Forget pay-to-play, it's click-to-play that counts

The media's rapid evolution from print to desktop to mobile has changed not only our news habits but the nature of what's reported, testing financial PR firms' focus, strategies and approach to media relations.

By Matt Zachowski

Like every area of communications, financial PR is being challenged by ongoing pressures facing its traditional outlets: mainstream and trade print media. Advertising revenue continues to be lost to the Internet while readers disappear due to the meteoric rise in popularity of social media.

With many publications consolidating their print and online businesses, going online-only — or even going out of existence entirely — the core media relations business of financial PR firms is being severely tested by the sharp reduction in publications, coverage areas and journalists that are available to their clients.

Mobile on the rise

Driving this accelerating change is the rise in mobile consumption of media. Forget about the Millennial generation and all of those thereafter, few of whom will ever look at a print publication in their lives. Even most of the Baby Boomers I know get most, if not all, of their news online at this point. I was particularly struck last month during a conversation with a former *New York Times* overseas bureau chief who had worked in global hotspots like Moscow, Beijing and Cairo, now approaching 80 years of age, when he told me he gets all his news on his iPad each using mobile applications from mainstream print publications. The shift from print to desktop to mobile consumption of media is clearly happening much faster than any of us expected.

Steadily improving mobile applications and smart algorithms are now making long-promised mass customization of media product a reality. Today, we all get our morning emails from the *Times*, the *Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, Politico and many others, with the day's news carefully curated for us based on the clicking behavior of their online readers.

Facebook shows us the news based on our posts and "likes," and Google now provides us with "feed," a news app based on our location and Internet searches. While all the bots watch us, journalists now watch Twitter for breaking news, rather than the other way around. Entire governments have even fallen in part because of so-called "Twitter revolutions" and smuggled videos posted on YouTube. Social media is not only popular, but powerful.

The rapid move to mobile and social has not only changed our habits but it has changed the nature of reported news. Even the Old Gray Lady and WaPo under Jeff Bezos have reorganized around an "online first" news reporting strategy, going where their audience is. This equates to headlines and photos in their morning briefs that tease rather than tell the story, serving as clickbait to the website where the opposite is true: the headline and the lede tell all, stories are truncated with links to related content, and short videos abound. No surprise, really, that both publications have seen a bump in digital subscribers following these changes. Meanwhile, the trade publications that haven't disappeared are merging and consolidating staffs through "synergies," which typically translates to fewer people doing more work.

In this new world order, the opportunity to provide quality material in the form of sponsored articles to content-starved publications has increased, as has the ability to disseminate it directly to your audience via social media. Many financial PR agencies have shifted their focus away from traditional media relations as a result of these developments. If you can go directly to the market with your client's message, they reason, why go through the filters of reporters and low-level editors? Many of these journalists are younger and less experienced than those of generations past and are not yet fully conversant with all the subtleties of financial markets and products, fintech, in particular. To many agencies, traditional media relations just doesn't work anymore.

Mainstream media remains credible

We reject this line of thinking. Even as mainstream media takes it on the chin from President Donald Trump — quite literally in the case of CNN — these outlets remain far and away the most credible sources for news and information to well-educated business and professional audiences. In a sea of sources, many of which look and sound alike and have "innovative" business models that don't involve revenues, whom do you trust as a reader? As a recent detailed survey by Pew Research Center showed, it is those fabled purveyors of "fake news": the mainstream national and business media. About 8 in 10 respondents said they trust the information they get from mainstream media "somewhat" or "a lot," versus only 3 in 10 respondents who said the same about information obtained from social media.

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Recently, one of our fintech clients had a brief but prominently placed article in the *Financial Times* on the firm's latest funding round. From that single bit of coverage, the company got several thousand website referrals directly from the *FT* website or mobile app, translating to more than 500 qualified leads. This was roughly 10 times the number of qualified leads that our client received from any of the 15 other publications that ran a similar story or from social media postings. This example demonstrates the power of online and mobile coverage in traditional mainstream outlets, which are highly respected in the marketplace notwithstanding anything the President might say. It also shows how the Internet has sped up the sales cycle right along with the news cycle and just about everything else.

A changing approach to news

In the rapidly-evolving online world, crowded with so many niche and social outlets, mainstream media still own many of the most powerful brands in the market, boosting their credibility and engendering trust. And short of staff, they are more than open to hearing your pitches. But their approach to reporting the news is changing, so PR firms must change their approach as well.

It has never been more important to think like an editor rather than a marketer. If you can't tell your client's story in a headline and a couple of bullet points, you need a new narrative. If you can't supply an interesting photo or infographic that supports your pitch, you need a new narrative. If it's not about what your client is doing for the reader, you need a new narrative.

As James Carville might have put it, "It's the clicks, stupid."

Matt Zachowski is Managing Partner and Executive Chairman at Intermarket Communications.