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Blogs Becoming a Growing Bazaar for PR

They were started a few years ago by political observers who made their running commentaries available online, but have recently emerged as a potent media force for PR execs: blogs. These days, blogs go well beyond the political scene, with diverse sites offering all kinds of news by the day, hour and minute. Indeed, a recent survey by **Perseus Development Corp.** predicts the top blog-hosting services will be home to 10 million blogs by the end of 2004.

"I know journalists visit the better blogs, so this is a way to spread a story or spread awareness of your company," says David Burt, PR Manager at security software firm **Secure Computing**, who spends about 5% of his time trying to get bloggers to mention his company. In one case, a blog reported on a security study conducted by his firm. That story, in turn, drew a call from a writer at *Information Week*. (Curiously, Burt sent a press release on that same study to another reporter at the magazine but did not get a call back.)

Other PR execs have been able to make inroads through pitching blogs. Take Brian D. Johnson, PR director for

CenterBeam, a network-management outsourcer. In the summer of 2003 he sent a press release to Jeremy Wagstaff, a writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, who covers technology in the "Loose Wire" column on the *Journal's* Web site, and also runs a daily blog of the same name.

At a time when the computer virus threat ran high, Johnson offered 10 tips for protecting one's PC. Wagstaff ran the column verbatim on his blog, positioning CenterBeam as an expert resource.

It takes strategy to score a blog win of that magnitude. "I knew from his blog that [Wagstaff] was a fan of 'Lord of the Rings,' and so I wrapped my 10-point plan in a metaphor of [the movie]," Johnson says. "Just as the humans defend their mountain castle using successive lines of defense, network security defends a system using a tiered system of blockades."

Blogs offer a new opportunity to craft that kind of pinpoint pitch. "If I read Jeremy Wagstaff's blog every hour of every day, I am peering deeply into his consciousness as a

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Economic Climate Warms up Business for Niche PR Firms

Terry Catchpole, founder and president of **The Catchpole Corporation**, a boutique PR firm specializing in securing speaking engagements for high-tech business executives, thinks the dot-com debacle was a blessing in disguise for niche PR.

Huh? Aren't those the same dot-com companies that, while throwing money at PR firms during the late-1990s, reinforced the reputation of PR execs as glorified publicists? And didn't PR enable the dot-com companies – many of which have since flamed out – to put out elaborate press releases that didn't really serve any message (or plug any real product) so much as the CEO's ego?

Catchpole, whose clients include **Adobe**, **Microsoft** and **Palm**, looks at it from a different perspective, pointing out that the Internet rush of a few years ago conditioned marketers to hone their media targets more carefully, and what better way to do that than with PR specialists. "The seed was planted that it was possible to deal with a series of

experts in different areas as opposed to always going to full service PR firms," he says.

The dot-com boom-and-bust is one of several factors that have played into the hands of niche PR players in the last few years. For starters, niche firms are a lot more affordable than the big players in the field. Although underlying economic trends are heading in the right direction marketing budgets are still tight, and the value niche players can offer can't be underestimated. Niche PR firms are also flatter and more flexible than the heavyweights – no small thing when you're watching every dollar. Another reason for the growth in niche PR: clients know they're going to get service directly from the boss(es) of the firm rather than an account executive from a large firm who is a few years out of school and doesn't know the space very well.

In the current climate it is also reassuring to client when you speak their languages. "Our clients understand 'dollar

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Minimizing Crisis Through Grass-roots Efforts & Coalition Building... Our April 27th virtual seminar features Amy Weiss, senior VP of communications for the Recording Industry Association of America and former deputy press secretary to President Bill Clinton; coalition building expert Jack Bonner and Richard Levick, who has worked on high profile litigation cases. Register today for this unique team-oriented workshop at <http://www.prandmarketing.com/webinars/grassroots.htm>.

Pitching Blogs

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journalist,” Johnson adds. “If somebody is printing their consciousness on line every hour of the day, then I as a PR person have an opportunity and an obligation to understand how that person operates and how to appeal to them.”

A PR executive who spends time learning a certain blogger's style can score more than just a one-shot deal. “PR people can take advantage of this [investment] by becoming a source of information for the blog author, rather than simply asking the author to report on them and what they are doing,” says Matthew Bailey, Web marketing director for **The Karcher Group**, an Internet marketing agency. “Approach them in a nontraditional way. Lose the pitch. Comment on their stories and give them feedback, and then as they get to you know you and they come to respect the value of your feedback, then you start to become a resource.”

It also helps if you can get there first. Many blogs follow specific industries, “and like any reporter, they want the scoop. They want to be the first to report something and they love scooping traditional media,” Bailey says.

While getting a mention on a blog has some value, it is just as useful to follow a blog for the sake of its own existing content. Industry blogs, in particular, can offer dish on developing news and trends.

“Good blogs, all they do is search

for trends,” says Michael Prichinello, a vice president with **RLM Public Relations** in New York. “By the time a newspaper makes sense of a trend, it is already known to everybody and it is not really news anymore. Blogs are not interested in what is ‘newsworthy.’

its Web page each day, and creates a bigger presence on the Internet. “When people go into Google and type ‘desktop outsourcing management,’ or ‘CenterBeam,’ I am filling the first screen-full of results with stuff that I have created, rather than other ran-

Clearing the blog

Blogs have gained momentum and draw millions of hits daily, but looks can be deceiving.

In Oct. 2003 Perseus Development Corp. randomly surveyed 3,634 blogs on eight leading blog-hosting services. The study showed that some 4.12 million blogs had been created on those services. Perseus estimates the number will top 10 million by the end of 2004. But there's a catch. Some two-thirds of surveyed blogs had not been updated in two months, meaning that 2.72 million blogs had been either permanently or temporarily abandoned. In fact, 1.09 million blogs were never used at all.

Among those still in use, links forged a potentially powerful network. Some 80% of active blogs connected to at least one external site from a post on their home page — yet these links rarely connected to traditional media sources.

Who's blogging? Mostly young people, with more than 92% of blogs surveyed created by people under 30. Females outnumber males, having created 56% of surveyed blogs.

They just want to know what is happening.”

Finally, there is the proactive blog. Few corporations at this time maintain their own blogs, but the idea already is taking shape. Johnson produces a daily news summary and posts it to the company Web site. “Every day I have to read an unhealthy amount of media because that is what I do for a living,” he says. “I may as well make added use of that information if I can.”

The blog gives Johnson an easy way to archive the information he collects. It affords his firm a way to freshen up

dom links,” he says.

For PR professionals interested in pursuing this route, numerous tools exist to help would-be bloggers get started. The online application **TypePad**, for example, offers blogging basics and a content management tool starting at about \$60 a year. While all of these tactics can help PR execs take maximum advantage of blogs, there's also one sure way to get yourself booted from the blog community.

“You must *never* participate under a pen name or hidden agenda,” warns DeeDee Legrand, president of **BRW LeGrand**. “You will be found out and blackballed and do permanent damage to your brand, particularly if the blog is hosted by an analyst, thought leader, politico, journalist or technologist.” This may sound like Ethics 101, but the inherent anonymity of the Web can tempt people to skirt the rules. Few things draw disdain in the blog world quicker than covert PR.

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Find your (inner) blog

Not all blogs are created equal. Before launching a PR effort to get mentioned on a blog, it makes sense to choose your target wisely.

- >> **First stop, Google.** Pull together a list of likely blogs, especially those that focus on your target industry or related subject areas.
- >> **Follow the trail.** See what kinds of links are referenced within the blog: They are a good indicator of its popularity and its seriousness.
- >> **Judge the content.** Is there true substance here or just somebody ranting about his cat?
- >> **Finally, check the family tree.** Many blogs have institutional affiliations, for example with a university. That kind of connection often indicates a more serious intent.