

ROI of Online Press Releases

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The following is the executive summary of a research study conducted by a team of Fellows of the Society for New Communications Research and made possible by support from Vocus. The full research report will soon be made available by SNCR.

Press releases used to be one of the basic tools of the public relations profession, used by PR practitioners to communicate news directly to journalists. With the advent of new online communication channels, the goals, target audiences, and overall scope of press releases have evolved, transforming press releases themselves into a new communication tool used by public relations and marketing professionals alike.

The purpose of this research study was to identify and analyze current patterns in the uses of online press releases. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to identify:

- Goals of online press releases;
- Target audiences of online press releases;
- Criteria for evaluating the success of online press releases; as well as
- Tactics, opportunities and challenges of using online press releases.

Ultimately, the goal of the study is to examine the changing roles of public relations and marketing in the context of how the press release is being used as a tool used not only by PR professionals but also by marketing professionals and small business owners for a wide variety of purposes and objectives. Based on the study's results, the SNCR Fellows have compiled a list of recommendations about the use and evaluation of online press releases and some observations about this evolving communications profession.

Methodology

The study utilized in-depth structured interviews, a Web-based survey, and case studies. This executive summary presents and discusses the results of the survey. The in-depth interviews and case studies will be made available by SNCR in the full research report.

The survey was developed by the SNCR Fellows and administered by TWI Surveys during March 31-April 16, 2008. We sought the responses of professional communicators who use or have used online news releases.

Sample

The survey received a total of 423 responses from marketing professionals (32.9 percent), PR professionals (30.1 percent), small business owners (23.7 percent),

representing mostly small (under \$1 million revenue, 44.8 percent) and medium (\$1-\$10 million revenue, 31.5 percent) organizations from various sectors: service/retail (52.6 percent), technology (24.6 percent), as well as other sectors such as: nonprofit, government, and manufacturing. The overwhelming majority of respondents work primarily in the United States (83.9 percent).

Results

Goals of Online Press Releases

The respondents' top goals for online press releases indicated that the traditional goals of increasing an organization's visibility and credibility and announcing news are now almost equally as important as new goals that traditional press releases could not have accomplished. These new goals include reaching customers directly, creating online content, and search engine optimization (SEO). (See Table 1.)

Table 1.

2. What are your goals for your online press releases?

Questions	Mean	Mean as a percent of possible score	Very important/important	Neutral	Very unimportant/unimportant
		0 20 40 60 80 100			
Gaining increased visibility and credibility with audiences	4.50		90.9%	8.2%	1.0%
Announcing news	4.30		79.6%	16.0%	4.4%
Reaching customers / consumers	4.25		80.0%	13.8%	6.2%
Creating online content that is readily available	4.10		74.5%	18.1%	7.5%
SEO optimization for organization's website	4.09		71.1%	18.6%	10.3%
Providing a conduit to other online sources of information	3.69		59.7%	29.0%	11.4%
Using the release as a sales tool	3.59		58.8%	19.5%	21.7%
Reaching bloggers	3.57		56.3%	23.6%	20.0%
Enhancing thought leadership	3.25		43.3%	31.0%	25.7%

Beyond the unanimously agreed-upon goals of increasing visibility and credibility, the researchers noticed significant differences among communication professions with regard to the goals of online news releases. While PR professionals placed more importance on traditional goals such as announcing news and enhancing thought leadership, marketing professionals reported SEO and reaching consumers as important goals for their online press releases. Small business owners were concerned with using the release as a sales tool and reaching customers directly.

Audiences

Both traditional media and new media emerged as the top two most important audiences respondents hoped to reach with their online press releases. Bloggers and new media followed traditional media in importance, but were a very close second, separated by only 0.28 points on a 1-5 scale. Following closely were consumers and customers, whether in B2B or B2C environments. (See Table 2.)

Table 2.
Who are the particular audiences for your online press releases?

Questions	Mean	Mean as a percent of possible score				
		0	20	40	60	80
Traditional media	4.16					
Bloggers and new media outlets	3.88					
B2B Consumers/customers and prospects	3.72					
B2C Consumers/customers and prospects	3.32					
Webmasters that will repurpose release	3.27					
MSAs - geographical targets	2.89					
Partners	2.83					
Financial Analysts and Investment community	2.47					
Competitors	2.23					

In terms of target audiences for online press releases, significant differences emerged between marketing and public relations professionals. Although both marketing and public relations professionals reported more than average importance for reaching traditional media, consumers, and webmasters that will repurpose the release, PR professionals were consistently more interested than marketing professionals in reaching traditional media. Marketing professionals were consistently more interested than PR practitioners in reaching new media or consumers directly. For example, PR professionals rated the importance of reaching traditional media an average 4.53 on a 1-5 scale, which is significantly higher than marketing professionals' rating of 3.82. Similarly, marketing professionals rated the importance of reaching webmasters with an average 3.49 on a 1-5 scale, which is significantly higher than PR practitioners' rating of only 2.83.

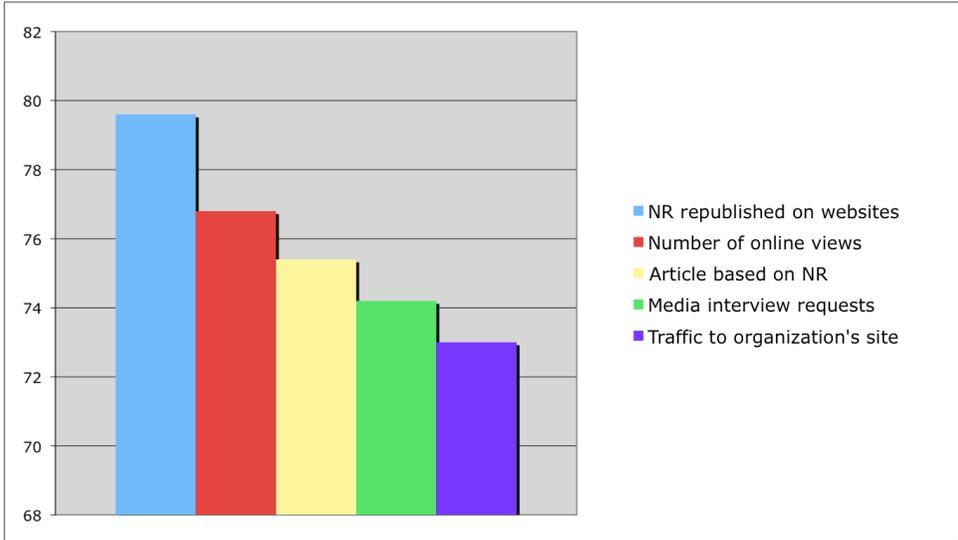
These results indicate that online press releases have been adopted as a communications tool by the marketing profession, but are being used very differently than they have traditionally been used by public relations professionals. It is possible that the traditional patterns of press release usage might keep public relations practitioners from adapting press releases to online contexts and new audiences.

Evaluation

The most frequently mentioned criterion for evaluating the success of online press releases was the number of times the release has been republished on websites (79.6 percent), followed by the number of times the release has been viewed online (76.8 percent), an article based on the release (75.4 percent), and media interview requests as a result of the release (74.2 percent). (See Table 3)

Table 3.

What are your criteria for measuring the success of online press releases? (multiple selections allowed)



In terms of having the press release republished on other websites, the survey responses indicated that some websites are more highly valued than others. The most important types of websites for the republication of press releases were news portals such as Google News or Yahoo News. They received a 4.56 average importance score on a 1-5 scale. News websites such as Reuters and Topix were the second most important type of websites, with an average importance score of 4.27. Blogs and social media sites were ranked third in terms of importance, receiving a 4.01 importance score.

Interestingly, although marketing and public relations professionals seem to use online press releases differently, there were no statistically significant differences between the two in terms of the criteria they use for evaluating success. In fact, the evaluation criteria were homogenous across different size organizations and industry sectors as well. The only statistically significant difference identified young communication practitioners (under 30 years of age) as more interested than the other age groups in obtaining coverage on blogs and social media sites.

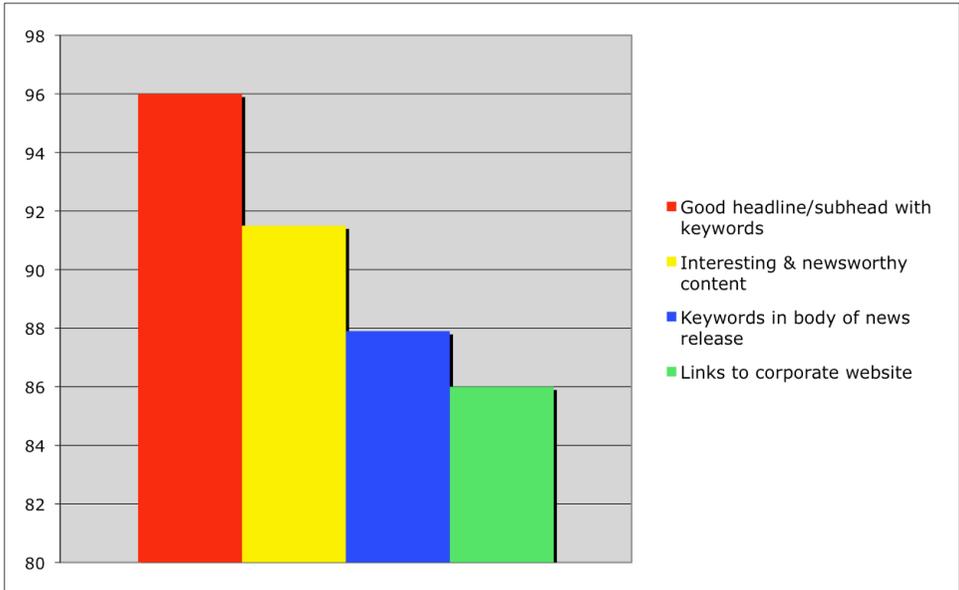
These data show that the criteria used to evaluate the success of press releases measure message distribution and exposure, and are the electronic equivalent of press clippings. However, these metrics provide no information about higher-level success indicators such as audience receipt; message comprehension, recall, and acceptance; and behavior change. Simply put, the fact that a press release has been republished on a website offers no certain evidence that the target audience actually read it, understood it, agreed with it and, if applicable, engaged in a different behavior (*i.e.* product purchase) as a result.

Open-ended responses to a different survey question indicate that higher level indicators such as “eyeballs” and “dollar value” are desired evaluation criteria of online press releases, but communication professionals do not know how to measure them. The researchers found these metrics interesting and worth further exploration and examination. These findings regarding metrics mirror what we have seen in our earlier studies of organizations using new communications tools and technologies in their communications initiatives, and may be indicative of the maturity level of the communications industry in terms of their understanding of how to best deploy and measure new and evolving communications tools and methodologies. We hope that this study will help to add to the knowledge base and provide some best practices for how both the PR and marketing profession can think about new metrics.

Tactics, Opportunities, and Challenges

When asked to select the primary tactics used for issuing online press releases, 96 percent of respondents indicated using a good headline/subhead with keywords. Making sure the content is interesting and newsworthy was the next most popular tactic, indicated by 91.5 percent of respondents. Including keywords in the body of the press release and using links to the corporate website in the release were other popular tactics, selected by 87.9 percent and 86 percent of respondents, respectively. (See Table 4.)

Table 4.
What are the primary tactics you use when issuing a release for online distribution? (select all that apply)



Only 57.8 percent of respondents indicated using SEO tactics, although some of the keywords and linking tactics in Table 4 are likely to help the release's search engine rankings. This indicates a lack of knowledge about SEO on the part of most PR professionals, according to the researchers. Interestingly, very few respondents indicated using social media release formats (26.3 percent) and even fewer reported adding video (12.8 percent) or audio (9 percent) enhancements. Of all multimedia elements, photos were the most popular, used in online press releases by 49.5 percent of respondents.

Even more puzzling is that less than half of respondents (48.8 percent) link to their own press releases after they have been posted online.

According to respondents, the top opportunities for online press releases were the possibility to engage in SEO (34.1 percent) and the ability to reach both consumers directly and media (31.5 percent).

One open-ended survey question asked respondents to identify challenges of online press releases. The open-ended responses were grouped into categories according to the main themes. The most frequently mentioned challenges were:

1. ***Cutting through the clutter.*** This challenge speaks to the difficulty of getting a press release noticed in an information-rich environment.
2. ***Targeting and distribution.*** Respondents often find it difficult to identify and target the specific audience for their press releases.
3. ***Measurement.*** Accurate evaluation of online press release results to include not only message distribution and exposure, but also evidence of audience receipt and behavior change was another perceived challenge.

Conclusion

The survey responses indicate that online distribution is changing the nature of press releases, repurposing them into *news releases* used equally by PR and marketing professionals alike as a communications tool to reach a multiplicity of audiences and achieve a number of goals. As opposed to traditional press releases, which were a channel for communicating only with the media, online press releases present the opportunity to reach the public directly. However, some challenges accompany this opportunity:

- Ensuring that the public actually finds the press release online;
- Adapting the writing style to multiple audiences (media and the public) while optimizing for search engine rankings;
- Measuring the results and value of news releases

Communication professionals need to understand the opportunities and challenges of online news releases and choose their options carefully. It might be unreasonable to expect that one release will accomplish all purposes for all target audiences. We expect that news releases will evolve into several specialized categories, such as:

- Mainstream media releases

- Online media releases
- Social media releases
- Consumer releases

It will be a while before these specific types of news releases emerge and are taught in public relations courses. Until then, communication professionals can use these sound and proven principles to maximize the benefits of news releases:

1. Define your goal and target audience(s) in specific terms – What do you want to communicate? To whom?
2. Define your evaluation criteria: How will you know that you have accomplished your goal? What does success mean for this particular news release?
3. Research and understand your target audience(s) – Who are they? Where are they? What are they interested in? What do they read? What writing style is appropriate for them? What do they care about? Why should they care about your news?
4. Create and distribute your news release.
5. Track the news release’s impact; measure the results using the appropriate metrics.

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The research team for this study was comprised of SNCR Fellows Shel Holtz and Mihaela Vorvoreanu. The Society for New Communications Research thanks these individuals for their work on this study. In addition, the Society thanks the many participants in the survey and case study portions of the study and extends its appreciation to Vocus for its support of this research.