11 Lessons that PR Professionals Need to Learn in a Digital World

How to Measure Your PR, Take Control, and Scale Your Global Communications on the Social Web Without Having to Beg the Gatekeepers
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**.................................................................3  

**Communication Is Now Crowded and Noisy** .............4  

**11 Lessons for PR**..........................................................8  
1. The Online Influencer Is Now a Credible and Mainstream PR Tactic .................8  
2. Technology Is Your New Tool to Scale Your PR ........................................9  
3. The Social Web Has Democratized Communications .....................................9  
4. Content Marketing Is the New PR Spin Doctor ...........................................9  
5. Social Proof for Brands Is Now About Data and Metrics ............................11  
6. Online Search Results Now Define Your Brand ........................................12  
7. PR Is Now Mobile and Visual ..............................................................12  
8. It’s Now About Your Digital Content Distribution ....................................13  
9. Reputation Management Is Now a Tech and Data Game ............................14  
10. PR Is Now Measurable ..............................................................................15  
11. PR Needs to Predict the Future ...............................................................16  

**Wrapping It up**.........................................................................17  

**About the Author**..............................................................18
Introduction: Let’s Chat

I called my grandfather.

It was a grey day on a busy road and I was on my way to a business appointment. He was delighted as it had been a while. As we chatted I proceeded to tell him that I was speaking to him from a phone in a car. It was running on the ether. Invisible wireless waves that made talking while driving possible.

No cords required.

He was amazed. The man that was a milkman in his past life and delivered bottles of milk with cream on the top by horse and cart was now on his first mobile call.

It wasn’t a smart phone and the Internet hadn’t been made public. But it was the start of the communication revolution that hasn’t stopped. Not unlike the home delivery of milk, faxes are now a distant memory and printed newspapers have started disappearing.

Most media moguls hadn’t smelt the fire yet.

Human communication used be like the milkman. Personal and welcome. One house at a time. One on one. Today it is mass communication at scale. The challenge: still making it feel personal, authentic, and real.

Public relations is about communications…. the message, the medium, and the content. The channels are changing and so is the technology. But the message still needs to touch hearts and minds.

Communication is now messy, splintered, and in real time. It’s amplified by the social web and has made everyone a publisher and a virtual reporter.

The democratization of publishing and marketing is switching the power from the gatekeepers to the creators.
Communication Is Now Crowded and Noisy

If you think it was hard to get your message out before the social web showed up then you were right.

But now the challenge is even harder.

The number of channels, social networks, and types of media has exploded. The amount of data created by citizen publishers now competes with mainstream media.

The Facts on the Data Explosion
To put some perspective on the explosion of data knowledge and noise, here are the latest facts:

- Facebook video has passed over 8 billion viewers a day *(Techcrunch)*
- Over 1 billion users are being distracted every day just on *YouTube*
- More content is uploaded in 60 days on *YouTube* than all the 3 major U.S. Networks generated in the last 60 years
- There are over 500 million tweets a day on *Twitter* alone
- The young upstart *Snapchat* has added even more noise to the mix with their users watching over 7 billion videos a day *(Fortune.com)*
- 8,796 photos a second are also shared on *Snapchat*
- *Whatsapp* is another communications channel that has now passed 1 billion users with 700 million pictures shared daily and the average user sending more than 1,000 messages a month

This creation and sharing all takes time. But time is a limited resource.

How do you compete for eyeballs and attention in a world that is more distracted than ever before?

Adapting to new communications channels and media is critical. And keeping on top of the revolution that is happening right in front of us in what is now a global village.

Also the splintering has taken place not just with the channels but also the multiple devices we need to consider. The proverbial stoop where my grandfather delivered milk to every morning now takes many forms (smartphones, tablets, desktops, smart devices) and we must optimize the messages we deliver throughout.
So how do companies, PR agencies and communications professionals transition from a world of the 7 o’clock news cycle and column inches to a noisy and distracted 24/7 digital world that never sleeps?

**Innovation Is the New Catch Cry**

It’s about innovation, re-invention, and always learning. Technology is both a curse and a blessing.

The challenge is not just innovating but re-inventing. Old habits die hard.

So what do we need to unlearn?

“*The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones*”

– John Maynard Keynes
Is the Press Release Dead?

Let’s start with this….the almost buried but not forgotten press release.

The reality is that sending an email to your power list with a press release attached no longer cuts it like it used to. The once ubiquitous press release is not quite dead but has almost become irrelevant. It’s just that no one has told the old school PR practitioners.

Is it time to cut it out from PR 101 or is time to just be more creative in our communications practices?

Use case: Get Smarter with Your Press Release

Let’s imagine a PR firm that specializes in beauty and personal care sends out multiple press releases for the same product over time.

A media intelligence platform like Meltwater’s provides the tools to compare the performance of each release and benchmarking their impact on reach, share of voice, keyword themes associated with the brand. The company can now track impact and ROI by asking and answering questions like:

- How did various releases compare in reaching our target audience?
- Which releases succeeded in changing the conversation in the way we wanted?
- Were the media lists different?
- Was the language different?
- Did timing play a role?

One thing is for or sure: You need to be more creative with your communications. How about using the data to benchmark what happens when you add a video, some memorable images, or maybe even a podcast to the media pack that is sent with the press release.
Time to Be Authentic

The buttoned up formality of the communications industry 20 or even 10 years ago is now passing. The way we write and craft our messages needs to be real.

Ever had a press release that felt like it was written by a machine. Maybe it was all cut and paste. Whenever I stumble upon an ivory tower communication, it’s browser closed.

That formulaic and formal language and approach also doesn’t cut it any more. Now it’s about authentic, powerful and personalized communication.

People want to hear real stories in a conversational writing style. Write a formal communication piece and I can guarantee you that it will only be the competitors reading and not your intended target audience.
11 Lessons That PR Professionals Need to Grasp in a Digital World

1. The Online Influencer Is Now a Credible and Mainstream PR Tactic

The online influencer has now been identified as powerful and credible. Their digital reach and signal is measurable. Their time has come. The technology to identify their influence is now available, affordable and easy to use.

Influencers Are the New Thought Leaders

PR firms used to concentrate on creating an article in the printed press to position the brand as a thought leader or influencer in its industry. Now you need to earn it online.

Benchmarking your contacts so you can make the most valuable connections. Consider this as part of a new “relationship-building” approach, where you don’t just spam everyone with a press release or email inquiries, you do your due diligence and engage in 2-way dialog.

Use Case: Influencers and Advocates

When choosing an influencer or spokesperson to represent your brand, a business can benchmark potential candidates by reach and media exposure.

Media intelligence dashboards provide the tools to set up a separate search for each individual and then create a dashboard that aggregates and compares them all.

The data doesn’t lie. It will show a clear frontrunner in terms of reach and exposure. Or maybe one top candidate has greater reach, while another one has more exposure. You can now figure out why... and make an informed decision.

Online thought leaders often have more distribution and influence than the daily news.
2. Technology Is Your New Tool to Scale Your PR

The explosion of online data has made manual management and insight gathering almost impossible. You will make mistakes and you will miss brand mentions.

Today you need the platforms and tools that help you sift and collage brand mentions, and provide the intelligence to discover the trends, and sniff around your competitors at scale.

You now need to create communication that can then be published and distributed to your market in real time. No more waiting for the print company to create the collateral, proof read it, and snail mail.

3. The Social Web Has Democratized Communications

What excited me when I first discovered Facebook and Twitter was that I no longer had to schmooze a journalist, always pay for advertising, or beg permission from a media outlet to publish and get noticed.

Now it’s start a blog and build your own audience. You are now a publisher.

Then build a following on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. It’s about owning, earning, and investing in your brand audience.

**Realtime media is now the norm**

Social networks have also added an immediacy that breaks news in real time by the average Joe. A natural disaster, plane crash, or terrorist attack. It is broken by the public with their smart phones

**Use case: News coverage vs social coverage**

Comparing news coverage vs social chatter on a specific topic can be especially useful for understanding the connection (or disconnect) between news and public opinion.
4. Content Marketing Is the New PR Spin Doctor

In an online world you are defined by your content. That’s it.

No matter how you twist and turn, the virtual world has a face and it’s made up of images, video, ebooks, infographics, and podcasts. Creating content that puts your best face forward is essential for brand building.

You can either choose to create and build content yourself or be at the mercy of content that is written and produced without your permission.

Content written about you can be inspired by content that you have created that makes your brand worth talking about. Online content is your influencing weapon of choice. It’s your new spin doctor.

Content Amplification Is PR’s New Super Weapon

Content is one thing; making it move is another.

You don’t just put out content on your website, you need to find ways to repurpose and amplify it. Marketing your content whether it’s via email, social, or on mainstream media is as important as the content creation itself. You need to be everywhere.

So….hustle.

Use case: Channel effectiveness

Imagine this scenario. A client logs into the Meltwater app. They then start promoting their content on multiple social media channels and want to benchmark the networks against each other to see which one is worth extra investment.

Here are some potential insights:

- To measure virality, look at which posts from each channel led to more reposts/retweets.
- See which channel experienced the greatest growth in followers (community) as a result of the message.
- Benchmark each channel’s impact on conversions by linking Google Analytics to the “Meltwater Engage” feature to see which click led to a direct website conversion and which channel that click came from.
- In Google Analytics they can also see each engagement’s demographics and if that person is their target market etc. (They can also use their internal automation/analytics tool to track the engagement all the way through the funnel to purchase.)
5. Social Proof for Brands Is Now About Data and Metrics

Turned up to a website or blog and saw no share quantification? You start to wonder if anyone is reading or visiting. You think, not much happening here.

Stumble onto another blog and find it has thousands of shares. Your impression is one of importance and credibility. It may seem a shallow way to judge influence but it’s a human thing. Share numbers offer social proof.

You can now compare the influence of a brand based on metrics and data. It needs to be obvious and visual.

**Use case: Data measures product performance**

An athletic shoe company is branching out to athletic wear. They have several lines of clothing they just launched (men’s, women’s, and various sports).

Benchmarking for exposure, reach, and share of voice against the competition wouldn’t make sense as the competitors are well established brands. So they pose a question. Let’s see what works? We will benchmark the different lines of clothing against each other.

The data produces insights that are worth gold!

- You can see which lines are building momentum/traction,
- Now you know where to focus marketing/PR resources.

Because the company understands that a new line of business can take time to make money, they will use this benchmarking (as opposed to simply sales figures) to help guide product decisions.

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In a global economy, big data now provides the true measure of influence.
6. Online Search Results Now Define Your Brand

Social media might bring your dirty washing into the online live stream and make it visible on Facebook and Twitter.

But a continuous and ongoing search engine strategy that creates and pushes good content to the top of brand search results is vital.

Proactive and optimized keyword phrases that are woven into the online brand publications on blogs and websites are a positive bastion against bad PR that may pop up on the page one of search engine results.

7. PR Is Now Mobile and Visual

When the iPhone was first launched, the only people with smartphones were the connected corporate executives. Those “Crackberries” were a status symbol.

Today the smartphone is ubiquitous and the communication device of choice for the masses. Just add an obsessed social network user to the mix and you have a perfect storm. That bad customer experience will be shared in real time and is also often visual.

No more waiting to draft a letter when someone gets home or craft a private email to be sent to the complaints department.

The PR professional needs to work out how to counter that challenge.

Text and newspaper column inches was #PR. Now it is text, video, and images.

PR is also visual

Communicating is now photos shared on mobile, videos captured while you are out and about, and we even have the disturbing but fun trend of emoticons.

People are getting used to a video sent via MMS, on Facebook, or even on WhatsApp.

Public relations needs to work out how to use the powerful and emotive visuals that we all now expect.
8. It’s Now About Earning and Owning Your Digital Content Distribution

You can no longer just rely on the influence of the journalist to push your content out to the waiting world. No more is it just about begging, renting media mentions, or schmoozing for attention, influence, or communication distribution.

The Democratisation of PR’s Reach

Today you can reach your audience yourself if you focus on earning and owning global reach.

You need to build your own distribution networks for the brand.

This approach provides a degree of independence and ownership of your marketing and communications channels. The social networks started offering this ability for free 10 years ago. Today you need to continue to seize opportunities before the changing newsfeed algorithms of Facebook remove this ability forever.

Otherwise you will have to pay.

This requires brands to not just tap into the power of online influencers but to take responsibility for their own content distribution. Doing this means building communities on social networks, earning authority on search engines, and building email lists.

You have the choice of doing these things for yourself, paying for it, or placing your brand’s messaging in other people’s hands.

Paying for reach & promotion with your communication is now becoming a necessary evil in a new Facebook world.
9. Reputation Management Is Now a Tech and Data Game

Reputation monitoring for brands was a simple task in the past.

Keep an eye on the TV, the ear to the radio, and check out the newspaper everyday.

Now we need tools that are listening to dozens of digital channels to make sure that a tweet hasn’t become a viral bad news disaster.

More and more we see that absolutely anything can spark a controversy (especially on social media where everyone has an (often knee jerk) opinion.

But luckily we have the tools to listen to the first hints and take action.

**Use case: Financial earnings**

Financial earning announcements are a time of fact and fiction. Rumors abound. Let’s say a large tech company uses their media monitoring and social listening tools to benchmark exposure, reach, share of voice on their upcoming financial earnings so they can mediate their message and carefully position themselves agains the competition. For instance, they can:

- Check for reach and impressions leading up to the financial earnings call to keep up with rumors and speculations about themselves and competitors.

- Use this real-time listening to stay on top of any breaches of the blackout period and get ahead of any potential crisis should a break occur.

- Monitor for any breaches of competitor financials. If one happens, they might subtly find ways to amplify this breach.

- Use their findings to prepare the executives for questions, accusations, false rumors and comparisons to competitors when briefing media.
10. PR Is Now Measurable

It’s a competitive world.

School was where we started to talk about faster, higher, and stronger. When we competed for that first job, the awakening of that fight or flight survival gene was heightened. Business is no different.

Businesses are used to benchmarking themselves by revenue (vs their competitors as well as quarter over quarter and year over year). But now marketing can do the same for share of voice, reach, engagement, sentiment. How’s your reach and brand chatter compared to your competitors. Are you making measurable headway?

**Use case: Quarterly performance**

A tech hardware company benchmarks itself every quarter against their 9 top competitors as well as their own past performance. Criteria include:

- Media exposure
- Overall reach
- Top publications by volume and reach
- Sentiment
- Share of voice by volume and by reach
- Geographical spread of their reach

This means that from these benchmarks they can drill down to look at the coverage that contributed to spikes (or low points) for themselves or their competitors.

These benchmarks may now be included in management reports and represent the core of the marketing department’s reports to the CEO/board backed by real data.
11. PR Needs to Predict the Future

PR people have always been expected to be at the forefront of trends. Luckily they now have the tools to spot them more accurately as they start to trend. No longer do they need to react and guess.

As technology gets smarter and artificial intelligence becomes usable, the ability to pick trends is now much more visible. No need to just rely on human intuition but enhance that with insights that are captured by the web crawlers, marketing tools, and data.

**Use case: Trending themes**

A startup has established a big market in Germany and they are trying to expand to other countries in Europe. What can a powerful technology tool like Meltwater provide?

- Investigate the keyword benchmarking around their brand
- Drill down into the top themes associated with the kind of service they provide.

By comparing the keywords in various markets, they can build on what made them successful in Germany but also take cultural differences into consideration. This may mean that in one country they discover the service they provide is strongly associated with new mothers. In another it is associated with an older (mostly retired) demographic.

They then tailor their outreach based on findings.
Wrapping it up

So if we had to choose which are the top trends that you need to keep a close eye on. What are the top 3 that you need to take a closer look.

The social web
Adapting to the speed of this transformation in communication is maybe the biggest challenge for all of us. It is the breadth, scope and scale of the social networks that needs constant monitoring, managing and measuring.
It’s not going away.

Mobile
The rapid rise of the smartphone and its intersection with social is sometimes daunting. The perfect storm of these addictive technologies has transformed communications forever.
It will never be the same again.

Technology
The adaptation of technology to these changes means that the scaling of the communication is possible. But you need to implement and learn how to use the tools. That requires an investment of time and money.

Are you adapting, innovating and embracing the change or are you hiding and avoiding it? Your attitude to change is maybe the biggest challenge you have.

Over to you.
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Jeff is a Forbes Top 10 social media influencer and a Global #1 content marketing influencer, who learned the secrets to growing web traffic without paying Google or Facebook a cent. He works with companies and communications executives to optimize their online, personal, and company brands with digital content and social media marketing. In spring 2016, he was named #1 global Digital Marketing Influencer by Onalytica.