'Relating to the Public'

The Evolving Role of Public Relations in the Age of Social Media

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ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL OF PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRMS

> *It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today.* — ISAAC ASIMOV

The late science-fiction author perhaps best described what dominates society and certainly communications today: continuous change. Within the communication landscape, social media – blogs, wikis, podcasts, social-networking sites and the like – have sparked profound change in the media, publishing and marketing industries. Public relations, with its focus on building dialogue and "relationships," can and must play a critical role in helping today's organizations succeed in this new world of communication. In this paper, we explore and examine how social media have introduced and encouraged change in internal public relations departments and public relations agencies in the United States, with a special focus on member agencies at the Council of Public Relations Firms (Council), the sponsor of this project.

Why does this matter? For one thing, the emerging media will continue to define and shape our profession, our industries and our jobs. For another, these new media will impact how organizations and their brands ultimately communicate with their various constituencies. The public relations industry finds itself at an historic juncture. It always has been about social influence – i.e., "relating to the public." Now that the rules of social influence are gaining precedence over other approaches, public relations looms larger than ever. Working collectively, internal public relations departments and agencies can better serve their organizations while resetting the mandate and direction for an entire industry.

Now is the time to take the path that envelops traditional and new media. Every marketing and communications discipline is heading there in some way. So the big question becomes: How much influence will public relations wield as other marketing disciplines rethink their own mandates and retool themselves for the new world?

METHODOLOGY

For this paper, we interviewed top communicators at leading companies and at major public relations agencies. We asked them questions ranging from what new media tools they employ to what issues they expect will influence corporate communications and public relations agencies over the next five years. We also analyzed opinion polls from communicators about their use of social media tools.

THE QUESTIONS

1. What new media tools are you employing on behalf of your company or clients?
2. What issues/trends do you see impacting corporate communications, primarily in the next five years?
3. What issues/trends do you see impacting agencies, primarily in the next five years?
4. Is there confusion about the roles and responsibilities of the different marketing and communications providers?
5. Have you run into ad agencies or other marketing providers delivering services now that would have been considered PR services in the past?
6. What skills do you believe PR practitioners will need to master in the next five years?
7. For agencies, do you believe your business model and revenue mix will be different in the next five years than it is today? If so, how?
8. Are your clients or senior executives already embracing new or social media?
9. What advantages do you believe PR practitioners have over other strategic marketing disciplines in managing social influence? What disadvantages?

THE PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

1. **Peter Debreceny,** former vice president of corporate relations, Allstate Insurance Co.
2. **Barbara Bates,** principal and co-founder, Eastwick Communications.
3. **Mike Fernandez,** vice president of public affairs, State Farm Insurance Co.
4. **Aedhmar Hynes,** chief executive officer, Text 100.
5. **Christopher Kircher,** vice president of corporate communications, ConAgra Foods, Inc.
6. **Myrto Lazopoulou,** director of user experience; as well as other practitioners, at Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein.
7. **Mike Prosceno,** VP of Marketplace Communications and Social Media at SAP.
8. **Nicholas Scibetta,** senior vice president and global director, Communications and Media Strategy Network, Ketchum.
9. **Lyann Bradley,** senior vice president, Waggener Edstrom Worldwide.

SNAPSHOT OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS

- The respondents are using a variety of tools, especially blogs, podcasts and wikis.
- In the next five years, respondents see four themes impacting corporate communications:
  - > **Information and influence coming from new sources.** Communicators must address and embrace these changes to be truly effective.
  - > **Corporations and marketers are not in control any longer** and must recognize that soon, the world's most respected and valued brands may be those least "controlled" by their owners.
  - > **The disciplines that comprise corporate communications are converging.** Public relations firms, online marketers, advertising agencies and even web-design firms are taking on aspects of one another.
  - > **Corporate communicators must build trust with audiences** through more authentic information and greater transparency to overcome the flattening effect of the Internet and skeptical audiences.
- Within public relations agencies, trends in the next five years mirror those for corporate communicators with some differentiation:
  - > **Focusing on developing more sophisticated online measurement capabilities** that provide deeper insights into consumer behavior, as well as mechanisms that demonstrate the impact of campaigns to support strategic business goals.
  - > **Conducting their businesses in an ethical and transparent manner that is beyond reproach,** and advising their clients to do likewise.
  - > **Identifying, developing and offering new tools and technologies,** and evaluating their potential for clients as "keepers of the content."
  - > **Hiring PR practitioners who counter "traditional" public relations skill sets** while also emphasizing core writing, research and journalistic skills.
  - > **Finding ways to pull relationships together,** especially since more competitors are stepping into the traditional PR agency space.
- As the lines blur between communications media, public relations practitioners must do a much better job defining their role and value. Questions remain: Should public relations agencies do "everything?" Should they serve more as an integrator across disciplines? Should public relations opt to encompass anything used to drive conversations?
- The current communication landscape has become like the "wild west" as advertising agencies and other marketing providers deliver services that, in the past, have been the domain of the public relations industry.

- Public relations practitioners are also increasingly morphing to embrace a number of non-traditional public relations activities.

- The integrated-marketing approach that several public relations agencies are pursuing raises concerns that it could reduce the overall effectiveness of a client's communications effort. Many PR agencies may lack the specialized expertise in certain areas. Regardless, PR agencies must emerge as trusted advisors to clients in those areas or other disciplines will likely fill the vacuum.

- As for future skills, social media must become part of the way public relations practitioners do business or they will become obsolete. The best firms are balancing the emphasis on social media with expertise in content so they can deliver the right message to the right audience over the right medium. As in the past, the best practitioners will know their clients' businesses and products intimately, enabling them to provide strategic counsel that is situation- and audience-appropriate.

- To command a better place in the new marketing mix, public relations practitioners should strive to become more adept at business strategy, and become more quantitative and measurement-oriented.

- The ability to think creatively has always been a core public relations skill, but it will take on even greater significance with digital communications and – especially – visual storytelling. Practitioners are breathing life into clients' brands through interactive and visual means, and in other ways that engage key audiences.

- As for agency business models and revenue mix:

  > Hybrid compensation models are likely to develop that are more closely tied to audience engagement than hourly revenue. This new model would be based partly on an hourly basis, on project deliverables, and measurable outcomes. Clients often are measured and compensated this way in their own businesses, so metrics will become increasingly important and sophisticated within public relations.

  > A cyclical situation may arise as clients decide to pull some social media activities in-house (figuring it will be less expensive and "easier" to do there) and then returning these activities to external agencies when they realize they may not have the resident resources and skills to do everything effectively.

- Clients and their senior executives are embracing social media, although the approach remains fairly conservative and a bit of "waiting on the sidelines" persists; the extent of that adoption depends on a number of factors:

  > Clients that target traditional business decision makers continue to focus predominantly on traditional media outlets, although bloggers are included in that definition, increasingly.

> Clients are turning more enthusiastically to social media if they target audiences comprised of Generation Y members (born between 1977-1994) who grew up with the Internet or if they are in businesses that use the Internet to reach their audiences.

> Fears persist about the legal and ethical implications of social media projects as executives worry about inappropriate financial disclosures, violations of company policy or government regulations, and disclosure of product roadmaps or trade secrets.

- Public relations practitioners enjoy some advantages over other marketing disciplines in managing social influence:

  > Public relations is seen as a more creative and progressive voice in marketing and communications, along with advertising.

  > The discipline has always been multidimensional, using various platforms (e.g., media outreach, special events, grassroots activities, influencer programs) so the practitioners are comfortable with using more than a hammer to hit a nail.

  > Traditionally, public relations has been about creating and sustaining conversations, about engagement and relationships, which social media is all about.

- There are also some disadvantages:

  > At many organizations, public relations has not earned a lead role in the marketing mix.

  > Traditionally, other disciplines have commanded bigger budgets.

  > Public relations isn't moving fast enough in demonstrating leadership in social media.

DISCUSSION

This new world of social media has opened a window for the public relations profession to elevate its role and strengthen its reputation. This window demands change and evolution, and one thing is certain: *Clients must find and engage the best partners with the best ideas, regardless of whether they are public relations agencies or not.*

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Given this reality, public relations practitioners – in organizations and within agencies – should recognize that defining, or redefining the role they will play in this changing communications landscape is critical. And the future role that public relations plays will trigger significant changes in services, personnel and business models.

Some within the profession are thrilled by the prospect of change; others are concerned about what it will bring. Peter Debreceny, former vice president of corporate relations, Allstate Insurance Co., expressed concern

for the profession, "as many more competitors step into the traditional agency PR space." He thinks confusion about the roles and responsibilities of various marketing and communications providers is steadily increasing and adds: "I don't like where the trends are going." Debreceny believes public relations agencies must either adapt and lead faster with social media "or they will once again be following ad agencies into this new world."

Whatever the outcome, the proliferation of consumer-generated media gives organizations an unprecedented opportunity to understand and act on the consumer-led conversation that now occurs continuously around their products, services, brand and reputation in today's digital world. Major changes already are affecting public relations, including:

Changes in service

A majority of agencies already are employing various social media tools, but many more are expected to offer new services tied to social media. According to a Council survey of its members conducted in April 2007, 78% of the respondents claimed that clients and prospective clients were either "extremely interested" or "interested" in their firms' social media capabilities. Only 7% said clients were not very interested.

The survey also found that 84% of participating firms were employing blogs on behalf of clients. The number using podcasts and RSS – a family of Web-feed formats used to publish frequently updated digital content such as blogs or podcasts – had virtually doubled since 2005, to 60 % and 53 %, respectively. As for other social media tools and platforms, agencies also were assisting clients with interactive portals (42%); mobile marketing (33%); microsites, or separate parts of a larger Web site (53%); and wikis, collaborative Web sites that are used for collective content creation and aggregation (22%).

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Waggener Edstrom Worldwide, for example, has experimented with the whole mix: It has created corporate blogs; coordinated interviews on Slashdot, Engadget, Gizmodo and other blogs; handled speeches and interviews via podcast; managed salon dinners with groups of bloggers; created episodic blogs; hosted blogs on virtual newsrooms; and developed measurement systems to understand the dissemination and impact of messages. To support the Microsoft TechEd Conference, the agency developed a microsite, video blog and RSS feed that boasted 300,000 unique users from 115 countries seeking to participate virtually in the conference.

Eastwick Communications, a smaller public relations agency, also employs nearly all the new and emerging media on behalf of clients. It also has developed a client-tested methodology for creating and deploying high-return content that can reach each audience via the most effective medium.

"Our goal is to be the best possible full-service public relations agency to our clients," said Barbara Bates, Eastwick's principal and co-founder. "As the public relations landscape has changed, we've been able to help lead that change and not just follow. One example is the impact social media has on influencing the market. We've been working in social media for the past three years, not just talking about it. And our extensive experience is helping our clients maneuver through these new waters. We have dedicated staff that are emerging media experts and have many programs that we're implementing in these areas."

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Many agencies are adding new measurement services to track and measure the effect of social media. Waggener Edstrom, for instance, has introduced what it calls Narrative Network media-mapping and analysis service to assess the impact of conversations across the spectrum of traditional and new media, and also to aid strategic communications programs. Narrative Network maps provide clients with insight on trends and behaviors regarding media and brand perceptions to help develop integrated communications strategies, says the agency.

ADOPTION OF COLLABORATION TOOLS

On the corporate side, a growing number of businesses are adopting social media programs for a wide variety of business purposes. Collaborative tools such as wikis are gaining wide acceptance.[1]

Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, the international investment-banking arm of Dresdner Bank, based in Europe, has used a wiki for a decade to improve communications between its different worldwide locations and business groups. The wiki has gotten much more sophisticated and easier to use in recent years,

[1] For an analysis of how 40-plus enterprises are using social media to gain business efficiencies, see Giovanni Rodriguez, "Peer Pressure: A Working Hypothesis on the Corporate Adoption of Social Media," Journal of New Communications Research (SNCR: Fall 2006), pp. 119-127.

especially after Socialtext Inc., of Palo Alto, Calif., which makes enterprise social software for collaboration, released a WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editor in January 2006. WYSIWYG provides an editing interface that behaves like word processors such as Word, making it easier for many more people to access and use the company wiki. Following the editor's introduction, wiki usage climbed 30%, becoming the primary tool for intra-team communications.

Dipen Jobanputra, a Digital Markets Sales manager, uses the wiki for his weekly teleconference to discuss clients. The session used to last 90 minutes, with much time spent keeping his staff current on the week's events. But now, members update themselves on the wiki and that part of the teleconference takes only five to 10 minutes. "The rest of the teleconference is used for idea generation, being innovative, talking about problems and looking at solutions, which is what the meeting should be about," says Jobanputra. "It shouldn't be about updating people as to what's happened, but thinking about our clients and how we can service them."

A few companies that we spoke with had a broad view of social media. SAP, the enterprise software giant, is applying social media in a multitude of efforts. Through a combination of internal and external bloggers (employees, customers, partners, competitors and other interested parties) SAP is using social media concepts (e.g., participation, community, connectedness, etc.) and tools (e.g., blogs, wikis, pod/videocasts, social networks and content communities) to engage with the market directly. In some cases, the company is reaching entirely new segments of the market. In others, SAP is reaching existing audiences in an entirely new manner.

The highly regarded SAP bloggers corner program is about engaging bloggers directly by providing them a resource inside of SAP to ensure that what they write about SAP is as accurate as possible. "It's not that we expect that they agree with everything we do," said Mike Prosceno, VP of Marketplace Communications and Social Media. "It's more about ensuring that if they do have something to say about SAP, they at least know what it is were trying to do and why were doing it. It isn't completely about pushing our message to the market. In fact, the best part about the program is listening to what a diverse group of interested and knowledgeable people have to offer us in the way of criticisms and comments that we can learn from."

SAP also hosts two of the software industry's most active communities. The SAP Developers Network (SDN) is an active online community that serves as a resource and collaboration channel for developers, consultants, integrators, and system administrators. SDN hosts a technical library, expert blogs and wikis; exclusive downloads and code samples; an extensive eLearning catalog; and an active, moderated discussion forums. The Business Process Community (BPX) was launched after many SDN members revealed a growing number of them wanted information about business processes, methodologies, and best practices. BPX provides a

similar set of resources to help business process experts drive business process innovation. These include a combination of industry business process and services content and information on software composition tools from the business process platform.

Changes in personnel

While public relations practitioners must continue to excel in traditional skills – from strong writing and creative thinking to exceptional client-service and media-relations talents – the emergence of social media is changing the skill sets of personnel in the future. Nicholas Scibetta, global director of Ketchum's Communications and Media Strategy Network, says: "These new media skills need to be a part of the way we do business, seamlessly integrated into the PR practitioner's broader skill set; without them, we rightfully run the risk of being out of touch and obsolete." Aedhmar Hynes, CEO of Text 100, adds: "PR practitioners must be experts in all kinds of 'media.' You can't parse out new and traditional media providers anymore. It's one in the same."

But other skills will need to be sharpened or developed, as well. Mike Fernandez, vice president of corporate communications and external relations at State Farm Insurance Co., and Christopher Kircher, vice president of corporate communications at ConAgra Foods Inc., believe practitioners will have to become more adept at business strategy and also will need to be more quantitative and measurement-oriented.

As messages are increasingly adapted to fit the Internet's platforms of sight, sound and motion, Scibetta and others believe agency makeup also needs to adapt by recruiting nontraditional practitioners from a wide variety of backgrounds. Whereas journalism has historically been the top non-agency source of talent, agencies should broaden their view to include such creative wellsprings as comedy and songwriting, videography and other niche areas.

One obvious place for these new skills to blossom is in public relations education. Indeed, the 2006 Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, issued in November 2006, emphasized that PR education must encompass the new and emerging media.

"Today, the choice of communication channels is dictated by technology: a practitioner must seriously consider which message forms and channels would be best for specific publics," explained the Report's authors.[2] "Often, new technological forms and channels, such as electronic pitching, podcasting and blogging, prevail over traditional news releases and media kits. Thus, students must know how to use today's communication technology and must monitor and most likely adopt rapidly and unpredictably changing

[2] Edited by Judy VanSlyke Turk, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, director of the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University

technology," the Report continued. "Equally important, public relations students must be taught how their organizations strategically use communication technology to affect public relationships." Additionally, the Report maintains that students "must learn strategies, not only for using this technology, but also for dealing with its effects, ranging from the ready availability of virtually all types of information to questions of personal and organizational privacy."

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Agencies themselves are recognizing they must sharpen their training programs to encompass social media. They also are realizing the importance of all of their employees reading relevant blogs, understanding how wikis can benefit internal communications and generally ensuring their practitioners are comfortable with the new tools. Some agencies, too, are altering traditional tools, like news releases, to make them compatible to social media. Edelman and Shift PR, for example, have produced tools that assist in what has become known as the "social media news release."

As for the search for top talent, this already highly-competitive hunt will continue for quite some time. A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics report from the U.S. Labor Department concluded that "keen competition likely will continue for entry-level public relations jobs … employment of public relations specialists is expected to grow faster than average for all occupations through 2014."

Changes in business models

The business of social media already is and will continue to alter the business models that public relations agencies employ. A business model, of course, reflects the way a public relations agency relates to its clients, the services it provides, its talent and the way it gets paid for its services. Some detractors believe public relations agencies are stuck defending an outdated business model. Actually, many agencies already are rethinking their business models to reflect social media.

Some traditional agencies have been evolving because they believe they have to get out in front. Known primarily as a technology PR firm, Text 100 "had to be in front of many of these areas faster than traditional agencies," says CEO Hynes. "Our business is changing and we have to more clearly stake out our areas of expertise."

Clients often serve as catalysts for revamping PR agencies' business models. Says State Farm's Fernandez: "Things are changing, and we don't have a mandate to buy PR from PR firms and ads from ad agencies." Thus, to become communications partners, public relations agencies must illuminate how they develop the best ideas from all the media tools available.

Waggener Edstrom anticipates a shift to a business model that more closely ties to audience engagement from the traditional hourly revenue model. "Taking into account the successes that components of existing revenue models used by consulting companies are achieving and that leverage a mix of media, the [PR agency] business model will evolve and tie to the results and impact of campaigns to demonstrate their effectiveness," says Waggener Edstrom's Lyann Bradley.

Eastwick Communications also sees some trends developing in the business-model arena, including a return look at pay-for-performance models and a move toward hybrid compensation models. This latter model mixes hourly revenue, project deliverables and a measure of the impact that communications has on a client's specific PR program.

For such hybrid business models to succeed, measurement metrics should become more sophisticated and critical. "This is a trend that affects every supplier, not just communications providers. Chief information officers are paying datacenter and hosting providers on the basis of uptime and petabytes of data storage. Jet engine manufacturers are selling operating hours, not jet engines, to the airlines. Package delivery companies are paid for on-time delivery," says Barbara Bates. "It's only a matter of time before clients expect the same from their communications' providers."

Still, public relations agencies must be prepared within their business models to expect that clients might pull some of their new media activities in-house, thinking they will save money by having their own communications staff handle such media. Eventually, some of that lost revenue may return as some clients realize they don't have the in-house skills and resources to handle such activities themselves.
What's clear is that old-school agency business models will evolve to reflect new and emerging digital and social media.

COMPETITIVE ISSUES

Is public relations prepared to compete today with other disciplines as social media emerge and increase in importance? Are public relations firms both competing and collaborating more today than in the past with other disciplines – and what are those disciplines?

Within the public relations industry, practitioners increasingly understand that the media communications landscape has changed dramatically. A Council of Public Relations Firms' survey in the 2006 third quarter found that a majority of public relations agencies (52%) say they have run into advertising agencies or other marketing providers that are pitching and/or delivering services today that they consider traditional PR services.

Among the survey's individual responses were these:

- "Many marketing companies are offering PR services and Web-design companies are offering search-engine optimization."
- "The ad agency for one of our clients keeps trying to pitch for the PR services even though they would have to use freelancers to service it."
- "We run into it and why not? There are no more 'rules,' so if clients want more 'holistic' strategy and execution, they should be able to get it from any excellent communication firm, no matter what their foundation. If we can crack this one as an industry, then we have the best of all worlds. One, clients will come to us because we are the true reputation builders. Two, we retain unique core competency in using the news media – print and electronic – to amplify our clients' stories. That's worth a lot."
- "Name it and I've seen others pretend to offer it – from custom publications and blogs to special events, employee communications and word-of-mouth marketing."

Public relations associations and industry groups also are discussing the new competitive environment at their meetings. The Council of Public Relations Firms, for instance, devoted a half-day Critical Issues Forum to the competitive challenge public relations faces in today's far more fragmented media world. It focused on helping participants recognize what their organizations – and the entire public relations sector – must do to play a leading role in this new landscape.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is sponsoring events at least once a month that touch on communications' competitive battleground. In January 2007 alone, the PRSA scheduled teleseminars on PR secrets for engaging niche audiences online and on creating an impact with press releases through search-engine optimization and social media. And the Arthur W. Page Society's 2006 annual conference explored how corporate communications counselors can help their management anticipate and address the kaleidoscopic challenges in the marketplace, businesses and the communications profession.

Collaboration within media disciplines is increasing as more corporations demand that their various marketing and public relations agencies work together on integrated communications programs. A June 2006 survey by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) of 88 corporations found that companies are involved in developing and executing integrated marketing-communications programs for nearly half (48%) of their brands, while only five percent of the companies said they aren't involved in such programs with any of their brands.

Still, only six percent of the respondents rate their integrated marketing-communications programs as "excellent," although that percentage has doubled since a similar 2003 survey. In both years, one-third of

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respondents rated such programs fair to unsatisfactory. (However, the survey did find that marketers are increasingly viewing public relations as a key contributor to their businesses. Respondents characterized the value to their business of each of a dozen different marketing disciplines – and public relations scored the highest. Fifty-nine percent rated it as "very important" and another 30% rated it as "important.")

"The evolution of online media serves integrated communication providers well and brings the focus on facilitating dialogues," says Waggener Edstrom's Lyann Bradley. "We have moved from integrated communications to hyper-integrated communications because of the broad choice of media to reach audiences regardless of the disciplines."

Many public relations practitioners think their industry and advertising enjoy advantages in managing social influence because they are viewed as the more creative and progressive voices in marketing and communications. Additionally, maintains Eastwick Communications' Barbara Bates, "We're trusted to watch the competition, do the research and commit the resources needed to make sound recommendations to our clients."

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Where public relations agencies and corporate communicators go from here depends largely on where they've been and what they foresee for the future. Sometimes, it's helpful to consider the views of non-PR communicators. Former *Financial Times* reporter Tom Foremski, who hosts the SiliconValleyWatcher blog, says he's often asked to recommend public relations agencies to companies and also how to choose public relations agencies, especially ones that understand a bit about new media and, specifically, the blogosphere.

"Here is a key pointer:" he advises, "If you are looking for a PR company that understands something about blogging, find out who in that organization blogs, and how long have they been blogging, and what is their blog page rank and traffic. You will find that in many large PR agencies, it is their most junior staff that are the in-house bloggers, and there lies the rub. PR companies that 'get it' have senior staff as bloggers, and they blog regularly, and they have decent traffic, and they also use other types of new media such as wikis."

Foremski's point is an increasingly common one, within and outside the PR community. All public relations practitioners must understand and use the new media tools to truly counsel their clients effectively. Citizen-

journalist Brian Oberkirch, author of the Slidell Hurricane Damage blog, offers PR practitioners four simple points to remember about social media:

1. Social media is about connection, not content.
2. Social media is about them, not you.
3. Social media may be cheaper initially, but it takes far more homework.
4. Get small fast. (Niche is nice. Think smaller feature sets, more targeted audiences, less chatter from you, and so on).

Says Oberkirch: "I expect the PR function to increase in importance as analysis, interpretation and timely response to the market will be needed more. PR people have a golden opportunity to take a more central role if they don't cling to old-fashioned publicity/gate keeping/messaging models."

Still another trend to consider is the emergence of new agencies – e.g., Crayon and Hubbub (launched recently by one of the authors of this report) – that are deliberately built to service both traditional public relations and "new PR" services. Do these new agencies belong in the public relations world, or are they migrating to the general world of marketing? The outcome of that debate is important, as more and more agencies begin to lay the foundations for their own future practices.

The public relations industry – agencies and corporate communicators – must determine that the golden opportunity to lead on the new media front has arrived.

This, then, is where an industry Call to Action enters. The days of hand wringing are over concerning non-PR media invading the traditional territory of public relations, and taking control of technology-driven advances like digital/social media. The public relations industry – agencies and corporate communicators – must determine that the golden opportunity to lead on the new media front has arrived. They must develop integrated communications programs that encompass traditional and new media, and they must illuminate to clients and prospective clients why their new media public relations services are superior to non-PR competitors.

In August 2005, blogger Dave Taylor, a veteran techie and business expert, raised eyebrows at a Blog Business Summit by claiming that public relations is dead. He insisted that the blogosphere has supplanted the traditional job of public relations. Needless to say, his contention caused a stir. Later, though, after discussions with public relations practitioners, he acknowledged that public relations firms that understand the much broader role that media communications assumes today aren't dead – yet. Still, he argued, "in a world where

messages are born, evolve and disseminate without controls, it does beg the question of what's left for the public relations profession ... I believe that I'll stick with my original statement: *PR is still dead.*"

For public relations professionals, 2007 will be an important year to determine what path they take as an industry from the critical crossroads they're at today. Will agencies embrace social media and move to incorporate its various forms into client communication strategies? Or will they allow outsiders to furnish those services? It promises to be a very interesting period ahead. As for Dave Taylor's PR obituary, it's up to the public relations industry to prove him wrong.

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The Council of Public Relations Firms' mission is to advance the business of public relations firms by building the market and firms' value as strategic business partners.