

PQR article by Charlie Pownall

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What role does digital play in the way we communicate today?

Digital technologies are deeply engrained in our lives. Could we manage without email? Instant messaging is indispensable to teenagers and students, and is increasingly widely used in the workplace. And while blogging and social networking remain limited to early adopters in many countries, in others they are already mainstream.

What factors have led to the dramatic growth of digital?

Access to the internet and broadband penetration provide access to tools that enable people to do things they'd never been able to before. Crucially, many of these tools are also free, easy to use, fun and potentially very powerful.

How has this impacted the PR industry? How has it changed the rules of the communications business?

Information is flowing much faster, making it difficult to manage news and raising concerns about where the next issue will spring from. More importantly, digital technologies are fueling a culture that values individual voices over institutional ones and that demands new levels of disclosure and authenticity. The challenge for PR companies and marketers is to find ways to connect with stakeholders that are credible and impactful, and that will build useful and meaningful relationships. The shift from a culture of telling and selling to direct contact and conversation has huge implications for us all.

How can communications professionals use digital to their advantage?

Digital technologies provide opportunities to reach, engage and build relationships with very specific audiences. This requires all sorts of new skills, from the ability to identify and deal with online influencers to developing a good understanding of how stakeholders and customers behave online, and how this translates into their lives offline.

What are the challenges one faces and how can these be converted into opportunities to effectively leverage the power of digital?

In some organizations, PR is seen as little more than press releases and media launches, while digital is limited to having a website. What's the value of the website to the Finance Director, especially if there is no transactional component? Equally, if budget is available for marketing your website, the PR and interactive units are likely to work separately. The challenge is to get clients thinking beyond



messages and distribution, and approach digital as a means to build relationships with key audiences through dialogue. To do this, it is essential to work in an integrated manner, and because campaigns can be built around niche audiences, PR's traditional strengths can and should be leveraged.

What are the key points that one needs to keep in mind while going digital (quick tips)?

What are the solutions / services / tools available to master digital?

Be pragmatic: take a small step, observe and go from there. Take the opportunity to listen – the more you are seen to be acting upon that listening, the stronger the bond you'll form with your audiences. Also, be genuine and behave as a human being – it sounds obvious, but press release style formats don't make for great conversations! Equally, approach digital from an integrated perspective – many parts of your organization can benefit.

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