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PR TECHNIQUE - DISTRIBUTION: Alternative methods of distributing your messages - Wire services are the main - but not the only - distribution method for press releases and other important information **Craig McGuire reports.**

CRAIG MCGUIRE - 21 Feb 2000 00:00

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way.

Now, of course, we have the Internet. There is e-mail. And reports of

the death of the fax as a means for news distribution are greatly

exaggerated.

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In fact, some studies show that many writers still prefer that channel.

Which method to use largely depends on what the journalists want.

'The bottom line is that journalists are used to getting information a certain way, and you have to service them,' says Sarah Hofstetter, vice president of corporate communications at Net2Phone.

Jon Austin, managing director of corporate communications at Northwest Airlines, says that while PR Newswire is his primary method of news distribution, he also uses direct e-mailing. 'E-mail is big, and it's free with little back-end cost,' says Austin. He explains that the success of a mass e-mail campaign relies solely upon the quality of the in-house developed circulation list.

'You have to survey the sources on your internal lists, refining them on a continual basis, or else they're of little use,' he says.

PR professionals are discovering the virtues of such things as cybercasting and multimedia content development - with the Internet revolutionizing the way they do their jobs.

Often the press release is now being used merely to point to further information. 'In our industry, press releases and media advisories are being used more to promote corresponding Web sites, Webcasts and other devices related to telling the story,' says Brian Taylor, director of marketing communications at US Newswire. 'This is a recognition by PR professionals that the Web is an important part of PR, but by no means the only part.'

Jeaneen Zappa Butler, marketing communications manager at E-Transport, an online business-to-business company, has found one Web-based application she considers effective. 'Last spring we cybercast the product launch of a new suite of e-commerce tools, and later archived that presentation,' says Butler. 'At last count, we had 170 inquiries directly attributed to the cybercast - the most recent on January 17.'

Reporters are obviously relying on the Internet more. Hundreds of sites are springing up like NasdaqNews.com, the news site partitioned from Nasdaq's main site and dedicated to serving journalists. 'We post everything to our Web site,' says Nasdaq director of media operations Scott Peterson.

'Reporters who write about Nasdaq regularly have the advantage because they know to check the site first. It's also a good educational tool. I just direct the reporter to the appropriate page and let him loose.'

A 1999 MSNBC survey reported that 25% of consumers currently go to the Internet first for news.

'As a result, our clients can no longer afford to send their time-sensitive news announcements through the traditional wire services to a brick-and-mortar building,' says Amy Orebaugh, PR manager at Internet Wire. 'They must fully utilize the speed and reach of the Internet.'

On the IR front, simple mass e-mailing (or faxing) of a press release doesn't offer the security of a wire campaign when it comes to the sensitive issue of selective disclosure.

'What I've found is that the newswires are an effective way of issuing simultaneous disclosure,' says Thomas Kelly, vice president of corporate media relations at Bank One. 'Last year we issued a couple of earnings warnings over the wires which negatively affected the stock. But, we made the SEC happy and, more importantly, we want to be known as a fair company that gets out the information quickly.'

As for the good-old fax, services like those offered by BlastFax may be an element in every major campaign, but they're now often more of a secondary consideration. PR professionals are well aware of the limitations of faxes and are opting for more sophisticated alternatives.

'Fax vendors are more for when you have an announcement, such as an appointment, than for a real news release,' says Rick Lehman, director of marketing for fax vendor Exstream Data, formerly E-Fax Communications. 'If you have a news release and need a network to distribute it to, you'd probably go to the wires. I mean, we go to the wires when we have our own news releases.'

Lehman adds that, as with e-mail, fax vendors also do not provide distribution lists.

Bank One's Kelly says, 'We use BlastFax sometimes but the bread and butter of our media operations is US 1 (PR Newswire's primary distribution list), which gets it to everyone it needs to.'

Jack Serpa, executive vice president at Internet Wire, says, 'Fax distribution is popular because it allows companies to select the specific journalist they want to target and send a hard copy of their announcement to that journalist by name.'

He adds, 'The downside to faxing is that journalists have to pay for paper, so many organizations have unlisted fax numbers or change them with such regularity it is almost impossible to deliver news successfully.'

Finally, technological tools and expertise are assets, but no substitute for well-grounded management and communication skills. 'The biggest 'don't' in this business is don't let somebody else talk to the media,' says Marlin Collingwood, partner and director of PR at Bozell Camstra Advertising and PR. 'Use their tools and distribution channels, but make sure you're the one pitching the stories and building those key relationships with the media.'

DOs and DON'Ts

DO

- 1 Find out which method of distribution key journalists on your circulation list prefer.

- 2 Constantly survey your circulation and continually refine your lists.

3 Understand that generic announcements, such as appointments, do not require a wire and can be mass faxed or e-mailed.

4 Include good contact information on every release.

DON'T

1 Use faxes if the news release is extremely urgent.

2 Neglect multimedia when putting releases on the Internet.

3 Think that journalists will read 10-page releases.

4 Let someone else talk to the media for you.

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