



Healthcare Marketing

Using the Internet as a strategic marketing and PR tool

More than 185 million Americans have Internet access and are using the World Wide Web for everything from e-mail to online shopping, according to the Nielson/NetRatings service. That's a huge jump from the 156 million reported a year ago. In the work place, Internet usage has jumped 23% over the past year, with more than 42 million employees logging on for help with business-related functions such as research and planning business trips.

More and more hospitals, managed care organizations, and medical associations are discovering the power of the Internet as a resource tool. Many are creating their own websites as informational and operational tools to improve communications with key audiences. Physicians are also stepping up to the plate and incorporating the Internet into their practices. According to the American Medical Association, between 70% to 80% of practicing physicians use the Internet for medical research, continuing medical education, and regulatory updates.

Yet, despite this surge of Internet use among the medical community, there are still some healthcare organizations that do not know how to leverage this popular entity known as the "information highway."

Think of the Internet as a resource, a tool that can be used to your advantage, especially for marketing and public relations. Here are a few ways in which your organization can embrace the Internet as a communication tool and incorporate it into your marketing and PR strategies:

- **Recognize the Internet as a high-speed media outlet.** For years, there were only two mediums for public relations - print and broadcast. But in the 1990s, the Internet became the third medium, and today its coverage almost surpasses the other two. Practically all newspapers, magazines, and journals have websites where they post their print editions, as well as daily news updates. Even broadcast stations post their news and feature segments, viewable in various video formats. In addition, Internet wire services offer news in real time, making the Internet a source for the latest up-to-date world, national, business, financial, and healthcare news. By embracing the Internet as a third PR medium, you can increase your media coverage and thus, create a higher profile for your organization.
- **Use Internet wire services to get more coverage for your press releases.** Through an Internet wire service such as BusinessWire, Internet Wire, PR Newswire and even HealthLeaders.com, your organization's information becomes accessible to the millions of people surfing the Web. No matter how wary you may be of posting your release, consider how you can use it to your advantage. When posting a release on an Internet wire service, you decide where you want it to be sent. These services can customize the distribution of your release and make sure the information is sent to your

targeted audience. In addition, the services have contracts with some of the major websites, such as AOL, Yahoo, and MSN, guaranteeing the posting of your release on particular sites.

While this creates more coverage for your organization, it also means you will have to look more carefully at what you are saying in your releases. Write them in a manner that will directly address the interests of those using the Internet for news and research purposes. Remember that your electronically distributed releases are available to anyone and everyone.

- **Use available services to track your coverage, as well as the coverage your competitors receive on the Internet.** Whether you distribute a press release through an Internet wire service or distribute it in-house, finding out which websites post your release is difficult. You could search individual websites, taking up hours of time. Or you can have someone else do it for you. Most Internet wire services provide the option of receiving a report listing websites that pick up a particular release.

Another option is an Internet monitoring service like eWatch™ that not only tells you what websites posted your press releases but what kind of overall coverage your organization is getting on the Internet. For example, eWatch™ tells you which news sites are writing about your company, which writers are covering your industry, what consumers and the investment community are saying about you, and what your competitors are saying.

- **Use a website as an information communication tool.** Your website is the world's portal to your organization, and it should be designed as such. Your website is probably the best marketing and PR tool available today. Most reporters will ask if a company has a website where they can view an electronic press kit or obtain more information rapidly, as opposed to having hard copies sent via snail mail. The same holds true for everyone from investors to prospective clients who are interested in finding out more about your organization. Therefore, your website should convey the messages and image of your organization that you want presented to the world. It should be well designed with the information easily accessible, especially to those who are new to Internet surfing. It should contain an updated press kit and press releases, as well as any published news articles about your organization. And you can't forget the all important contact information, necessary for those who would like to learn more or have questions regarding your systems, products, or services.
- **Use e-newsletters as a marketing tool.** The latest thing to hit the e-waves is the e-mail newsletter. Numerous trade publications, newspapers, and news websites have created e-newsletters that provide their subscribers with the latest news for a particular industry on a daily or weekly basis. Consider how you can use an e-newsletter as a direct communication tool to your target audience. For instance, you could use an e-newsletter to inform your current customers, as well as prospective ones, about your latest developments. Or you could further establish your organization as an information resource through an e-newsletter that provides the latest industry news.
- **Use the Internet for crisis communication.** Due to our nation's recent tragic events, it became very clear how valuable the Internet is as a tool for crisis communication. However, the key is to develop a plan before a crisis

occurs. Create a secure employees-only location on your website and let your employees know that in the event of a crisis, they need to go to that location on the site for news and updates. If you don't have an employees-only section and a crisis occurs, you still can use your website to post important news and to alert employees, as well as clients and reporters. They should know they can turn to your website for frequent updates.

With constant technological advances and usage rates steadily increasing, the Internet has become a popular communication and information tool for millions. Now, more than ever, audiences ranging from customers, health plan members, physicians and healthcare executives to legislators and reporters need qualified sources of information for the healthcare industry and for products and services available. By incorporating the Internet into your marketing and PR strategies, you can establish your organization as a qualified source of information for these audiences while opening up more lines of communication with your desired audience.

Scott Public Relations, in Woodland Hills, CA, specializes in healthcare, benefits, insurance and technology public relations. The company can be reached at **818-610-0270**.