

The Demise of “Dead Tree Media” and the Future of PR

Seattle is a great city, but its days as a two-newspaper town are numbered. What happens in the Emerald City may be a harbinger of things to come for the newspaper industry, in the process signaling a change in how public relations is practiced.

Last week, Hearst Corp. announced that it had put the Seattle Post-Intelligencer up for sale. If no one buys the daily newspaper within 60 days, Hearst Corp. will either move the publication to an online-only format or shutter the 146-year-old publication completely. With the economy in the tank, the newspaper business dying a slow death, and credit markets tight, it's doubtful that Hearst Corp. will find a buyer within its narrow timeframe.

If the Seattle Post-Intelligencer ceases publication, it won't be the last newspaper to do so. Over the past few months, major newspapers in Connecticut and New Jersey have narrowly avoided being shut down, and weekly newspapers in Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Idaho, among other states, have ceased publication. The Christian Science Monitor, one of just three truly national newspapers (the Wall Street Journal and USA Today being the others), ceased print publication and moved all operations online. In Detroit, both daily newspapers have ceased home delivery on certain days, while college newspapers across the country are cutting back on the days they publish.

These problems for the newspaper business stem from a sea change in how consumers get their news, and a stunning lack of foresight displayed by executives in the sector, who marginalized their business by giving content away for free. Add in the historically weak economy, continued high newsprint costs, and a longer-than-usual advertising downturn, and you've got a recipe for a wave of newspaper closures. High labor costs are also working against the industry.

Many newspaper industry watchers now believe that the days of print newspapers are nearing an end. They point to the New York Times' recent decision to sell front-page advertising as a signal that even the largest and best capitalized newspaper publishers will eventually throw in the towel. If and when the New York Times shifts to online-only, trees around the world will rejoice.

In the meantime, public relations professionals need to recognize that the days of daily deadlines are also coming to an end. Sooner rather than later, virtually every publication will be deadline-free, because no journalist will ever have to say, "We're going to press at 7:00 P.M." This will change the playing field, giving public relations pros more time to respond to some stories, but less time to deal with breaking news, especially bad news.

The declining fortunes of the newspaper industry also mean that newspaper publishers will continue to look for cheaper labor. Layoffs and buyouts are

occurring daily at newspapers, meaning that veteran journalists are disappearing from the business. They take with them years of experience, and younger journalists, with a different view of the public relations industry, often replace these departed vets. Younger journalists are also more prone to errors, something that makes life difficult for editors and public relations pros alike.

The death of print newspapers will mean fewer special sections but more dynamic interactive content. Localization of news will increase, but so will blogging, which often goes unedited in the newspaper environment. Video and audio content will be more important, but so will source material such as internal company documents. Interaction between readers and journalists will also increase, making it easier for angry customers or employees to exact revenge.

Public relations is a fluid concept, and thus far, the industry has adapted well to changes in media consumption. Public relations grew in part because of the rise of radio and continued to grow as television and then the internet became the main platforms for information dissemination. The evolution continues today as people obtain their news from sources such as Twitter and Facebook, and as wireless access to data and information becomes more ubiquitous.

The biggest challenge for the public relations industry, however, may be the eventual death of the print newspaper. Once that occurs, the news world will truly be 24/7 and opportunities for well-crafted story pitches will diminish. Online-only newspapers will face stiff competition from competitors outside of their region, and editors will push for harder news to garner eyeballs. The change will create a domino effect across other mediums, especially among other online publishers, which will eventually find that they're no longer competing with dinosaurs.

In the end, public relations firms and departments that recognize the changing media landscape and craft their strategy to deal with it will not only emerge as winners, but will play a role in shaping how the media and the public relations industry deal with one another in the future. Those that sit idly by will find themselves longing futilely for the days of a bundle of dead trees sitting at the end of their driveway.

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