

# MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

*For Public Relations Firms*

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A collection of thoughts, theories and trends aimed at improving public relations firm operations, income and profit. Collected by Al Croft, APR, President, A.C. Croft and Associates, Inc.  
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## **"EMERGING MEDIA" TAKES AGENCIES IN "NEW" DIRECTIONS; Four Principals Show The Way.**

The following concerns "new and emerging media," a topic about which I know very little, but which has been gathering a growing amount of agency attention. In my agency days, "emerging media" might have referred to Punxsutawney Phil poking his head out of his mid-Pennsylvania burrow to predict whether there was going to be six more weeks of winter. However, "**new/emerging media**" is obviously a topic that **agency principals need to reckon with**. Witness the following:

A well-respected, mid-size, Southeastern agency recently came in second in a new biz shootout because the client was impressed with the strength of the winning firm's new "emerging media" division. With some research and help from friends, I calculated that at least **14 types of "media" probably qualify as "new" or "emerging"** (not in any particular order): corporate blogs; grass roots blogs; RSS feeds; Podcasts; client wikis; collaboration wikis; Technorati tags; social media (Facebook; Myspace; Youtube); webcasts; video blogs and virals. (I suspect that some of these may be the same thing operating under different aliases and that I may have missed some that should be included.)

To learn a bit about this emerging topic (and provide grist for this issue), I asked **four agency principals, who've been involved in new/emerging media from the git-go** to give me their thoughts on the subject; herewith:

### **The Evolution of the Press Release**

"In today's networked world, the definition of a news release has expanded. The press release is no longer exclusively a media relations tool; now, with the Internet's search capabilities, consider it a **direct-to-consumer online page of Web content**.

"The news release changed forever in September 2002, with the launch of Google News. From then on, all major public relations wire services – BusinessWire, PR Newswire, Market Wire, et al – became searchable online. Yahoo! News and AOL News soon launched their own news search portals. Today, each has more site traffic than the *New York Times'* website.

"This sea change for news releases (and the PR industry) means that consumers now **access releases simultaneously with journalists**. This has important implications for news release content, style and format.

"Integrating multimedia assets, anchor text and hyperlinks, and social media tags can enhance a release's intrinsic value and make it a portal to other information on the topic. A news release, as a page of web content, is now competing with a forum filled with news and multimedia elements including video and images. Even if you don't have photography or film – embedding a company logo is better than nothing.

"**Press releases are no longer one-dimensional**. Rather, they initiate a dialogue between an organization and its audience and engage an entire online community in an integrated conversation. Creative use of online content, from graphics to PDFs, logos, pre-approved executive quotes, and creative formatting can keep the conversation going longer and with more intensity. Adding hyperlinks in press releases to help viewers find interesting, related content on specific pages within your client's Web site is another way to provide the 'bread crumbs' that guide a journalist (or a consumer) to the content or specific action desired on a Website.

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“Search engine optimization (SEO), an activity previously reserved primarily for websites, may be the **most important (and easiest to incorporate) technique** for the ‘new’ news release. Without SEO, a release will be buried (and anything lower than top 10 on a Google News search, is buried).

“News search engines search by algorithms that are based on that old-school/J-school standard--the inverted pyramid. Thus, from a search perspective, headlines are the most important areas of content, followed closely by the lead and second paragraphs. Descriptive headlines are a must, and if you can **work important keywords into the head**, all the better. A great place to determine appropriate keywords is Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends)), where you can enter specific keywords to discover how often they are being searched online. Find them, and include these in your headline and first two paragraphs.

“Finally, public relations pros today have to consider consumer generated social media and the myriad ‘Web 2.0’ tools and technologies that are expanding the opportunities for online public relations. At the top of that list are blogs. The **most direct path to bloggers is via RSS feeds** – ‘real simple syndication.’

“How should public relations pros approach blogs? First of all, by respecting the medium’s non-commercial conventions. In many ways, pitching a blog is just like crafting a tailored pitch to a top tier (print) media outlet. Consider the blog’s audience and how your client or product can benefit that community. Work it into a trend angle. **Don’t expect to see your news release posted on the blog**, but do expect a spike in Web traffic if your pitch succeeds in sparking a blog mention or dialogue.

“The pace of change in new media is ever accelerating, and the ability to identify and leverage your agency’s knowledge resources is paramount. The major wire services all have experts ready to share the latest tips on SEO, RSS, Technorati tags and (fill in the next new thing here). Seek their help, guidance and recommendations. After all, shiny new bells & whistles for what used to be plain-Jane news releases represent revenue opportunities for us as the distributors of ‘optimized’ news releases. And get ready for the next new thing. Change is what we can count on—embrace it!” (*Lydia Graham, president, Graham Associates, San Francisco*)

## Getting Up To Speed With The Changing PR Landscape

“Whether you’re a technophile or a technophobe, you’d probably agree that technology continues to transform the public relations industry: how we communicate, how the media does its job, what the very definition of the media is.

“But **many of our peers are in veritable denial** and in need of a new media makeover. Are you one of them? Signs and symptoms include:

- “You find yourself unable to engage in intelligible – much less intelligent – conversation when the discussion turns to blogs, podcasts, RSS, social media, Web 2.0 (or whatever all the buzz is about this week).
- “You don’t know how to use IM (instant messaging), have no idea what ‘LOL’ means and are certainly not skilled in the art of communicating by emoticons. (**What the heck is an “emoticon?”** Told you I didn’t know much about this subject.)
- “You use your cell phone only for talking.

“The time for excuses is over. ‘Not my thing’ doesn’t cut it. **It’s time to pull your head out of the digital sandbox** and embrace your inner tech self. The success of your firm and your career depends on it.

“Here are three simple steps to getting up to speed with the changing PR landscape:

*Step 1: Learn the lay of the land.*

“The younger people in your organization are your lifeline to what’s happening on the front lines. Spend time with them, ask them to walk you through the hottest websites, to send you links to some of the more influential blogs, to set you up with IM, to teach you to use text messaging. While you’re at it, **learn the lingo – it’s actually easier than a foreign language** (no verbs to conjugate!). Most of your younger colleagues will get a kick out of showing you the way. And they’ll respect you more for keeping up.

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*Step 2: Take the plunge.*

“Visit a blog a day. When a new website suddenly becomes the hottest thing (think YouTube, MySpace or Second Life), go visit it right away. Navigate it or even try registering and using the site. Listen to podcasts. Subscribe to RSS feeds. **Follow developments in technology, media and communications.** Don’t be surprised when you suddenly become the life of the new media party. The jaws of your technophobic friends and colleagues will drop in awe at your transformation.

*Step 3: Use it or lose it.*

“Today’s market is increasingly competitive. Whether or not you’re incorporating new tools and tapping technologies in your public relations programs, you can bet your competitors are. **Think of ways to begin using the new tools at your disposal.** Monitor the so-called blogosphere for conversations about your company and your clients. Post video from your latest event to YouTube. Incorporate a text messaging component into your next community relations program.

“You may never become an expert in new media and technology but at least you can keep pace – because if you don’t, your competitors and your clients might just leave you in the digital dust.” (GG Johnston, president, COO, Johnston Wells, Denver)

### **Here’s What I’ve Learned So Far**

“From podcasts to blogs, text messages to vlogs, the communications world continues to advance beyond traditional media. Our clients know these channels exist; our job is to sort out the critical, the useful and the one-day wonders, and then **match the appropriate tools to each element of the communications strategy.**

“Here’s what I’ve learned so far:

“These are tools, like any other. They need to be integrated into your overall communications plan, not added on like shiny ornaments on a tree.

“Search engine optimization should be embraced—for your firm’s web position as well as your clients’. There are companies that specialize in **helping to ensure that your site moves up ‘organically’** when people search for key words. Key word techniques can also be applied to individual press releases, for example, to further their Internet exposure.

“**Build measurement into the budget** whenever possible. You can learn whether people are really engaging with a Website or flocking to it in an initial flurry of activity, only to leave just as quickly.

“Your youngest employees are already early adapters. They’re using these tools in their everyday lives. Let them lead the way in exploring the many ways you can **use emerging media to achieve client objectives.**

“Social networking sites seem like a natural fit for social issue campaigns, but it’s not a given. It’s **important to manage client expectations.** We present these communication tools as value-driven assets to strengthen an existing audience base and generate new support in a cost effective manner, not as a magic bullet.

“We are using emerging media for the Donate Life Illinois campaign, an 18-month effort to register Illinois residents in the state’s new organ/tissue donor registry. The client is Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network. In planning the campaign, we knew that **we wanted to implement a strong web presence,** given that the campaign is situated around online registrations and deals with a public issue. As part of the interactive component of our campaign strategy, we created a campaign blog and Donate Life Illinois MySpace page to: a) **Spark initial interest about the issue among 18-45 year olds;** and b) Expand our social network by creating a centralized location for supporters to receive regular campaign updates and learn about how they can contribute to the campaign.

“We also use **Facebook to facilitate conversation among student leaders** from colleges and universities throughout Illinois who are participating in the college component of the campaign. We quickly realized e-mail was not their tool of choice for communicating with the outside world. **The official campaign website [www.IAmAreYou.org](http://www.IAmAreYou.org) serves as a focal point,** while encouraging online involvement with quick links to our blog and MySpace pages. Measurement tools such as blog counters that assist with readership

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and tracking help our clients understand the relative value of these efforts.” (Carolyn Grisko, president, Carolyn Grisko & Associates, Chicago)

### Emerging Media Has Emerged

“Emerging media’ is no longer on the cutting edge. It’s here. Blogs, podcasts, vblogs, virals and the like have fully emerged and are actively engaged every day by PR and marketing pros all over the country. **Every agency has (or should have) its own strategic approach** to these media. At McClenahan Bruer, we deploy tactics across these areas every day, but rather than package them as a separate practice area, we integrate them into our daily approach to PR, advertising, and marketing communications. **The key to successful implementation is simple; do your homework.**”

“Just as you would if a new magazine or other media outlet was launched, start by investigating the players, the target audience and the rules of engagement before you pitch a client’s story. In fact, we decided to use ourselves as a guinea pig. We **launched a blog for the agency and ‘played’ with it for nearly a year** before offering blog strategy and management programs to our clients. That allowed us to find and figure out the ‘gotchas’ on a more forgiving client than those that actually pay for services.

“We did the same thing with e-newsletters and podcasts, testing them for ourselves before offering those services to paying clients. In addition to avoiding beginner’s mistakes on the client’s dime, it **allowed us to speak with integrity and authority** when we told clients we knew how to effectively deploy such programs for them.

“One final thought: Seek out the input and advice of your interns and other young team members. For them, there is nothing new about these media. They are likely **far more sophisticated about online platforms than senior team members**, and will welcome the opportunity to share what they know. Their knowledge of the tactics and your strategic expertise could be a very powerful combination.” (Kerry McClenahan, president, McClenahan Breuer, Portland, OR)

### The Other Side of the Coin

Coming at the topic from another direction, a Michigan firm president suggests, “Seems to me we haven’t asked a couple of basic questions (referring to the agency mentioned above), like who was the client; who was their target audience; and **why were they so ding-dang hot on ‘emerging media’?** Obviously, they’re (new media) more tools in the arsenal, but they’re only good if they work. Just because they’re the new shiny thing doesn’t mean they work.”

Noting that some of the “shine” may already be wearing off “new media,” *PR Week* editor Julia Hood asked recently in an editorial, “Is it possible that **we all engage in overkill in promoting the impact and influence of user-generated (new) media** at the expense of other marketing platforms? Far too much of the buzz relates to the opportunities of consumer content in isolation, rather than part of a complex and multifaceted program. This is both over-simplifying the ‘new media’ strategy and disproportionately diminishing others.”

I think maybe **they have a point**; a couple of points.

(Many thanks to the four agency principals who took the time to contribute so much – right on deadline – to this issue.)

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A.C. Croft and Associates provides analysis, planning and direction to public relations firms in management and administration, marketing and account management. The firm also hosts the annual three-day Sedona Round Table and offers in-house account management seminars as well as confidential one-on-one counseling on sensitive management issues. Annual subscriptions to *Management Strategies* are \$205.00 U.S. While the publication is copyrighted, internal agency distribution is permitted. Reprint permission is granted with credit.

