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PR pros using more social networking to push clients

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The rules for public-relations firms used to be simple. Get your client into well-read newspapers and magazines and onto television programs — especially the most popular ones in each market — and pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

Then came blogs. And Facebook. And Twitter.

And in the past two years, social media has redefined the entire PR business.

Where only a handful of companies had a social media specialist back in the dark ages of 2006, some firms now are built solely around the idea of using, engaging or measuring the effect of social media, said Ashley Boyden, social media chairwoman for the Colorado Chapter of the **Public Relations Society of America**. And while some firms may not specialize in the medium yet, she knows of none that doesn't employ it somehow.

"Things are changing rapidly. There's a new site or something new you can learn on Twitter or Facebook every week," said Boyden, PR director for **Cactus Communications**. "What social media has given us really is a way to engage consumers and to engage new consumers that we never would have been able to reach before."

Like the rise of websites in advertising circles 15 years ago, the appeal of using social-networking and new-media sites increased slowly in recent years, a number of area PR professionals said. But the twin declines of the economy and of more traditional media such as newspapers late last year accelerated the revolution that many PR companies and clients had only considered up to that point.

With PR budgets shrinking, companies throughout Denver and the country began going to their publicists and asking what they could do to reach people in a cheaper but effective fashion, said Gina Seamans, a senior counselor at JohnstonWells Public Relations and president of the state PRSA chapter.

Every client now seems to ask if their firm handles social media, said Karla Trippe, whose firm, **Trippe and Company**, launched a new social media practice in April. Clients love the ability to see how many hits a mention of them gets on certain sites and to know what return they're getting on their marketing dollars, she noted.

But while everyone may want a piece of Twitter or Facebook, PR professionals cautioned there are only certain instances in which they should move away from newspapers or TV and toward Internet-heavy content.

One is if they are targeting a demographic far more likely to go to a themed website than a generalized media source to get information. Trippe steered a cybersecurity client, for example, toward a particular website that's influential in the computer-hacking community when she wanted to build up their name.

Another time to go to lesser-read but still-influential blogs and websites is when they have found the client first — and not always been kind to them.

Angela Berardino, director of emerging media for Turner PR, relates that a luxury resort the firm represents was getting savaged by an environmental blog in its area. So, an official with the resort



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Michael Schaefer, marketing manager at Mile High Harley-Davidson, uses social media to reach customers. He says posting a blog is like "publishing our own little newspaper every week."

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went onto the blog, refuted some of the allegations and received a largely warm response, she said.

“It became a real person, rather than a nameless, faceless company,” Berardino said.

Taking the message of a client or product to a blog or social-networking site rather than traditional media means some loss of control over the message, Boyden said. Because of the instant conversational nature of a posting — something that doesn’t happen with a printed or broadcast story — someone has to be willing to talk or debate with site visitors once they get there.

Yet, in some ways, the ability to ensure the unfiltered nature of the first message you send out has attracted some who used to go only through traditional channels to branch out into social media.

Gov. Bill Ritter, for example, launched video, audio podcast and e-newsletter features where he speaks directly to constituents on his website just 1½ months after the Rocky Mountain News closed.

And PR people say that creating their own online communities has led to surges in business even during the recession.

Mile High Harley-Davidson, for example, created its own blog, where it not only informs motorcycle enthusiasts of upcoming events, but also posts videotapes of parties and fashion shows. When floor sales at the Aurora shop dropped in December, Internet sales rose, with 80 percent of the purchases coming from outside Colorado, said Michael Schaefer, marketing manager.

“It’s sort of like us publishing our own little newspaper every week, but we just do it on the blog,” he said.

This doesn’t mean the push for mention of clients in traditional media is dead. Trippe noted that segments such as government officials and health care providers who still need to reach the widest audiences can best do so through a television or newspaper.

Michael Cherenon, chairman of the national PRSA, said that while traditional media remains hugely influential and must be a part of every conversation, these new sites and communication methods are becoming more common to everyone. So, all have to be employed.

“There’s no silver bullet anymore ... The market has become so fragmented now that there’s no one media, no one place to be anymore,” Cherenon said. “It’s a tidal wave in a shift of how we communicate.”