



## What Is "Blended" Media? New Strategies Are Redefining PR Relevance and Profits

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Public relations has always been about "earned" media while advertising traditionally gets the lion's share of a marketing budget for "paid" media initiatives. Hardly the most desirable equation if you're a PR professional. But due to the changes in the way consumers now get their news and information, it's time for PR to ascend to the top of the food chain and claim its rightful place atop the marketing mix.

There's never been a better time for this to happen. Here's why: We've all read how the world of media has changed virtually overnight. Social media, citizen media, RSS feeds, video-on-demand and the 24 hour news cycle are byproducts of consumers' desire to get their news and information when, how and where they want it. According to a Lumin survey conducted in January, consumers are not only spending more hours online than watching TV or listening to radio—but they are also relying on it as their main source of information. This represents a powerful shift in consumer habits and necessitates an urgent retooling of how and where PR professionals should be conducting their craft.

So what does this mean to PR people—how can we capitalize on this? Answer: By embracing the concept of "blended media strategies," which essentially means using ALL the available tools at your disposal to reach your audience. If translated into a mathematical equation, it might look something like this:

*(Earned Media + Paid Media + Audience Development) x PR Context = Increased ROI*

Four key components of blended media strategies:

- While earned media remains the staple of a PR campaign, we must now understand that paid media and direct marketing tactics are essential contributors to any PR initiative.
- In executing paid media or direct marketing tactics in support of a PR campaign, the context of the message and the tactics used should be cast in PR terms, not advertising jargon or heavy branding tactics.
- While traditional media outlets like TV, radio and print should not be discarded, it is no longer acceptable to ignore or dismiss Internet communication channels when planning a PR campaign.
- When communicating with publics online, promotional and evangelical activities are essential elements for driving awareness and interaction with your video or multimedia assets, which are the most sought after commodities on the Internet.

Building on the last two bullets and understanding that the Internet and "on-demand" content delivery options continue to trend upward in consumer engagement of news and information, PR pros must now adapt their strategies and tactics accordingly. Consider the following:

- Traditional media comes with a built-in audience by virtue of circulation, impressions or audience, and for broadcast media there are dedicated blocks of time when news is served to the public.
- On the Internet, that linear model does not exist. Information on the Internet is vast, unorganized and sometimes difficult to find.

Therefore, to succeed online, it becomes the job of savvy marketers to build awareness for their message. This is what we call "audience development." If you Google the phrase, you'll find organizations that are dedicated to building audiences for the arts. The proposition for online marketing is similar. It is not enough to just place your content and video assets online. You must invite people to "come to the theater to see the show" when looking for your target audience online. The good news is that it is easier than you may think—more so for PR than advertising.

The Internet, by its nature, is a "tell me, don't sell me" environment. Websites, newsgroups, chat rooms, social video sites, blogs and even search engines (Yahoo! Answers, for example) provide opportunities for people to connect with information, other like-minded people, brands or whatever their area of interest. If they engage a message, cause, community or brand, they do so because they have a desire or need.

This is why PR is better positioned for the Internet than advertising is. The essence of a PR message is grassroots, one-to-one and relational.

One excellent example of how PR is outscoring advertising is to look at the most obvious advertising vehicle of all: banner ads. WestGlen Communications has successfully used banner ads to promote PR messages and while the advertising industry averages just .02% per click-through, our campaigns have consistently performed at a level three- to ten-times that number. How? By utilizing a PR approach and information-based message rather than a heavily branded and commercial message typical in most advertising banners.

But how do we justify paid media tactics to our advertising brethren when PR is supposed to be all about earned media?

The answer is simple. PR *must* step outside the box it has been kept in and take ownership, not through permission but through results and statistical proof. Not convinced? Consider this:

- 85% of WestGlen's clients have already migrated to this new approach and results always exceed typical traditional broadcast PR campaigns.
- Instead of just distributing a b-roll/VNR package or SMT to TV stations, our clients are benefiting from our ability to also place the video on TV, radio and print media websites, as well as major consumer websites and social video sites.
- The number of actual views (impressions and click-throughs) their videos receive are dramatically multiplied by the online audience development activities we undertake such as evangelizing the campaign through newsgroups, chats, social media sites, search engines, RSS feeds and the strategic buying and placement of "news" banners on sites matching the demographic or interest profile of their desired consumers.
- Through producing alternative versions of a b-roll/VNR or SMT segment for guaranteed placement vehicles and other paid media tactics such as DirecTV, Sirius Satellite radio and local ad buys on traditional media, we ensure that many more consumers connect with our clients' key messages which are delivered in the context of PR, not advertising.

After learning of these new strategic and tactical initiatives WestGlen has developed, a senior corporate PR executive at a Fortune 500 company announced to his entire communications team that he was "giving them permission to step outside the earned media model" so that they could exponentially improve the results and ROI that PR provides to his company and, through having measurable results and statistical data on direct-to-consumer efforts, get more funding from his marketing department.

Armed with numbers, statistics and click-through rates, all PR professionals can now speak the same language as their advertising counterparts and thereby convince them to invest more of their budget into blended media strategies under the purview of PR. And let's face it: Those folks largely decide how much will be spent on PR each year.

Peter Verrengia, president of Communications Consulting Worldwide, a global business unit of Fleishman-Hillard was recently quoted as saying, "PR people need to be careful that they don't spend so much time defending the label of their activities that they miss an opportunity. Marketers have had the advantage in the past, but the direct connection to the customer is no longer in their province."

This is what all PR pros must now understand and embrace if PR is to capitalize on the emerging opportunities blended media strategies provide. If PR can prove how effective its messaging can be in driving awareness, brand loyalty and ultimately sales and revenue, then advertising—no, scratch that—then *PR* will be forever changed for the better.

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