

PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE INTERNET ON THE EXAMPLES OF THE METALLURGICAL INDUSTRY IN POLAND AND IN THE WORLD

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A short history of the development of the WWW and online marketing have been outlined in the article. The work of Public Relations as a promotion-mix tool have been presented. The WWW site has been characterized as a basic tool of communication on the Internet (using the examples of WWW sites in the metallurgical industry in Poland and in the world). Moreover, the target groups of online Public Relations have also been presented.

Key words: public relations, e-marketing, the WWW site

Public Relations (Odnosi s javosti) preko interneta na primjerima metalurške industrije u Poljskoj i u svijetu. U članku smo u sažetom obliku prikazali razvoj WWW i online marketinga. Prikazan je rad na odnosima s javnosti kao promotivni alat za komunikaciju na Internetu (koristili su se primjeri WWW stranica metalurške industrije u Poljskoj i u svijetu). Štoviše, prikazane su i ciljne grupe online Public Relations.

Ključne riječi: public relations, e-marketing, WWW stranica

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Internet, in spite of the common beliefs, is quite distant, as it dates back to the 50-ties of the 20th century. The Internet was born as ARPAnet - a network set up by the Department of Defense of the United States of America with an aim of conducting research on computer networks designed for military applications. Fortunately, a few years later, the Internet evolved towards the educational direction to become an inter-university network. In 1974, the TCP/IP protocol was developed, and Vinton Cref used for the first time the word "Internet" in his article explaining the operation of the network [1, 2]. The WWW (World-Wide Web) network - the most important element of the Internet was established in 1991, developed by Tim Berners-Lee. This facilitated access to information stored in the form of hypertext and retrieving it to a client computer. A year later, the World Bank created its first WWW site. Up to now, the Internet has expanded to a huge size covering the whole world; virtually everything can be found here, on any subject.

For a change, the history of Internet marketing is only a few years old, and its development is a direct consequence of the dynamic commercialization of the Internet over the 90-ties. That commercial consciousness was born in the minds of people around the world along with the appear-

ance of World-Wide Web sites. The WWW enabled one, in an user-friendly manner, to acquaint oneself with the offer of a firm, formed a kind of a company's showcase, and became the catalyst of a rapidly growing demand for access to the network and, as a consequence, laid the foundation for the application of the Internet in the market economy.

However, the WWW enabled something more than merely inserting simple information of the activity of an organization; it provided an opportunity for using corporate sites in the promotion of the brand and integration of marketing campaigns. That "something", noticed by specialists, has created bases for a new quality of marketing activities - the electronic marketing (also known as e-marketing, online marketing, or Internet marketing).

Today, e-marketing expansively covers all elements of the classical marketing mix, from the product through the price, promotion to distribution, and its importance in the marketing plans of organizations is constantly growing.

In this study, we will deal in a detailed manner with the effect of the Internet on public relations activities, one of the basic parts of the "promotion cake" of an organization.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A PROMOTION-MIX INSTRUMENT

Promotion, or marketing communication, influencing the market, influencing purchasers - is a system of an organization communicating with the target market and other entities affecting the functioning of that organization. In

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order to achieve a high level of efficacy and effectiveness, promotion is coordinated with other marketing strategy elements - product, price, distribution channels used and the company's personnel activity - aiming at achieving the required market share by the organization.

The promotion system (promotion mix) includes pure forms of promotion - advertisement, personal promotion, public relations, complementary promotion, and mixed forms of promotion, such as sponsoring, exhibition & fair promotion, direct promotion and spectacular event promotion. From an organization's point of view, all forms of promotion perform an informative function in the system of the organization communicating with the environment and the function of supporting the sale of goods on the market.

Close relations exist among promotion-mix instruments, of both substitutional and complementary nature. Indeed, all instruments operate for the benefit of the company's image, however, public relations are characterized by continuous, long-term activities, while the other tools are focusing on a short-time period.

There are a lot of facts indicating that the significance of PR as a promotion instrument is relatively growing. Three features are decisive to the popularity of PR. A company becomes, as it were, an objective "third party" instead of a simple organization that maximizes its profits. Secondly, through public relations, firms reach segments that are hardly accessible by using other means, such as governmental circles, or academic people. Thirdly, PR are covered by legal regulations to a lesser extent. In western countries, expenditures to public relations are growing twice as rapidly as for sale advertising and promotion. This undoubtedly results from the fact the strength of mass publicity is weakening due to rising costs, an increasing advertising confusion, and a decreasing number of receivers. The marketers of many companies increasingly often orient themselves to PR activities [3, 4].

PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE INTERNET

The aim of public relations activities is creating and maintaining the desired image of an enterprise or an organization. This goal can be effectively achieved also on the Internet. This is particularly true for the following forms of PR:

- shaping of the company's image;
- cooperation with mass media (media relations);
- communicating with investors (investor relations);
- internal public relations, or communicating with the company's employees through the network [5].

The use of the Internet in PR activities is relatively new. The promotion of Amazon.com carried out by Eric Ward, a PR specialist, can be regarded as the beginning of

public relations activities on the Internet, where telephone calls and fax transmitted to journalists were replaced with communication by electronic mail, thus achieving a wider range of influence and a greater response by the media.

In fact, electronic PR performs a broader role than PR created and built in the real world. In a virtual reality, image creators are not at journalists' mercy.

A message goes directly to receivers, not being halted, shortened, or - what often happens - distorted by "press agents" [6]. Moreover, the Internet is an interactive medium providing a possibility of virtually unlimited publications at a low cost. All those features cause PR specialists to increasingly high appreciate the advantages of the Internet and increasingly often practically utilize its capabilities in their everyday work.

Online public relations can be conducted using the following basic tools:

- the WWW site;
- electronic mail;
- mails and discussion groups;
- Internet conferences (chat rooms);
- electronic newsletters;
- services sponsoring.

THE WWW SITE AS THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL FOR CONDUCTING ACTIVITIES THROUGH THE WEB

The skilful and properly integrated use of the above-mentioned PR tools provides a guarantee of success for every specialist in this field. However, it should be emphasized that first and foremost tool for conducting online public relations activity is the WWW site. It is in most cases the WWW site that corporates PR activities on the Internet should be started from.

The Internet service proves extremely useful when a need arises of clarifying, correcting or expanding the information on the functioning of a company. Any (not only press) information published on Web sites enjoys the advantage of having its lifetime substantially prolonged. By using a browser, an interested person can reach the required information within seconds. The range, speed and a low cost of information reaching the receiver are also of great importance [1].

Before starting to create a corporate WWW service, its purpose, objectives and most important functions should be precisely defined. Only a correctly planned Internet service has a chance of becoming an effective PR tool. When administering a corporate WWW site, particular attention should be paid to its up-to-datedness, uniform graphical setting, interactivity, functionality and easy navigation. A lot of consideration should also be given to the monitoring of service viewing rate.

The best method of using Internet sites in online public relations activities is to create a special section directed to the media, so called press rooms or press releases. The aim of this section is to collect in one place of all information that could be useful for both journalists and any other people interested in the company's activity. When creating a press room, it should be borne in mind that it can be very helpful in building the company's image in the media, but it may also undermine that image; therefore, the proper construction of the press room is of paramount importance.

It should be added that, from the Web public relations point of view, any other materials related to the company's activity, such as photo reports of interesting events, video films and sound records of important conferences to be used by radio or TV stations, are also worthy to be inserted on the Internet, [6].

TARGET GROUPS OF ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Any actions undertaken within PR by organizations must have their specific addressee. In the case of public relations, three main target groups can be distinguished.

The first group consists of traditional media. For journalists working there, the Internet has become the basic work tool. Besides information agencies and press, the global web is also an information source. Through e-mails, contacts are initiated and interviews are made, and the transmission of press material via this route (very often owing to the use of data from subscriber lists included in the corporate WWW service) is fast and effective (this can be confirmed by anyone who has at least once tried to send a few dozens faxes a day). The role of press spokesmen has been taken over by WWW sites, and particularly virtual press offices (press rooms) maintained by companies. Providing journalists with the possibility of downloading texts or photos enables them to use fast this company-controlled information, while bringing savings to the company in terms of time and money.

The second target group of PR activities conducted on the Internet are Internet media. These are horizontal portals (designed for all Internet users), portals (topical services intended for small groups of audience), discussion mails and e-zins. Entering into friendly contacts with them may bring forth fruits in the form of not only appearing information about of our company, but also initiating some joint actions, such as competitions, sponsorship, or Internet events, which, owing to the number of their recipients, are more effective than in the real world.

The third and last group of online PR activities includes Internet users, an particularly those of them, who are interested in the products of our company. Each corporate Internet service is a company's showcase, and its appearance, substantial value and functionality determine opinions of the

company formed by the Web's users. It should always be borne in mind that this is a very demanding group of audience, as they are being consistently accustomed to a very high quality of services offered them. Therefore, it must be remembered that a corporate WWW service should always meet the highest standards and care for its users [7].

CASE STUDY

Undoubtedly, the best support for a theoretical knowledge are concrete examples. In this study, we will focus on the analysis of WWW services in the aspect of utilizing them in PR activities in the metallurgical industry in Poland and worldwide.

During the four recent years, an enormous increase in the awareness of metallurgical companies of the use of the Internet in marketing activities has been observed in Poland. In this period, a vast majority of the WWW services of Polish metallurgical works have been established. One of them is the "Częstochowa" Steelworks' Web service (www.hcz.com.pl).

This service was designed and created in 2001. It is characterized by a nice graphical setting, easy navigation and a good functionality. The service consists of two versions: Polish and English. The information is communicated gradually and in a concise and intelligible manner. The part of the service, which is the most important in terms of public relations activities, are the sub-pages of the "About the Company" group; these play the role of the company's virtual press office. In this group, the readers have access to information related to the company's management, the organization and technology of production, the structure of the capital group, the Steelworks' history, statistical data concerning the production activity of the Steelworks, and credentials. Thanks to thus constructed section, only after a few minutes of visit on the service, the reader will acquire quite a lot of information of the "Częstochowa" Steelworks in a fast and easy manner. Some reservations may be arisen by the fact that the service does not have a form that would enable and facilitate interactive communication between an Internet user and the company, so the contact with the public relations specialist is only possible by the traditional way.

A little more reservations can be arisen when viewing the WWW site of the largest Polish metallurgical works - the "Katowice" Ironworks (www.hutakatowice.com.pl). This service is not too attractive, both in the graphical and the functional aspects. The information is communicated in a little orderly and not very clear manner. The site includes a Polish and an English versions. From the point of view of PR activities, the core of the service is the section "About the Company". In this section, the reader can learn about the history and structure of the Steelworks, information of the staff, and obsolete information of the finan-

cial, production and commercial results of the company. Notwithstanding these weaknesses, the section "Events" and the "Metallurgical Panorama" service maintained separately in its own domain (www.panorama-hutnicza.com.pl), being an electronic version of the corporate weekly information bulletin, constitute strengths of the service. Here, the readers can familiarize themselves with current information of the functioning and development of the "Katowice" Ironworks.

The above-mentioned two WWW services of known Polish metallurgical works reflect in principle the state of utilizing the Web medium in PR activities in the metallurgical industry in Poland. In summary, we state that the awareness of the potential provided by the Internet in PR activities is constantly increasing; however, the practical utilization of this tool in Polish metallurgy, though in some instances satisfactory, generally leaves much to be desired (particularly in terms of using modern tools, such as subscription mails or dynamic modules for controlling the service contents from the level of a WWW browser; also, none of the Polish metallurgical works' services includes "Press Releases" alias "Press Room" sections addressed directly to the press).

Let us try to assess now, of how the Internet is used for PR activities by the world's leaders in the metallurgical industry.

Let the service of the British-Dutch corporation Corus (www.corusgroup.com) be the first example. This service features an original graphical setting, is functional and, due to the broad range of the corporation's activity, considerably expanded. The sections of the service, which are the most important from the PR point of view, are "Company" and "Info". The former includes the sub-pages informing of the corporation's organization, history, strategy, markets, research & development work, and generally of employment and production. As opposed to Polish services, a place prepared specially for journalists can be found on Corus' pages. "Press Releases", as this is being in question, is included in the section "Info" and contains information related to the current activity of the corporation and a collection of photographs intended to be published in the press. For those journalists, who look for more detailed information, the section "Publications" has been prepared, where there is a provision of downloading reports in the PDF format, concerning various spheres of the corporation's activity.

In summary, we state that the PR specialists at Corus Group skillfully use the Internet in their work. However, an objection can be raised due to no possibility of direct access to the "Press Releases" sub-pages from the main page. Also, the service does not have subscription news that would facilitate permanent contact to be maintained with selected persons.

On the other hand, the German metallurgical concern ThyssenKrupp uses its WWW service (www.thyssenkrupp.com) for PR activities in a somewhat different manner.

This service has a very attractive and aesthetic graphical setting, and is functional and clear. Surfing over it gives a real fun. All information important from the PR point of view is contained in the "Group", "Press" and "Publications" sections.

The first section includes, as standard, information concerning the entire ThyssenKrupp capital group, provided on sub-pages entitled "Who Are We?", "Management", Board of Directors", "Structure" and "History". Similarly as in Corus Group's service, the place designed specially for journalist is the "Press" section. It provides information of the concern's present and past activity and the telephone & address data of individuals responsible for collaboration with the press.

For those who search for broader information of the concern's activity, the section "Publications" has been prepared, from where, upon completion of a proper form, materials ordered by an interested person (annual reports, summaries, statistics, analyses, etc.) will be sent to the indicated e-mail address.

A fact is noteworthy that on the www.thyssenkrupp.com service one can become a subscriber of an e-newsletter addressed to all those who are interested in the concern's activity, and primarily to journalists. Thanks to this solution, the company maintains a constant contact with the press, and the PR specialists are certain that materials prepared by them will fast and accurately reach the proper place at the proper time.

Each of the above-mentioned sections, i.e. "Group", "Press" and "Publications", is accessible from the main page of the service which undoubtedly shows, in an exemplary manner, how the Internet should be used for PR activities.

The examples of the www.corusgroup.com and www.thyssenkrupp.com Web sites reported above are the sites of large corporations, where the scope of PR activities is much broader than that of Polish metallurgical works; it is certain, however, that these services should be the example for the latter for further developing online public relations activities.

CONCLUSION

Public relations are often regarded as a secondary promotion tool as compared with advertisement or direct sale. However, this does not detracts from the fact that public relations have considerable influence on the final result of a company's activity and play an increasingly important role in marketing, also in online marketing [6]. The Internet is more and more often treated as the primary source of information of a company, and with the increase in the importance of this medium, the center of gravity of PR activities will shift in its direction.

The greatest challenge in online public relations is to create an effective action programmed. This will be practically impossible, if a mistake has been made when defining the strategy of the organization's presence in the Web. The difficulty arises from the necessity of combining numerous competencies and interdisciplinary knowledge. In addition to the knowledge of the industry, the company's needs in many planes of its functioning, Web marketing and, obviously, public relations, a good understanding of the Internet as a medium and broad technical knowledge are also necessary.

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