

TUTORIAL

Online Newsrooms

By Steve O'Keefe

Online newsrooms have been around for a few years now — long enough for PR professionals to learn hard lessons about how well they work. This article is a survey of online newsroom content and activities, starting with essential elements and leading up to advanced, sophisticated, and often expensive options.

Before you get all hyped up about building a fancy online newsroom on your web site, let's start with a few caveats. First of all, this is passive PR; online newsrooms don't drive coverage so much as support it. News releases lure media contacts and other important publics to your site (investors, analysts, customers, suppliers, employees, etc.). Your online newsroom will give these people the depth of information they seek about your company history, products, services, and activities. But the newsroom won't generate news coverage — it will only enrich it.

The second warning is to watch your budget. Certain online newsroom activities — such as live, streaming news conferences — will not generate enough return to make them worth the considerable investment. You might feel like you're pushing the envelope by building an online newsroom with all the bells and whistles, but it's still passive PR. If it doesn't produce the desired results, that envelope could be pushed back at you — with your pink slip enclosed.

With those cautions in mind, let's do a quick survey of what you must have in your online newsroom, what you'd like to have, and what you might add if you had an unlimited budget and great IT support.

Newsroom Essentials

There is only one thing every online newsroom must have, and that is a way to contact someone for assistance or information. Most journalists coming to your site are already working on a story or have a story idea in mind.

All they really need is the e-mail address and/or phone number for someone who can help them gather documents, artwork, interviews, or other materials.

There are problems that come with providing contact information in the newsroom. Some sites have eliminated all contact info because it is abused by people who make customer service or employment inquiries through the newsroom. Other newsrooms require journalists to register for access to contact information. In my opinion, both of these are both poor strategies. Journalists on deadline do not want to apply for access or fumble to remember a password. Most organizations don't have adequate staff to handle access requests during non-standard business hours.

Here are my suggestions for handling contact information and access. First, provide a single page of contact info that includes staff names, e-mail addresses, and phone and fax numbers. The only contact information on news releases, archived news releases, and other content in the newsroom, should be *departmental* phone numbers and *generic* e-mail addresses, such as *news@company.com*. That way, current contact information will always be available to those who need it, and when your staff changes you only have to update the contact information page — not every news release on the site.

As far as the abuse of contact information goes, get used to it. The contact info for your PR staff should be public. Part of everyone's job description is to redirect e-mail and phone calls to the proper department. It is better to have PR staff sort this e-mail than to have PR inquiries sorted by customer service staff. You really don't want an inquiry from a *Wall Street Journal* reporter being filtered through customer service.

This brings me to the topic of things you don't need in online newsrooms. You don't need anything you can't maintain. If you have a small company, you have to think about whether it's really worth devoting much effort to an online newsroom. Perhaps all you need is contact information?

You don't need feedback threads or discussion areas at your site. Trust me, the press doesn't need a forum on your site, nor do you want to police one. You don't need chat facilities unless you provide them in combination with access-restricted online events. You don't need to update the site every day to keep it fresh. When you've got news to share, add it to the site, and make sure any calendars are current.

Basic Content

Beyond contact information, the next level of newsroom depth is to have, well, *news*, plus enough background information to enrich a story. Here are my best bets for basic content.

- **Current News:** Headline news about the company. This news is usually prepared by the publicity department, and is featured not only in the newsroom, but at the home page of the web site. This might be your latest news release or teaser copy for your last three or four most important news releases.

- **News Release Archive:** An archive of news releases as far back as you care to go. If your archive contains more than 10 news releases, you'll want to make it searchable by keyword and date. That means you need to store the news releases in a database, and that will probably require some assistance from IT.

- **Corporate History:** A concise story of the company's history. This section of the newsroom can also include a

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mission statement and/or a statement of core values.

- **Staff Profiles:** Bios of key staff, including management and the board of directors. Profiles should include photos. These profiles are often provided by Human Resources or Investor Relations.
- **Artwork:** Offering good artwork can greatly increase the size of a story and the amount of coverage you get. The media often come to your site looking for artwork to accompany a story that's already written and ready to go to press. Media contacts should be offered access to high-resolution artwork that is suitable for use in print publications and television broadcasts. The minimum standard for print and broadcast reproduction is 300 dpi. It's a good idea to use low-resolution (72 dpi) images to show the media what you have to offer, and include a link to high-res artwork that indicates the format the artwork is in, the resolution, and the file size (for example, 300 dpi TIFF 1.5MB). If you have a lot of artwork to offer, you'll want to database it, and that will require assistance from IT.
- **Advanced Content**
Don't attempt to include ambitious content in your newsroom that you can't maintain. Most calendars I've seen in online newsrooms chronicle ancient history — not forthcoming events. Poorly maintained newsrooms create a worse impression than simply having no newsroom at all.
- **Press Kits:** For large companies with multiple products, services, subsidiaries, and/or brands, Online Press Kits are a real time saver for journalists. Instead of having all the newsroom content in large, searchable databases, content related to specific products or divisions is gathered together for the media into handy kits that contain all the news releases, product information, artwork, and contact information related to that product or division.
- **Calendar of Events:** This would include such things as news confer-

ences, shareholder meetings, public appearances, trade shows, and sponsored events. Any events that will be held at the web site should be promoted.

- **Community Activities:** Information about the organizations philanthropic activities. This information is often presented as a combination of news releases covering current events, and a newsletter archive chronicling the organization's efforts to improve the world.

Cutting-Edge Content

At the high-end of online newsroom content, there are three offerings that are too complex to describe in detail here: Online News Conferences, Online Presentations, and your own News Wire. They all require a major commitment of resources, but for companies that can afford the price tag, staff time, and learning curve, they can provide substantial results. Let's take a quick look at these 21st Century products.

- **Online News Conferences:** Live online news conferences can be just as expensive to produce as television programming. However, the resulting video stream is not suitable for broadcast on television or even print reproduction of stills. I recommend using streaming video only in crisis situations; otherwise, streaming audio with a still photo of the speaker communicates just as well and is far less expensive.
- **Online Presentations:** An online presentation is nothing more than a narrated PowerPoint slide show that is streamed over the Internet. These modules are inexpensive to create and communicate well if kept brief (five minutes or less). They're perfect for introducing new products or services, or taking stands on issues of the day. They can be easily edited, updated, and stored, accumulating into an impressive library over time.

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News Wire or News Feed: The back door to media coverage is to become a provider of *news* — not just news releases. Many companies have started to assemble news wires by summarizing the top stories in their field on a daily or weekly basis, and syndicating those summaries to the media and other interested parties. For an example of a great niche newswire, check out MP3newswire.net.

Conclusion

Everyone agrees that the Internet has completely changed PR practices in just a few short years, but that's where the consensus ends and the arguments begin. For many years, there were no guidelines for using this new technology — just trial and error. Today, we can learn from the lessons of those who, like myself, have stumbled into a successful formula for integrating the Internet into public relations practices. For instruction, I recommend three recent books: Shel Holtz' *Public Relations on the Net* (Amacom Books, 1999), Don Middleberg's *Winning PR in the Wired World* (McGraw Hill, 2001), and my own *Complete Guide to Internet Publicity* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002). There is no need for you to repeat the mistakes made by others.

~ About ~

Patron Saint Productions

Patron Saint Productions is a publishing consultancy specializing in online marketing strategy, campaigns, and training. It was founded by Steve O'Keefe, a 20-year book publishing veteran who has launched online marketing campaigns for more than 1,000 books and dozens of publishers.

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