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How To Engage With Clients Now

Published: *RainToday.com*

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When dozens of principals of independently owned public relations firms converged on Austin, Texas, for the conference of the Public Relations Society of America Counselors Academy, they talked about many issues: industry specialization, research in PR, and content generation, to name a few. Underlying all of those conversations, though, was one question: *how can we engage with clients now?*

That question is as relevant to PR practitioners as it is to attorneys and other service professionals seeking to develop their business. Everyone is looking out over the same fast-changing marketing landscape and searching for ideas to engage with prospects and clients. The following are a few things you can do.

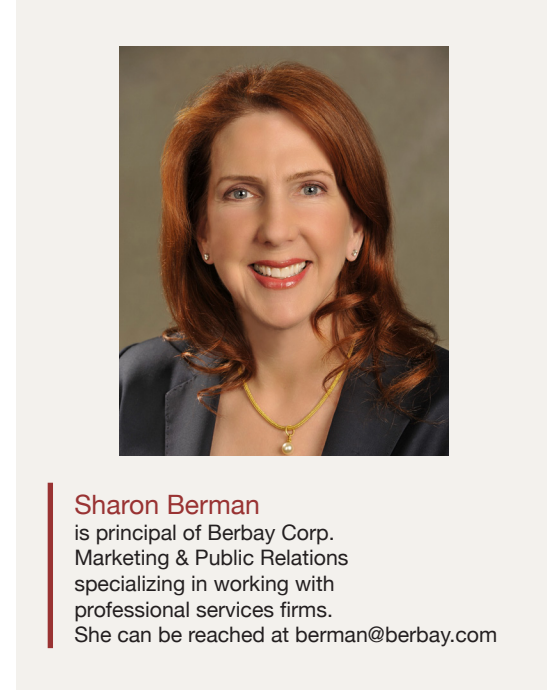
The walls are down. One of the emerging top-line messages is that in today's digital and interactive world, the web has blurred the distinctions between online and offline marketing, and even among formerly segmented marketing areas such as advertising, PR, websites, blogs, and social media.

PR firms that focus only on getting their clients visibility in the media will continue to disappear.

Firms that succeed will be those that integrate the results (the media interview or feature story, for example) into a larger marketing campaign, e.g., posting a story on the website, leveraging visibility through social media, etc. They recognize marketing is a non-stop spectrum that includes print collateral, websites, social media, and all the tools in between.

Clients' demand for industry specialists will only increase. Professionals, whether public relations, legal, engineering, or others, should specialize to some extent in their clients' industries. If they don't, they will be eclipsed by others.

Focusing your professional service on one or two specific industries allows you to become deeply familiar with them and to serve those clients better. At the same time, it



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immediately distinguishes you from generalist practitioners. All other things being equal, your marketing results will be stronger if you are an employment lawyer who has expertise in a specific industry, such as healthcare. We've seen that industry specialization does set firms apart and grow qualified leads.

Know what your clients don't know.

Specialization means being where prospective clients are, knowing what they know and knowing what they don't know.

Marketing and PR professionals need expertise in the industries their clients specialize in. That's because they need to be able to identify emerging issues, not merely current issues, their clients may not be aware of yet. When you know what the issues are,

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you can bring them to your clients' attention and reinforce your position as the expert.

Having such knowledge can also lead to your being a source in research articles, which more prospective clients are seeking out, and further reinforce your position as an expert. In the current information-overloaded media environment, journalists more than ever are looking for unreported stories. And if you're the one feeding journalists fresh stories, you're the one they'll contact if they need a quote or a subject to profile.

Content is forever. Anybody who wants to develop a business, whether they're a marketing professional or a lawyer, must generate content: blog posts, bylined articles, webinars, etc. Content drives prospective clients to your website, keeps them there, spins them off to your social media, and, hopefully, converts them into paying clients. It does that while at the same boosting your site's search engine ranking.

Generating content requires time and effort initially, but the nice thing about it is it's an almost infinitely renewable resource. Let's say you write an article. If you get the article published and do nothing else with it, that's like wearing a piece of clothing once and then throwing it out. If, on the other hand, you post alerts about the article on your website, tweet about it, promote it in your enewsletter, and create a webinar based on it, that's like wearing the piece of clothing over and over, altering it each time into something new.

I heard a story about a large professional services firm whose CEO continually rejected the recommendation of the company's marketing consultant to invest more resources into online marketing and content generation. The CEO didn't believe prospective clients were finding the firm via the web.

The consultant was able to demonstrate, however, that even if prospects weren't actually visiting the firm's website, they were Googling the firm and its partners—as well as comparable firms and their partners. A Google search for those competitors, the consultant showed, yielded content such as bylined articles, while a Google search for the CEO produced very little. That was enough to convince the CEO. His firm now does a great deal of digital marketing.

There's content, and then there's content. The first “level” of content, which we'll call “the hum,” includes blog posts, articles, webinars, and such on subjects that are written about consistently. Examples include “How to Avoid Being Sued by Your Employees,” “What to Look for in Your Insurance Policy,” and “Why You Need to Optimize Your Website.”

The hum isn't bad. This kind of content is easy to produce and is useful to readers. It usually doesn't come with an expiration date, either. So, a blog post about choosing an insurance policy might not be relevant to a reader today, but in six months, when the reader is about to meet with an insurance agent, it will take on new meaning.

As easy and useful as the hum may be, it can't compare in value to the second, deeper level of content. This kind of content goes beyond the hum to subjects that aren't being written about yet, such as pending legislation. In-depth content requires more work in the form of independent research, but it is much more compelling than the hum, both to your network and to the media.

If Content Is King, Engagement Is the Holy Grail

Getting prospective clients to visit your website is worthwhile. Getting them to engage

with your business by, for example, commenting on your blog is much better. The overloaded, segmented nature of the current information environment makes that hard to achieve. But it's possible, and it's necessary if you want those visitors to become clients. Engagement is a prize you need to keep your eyes on. ■