plan only after more traditional media relations elements are set.

On the other hand, many B2C communicators are moving or have moved to a digital-first approach. **Onyx Health**, a firm in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, did so this summer, says Louise

## Video's Proliferation



- 60%** of businesses use video for marketing
- 94%** of marketers who use video plan to continue to use it
- 74%** say video has a better ROI than static imagery
- 65%** say it is "very important" or "extremely important" to show diversity in videos

Source: Biteable, State of Video Marketing, 2021

Flintoft, its associate director.

"The digital-first approach has effectively involved the merging of our creative and digital teams," Flintoft says.

Yet Onyx and many other communication shops are not

*Continued on page 2*

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only emphasizing digital, but going a step further, adopting the content studio model.

Similar to several PR terms, the content studio model lacks a precise definition. Ask five PR pros what it means to them and you'll likely receive five different answers, Tom Bolger, the newly hired content studio manager at **rbb Communications**, jokes, only partly in jest.

On a gross level, a content studio builds on the integrated PR approach, but adds a suite of in-house digital capabilities. These include social media graphics creation, video and podcast production. Some PR teams have the ability to produce television-quality shows and commercials in-house.

But adopting the content studio structure implies more than offering digital and other creative services under one roof. The approach also is intended to break down traditional PR work structures.

For example, in a traditional PR set-up, creatives, such as graphic artists, video specialists and social media administrators, are brought to the table only after account personnel determine a client's communication strategy.

The necessary creative work, let's say a podcast or video series, is "bolted on" to the strategy at the end, Bolger says,

"You don't want to know how many times I heard, 'Make it look pretty,'" Bolger says referring to graphics or other creative work he was tasked with doing well after a company's communication strategy was determined.

## PRESENT AT THE CREATION

By contrast, in the content studio model, creatives have a seat at the table with the client from the outset.

That's in part because those who take the content studio approach elevate creative work to the level of strategy. As Bolger says, creative work must "ladder in to the communication strategy...creative and design isn't just about making things look pretty; aesthetically-pleasing work is a byproduct of good strategy."

In addition, the content studio model emphasizes a holistic approach to communication strategy. There's an emphasis on taking a wide view of a company's communication issues and solving them in a creative, channel-agnostic, cost-effective manner. In some ways, the model centers on creative problem-solving, Bolger argues.

In a content studio model, communicators and creative personnel are not a shotgun; they're a sniper rifle, Bolger says.

"We're trying to hit your target. Knowing that everything we're doing is founded in sound strategy and is tailored to you."

In some cases, this creativity and strategy are primed with a literal studio. At Onyx Health, the newly constructed content studio allows creatives and more traditional PR personnel to sit together, prompting collaborative creativity.

"We all know that the best ideas happen when different people work together collaboratively; our new working studio enables exactly that," Flintoft says. The content studio is "a space without boundaries that allows our team to bounce ideas off each other," Flintoft adds.

## MORE WITH LESS & WELL-ROUNDED

While by definition the content studio brings more department representatives to the table, it is not intended to result in a larger bill.

For example, Bolger's team can flex up to shoot a broadcast-quality television commercial, "but that's not necessarily what we'll recommend," he says.

"The idea is we can do a lot more in-house [and more cost-effectively] than we can when we employ vendors because we hire more well-rounded people who have a content-based approach," he says.

Adds rbb CEO Christine Parsons, "The whole concept that creatives are the only people who can be creative and account people can't is a misnomer."

Bolger is a prime example. He's been a writer and editor, but is trained in art and design. The people he hires are "great at one thing" and good at many others.

"I want people...to clearly have a focus, whether that's writing or design. [Fortunately,] everything's become much more accessible. Tools like the **Adobe** Creative Suite help...so people generally have a broader understanding of doing this work."

## TALENT EVALUATION

Are PR students coming out of college with this broader understanding?

"I've definitely seen a change in that young people today want to do more integrated work," Parsons says.

Yet she and Bolger agree that few new graduates possess "a sense of what it takes to deliver good integrated strategic thinking, whether it's PR, digital or creative. The schools haven't quite caught up," Parsons says. She favors internships to discover talented young PR pros.

When Bolger hires he looks for people who

know their weaknesses.

“Good people know where their gaps are and they are wrestling with them...they make that apparent in their work and conversation...that’s the sign of someone who could be a great creative director,” he says.

## ALL MEDIA IS EARNED MEDIA

For some PR teams, the studio content approach translates to storytelling solely through digital services. While more traditional media relations and third-party earned media remain valuable tools, market conditions dictate that brands tell their stories directly to consumers, says George Snell, head of content innovation & integration, **360PR+**.

He points to the well-known numbers issue—there are too many PR pros chasing too few media outlets. In addition, he notes the overwhelming popularity of digital search with consumers seeking information before making purchases. He also contends consumers do nearly anything they can to avoid commercials.

He concedes the digital space is crowded and becoming more crowded each minute (see graphic), Snell argues content studio-created storytelling may eventually overtake traditional media relations.

The key, he says, is understanding that “all media is earned media, even if you’re paying for it.” When currency is consumers’ attention, companies need to pay, perhaps a bit more, to create content that will educate and entertain, he says.

Another payment comes, Snell adds, when companies pay to circulate, as opposed to advertise, their content on various platforms.

An example he provides is work his company’s content studio did for **Sagamore Spirit**, the Maryland-based maker of rye whiskey.

Each month, Sagamore Spirit offers consumers branded content in the form of a 30-minute, [online show](#) called “Sip of The Rye.” The format is the same every show. A celebrity bartender is asked to mix the perfect Manhattan and another drink of their choosing.

Around those segments is a mix of whiskey news and features. The show runs first on **Facebook**, but content snippets are re-purposed on other platforms and form the basis for 360’s social media work for Sagamore Spirit, Snell says.

## Every Minute on the Internet

- **550** new social media users register
- **300** hours of video are uploaded
- **4.5** million videos are watched

Source: PRN Research

The show averages 50K-60K viewers watching it in full, Snell says. It’s advertised via social.

The takeaways, Snell says, are that brands are paying a bit more to create fewer but higher-quality pieces of content that consumers are opting in to since it offers valuable information and entertains.

Indeed, we’re seeing more examples of brands looking beyond traditional media relations to tell stories. In the July edition of PRNEWS, we saw **Infiniti** [introducing a vehicle](#) in a short film starring Kate Hudson. In the current edition, we write about **Kia Canada** streaming a concert to tout its EV6 (see page 6). Next month, we’ll report on another brand, **Dubai Tourism**, that’s created a series of short films with Hollywood talent to promote its destination.

On the other hand, flashier video storytelling seems rooted in the consumer sector. For B2B companies, “the most valuable tactical results that PR can drive” is traditional earned media, says Mike Moeller, principal/ founder, **Aircover Communications**. “Nothing else comes close,” he adds.

Similar to Snell, Moeller notes the limited number of reporters and publications dictates that “you need to also ensure you keep a steady cadence of awareness-building activities in the works.”

Moeller’s advice: B2B companies need to think like publishers, using various means to tell stories, including digital assets such as video.

But in B2B, he argues, “video is a supporting tool. It’s a nice to have, not a need to have.”

More important, he says, “is the development of a B2B company’s executives to drive thought leadership and crisp points-of-view.” He adds, “You have to help people understand why a company’s vision and products matter. Context is king.” ■

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# The Key to Being a ‘Loved’ Brand by Consumers? Be Culturally Relevant

Consumers today can choose from an endless assortment of brands to welcome into their daily lives. A preferred phone. A favorite soda. A dependable vehicle. A coveted sneaker.

And yet, even with a bevy of options, several names always seem to rise to the top in each category. **Apple. Samsung. Coca-Cola. Nike.**

But what allows a brand to become so omnipresent? How does it get to a point where consumers feel affection for a commodity? Some folks love their morning **Starbucks** coffee. Others have a bad day if their preferred shampoo runs out. What goes on behind the scenes to manifest an iron-clad brand loyalty?

“It’s one word: ‘my,’ says Adam Ritchie, principal, **Adam Ritchie Brand Direction**. “I drink several cups of coffee a month. I say, ‘I’m getting a coffee.’ The other day, I heard a woman on the street say, ‘I gotta get my iced coffee!’ My. Mine. The coffee hasn’t even been poured yet, but it’s ‘my’ coffee. When something is so much a part of your life that you feel pre-ownership over it, that’s as personal as it gets.”

## MEASURING “MOST-LOVED” SENTIMENT

Earlier this summer, consumer intelligence platform **Talkwalker** released its annual roundup of the [most-loved brands](#). The report, aptly titled “Brand Love Story 2021,” revealed which companies thrived during a year of uncertainty.

Fashion and beauty brands made up a third of the list, which Talkwalker found to resonate with popular characteristics of comfort and distraction. The top 10 U.S. brands included **Fenty Beauty, Netflix, Hulu, Sony, Nintendo** and **Samsung**. In a year where many of us stayed at home, these names come as no surprise considering the amount of time spent with them.

Elena Melnikova, CMO at Talkwalker, defines “brand love” as about “more than people just wanting to buy a brand,” but establishing a connection.

“It comes down to consumers developing emotional and psychological ties to a brand, which leads them to willingly engage with a brand, experience joy from a brand, and ultimately results in increased loyalty, advocacy and trust,” Melnikova says.

However, brand affinity *does* also translate into big bucks. According to a **Khoros** report, [86 percent of U.S. adults said they’d spend more](#) on products and services from a brand they love. Thus, Fenty Beauty [reached \\$2.8 billion in revenue](#) for 2020. Netflix enjoyed a cool [\\$25 billion profit](#), and Hulu came in with [\\$4.4 billion](#).

From Jan. 2020 to Jan. 2021, Talkwalker gathered data for 1,228 brands from 30 industries, based on several industry listings (including **S&P, Fortune** 100 Best Companies and **BrandZ**) and regional marketing expertise.

“Each brand was ranked based on engagement rate and net sentiment using [Talkwalker’s] Quick Search to create a

shortlist of 153 brands,” Melnikova says. A score was formulated based on this, in addition to consumer engagement rate and sentiment across social media and news, percentage of mentions that were categorized as related to ‘joy’ and percentage of mentions that contain love-related keywords (“love,” “favorite,” “best,” “obsessed with,” among others).

Talkwalker created a report using brand names, social handles and related images using its AI-powered image recognition and logo detection at the platform’s ‘Topic’ level, then applied a filter with those “love” keywords that isolated the comments around those specific types of posts, according to Melnikova.

Talkwalker is not alone in these assessments. Several brands appeared multiple times on lists released this year, including **Morning Consult’s** [Most Trusted Brands](#), and **Moosylvania’s** [Top 100 Millennial Brands](#). Brands including Sony, **PayPal**, Netflix and Samsung overlapped several lists.

## THE POWER OF SOCIAL LISTENING

No brand becomes a star overnight, nor does strategy work in a vacuum. However, measuring brand affection with social listening is the new digital focus group, allowing organizations to learn more about audience sentiments.

Nkongho Beteck, senior manager, social media and digital content, **National Retail Federation** (NRF), says social listening can benefit brands, but it’s about more than just searching what people are saying about your organization.

“From a corporate perspective, retailers are not only using social media to see what consumers and other members of the public are saying about their products and their brands, but they are also listening for sentiment around their competitors,” Beteck says.

“For example, along with our company name, NRF may search ‘retail,’ ‘retailers’ or ‘trade association.’ A company with many competitors like Nike would also want to search for related retailers like **Adidas, Under Armour, New Balance**, along with terms like ‘sports,’ ‘sneakers’ or ‘active apparel,’ to gauge where share of voice is happening on social media. This kind of information can inform organizations where gaps in their brand awareness could be and which new audiences to engage.”

## BUILDING A BRAND

While numbers and spreadsheets provide relevance, data only goes so far. In these pandemic times, Richie says, strong brands emerged by innovating and meeting audience needs.

“If you look at how brands moved consumers from casual to die-hard during the pandemic, the standout ones came to their rescue by inventing new products and services that met consumers exactly where they found themselves,” Richie says. “**Bumble** partnered with **Babe Wine** to help couples break up and move on — literally — with a new service that

gave you wine, paid for your moving expenses, helped build your dating profile and deleted all traces of your ex from your phone...**Heineken** rolled out “Heineken Haircuts;” mobile hair studios parked outside pubs where a celebrity stylist would give patrons a clip while they sipped a beer.”

## BUILDING A LEGACY THROUGH CULTURE

**Sony** doesn’t make “most-loved” lists year after year by accident. Ken Byers, co-founder and principal at **Confidant**, who works with Sony Electronics on branding, campaigns and content, credits Sony’s longitude by building agency at certain moments in time.

Sony found cultural touchpoints during the pandemic, when so many depended on entertainment and distraction during stay-at-home orders and lockdowns.

“Brand love has to be propelled by culturally iconic moments,” Byers says. “When you consider what you were doing during the pandemic...perhaps you were one of the many people clamoring for your PS5. Or maybe you picked up a new photography hobby with an Alpha. Or your kid recently watched a Sony Pictures Animation movie on a Bravia.”

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATORS

Talkwalker acknowledges the impact of the pandemic on organic social mentions and experience sharing, particularly because face-to-face interactions simply weren’t available. This made PR have an even higher influence than usual.

“As face-to-face conversations dropped, the organic mentions of brands online dropped too,” Talkwalker reports. “People were telling fewer stories about real-world interactions. To compensate for this, savvier brands turned to traditional PR.... People wanted escapism, and these stories gave them the opportunity to think beyond the current crisis.”

Richie agrees that the communicator’s role, no matter what size or age of the brand, makes a real difference when it comes to online AND offline perceptions. This can include inventive storytelling as well as providing ideas for new customer care and experiences.

“The communicator’s role in making brand diehards is to invent new products and services that are the truest embodiment of the brand — not just to promote what’s already coming down the conveyor belt,” Richie says. “A brand doesn’t need deep pockets ... to take this approach. You need an on-brand product or service idea — one that could make news

## How Brands Can Build a Consumer Love Connection

### 1. Become customer-centric

Understand your audience, not just what they mean to your brand, but think more broadly. What are the issues they’re facing? How has the pandemic impacted them? What global topics will get them engaged?

### 2. Find where your customers talk

There are numerous ways for consumers to stay connected. Find the channels that will work for them, and shape your conversations to suit those channels.

### 3. Start conversations

Don’t focus on your brand message. Consumers are looking for authentic connections with brands, and that means telling stories that they want to hear. Whether it’s tackling topics that are making global impact, or simply asking how they are, these will be perfect starting points to connect.

### 4. Join conversations

Marketing should be a two-way street. Be proactive, and join the conversations that are happening around your brand. Use social listening to find mentions you may have missed and answer questions people are asking.

### 5. Keep monitoring your brand love

Your brand love, and consumer perception, can change at any moment. A new campaign can give you a love boost, while a social media crisis can pull you down. By monitoring your brand constantly, you can shape the conversations to mitigate any potential risks.

just by existing, one which your audience would love — the drive to make it real and the persistence to promote it. That’s how you build a brand beyond social or any other platform... This creates diehards, puts PR in charge of all functions right from the start, and elevates the profession from a brand’s mouthpiece to a brand’s creative engine.”■

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# Kia Canada ‘Shocks’ Journalists with a New Car and an Electrifyingly Powerful Stunt

**[Editor’s Note:** What part of your pitch will catch a journalist’s eye? When we saw a press release saying **KIA Canada** was going to power an electric guitar using a car’s battery we had to know more.



**Fefe Dobson croons atop a Kia EV6 that’s powering Ryan Chalmers’s guitar (in background).**

In late July Kia Canada launched its EV6 crossover with a [press event](#) featuring a Fefe Dobson concert. The EV6’s battery powered electric guitarist Ryan Chalmers’s instrument. Our curiosity led to a conversation with Michael Kopke, marketing chief, Kia Canada.

Kopke told us the event was intended to overcome several struggles. Canadians, he says, know Kia Canada, but they’re unable to name its car models or say whether it’s a sports car or minivan company. In addition, the event was intended to highlight Kia Canada’s new brand and debut EV6 as the brand’s new face. The interview also highlights the importance of listening to customers. They might spur your next messaging idea, as they did for Kia Canada.]

**PRNEWS: Can you recall how all this came to be? How long it took?**

**Michael Kopke:** In terms of the idea, it came up during an early product research clinic, where we tested the vehicle with customers to see how the features and design resonate. And what came out of the clinic was that the V2L (vehicle to load, which allows users to pull juice from the car’s battery to power appliances, such as projectors, air conditioners, TVs etc.) was a clear ‘aha’ moment for customers. They’d say, ‘Oh, that’s really neat. I can go camping potentially with this vehicle.’ Or



**Michael Kopke**  
Director,  
Marketing,  
Kia Canada

they can power a light or a projector. It goes all the way up to powering a mini-fridge.

So, the original idea was, when we execute our press event, since we’re doing it in the summer, wouldn’t it be cool if we hand out water bottles to the journalists from a fridge that’s plugged into the car. That was the initial gestation of how we’d bring V2L [to the event’s messaging].

But once we identified the connecting opportunity with Fefe, we were like, ‘Wait a minute. Could we actually plug an electric guitar in here too?’

We checked with the engineers and then we tested it. We ran the guitar for 20 minutes at full volume. And we learned it was not a problem at all. In fact, after the test there was almost no depletion of battery power from the car.

**PRNEWS: I guess since Elon Musk’s infamous demo of the Tesla Cyber Truck in 2019 you tested the guitar and V2L pretty carefully?**

**Kopke:** Yes. There [were no bricks involved](#) in our demo. [Laughter]

**PRNEWS: But seriously, you probably tested and re-tested the V2L to make sure it could power a guitar for an entire concert.**

**Kopke:** Oh, yes, for sure, we did. It was a pre-production car and they’re basically made by hand. The engineers told us it could power a few things, but they’d never tested it with an electric guitar. So, we did it ourselves. We brought in the amp, plugged it in and it worked perfectly. And, again, the thing was the battery was at 99 percent before the concert and after, and basically the charge hadn’t changed at all. That was very encouraging.

**PRNEWS: Tell us about the research that went into the decision to introduce a car with a musical event.**

**Kopke:** There’s a bit of research that formed an insight for us. But it was really the business problem we were trying to solve that led us down the path [to the event].

In Canada, the Kia brand is well-known...but we still struggle for people to articulate the exact car names or to be able to say whether we are a mini-van company or an SUV company or a sports car company. We struggle at that...level.

Layered on top of that, with the brand relaunch and the EV6, the business problem was, how do we get people to sit up and listen? Because whether or not you know Kia, we want you to tune into the event. It was live streamed as well as being an in-person event.

Secondly, how do we get people to listen in a different

*Continued on page 10*

# Education about Multiculturalism in the Deaf Community is Key to Communication

**[Editor's Note:** While it's difficult to pinpoint how large the deaf population in the U.S. is, about 15 percent of adults, or 37.5 million, [report difficulty hearing](#), according to the **National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders**. In honor of National Deaf Awareness Month this September, PRNEWS convened a virtual roundtable of deaf communicators. We asked what they want other PR pros and journalists to know.

The participants were: Tyrone Giordano, director of communications, **Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center**; Christ Johnson, manager of community relations, **Gallaudet University**; Rosa Lee Timm, CMO, **Communication Service for the Deaf**, division president, **CSD Social Venture Fund**; and Robert Weinstock, director, public, media and community relations, Gallaudet University.

We discussed the impact the pandemic has had on the deaf community, communicating during crisis, how mainstream communicators can make accessibility part of their DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) effort and what corporations looking to embrace DEI and accessibility should do to push forward inclusive campaigns. [An unabridged version of this roundtable is available online.](#)]

## PRNEWS: How do you educate journalists and the mainstream community about communication needs of the deaf?

**Robert Weinstock:** It's important not to focus solely on...deafness...Very often at Gallaudet reporters contact us because they heard a deaf person did something significant. And they focus on the fact that the person is deaf as opposed to what they accomplished. So, that's point number one: Focus on achievements, not on a perceived disability.

Number two: Have an understanding that we in the deaf media field may need more time to respond to your requests.

We understand reporters are in a fast-paced environment. But when working with deaf people, [reporters need to understand] we need to have time to set up interpreters and have certain people available to have an interaction be successful, and it's not always possible to have everything happen instantly.

**Chris Johnson:** Another key aspect is having the cultural competence to know your audience. For instance, to diversify your publications with the deaf community. You're working with the Black community, Asian



**Robert Weinstock**  
Director of  
Public, Media  
and Community  
Relations,  
Gallaudet  
University



**Chris Johnson**  
Community  
Relations  
Manager,  
Gallaudet  
University

## Tips for Publishing a Story on the Deaf Community

- ▶ Use "deaf" and "hard of hearing" when referring to deaf people. Do not use "hearing impaired."
- ▶ Deaf with capital D largely refers to a cultural identity used by some deaf people who usually share a sign language and beliefs; deaf with lowercase d is an all-inclusive description of the broader deaf community, which also includes culturally Deaf people.
- ▶ Do not describe deaf people as having "lost" something or as "those who cannot hear."
- ▶ When interviewing a deaf person, do not report as "interviewed or responded through an interpreter." The interpreter is not part of the story.
- ▶ ASL (American Sign Language) should not be abbreviated with periods (i.e. A.S.L.). The correct abbreviation is ASL

Source: Gallaudet University

community, the LGBTQ+ community. It's important to have that cultural awareness lens.

**Weinstock:** I also think that it's critically important not to make things [inspiration porn](#). That's something that can be seen very easily nowadays. You can pick up the latest article and it will showcase a deaf person who succeeded in doing something, and it serves as inspiration porn.

## PRNEWS: What has been the greatest impact of the pandemic on the deaf community, and what lessons can the mainstream community learn about best practices for communicating during crises?

**Tyrone Giordano:** The number of events in [ASL](#) that have become accessible has increased by far because we're working online. Interpreters are forced to work online, and a lot of events are online, and [it has made] it easier to be much more accessible.

The deaf community seems to be more assertive in asking for access and what it needs. It seems to be somehow less of a fight in getting these access points rather than when we're in person...when we're trying to figure out how we're going to communicate.

**Rosa Lee Timm:** And often we have press conferences addressing COVID-19, and there are interpreters there. More and more people are working from home; more and more



**Tyrone Giordano**  
Director of  
Communications,  
Laurent Clerc  
National Deaf  
Education Center

people are seeing these news events with the interpreters, live on the news, and so we hope people start to replicate these behaviors.

We're seeing that already; we're seeing states start to replicate and mimic these behaviors and make sure they have sign language interpreters available at all of these major media events.



**Rosa Lee Timm**  
CMO,  
Communication  
Service for the  
Deaf

**PRN: What do mainstream PR pros get wrong about the deaf community? How can they fix it?**

**Timm:** A couple of things. One is the sense of agency and ownership of what I say, what I do, during any interaction with a journalist or communicator.

Often there is an overreliance on interpreters. For example, right now you are listening to an interpreter's voice. So, we have no way of knowing if the interpreters are accurate with what I'm saying. We really don't. So the story that you're gathering, is it exactly what I've said? Maybe. Maybe not.

**Weinstock:** Hearing-impaired is a label often used with deaf people that I, and many others, take offense to. There also is other terminology that may not be appropriate; it is best to check with the deaf person to be sure they are accurately described.

“**Let us lead. Don't just use us in a story or bring us on only as a consultant or subject-matter expert.**”

**Timm:** We might have an email request asking us to [provide a] quote in a story. English is my second language. ASL is my first language. So, asking me [for a] quote...in English is maybe not going to elicit the response you're looking for.

As a deaf person, I would really like the opportunity to respond either in written English or via ASL through an interpreter so we are truly on an equal playing field.

**PRNEWS: What can you tell us about the progress you have seen over the course of your career about how the PR industry treats the deaf community, as well as what opportunities are available to you as deaf communicators?**

**Weinstock:** Social media has had the biggest impact by far. Currently there's a lot of focus on Black ASL (BASL), particularly on social media. Here at Gallaudet, [there's a faculty member](#), Dr. Carolyn McCaskill. She is one of the preeminent scholars on Black Deaf culture and history, and she has been researching BASL with colleagues for more than 25 years and has a [large corpus of work](#). However, the recognition has not been commensurate with the amount of work Dr. McCaskill and her colleagues have invested. TikTok Nakia Smith (@realcaunsia) has made many posts [about Black ASL](#) and has had millions of views. As a result, she has brought

more attention to BASL, especially for younger generations.

Social media creates more visibility. It brings more attention and recognition to something that otherwise may not have gotten that level of attention.

**PRNEWS: What should corporations know as they are looking to hire deaf communicators or deaf journalists?**

**Weinstock:** You need to have someone who is willing to be assertive and to put themselves out there.

At the Gallaudet Communication Studies program, I have seen many Black deaf students and Asian students graduate, but their faces aren't being shown. They have to go to organizations and have internship opportunities.

**Timm:** More and more companies and corporations are thinking about diversity and quotas and making sure there is a balance in their workforce. Yet they still forget we are a part of that community, of being deaf, of having a disability. So if there could be more efforts to include those of us in the deaf communities or people who identify as being disabled

and making that a part of organizations' growth in terms of diversity. That is often where organizations struggle, with the how; how to partner. Partner with us, partner with Gallaudet.

**PRNEWS: What's the biggest thing that a corporation looking to embrace DEI and accessibility can do, beyond internships? How can they reach deaf people to push forward inclusive campaigns?**

**Giordano:** Let us lead. Don't just use us in a story or bring us on only as a consultant or subject-matter expert.

You have the power to publish. Let us co-create and take the lead with you in telling our stories, or even co-write with us. We know our own stories best. We know where to get first-hand sources for those stories. We can write about things not related to deaf topics.

I promise you, our takes and perspectives on things sometimes are more interesting than the usual.

**Weinstock:** I've been in PR for a number of years and the level of knowledge I have is on par with others in the field. But in my role at Gallaudet, I'm in a higher leadership position and I'm not sure that would be the case at a hearing firm.

So, just have in mind that there are deaf people who are equally skilled and adept and have the same amount of knowledge as their hearing counterparts. There should be opportunities to actively recruit these individuals. ■

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# A Lack of Consensus: Do PR Pros Working with Moderate Amounts of Data Need AI Now?

When it comes to deploying artificial intelligence (AI) in PR, the debate continues.

Most agree that PR teams managing massive amounts of data should invest in machine-learning technology and AI experts.

But for those working with small data sets—such as analyzing a modest-sized company's **Twitter** engagement for 12 months—a manual review of the top 100 posts often will suffice, [argues](#) Christopher Penn, co-founder and chief data scientist at **Trust Insights**.

"You need AI when you have machine-sized problems. You can use human solutions when you have human-sized problems," Penn writes in a recent e-missive.

He adds that a key to unlocking the intelligence AI provides involves boiling down machine-sized data sets into smaller chunks. Human analysts can then work with those data sets.

[Not everyone agrees with Penn, as you'll see below.]

## AI FOR PR? MAYBE

While we'd all love to magic away our workloads using automation, the concept that PR pros who are not responsible for large data sets do not have to employ AI is good news.

That means you'll require fewer consultants and external software, a relief for budgets.

On the career end, it's a sign that doom-and-gloom predictions that automation will soon replace PR and marketing jobs likely are overblown.

Hinda Mitchell, president, **Inspire PR Group**, agrees.

"While AI bots perhaps can be trained in time to write news releases based on preset determinations, it seems unlikely that AI will replace practitioners anytime soon."

That's not for a lack of trying, however. Plenty of firms are touting solutions.

For example, **HelloScribe**, a software company that offers "AI-powered writing software for communications and public relations professionals," recently pitched us.

Its software, the company claims, learns "from the context of [written messages] and [provides] relevant suggestions for content." This speeds up writing, it says.

Without purchasing additional software, however, many PR pros already are leveraging AI more than they realize. For instance, as the **Institute for Public Relations (IPR)** [notes](#), the software companies that offer media monitoring, website analytics tools and social media listening likely use AI to parse data and draw conclusions.

## USE CASES FOR AI

To determine potential AI needs outside of existing tools, PR pros must have a good working knowledge of AI terminology, says Dr. Timothy Coombs, a professor in the department of communication at **Texas A&M University**.

## Three AI Terms PR Pros Should Know

- **Machine Learning:** Branch of AI/computer science focusing on the use of data and algorithms to imitate the way that humans learn, gradually improving its accuracy. ([IBM](#))
- **Text Classification:** Machine learning technique categorizing responses to open-ended questions (such as "how" or "why" questions), as well as organizing and structuring that data. PR use cases: determining urgency of support tickets; organizing brand mentions by sentiment. ([MonkeyLearn](#))
- **Confusion Matrix:** A table used to judge the performance of a classification model (such as text classification). Accurate and inaccurate results of machine analysis can be tracked. Example: calculating whether a prediction that a patient has an infectious disease is correct or incorrect (displaying a "true" or "false" result in binary terms). ([Data School](#))

"PR people need to understand the basic language of AI just as they need to know the language of business," Dr. Coombs argues. For instance, he says, PR pros should know the difference between machine learning and simple text classification (see *sidebar*)—and why machine learning can provide superior results to computer-based content analysis.

This will help PR pros audit the benefits (or lack thereof) of adding higher capability for machine learning and AI at their organizations.

Dr. Coombs' research focuses on how AI identifies risks and signs of crisis.

"A PR person might miss the warning signs if they are swamped with data," he says. Yet he aligns with Penn when he says, "But that supposes that the PR people must cope with big data to be effective, [which] may not be the case for many small and medium-size firms."

Despite the emergence and proliferation of AI firms that take on writing tasks, Dr. Coombs is wary of such claims, arguing that "anything that involves content creation should not be done by AI." It's "too complex" for AI at this point.

Still, in small doses, such as the predictive text one might see when typing out a **Gmail** message, AI can be useful.

"All writers are using some forms of AI in the context of predictive text algorithms, which complete our sentences based on past writing behaviors," notes Mitchell.

Garrett Jochneau, insights manager at public affairs and digital communications firm **Kivvit**, is more bullish on AI. It's needed regardless of company size, he says.

*Continued on page 15*

way? Because we are launching the brand, the new logo, new sentiment, new approach etc.

The event itself included auto journalists but also, we invited a good chunk of lifestyle influencers, to get the brand communicated out in the context of Fefe, the concert and talk about the brand in a different light. On top of that, we were limited [by COVID] on the number of people we could invite. Still, we wanted to get the event out beyond Toronto, in both English and French. So, we expanded out to the virtual side of things.

Fefe is the reason to dial in. She's a popular artist and resonates with our target market, which is in the mid-40s and aligns with the EV6, a five-passenger crossover, which is the largest segment in Canada. It's the idea of Fefe attached to Kia; you'll listen to hear what new music Fefe is doing and you'll be introduced to the Kia brand, whether or not you're familiar with the brand or not.

So, we've had tremendous sales success but we think there's more opportunity. And we're struggling to build the brand up and want people to look at us differently, not just existing customers but new customers. Fefe is introducing the brand [to those who don't know it] and it's a demo that she resonates with and is also our target.

**PRNEWS: How did you get people to tune in? And are you satisfied with the results, after just one month?**

**Kopke:** Yes, we're thrilled with the result, we're already 125 percent of our target.

To get publicity for the event, it was several things. First, our PR team has good relations with the auto media, so it was a conversation and then an invite to the event. We've also undertaken an influencer program for the last couple of years. So, we reached out to those people who supported us already.

Beyond that we had a social media program that went out through the Kia Canada social channels inviting people to log in and listen to the event, but also Fefe was very supportive on her channels (58K followers on **Instagram**, iamfefemusic). We also urged our owner base (customers) to tune in. We got very good engagement.

**PRNEWS: What messages were you trying to convey with the concert-event [July 27]?**

**Kopke:** Kia, globally and within in Canada, is kicking off our long-term plan, Plan S (the S is for shift). It's a complete, long-term plan around our shift toward mobility in general, which includes electric cars, plug-in hybrids, hybrids and other strategies around mobility as a service. That was one message.

Another message was the redefinition of our brand, including our new tagline, which is 'Movement That Inspires,' along with the new logo and new ethos.

The third message was the EV6 [crossover vehicle] itself. It's built off our new E-GMP platform. EV6 is the first vehicle

coming off of that [platform] and is the first one in our Plan S strategy.

**PRNEWS:** Three messages in one press briefing. And you wanted a Canadian story?

**Kopke:** Right. So, we had three interconnected messages. Still, communicating three messages during a press event is fairly complicated.

**PRNEWS: How do you do that?**

**Kopke:** So, the job is communicating a brand-new idea, a new approach for the company with a new vehicle. Our PR team and agency connected with Fefe, who is famous in Canada. And [like Kia Canada] she's shifting her approach and her career. She's launching an album and a single.

So, we decided this would be a good way of connecting the reinvention story, [using] a musician well-known to our target demo in Canada [who also is reinventing herself].

And then within in the vehicle itself, as I mentioned, we have something called V2L. That's the ability to take power out of the car's battery to power other devices. It's a differentiating feature.

So, we said, 'Good grief, what if we could power an electric guitar to start off the show?' It would really connect the dots, making it an electric story all the way through.

**PRNEWS: What's next?**

**Kopke:** Well, the concert was the kickoff and we were happy with it. The car begins selling in early 2022 and we'll have a larger roll-out campaign around it then. We haven't figured out all of that yet, but Fefe might be part of that, her team is open to it.

With electric vehicles a large chunk of the market is tech savvy, so a huge part of the campaign will be online channels. But EV6 also is the face of our new brand, so there will be a mass-media element aimed at all Canadians, not just the target market.

**PRNEWS: What metrics and targets will you use to measure success?**

**Kopke:** Some of those haven't been set. However, with the global unveiling of the vehicle, in Korea a while back, we launched a pre-launch page where people can literally put their name and email address if they're interested. So, we've been collecting [hand-raisers](#) for about a month or so. We set ourselves a target for hand-raisers by the end of the year and we're already at 85 percent of the target. And that target was a good 20-25 percent higher than our best hand-raiser target, so indications are good that. ■

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# Reputation Building is Bottom Up and Top Down, and Requires Internal, External Communication

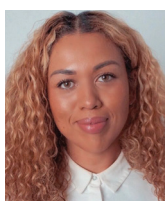
**[Editor's Note:** Shaffra Gray-Read, senior reputation manager for **KFC** (UK & Ireland), is a finalist in the arts & media rising star category for the 8th annual [Black British Business Awards](#) 2021. Prior to joining KFC earlier this year, she worked at **Weber Shandwick**, as well as at the UK [Home Office](#), leading its Brexit communication strategy. In addition to reputation, she's worked in crisis communication, media relations, corporate affairs and strategic communication.

In this interview, we asked what KFC UK/I is doing to bolster reputation. We also discussed her interest in diversity & inclusion as well as her penchant for using data. Gray-Read spoke to us from London. Her remarks were lightly edited for space.]

**PRNEWS: What's the most difficult area to build reputation in: third parties, government, regulators, employees?**

**Shaffra Gray-Read:** It depends on the project and the topic and what your aim is. Over the years, I've found where there's a lot of passion and the stakes are high, it will be difficult to engage different groups.

I've seen that building reputation is a ground-up operation, but it's also top-down. You need to get the right people in the business to support what you're doing, but also speaking about what you're doing is such an important thing to build reputation.



**Shaffra Gray-Read**  
Senior Reputation  
Manager,  
KFC  
(UK & Ireland)

**PRN: Please give us an example of something KFC is doing to build reputation.**

**Gray-Read:** One of the things we've been working on is a partnership with **Keep Britain Tidy**, which is a charity for the environment. We've partnered with them on their [Great British Spring Clean](#).

During the pandemic the UK has had a bit of a [litter problem](#), people disposing of litter in public spaces, people going to restaurants [for take-out] and disposing their litter on streets.

So, one of the things we really want to try and help improve is encouraging our guests to dispose of litter in a responsible way. But, also making sure that we, as a business, take that responsibility seriously.

So, a few months ago we created a couple of initiatives ensuring that our impact when it comes to litter is fleshed out.

We're engaging more with local councils and local government to see what we can do within our communities and perhaps collaborate further. But, also with our team members, how can we train them and add to their knowledge about why, as a business, we need to be managing our responsibility more seriously.

That's one piece of a bigger puzzle and ladders up to a larger initiative we've done around the environment and our pledge to be [net zero](#) by 2040.

What we're trying to do is to look at different areas of the business, whether it's our planet, or social impact...and work out where we really need to be shifting the dial and doing more internally and externally to help improve reputation.

**PRNEWS: How is KFC training staff to take litter more seriously?**

**Gray-Read:** We are currently designing training on that. Most of our training resources are online. For this particular program, we are working with partners to tailor something more for our staff, though we are working on creating training [for litter] now. Hopefully, it will be modular based so we can add to it. And people can use it in the same portal they already use for other training materials.

**PRNEWS: Give us an example of a crisis that's likely to occur in this time of COVID-19, tense race relations, dire economic circumstances for some and cybercrime.**

**Gray-Read:** Well race relations was a big area that I was working on when I was at Weber Shandwick. The events of last year obviously heightened conversations around race relations. Diversity & Inclusion is an area where brands are having so many more awkward conversations internally and externally around what to do to improve race relations.

Last year we saw brands struggle with how to engage and when to engage. It's not that there's not the appetite to engage, but sometimes there's a lack of understanding around all the context of the issue. Race relations is not an issue that will fade away. It's not necessarily a crisis, but it's an important issue that needs to be spoken about more and managed more in a genuine way.

**PRNEWS: What about race relations in the UK and how companies communicate about it?**

**Gray-Read:** Before last year people in the UK would say race relations is not a big issue here. But I think last year showed that while race relations is more subtle in the UK, [companies] really need to have those open, honest discussions about it and issues around [intersectionality](#) and how one sees themselves in an organization.

Gen-Z leans into this and embraces everything about intersectionality. They are the leaders of tomorrow and the talent that people are seeking for business. So, being able to lean into and address these issues is so important. It will

*Continued on page 13*

# Ethics Work Best When Reinforced as a Constant State of Mind

A prominent government official doesn't practice what he preaches. An internet site is accused of plagiarism. A corporate titan takes advantage of insider information.

These random examples broadly represent the challenges PR professionals, whose job is to communicate the truth, often face. And what do all these situations have in common? Ethics, of course.

And not just ethics as a particular and important set of principles, but as a state of mind, a behavioral guidepost, a moral imperative.

At PRSA, September is Ethics Month, a time when we specifically focus on and celebrate our [Code of Ethics](#), which is at the heart of what we believe in as communicators as well as how we practice our craft every day.

But ethical dilemmas, as we well know, don't follow the calendar year; we find ourselves constantly immersed in quandaries and quagmires that require close attention and expertise.

Throughout what has been, and continues to be, an immensely difficult time, PR pros, myself included, are reflecting more on the many changes taking place across the societal landscape.

As events and shifting perspectives influence our values and mindset, how are they affecting our ethical priorities and strategies?

With this in mind, below are basic tenets and best ethical practices for communication professionals.

## QUESTION EVERYTHING

Let's bring back [fact-checking](#) as a passion, and fully embrace our roles as ethicists, truth-tellers and purveyors of honesty.

Misinformation, which can lead to an unbreakable chain of unintended negative consequences, has gone from being chosen as the [dictionary.com word of the year](#) in 2018—long before the arrival of COVID-19—to being declared a “[serious threat](#) to public health” by the U.S. Surgeon General last July.

[Let's work](#) to help make misinformation, its evil cousin disinformation, and all that they represent, end, not trend.

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRUST YOUR GUT

You know the feeling. You're in a situation where you have done proper due diligence, gathered and digested information. Yet you are unsure how to resolve a particular question.

In these instances, consider the proverbial gut check as a supplemental decision factor.

If you suspect you're in a dangerous moral neighborhood,

you probably are. You'll feel it in your stomach—and your heart—that you shouldn't cross that ethical boundary; there's a visceral reaction that sounds the alarm.

You might think this suggestion is a bit mystical, but it works.

## VIGILANCE, ALWAYS VIGILANCE

We can hope we won't face one massive crisis situation that will require herculean, make-or-break ethics management.

Instead, we need to look out for the possibility of death by a thousand pinpricks, a series of moments, such as being asked to interpret research to fit a particular narrative,

or round up data in a press release, or fudge facts due to an impending deadline, which can add up and eventually wear down our ethical edge.

No truly professional PR practitioner sets out to slide down that slippery slope, but it's critical to remember: there are no ethical shortcuts.

## THE FUTURE IS HERE

As technology continues to develop, so too will our ethical strategies. How we conduct business will require new definitions, viewpoints and approaches to our work with clients.

For example, [Gartner predicts that](#) artificial intelligence (AI) used in marketing across the globe will increase in value from \$12 million in 2020 to \$107 million by 2028. AI already is used for such tasks as media monitoring, content creation and data collection. Whether you welcome or fear AI, it's here to stay; what will be our ethical reference points?

In a [recent Pew report](#), Stephen Downes, senior research officer for digital technologies, [National Research Council of Canada](#), said, “Ultimately, our AI will be an extension of ourselves, and the ethics of our AI will be an extension of our own ethics.”

Add to this discussions to be had [involving technologies](#) such as virtual reality, augmented reality and the metaverse; you've seen “The Matrix,” right? And you thought you just had to worry about working with a company executive who doesn't understand ‘conflict of interest.’

Ethics Month is a great time to reexamine and recommit to the ethical frameworks that guide us professionally as well as personally. But it can also serve as an important jumping-off point for the opportunities and challenges we face in the months and years ahead. ■

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“Let's make fact-checking a passion and embrace our roles as ethicists, truth-tellers and purveyors of honesty.”

”

grow and people need to be more adept at addressing and managing it.

It's not something that can just be a nice statement, which a lot of people did last year. We need tangible action and an understanding of addressing inequalities in society that seep into other areas.

**PRNEWS: In the US, some PR pros still approach data and measurement reluctantly. Though it's changing, PR remains a field attractive to people who don't want to work with numbers. Is it the same in the UK?**

**Gray-Read:** Yes. As in the US, it's getting better here.

**PRNEWS: Why your interest in data?**

**Gray-Read:** A couple of years ago, I took a year off and went back to university to get a master's in behavioral science. One of the reasons I did that is I wanted to ground my practical experience with more theoretical knowledge. One of the things I developed was being able to look at a data set and trying to pull out the insight to inform approaches.

I love qualitative data. There's a richness in it that you can get from discussions...to help understand why something is the way it is. Then, quantitative data helps to really put an overlay of information on top of that. It's really important to be able to understand research and extrapolate certain things...to arrive at how you want to take things forward based on insight from data that informs your approach.

**PRNEWS: Can you give us an example where you changed course based on data?**

**Gray-Read:** In my master's, I looked at Black communities, specifically Black male communities. I spent three months doing an ethnography in a barber shop observing how people interact with each other.

One thing I gained from that was that music, particularly [grime music](#), was a huge part of peoples' identity and culture, particularly Black culture in the UK. One of the things I changed as part of my approach was looking at lyrics to songs.

It just so happened [British rap artist] [Stormzy](#) visited that barber shop. I managed to do an in-depth interview with Stormzy, but also analyze his lyrics to make a correlation between the topics of conversation that go on in the barber shop and how prevalent they are in Black culture, especially Black male culture, in London.

The issues Black men are facing are evident in their barber shop conversation but also in the lyrics of music and they become part of the lived experience. To get the fullest out of my research, I needed to add that dimension to it. And it

became such an important part of the research. So, that's an example of how I switched a research method to help inform a better approach.

**PRNEWS: There's so much companies can do to advance social and racial issues.**

**Gray-Read:** Yes. One of my biggest passions and ambitions is to do a doctorate in this area. And I'm interested in how brands can play a big part in helping underserved and underprivileged communities to excel. To do this, companies need to understand the issues Black people face.

These are issues right at our fingertips, though they're not necessarily noticed, but they must be understood. The way you can understand these issues is by actually engaging certain people in communities to explore how we can work together to create solutions.

**PRNEWS: What are some of the things you consider working at a global company?**

**Gray-Read:** Every market has its headwinds. From a global perspective, it's about having consistency of brand in different markets, but it's also about leaning into the culture of the market and making sure there's local resonance with a global approach.

**PRNEWS: How did you get into the reputation field?**

**Gray-Read:** I started out in law. When I was doing that I always wondered if law was for me. I thought about doing something more creative and I did a few internships. I did one in PR.

When I finished my degree, I thought I should give law a proper go. So, I did an internship in NY at an employment law firm. One of the cases we did was against [Dominique Strauss-Kahn](#), the former head of the **International Monetary Fund**.

There was so much media interest in this case. I was really interested in how you protect both the reputation of the law firm and the client. The more I thought about it, the reputation side of law is so important, in order to build trust and engage your audience, you have to build positive reputation and increase positive perception of your brand.

So, after that internship, I came back to London and started working in law, but more so in legal PR. So, you're working on how you build a positive corporate reputation for the [law firm's] brand by engaging stakeholders and clients, but also by discussing things in the media that build the brand.

Now, with KFC, obviously reputation is built over many years, but it also can be ruined in a matter of minutes. At KFC there's such an incredible job to be done to build trust with our customers, but also with our stakeholders, with government, NGOs and different society groups. ■

“Building reputation is a ground-up operation, but it's also top-down.”

# Media Relations Strategy Begins with a Data-Informed Basis for Targeting



Target-audience penetration is key to a successful media relations strategy and the tactics that follow. Technology, research and insights provide detailed information about the audiences you need to reach and how to reach them. The results often surprise PR pros.

Conventional PR wisdom drives many targeting decisions to pursue 'big numbers' media. However, communicators make a mistake when they exclude smaller media outlets that offer a higher reach among target audiences.

For example, the **NY Times** appears on everyone's top-tier media list and, for the most part, it merits inclusion. However, if everyone seeks the same destination, that path grows crowded and competitive. In addition to aiming for media targets with the highest reach, smart communicators also target more accessible media that attract a large concentration of the intended audience. In this way, *target audience reach* becomes a preferred metric over *gross audience reach*. In laymen's terms, quality is more important than quantity (not to mention that we shouldn't automatically assume conventional media choices are the most efficient way to reach certain niche audiences).

When considering target audiences and the media they consume, you must apply data, not just 'big numbers' but 'smart numbers.'

For example, an ultra-luxury products retailer whose campaign touted expensive women's jewelry for high-income individuals generated many placements in high-circulation outlets, but missed its target audience. In Figure 1 below, attribution technology determined target audience reach. The resulting demographic analysis of those who clicked on the story revealed that only 9 percent earned a sufficient annual household income to buy jewelry of such extravagance.

## MEDIA TARGETING

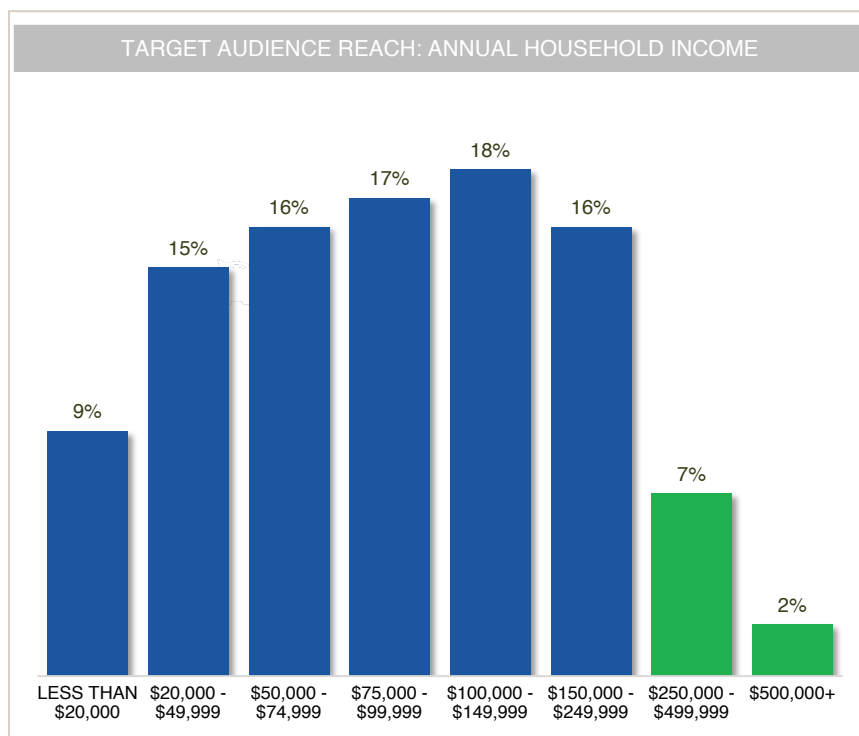
Today's media databases make it easy to make targeting decisions. In some ways, they make it **too** easy. So easy that some communicators assume 'it's only an email' and blast their pitch indiscriminately, regardless of whether a journalist or media outlet considers the content relevant.

A journalist's time is extraordinarily precious. The **US Bureau of Labor and Statistics** reports the number of PR pros outnumber journalists roughly 5-to-1. If you were an overworked journalist, wouldn't you gladly receive highly targeted pitches aimed purposely at your audience?

Targeted outreach delivers better results and improves the probability that a meaningful relationship between journalist and communicator will emerge. On the other hand, pitches based on whim or even 'coffee table logic,' an informed assumption, lead to frustration among journalists, who find you and your pitches easy to ignore.

To some PR pros, the concept of a target audience strategy represents too large a departure or suggests an overly complicated process. For many, concerns relate to the risky shift from big numbers PR to smart numbers PR. Indeed, there's the unknown reaction from senior executives who don't know the difference.

The targeted audience reach approach certainly will lower media exposure but can you imagine the CEO who prefers quantity over quality, especially when quality also leads to additional revenue accompanied by cost and time efficiencies?



**Not all media are created equal:** In this example, gross audience reach in the 15 largest population centers totaled 27 million. However, further analysis revealed that the target audience reach was just 9%, or 2.4 million. This data point suggests that communicators in this case should target media with the highest penetration among probable buyers of the jewelry, thus increasing their efficiency. Source: The author

## CREATING A MEDIA-TARGETING STRATEGY

For a scientific fresh start for media targeting, consider the following steps. Granted, some of these recommendations require resources, but

there is a lot you can do with even a small budget using similar logic:

- ▶ Access demographics databases to determine the best targets. The database identifies media with the highest likelihood of success given what readers, viewers and listeners say about themselves. Keep in mind that some of these media may be unknown to you now. If you can't access such a database, ask advertising or media-buying colleagues to run the numbers for you
- ▶ Pitch these high-potential media, journalist and influencers while tracking their responses. Refine accordingly
- ▶ Use media content analysis to monitor who runs your content and your competitors,' as well as the messages that appear. If coverage emerges from outlets that weren't on your original target list, explore the degree to which they reach your target audience and consider adding them.
- ▶ Attribution technology is becoming increasingly acces-

sible. If it's available to you, use the software to track click-through behavior: Which media drove traffic to your website? Which news sites sparked downloads, job applications and business transactions? If they trigger the right behavior, reinforce your focus on these high-yield media.

- ▶ Apply findings to manage your effort toward continuous improvement. Use results as a sword and a shield to attack new media opportunities and defend against poor emotions-based media targeting requests.

The optimal media targets are those your target audience reads. They spark constructive behavioral responses, generate positive stories about your company and feature them frequently. A data-informed approach will focus your resources on media that is important, in which you perform well and your competitors are either absent or covered negatively. ■

*Mark Weiner's new book is "PR Technology, Data and Insights."*

*Continued from page 9*

## THE COUNTER ARGUMENT: AI IS NEEDED NOW

For instance, while your company may have a small social media profile—which can be monitored manually, as noted above—AI can help track data from large numbers of consumers, which PR pros then use to make informed choices about messages, product development or brand direction.

"No individual can analyze the behaviors of a million profiles...Breaking the data into more digestible audience or coverage segments is one way to do that, made possible by AI," Jochneau says.

For market research, a function that may or may not reside on the PR team, "it's non-practical...to manually segment hundreds of thousands of social profiles based on shared behaviors or interests," he adds. "AI can do more high-level analysis about overlapping interests [and] influencers. For small- and mid-size firms in particular, AI allows for more advanced insights analysis."

Regardless of the scope of your social media or public sentiment analysis, AI does not come cheap, Dr. Coombs says.

"Money is the answer to many questions. If you do not

need to address large data sets, AI is not a good investment," he says. "You can do the equivalent work without it by using other computer programs" such as content analysis, "or alerts at a much lower cost."

## ANOTHER OPTION: WATCH AND WAIT

A potential strategy is watching how AI is evolving and waiting until it's right for your needs. As uses of [AI evolve](#), the technology should improve, become more widely available and drop in price. Since machine learning becomes more accurate by analyzing more data, "that means later versions of AI will have greater accuracy. If you can wait, or lack of funding requires you wait for AI, that is a viable strategy," he says.

Yet watching and waiting are unlikely to yield a perfect solution. "AI is not a magic cure-all for every organization or all PR tasks," Dr. Coombs says. He advises PR pros consider "their needs, resources and possible effect on the organization when deciding on whether, and how, to use AI." ■

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# More than 30% of Consumer Engagement on Mask Mandates This Year Came in Just 30 Days

Social engagement around mask mandates peaked several times this year: in January as President Biden came into office and signed an executive order mandating masks; in March, as Texas lifted mask mandates there; in May, as mandates were lifted in many other places and in August, when mandates returned, particularly as school districts determined back-to-school protocols, according to data provided to PRNEWS exclusively by **Shareablee**.

Actions, or engagement, are the sum of social likes, comments and shares.

Content mentioning mask mandates generated nearly 24 million consumer actions this year, with more than one-third (7.7 million) occurring between 7/26/21 and 8/25/21, the time period of our chart on this page.

In August, the biggest spike in engagement came when controversy rose [in Florida school districts](#) as Governor Ron DeSantis banned mask mandates.

“As the topic of mask mandates is so hotly debated, major news about them seems to generate a lot of engagement, as people debate in the comments,” says Shareablee analyst Madison Busick.

In the period observed in the chart, the most popular reaction to mask mandate posts on **Facebook** besides “like”

## TOP PAGES CROSS-PLATFORM MENTIONING MASK MANDATES

Based on Total Actions (reactions, comments, and shares) 7/26/2021 – 8/25/2021

Sources: @, t, i

| RANK | PAGE             | ACTIONS<br>@ t i | CONTENT<br>@ t i |
|------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1    | The Shade Room   | 604 k            | 7                |
| 2    | The Hill         | 342 k            | 95               |
| 3    | CNN              | 287 k            | 34               |
| 4    | Washington Post  | 262 k            | 16               |
| 5    | Fox News         | 244 k            | 32               |
| 6    | Breitbart        | 251 k            | 12               |
| 7    | Matt Walsh       | 134 k            | 13               |
| 8    | MSNBC            | 112 k            | 83               |
| 9    | NowThis Politics | 131 k            | 15               |
| 10   | ABC 13 Houston   | 101 k            | 20               |

Source: **Shareablee**

was “angry,” with more than 313K actions, making up 38 percent of all non-like reactions. August saw the most number of “angry” reactions on mask mandate content since March 2021.

Busick adds that “‘love’ reactions almost always spike at the same time as ‘angry’ reactions, which makes sense with the divisiveness of the mask debate.”

In the period noted, Facebook had the most engagement on mask mandate content, at 4.3 million actions. 53 percent of total actions were on Facebook, says Busick, while **Instagram** accounted for 33 percent and **Twitter** 14 percent.

## ENGAGEMENT WITH NEWS, NOT BRANDS

In general, Busick says, there was little consumer engagement with mask-related posts from brands. Instead, it was almost all news media, influencers and politicians.

Gossip site **The Shade Room** [once again](#) generated the most actions on content, despite posting just seven times across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The [post](#) (at left) garnering the most actions was on Instagram and featured news from **The Hill**: “JUST IN: Florida school board votes to keep mask mandate, defying DeSantis.”

The Hill, meanwhile, posted the most number of times on the topic, though not nearly as efficiently. ■

