

# Using the Internet to Communicate Your Message

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For the public relations practitioner, the internet is one of the greatest innovations of all time. Its continually increasing popularity opens up myriad opportunities for improving our ability to practice our profession. The internet facilitates nearly every imaginable form of communication, but in this article I will focus on three major areas of the practice: professional development for the practitioner, the ability to do research, and the all-important ability to actually disseminate our messages.

## **Professional Development**

Recent years have seen the advent of numerous websites, internet mailing lists, and “e-zines” or electronic newsletters devoted to improving the practice of public relations. Practitioners can find a wide variety of resources for their own education, knowledge development, and professional networking.

Perhaps one of the most popular forms of PR professional development and networking is the “listserve” or e-mail mailing list. There are so many mailing lists, forums, and message boards devoted to marketing, communications, and PR that each of us no doubt has a favorite. I’m only going to list a few here that I enjoy or that have been recommended to me; feel free to drop me a line with your recommendations for future articles.

The **Public Relations Society of America**’s website offers discussion groups through some of its professional interest sections, accessible through PRSA’s site at <http://www.prsa.org>. For example, the Association and Nonprofit Section has a listserve called **associationserve** for professionals practicing in those areas. Check out your own field of interest to see what is offered.

There are 827 Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) with the words “public relations” in their titles or descriptions. A popular mailing list for small agency owners is **SmallShop2**. The group’s introductory copy says, “We are a group of small shop PR/Marketing/Advertising agency owners looking for the best water-cooler to park in front of and share business experience.”

**CornerBarPR** (<http://www.cornerbarpr.com/>) bills itself as “The Sassy Source for PR Pros.” This irreverent website features articles on PR, several entertaining and informative forums, and archives of the Job of the Week newsletter, run by Ned Lundquist, ABC. Far more than just a job search newsletter, JOTW boasts more than 8,000 members and includes interesting communications news and discussion of developments in the field as well as job openings from around the country.

Another newsletter of interest is **PR Fuel**, a missive from the “other side” of the divide between journalists and PR pros, written by Ben Silverman, a former business news columnist for The New York Post and a Contributing Editor for FindProfit.com (<http://www.findprofit.com/>), an independent investment newsletter. PR Fuel can be accessed through eReleases.com (<http://www.ereleases.com/>), where you can read the newsletter online or subscribe to have it delivered weekly to your in-box. Silverman also produces a companion blog at <http://www.prfuel.com>, where he updates and archives the PR-related articles from PR Fuel.

**Ragan Communications** offers several newsletters of interest to PR professionals, including *The Ragan Report*, *Media Relations Report*, and *Web Content Report*. Some are printed newsletters and some are avail-

able by e-mail. You can view a sample copy of these newsletters and subscribe if you wish at <http://www.ragan.com>. *Media Relations Report Online* is a free bi-weekly e-zine; some of the other subscriptions do carry a fee. Ragan Communications also offers tele-seminars on numerous communications topics.

Several websites exist as well that contain resources to help you develop your career. The foremost of these is the **Public Relations Society of America** website at <http://www.prsa.org/>. PRSA's site includes multiple areas with career resources, information on the Accreditation program, a calendar of events that includes informational and educational seminars, a directory for finding a PR firm, and a vendor/services directory. The national site also provides links to PRSA's various professional interest sections, which contain information of interest to specific areas of PR, such as international PR, environmental public relations, government relations, and association PR. Last but not least, it provides links to local chapters, which also offer career resources, events, and networking opportunities.

In addition to PRSA's site, the following websites include information and/or links that can help you in your career:

- **PR Web** (<http://www.prweb.com>) – offers free press release distribution, a press release database, help writing press releases, help finding a PR firm, news feed for journalists, and more. Billed as “by PR professionals for PR professionals,” the site is very busy but offers quite a bit of information. Also includes some services in Spanish, as [www.AmbosMedios.com](http://www.AmbosMedios.com), and in Chinese and Canadian French.
- **The PR Place** (<http://www.prplace.com>) – lots of links to information you may find useful, including employment information, internet marketing links, PR business news.
- **Online Public Relations** (<http://www.online-pr.com>) – dedicated to online PR, this site also offers lots of links, including links to research sites, career resources and public affairs resources. A recent addition is a blog called Online PR Thoughts, which features “daily entries on Public Relations and communications ideas and trends.”
- **Journalist's Guide to the Internet** (<http://reporter.umd.edu>) – though aimed at reporters, contains links you may find useful
- **Fast Company magazine** (<http://www.fastcompany.com>) – aimed mainly at people working for large companies and high-tech firms, but very useful for networking. Offers several ways to find and contact people in your geographical area or your industry.
- **Guru.com** (<http://www.guru.com/>) is billed as the “world's largest online marketplace for freelance talent.” The service directly connects businesses with freelancers who specialize in four professional categories (with dozens of subcategories): IT work, creative design work, office administration work, and business consulting work. Professionals seeking work can register as a free (Basic) member, or in one of two levels of paid membership. Basic members are charged a 10% transaction fee.

## **Research**

A second way that the internet serves public relations practitioners is by providing a boundless source for research information. Practitioners can research their own industry or company, find out more about a competitor, look into a potential client, and generally find information on almost any topic imaginable.

One area of the web that is commonly overlooked by many researchers is the **Usenet**, also known as “newsgroups.” Separate from the World Wide Web, the Usenet is a network of thousands upon thousands of individual message forums each devoted to a very specific topic. For example, in the alt.tv hierarchy of newsgroups, there is a group devoted to just about every television show ever created, including older shows, cancelled shows, and sometimes multiple groups for current hit programs.

Why is the Usenet important? It offers quotable sources on any topic you can imagine, and is also a good place to ask self-styled experts for additional sources for your research. If you use Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer for web browsing, you can access the Usenet through a menu item on your browser, or you can use one of two popular websites for newsgroup searching: **Google Groups** (<http://groups.google.com/>) or **Supernews** (<http://www.supernews.com/>) (which charges a subscription fee).

As an aside, you can explore the Usenet for professional development purposes as well. There are a number of newsgroups in the alt.journalism hierarchy, and Google Groups has many different communities related to public relations.

A relatively new technology that has gained rapid acceptance is **RSS**, which stands for **Really Simple Syndication** and offers an easy way to access internet-based news. PR practitioners can download and install a small software program on any type of computer and subscribe to news feeds from almost uncountable sources ranging from email newsletters to websites to Usenet groups. For more on RSS, including links to numerous newsfeeds, visit **Lockergnome's RSS Resource** (<http://rss.lockergnome.com/>).

To return to the topic of research, the number of actual websites out there for research is literally countless; no organization has a reliable count of how many websites exist, and thousands of sites are born or die every day. However, the following sites represent a good selection of places for public relations people to start.

The **PRSA** website is an excellent place to begin, especially the **Professional Practice Center**. The professional interest section sites and local chapter sites also provide good resource links. Another excellent site, though fee-based, is **Factiva.com**, a global news and business information service that provides a huge amount of business news and research, including customized research for subscribers. Among Factiva's many offerings are white papers and information for download, webcasts on various topics, and RSS newsfeeds.

A couple of sites are "hybrids" in that they are good both for research prior to a campaign and for disseminating your message when the campaign gets underway. One of these is **Online Public Relations** (<http://www.online-pr.com>), mentioned above. Another is **Newswise** (<http://www.newswise.com>), which offers business, feature, medical and science press release distribution, as well as an archive that is helpful for research. Newswise also has an expert query feature where reporters can find an expert to help write their stories. Your organization could provide that expert.

Certain websites are available that are great for research **specifically for associations and nonprofits**. These include:

- **The Internet Non-Profit Center** (<http://www.nonprofits.org/>) – dedicated to information for and about nonprofit organizations. Includes a section giving the total assets and income of nonprofits in your state (<http://www.nonprofits.org/library/gov.html>).
- **The American Society of Association Executives** (<http://www.asaenet.org/>) – the trade association for trade associations has an amazing website that is a mecca for information on associations worldwide. Includes hundreds of links to associations in every industry category, as well as to its state affiliates.
- **The Society of National Association Publications** (<http://www.snaponline.org/>) – Offers a research center with lots of links to research resources. Also offers a career center and bimonthly magazine aimed at association communications professionals.
- Individual trade association and nonprofit websites vary in quality, but many of them can provide excellent data on their specific industries. One good example is the **Arthritis Foundation**

(<http://www.arthritis.org/>), which provides good information for reporters and other researchers on the diseases that fall under its umbrella, their treatments, and other points to consider. Note: if you are unsure how to find a trade association's site, try the search engine at ASAE's site, or try typing in the association's initials plus the ".org" extension. Many associations use this convention.

Other sites that are great for research purposes include:

- **Crayon** (<http://www.crayon.net>) – create your own customized newspaper with information from sources you select. Useful for research as well as for tracking issues.
- **American City Business Journals** (<http://www.amcity.com>) – publishes 40 business journals and includes searchable archives.
- **NewsLibrary** (<http://www.newslibrary.com>) – contains the archives of a number of major newspapers, and allows users to search by geographic region or to create a custom list. This is a paid resource, but seems very comprehensive. It provides only the text of the newspaper articles, no photos, charts, or graphs.
- **Finding Data on the Internet** (<http://nilesonline.com/data/>) – billed as a resource for journalists, but could be helpful for any writer. Robert Niles' Journalism Help concentrates mainly on helping visitors find and interpret data of all types, such as government facts and figures, scientific data, mathematical calculations, etc.
- **URLWire** (<http://www.urlwire.com>) – billed as a source of “news of useful and unique web launches,” this site is a newswire and announcement service, and offers press release distribution to thousands of contacts who have personally signed up to receive this information.
- **comScore MediaMetrix** (<http://www.comscore.com/>) – a subscription-based source for research on internet and digital media usage – great for answering questions like “how many [of a certain demographic] are using the net?”

## ***Communicating Your Message***

Once you've done your research and are ready to communicate your message, the internet provides a variety of tools to get your point across.

One major application for the internet has proven to be media relations. More and more reporters are starting to do their research online and to accept press releases by e-mail. The following online services will help you reach the media.

- **eReleases** (<http://www.ereleases.com/>) is one of many online services that will write and/or distribute press releases for you. eReleases boasts strong and up-to-date connections with journalists covering a variety of industries.
- **ProfNet** (<http://mediainsider.prnewswire.com/> - **requires registration**) – a way to reach reporters through press release distribution and free ProfNet briefs. Some parts of the site are fee-based. PR practitioner Andrew Sprung says, “ProfNet has brought us placements in articles at Home Office Computing, PC Computing, PlanetIT, Las Vegas Business Journal, and paint industry and accounting trades. It often generates an e-mail dialogue that can create a lasting relationship with a journalist.”
- **Bacon's Media Directories and Software** (<http://www.bacons.com>) – PR pro Anna Hughes of KnowEDGAR.com says, “Seems to be the bible of media contacts. Comes on disk or print. Pricing depends on what segments you want to pursue, or if you want the whole tamale.”
- **PR Newswire** (<http://www.prnewswire.com>) – one of the largest and best-known press release networks. Fee based.

- **Newswise** (<http://www.newswise.com>) – offers fee-based access to business, feature, science and medical reporters.
- **Internet News Bureau** (<http://www.news bureau.com/>) – a subscription based e-mail press release distribution service
- **Imediafax** (<http://www.imediafax.com>) – provides internet-to-fax distribution of press releases to a large database of media contacts.
- **URLWire** (<http://www.urlwire.com>) – offers press release distribution on website launches and other net events.
- **BusinessWire** (<http://www.businesswire.com>) – another major press release distribution site.
- **The Press Release Network** (<http://www.pressreleasenetwork.com>) – offers access to more than 20,000 subscribing global journalists and media organizations in 60 countries.

One important element of media relations is tracking hits. The following sites are dedicated to tracking, although many of the sites mentioned above offer tracking services as well. Keep in mind that many of these services can also be great research outlets, since you can read competitors' press releases, research the history of a potential new employer, or get the background on a controversial issue.

- **WebClipping.Com** (<http://www.webclipping.com>) – billed as “a comprehensive clipping service for cyberspace,” this site monitors the internet and online news services.
- **Newstracker from Excite** (<http://news.excite.com>) – a free service for tracking news stories. “I’ve used newstracker on excite.com for a few months now. I love it. It has a feature that learns which articles you like and makes your search results more accurate,” says Brett McBryde of Crowded Hour Press.
- **Web Side Story** (<http://websidestory.com>) – offers the “HitBox” traffic analyzer and other ways to track your PR efforts.

Media relations is, of course, only one part of getting out your PR message. Another way to use the internet to communicate is through the newsgroups discussed earlier in this article. Before you try testing the murky waters of newsgroup culture, however, find a more in-depth article on newsgroups (try **Google Groups** at <http://groups.google.com/> for some basic information) and learn how this unique part of the net operates. If you’re careful to observe Usenet etiquette, you can use the newsgroups to establish true two-way communication with some of your publics.

B.L. Ochman is an internet marketing guru whose website, **What’s Next Online**, at <http://www.whatsnextonline.com/> is definitely a worthy stop for PR pros. The site’s tagline is “Building Global Traffic and Sales for Online Business,” which gives you a good idea of the site’s focus. Ochman offers a free bi-weekly e-newsletter that promises how-to articles, tips on Internet marketing, articles on blogging and web content development, explanations of new technology for the “non-geek,” and links to internet resources online.

E-zines, e-mail newsletters, and listserves can also be ways to distribute your message and to get feedback from your publics. These e-publications can be identified, pitched, and tracked much like traditional publications are, although again, it’s a good idea to do some preliminary research on basic “netiquette.” These online publications also offer advertising opportunities if your communications plan includes advertising and your publics can be reached through online sources.

Direct e-mail advertising, much like direct mail, can be accomplished on the web. Several services offer mailing lists for purchase, and the important factor to consider is whether the e-mail recipients have signed

up and agreed to receive the advertisements. One popular e-mail list broker is **PostMaster Direct** (<http://www.postmasterdirect.com>).

You may also consider advertising on websites whose audiences fit your targeted publics. Several web-based services exist to match advertisers with websites. One popular service is **Burst! Media** (<http://www.burstmedia.com>). There are several more. A good source of information and resources on internet advertising is Mark Welch's **Adbility** site located at <http://www.adbility.com>.

All of these resources are good tools, but probably the main and most interesting tool practitioners think of when they think of the internet is the website. A website is an essential part of the public relations mix for any organization, from global corporations to non-profit associations and from government agencies to small businesses. Some of the ways an organization can use a website are:

1. Communicating with your members, donors, or other important audiences
2. Promoting a product or service that lends itself well to being sold via the internet
3. Promoting or selling data that your industry collects, via a searchable online database
4. Membership recruitment
5. Industry promotion
6. Providing legislative and regulatory information
7. Soliciting donations
8. Showcasing your calendar of upcoming events
9. Calling for submissions to your magazine or journal and providing submission guidelines
10. Promoting advertising in your other publications (consider bundling online advertising with print advertising to add value)
11. Providing general information that is useful to your members (links to other helpful industry sites)
12. Providing a job bank
13. Allowing members to register for meetings and other special events online

For links to more information on building a website for a trade or professional association, visit **Hints from Hieran**, my free resource site for association and nonprofit communicators, at <http://www.hieran.com/association/>.

In spite of the length of this article, it still hardly breaks the surface of all that is available to the public relations practitioner on the net. All you can do is take a deep breath and jump in – but at least starting with the sites named in this article, you can plumb the depths a little first.

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