

Chapter 4

Newsmakers Turn the Tables

On January 9, 2002, reporters Bob Woodward and Dan Balz of *The Washington Post* sat down with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The journalists were working on a series of articles about the hours and days immediately following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington—“the best serious history we can do of these 10 days,” they told the secretary.

Rumsfeld said he understood from Secretary of State Colin Powell that he, Rumsfeld, was at the end of the interview trail: “He said you’ve talked to everybody in the world on this.”

The two reporters were indeed prepared for their session. They asked a series of questions, probing deeply into what Rumsfeld had thought, said, and done in those days. Their homework was, in a word, exceptional.

How do we know? Because immediately after *The Washington Post* series appeared later that month, the Department of Defense posted a transcript of the interview on its DefenseLink web site.⁹⁷ Anyone who cared to know about the journalists’ interviewing style could see it firsthand. Moreover, anyone who wanted to see which small pieces of the interview had made it into the newspaper could also do that. It turns out that the Defense Department posts every major interview with Rumsfeld and his chief deputy, Paul Wolfowitz.

Why this practice? It’s to make sure that the full context is available, according to a Rumsfeld aide. What she didn’t say—

but didn't have to—was that posting these interviews serves a multitude of purposes for the department. First, assuming the transcriptions are accurate (and sometimes they are not),⁹⁸ they provide valuable history for anyone who cares and not just context for the interview itself. Second, if an interviewer writes or broadcasts a story that doesn't reflect the substance of the interview, or outright misleads the audience, the department can point to the transcript in its own defense. Third, the process helps keep reporters on their toes.

It will also make journalists uncomfortable. Our little priesthood, where we essentially have had the final word, is unraveling. But as software people say, that's a feature, not a bug.

Newsmakers have always possessed a certain leverage in the give and take with the press. After all, they are the ones we write and talk about; we're only the observers. Moreover, in a world where too many reporters serve as little more than stenographers, newsmakers can create and hold onto the agenda.

Now it's true that newsmakers can use the tools of new journalism in old ways, such as the old-fashioned trial balloon, to trick the press and mislead the public. Many will do just that because they continue to live in a world where all interactions with the media that can't be controlled are by their definition hostile. The ones who behave this way will be missing a profound point, but they've been missing it for years.

The point has *Cluetrain*-ish echoes—that markets are conversations. It has realpolitik echoes, too, because the stakes are so high in such interactions. But the bottom line is a change, for companies, for politicians, and for other newsmakers brave enough to get it. This evolution from a broadcasting view of the world to a conversational view will not be neat and clean. But its inherent messiness will open communications in ways that will benefit everyone, assuming it's done correctly.

As I noted in Chapter 3, the old rules of newsmaking are no longer the only ones in force. What made them work in the first

place—news flowing through a select group of heavily controlled mass-media conduits, mainly television—is still very much alive and largely in control of how most citizens perceive the news.

But the press release culture is beginning to die, and nothing could be better news than that. News and commentary from the edge of networks, from average people who want to be part of the conversation, from bloggers to activists, are facts of life for the newsmakers. Professional journalists remain very much a part of the action, and I expect we will continue to do so, but a wider constituency is emerging.

Newsmakers of all kinds—corporate, political, and, I'd argue, journalistic—need to listen harder, and in new ways, to constituents of all kinds, whether voters, customers, or the general public. Then they need to learn from what they hear. Marketing and customer service no longer work as simple lectures. Businesses need to engage in the conversations that are already occurring about their products and practices. Using weblogs and other information tools such as discussion forums, companies can engage customers, suppliers, and employees in a dialogue in which everyone learns from each other. Mass media remains a vital tool of modern communications, but understanding the evolving world I've been describing will become just as necessary. For example, a well-targeted approach to a weblogger who's become an expert in a given area may be more effective than a magazine ad.

And companies need to realize that being open and truthful is not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing. In the emerging world of Internet-enabled communications, obfuscation and lies will work even less well than before. Activists and informed customers will catch the cheaters and hold them accountable. McDonald's may have won the McSpotlight libel trial, but I hope and trust that the company will, in the end, be a better—not just craftier—corporate citizen as a result of this and

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other citizen action. Politicians such as Trent Lott will remember that nostalgia for a segregationist era is unacceptable to the vast majority of Americans.

Making this shift in thinking will feel, at times, like three-dimensional chess. Consider the multiple audiences business serves: traditional media, new media, other businesses, customers, regulators, politicians, and political constituents. Now add the varying communication tools—email, weblogs, short messages, syndication via Net-based tools such as RSS—and you get a sense of the new landscape and its complexity.

In this chapter, I'll offer some specific advice and examples to the newsmakers of tomorrow, ideas on how to conduct genuine conversations with their constituents, who include everyone from journalists to employees to the general public. I hope business people and politicians, in particular, will use them for the right purposes, and not to mislead and deceive.

LEARNING BY LISTENING

While it's possible to learn something from a focus group, or a scientific survey, those techniques don't add up to listening. Consider the case of Phil Gomes, a public-relations professional in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁹⁹ About two years into his career, his agency put him onto an account dealing with enterprise software. He was told to handle media relations and industry analysis for a suite of programs that ran on IBM's AS/400 midrange computers, which had a huge market presence and were known as sturdy and reliable machines. The software firm was looking into rewriting its software to run on computers running the Unix and Windows operating systems. Some of the AS/400 customers, then representing 90 percent of the customer base, were worried that they might be left behind.

Gomes found a "listserv" (an online mailing list) for users of the software in question where they were creating their own

news report, in effect, by conducting well-informed discussions about the product, gaining knowledge that once might only have come from a journal or a user group. Gomes and his client needed to understand what they were saying.

“By monitoring this list, I gained an incredibly rich perspective on what the customers’ needs, concerns, and decision-making processes were,” Gomes said. “Thus, I was able to then bring that intelligence back to the client and tune communications accordingly. Were it not for the perspective the list offered, the company might have pursued the communication of the open systems strategy so vigorously that the AS/400 customers (who were never in any danger of losing support) might have felt like stepchildren.”

Did Gomes’ employer fully appreciate his effort? Not exactly. Some of his supervisors “did not see much value in me subscribing to these lists and monitoring the discussions. ‘Oh, jeez,’ they’d say. ‘Gomes is in his chatrooms again.’”

More recently, Gomes has become one of the better-informed PR-industry observers of blogging and other new media. He’s written useful papers and weblog postings on the topic, but said he’s been greeted by “some degree of disdain. There’s a knee-jerk tendency in the corporate communications field to treat every new online media development as the next CB radio instead of fully exploring it.”

But some companies are catching on and learning to use new communication tools. Technologies such as RSS have given companies new ways to monitor what’s happening. Buzz Bruggeman, the lawyer I mentioned in the *Introduction*, also sells a software product called “ActiveWords,” an application that automates a variety of tasks in the Windows operating system.¹⁰⁰ He uses the Feedster service (discussed in Chapter 2), which searches for mentions of ActiveWords. It creates an RSS feed that goes into his newsreader, NewsGator. Every half hour, NewsGator checks with Feedster for anything new. If there is:

I immediately scan it, read it and figure out what to do, i.e. respond, comment, thank, forward to our team, etc.

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When I respond to a blogger, he/she is thrilled, and typically writes more about us, and tells his/her readers that we are great people, responding to users and customers and the net leverages all the time. If there are user problems, we solve them quickly; on balance it is brilliant stuff.

My total involvement in this process once the query is done is almost zero. Probably weekly I check out Google news, Google newsgroups, but the Feedster stuff is vastly more important.

If you assume that bloggers really are “intelligent human agents”, then this model is sensational as you don’t have to go look for anyone or anything; it comes to you.

At one time, this kind of service cost a bundle. Now anyone can get it at almost no cost.

BLOG IT

The average corporate web site has much in common with the average annual report. It’s loaded with information, too much of which is hidden or disguised in an effort to minimize problems and maximize what’s going right. To that end, particularly in the case of companies with problems, it seems designed to thwart the casual visitor who wants to look deeply into the enterprise and its doings. The least interesting feature of a corporate site, with few exceptions, is the typical “Letter from the Chief Executive,” a content-free missive that does nothing to reveal the character either of the company or its leader. Creating an impression of openness isn’t the same as actually being open.

“Blogging is an opportunity for Public Relations, not a threat,” wrote public-relations pro Tom Murphy on his PR Opinions blog.¹⁰¹ “Blogging provides a unique means of providing your audience with the human face of your organization. Your customers can read the actual thoughts and opinions of your staff. On the flip side, consumers increasingly want to see the human side of your organization, beyond the corporate speak.”

When Groove Networks Ray Ozzie explains something on his blog,¹⁰² the reader is gaining insight into the CEO's way of thinking, not just the company's products. The indirect trajectory of Ozzie's blog is what makes it so worthwhile. He's not pitching Groove so much as explaining what he's thinking about on matters relating to the company and its ecosystem.

On July 17, 2003, Ozzie posted an item about the poor security in wireless computing, linking first to an article he'd seen in the trade journal *Infoworld* as support. That article, he said, was one reason why "people are discovering why compartmentalized security such as that implemented by Groove is so important moving forward," he wrote. "The alternative is more than a bit frightening: Recognizing their valid concerns, would you allow your employer to 'lock down' and remotely manage your home computer?"

I don't cite this posting because it's earthshaking information, but because it illustrates how one executive used this channel to talk about an important issue in today's computing world—security—while simultaneously making a subtle pitch for his own product. Only because Ozzie already had some credibility was this effective, since there's an element of hyperbole in his message. He addressed an issue and reflected a viewpoint—in his own words, not a PR person's. The pitch fit the context of the posting. It was relevant. It didn't have to lead directly to more sales to be useful.

The blog gave Ozzie "a communications channel under my control," he told me, where he could say what he wanted (within limits, such as keeping trade secrets secret). He can post quickly and without limits on length. "I feel as though there's a conversation—many conversations—going on out there. It lets me feel like I'm part of that conversation, and when I get calls and emails, there's confirmation that I'm part of the conversation."

Not long after we discussed all this, Ozzie put his blog on a hiatus due to a heavy work schedule but then revived it many weeks later. "It's been a very busy past few months," he emailed me in early 2004. "The biggest difference between where my

head is at these days versus about a year ago is that I used to feel guilty for not posting. At this point, knowing how effectively RSS works, I know that when I start posting again—even if it’s only once in a blue moon—I won’t have to regenerate the audience from scratch. When I first started posting, I really felt as though I would ‘disappear’ from the community if I needed (for whatever reason) to take a break, but RSS aggregators really only impose a small burden for continuing to monitor people who can only post rarely.”

A more recent executive recruit to the blogosphere is Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks franchise in the National Basketball Association. An Internet billionaire (cofounder of broadcast.com, a Net company acquired by Yahoo!), Cuban became famous as the demonstrative sports team owner, though he’s also kept investing in the technology and television arenas. His “Blog Maverick”¹⁰³ attracted instant attention when he launched it in March 2004, and no wonder: he took on sports-writers and offered pungent commentary on sports and investing, and generally took to blogging like no other CEO I’ve seen. (He also needed a copy editor, but most bloggers do.)

I was intrigued and, on the spur of the moment, shot a quick email to him with five questions. He responded almost immediately.

Q: What prompted the blog in the first place?

A: I was tired of reading incomplete information or misinformation about what I was doing in the sports media. This was one way to get the facts out.

Q: From your observations, are business people and folks in the public eye generally aware of their own ability to frame the discussion, or at least respond to what’s being said?

A: Yes and No. I think everyone with any awareness of the Internet from a business perspective is aware of blogs. The issue is, “If you write it, will they come?” It’s one thing to write a blog to set the record straight, but if no one reads it, it’s not worth the effort. That creates a Catch 22 that I’m sure most don’t think is worth the risk.

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Q: Should all CEOs do their own blogs? If so, why? If not, why not?

A: Probably not. Being in sports is different than just being in business. The local newspapers write about the Mavs every day. They might write about a company once a quarter at most.

Q: What kind of thing wouldn't you say on a blog? What are the limits, if any?

A: I don't know yet.

Q: What else should I have asked you about the new world of communications?

A: It's not a new world. We all have been able to create our own websites for years. This is just a content management system, verticalized for diary entries. That diary-like format has caught the attention of the voyeur in all of us. Whether or not it's a long-term impact, I have no idea.

CEO blogs are useful. Even better, in many cases, are blogs and other materials from people down the ranks. For journalists, some of the most valuable communications from inside companies come from the rank and file, or from managers well below the senior level. Why not let them communicate with the public, too?

A growing number of smart companies understand why this is a good idea. Perhaps the best at this early on was Macromedia, maker of popular web-design tools such as DreamWeaver and Flash. Macromedia programmers and product managers contribute to a variety of blogs. For example, John Dowdell offers a "news service for people using Macromedia MX",¹⁰⁴ one of Macromedia's key products. Macromedia also aggregates its blogs onto one page for convenience and allows anyone to read them.¹⁰⁵

Microsoft has set a new standard in several ways. In May 2004, Bill Gates touted the advantages of blogs and RSS in a speech to corporate chief executives. Noting the convenience factor, he said, "The ultimate idea is that you should get the information you want when you want it..." Walking the talk,

the company allows hundreds of staffers to blog on personal sites. I'm especially impressed with Channel 9,¹⁰⁶ run by several of the company's software developers. They're putting a distinctly human face on what they do, and use videos, audio, and text conversations to augment basic text blogs. (The name "Channel 9" comes from some airlines' policies of letting passengers listen in to cockpit-tower conversations on the planes' audio systems.)

The public sector can use these techniques, too. Phil Windley served as the state of Utah's Chief Information Officer for about 21 months ending in December 2002.¹⁰⁷ He'd encountered weblogs at a conference in California and was intrigued by what they might represent. He started his own personal blog and then realized the format could have value in an enterprise setting. So he bought 100 licenses for Radio Userland, one of the major weblog software packages, and offered one to any state information technology (IT) people who wanted to start a blog. Almost three dozen took him up on the offer, and about a third of those remain active, he says. His own blog gave him better visibility among the IT workers who read it from around the state. And he, in turn, learned from their blogs about the challenges they were facing.

Of course, it's not as simple as just telling an executive (or having the executive volunteer) to write a blog, or offering blogs to others in the organization. Enter the lawyers.

Even in an era of openness, governments, companies, and other big organizations still have trade secrets. They don't want to air dirty laundry. That's why companies and governments have strict email policies, nondisclosure agreements, and other measures to prevent valuable inside information from migrating into the wrong hands. (Groove has rules on which topics bloggers can write about and which they can't.)

Sometimes what you can't post outside the firewall—where the public can see it—is fine to post inside. An internal blog or Wiki can help an organization's workers keep up to date on projects and each other's individual discoveries. Utah's IT blogs were for the IT workers only, and they served their purpose.

Weblogs, internal or external, are not for everyone or every enterprise, Windley says. “You have to decide how comfortable you are with people being candid,” he says. “Weblogs are about people being candid. Some organizations don’t like that.”

Robert Scoble, one of the most prolific Microsoft bloggers, has become well-known in the technology field because of his Scobleizer blog.¹⁰⁸ In a comment he posted on my blog, he said:

“Others will either figure it out, or will lose the benefits of participating in the marketplace. But, it really requires you to hire smart people and give them access to the most sensitive of internal information. Not every company will figure this out, but Microsoft is uniquely positioned to really take advantage of the new conversational marketing. Why? We all have access to executive-level views of the company. That’s quite unlike other places I’ve worked.”

I’ve had my battles with Microsoft over the years. But as one of the company’s louder critics, I can say with certainty that its willingness to let employees have this conversation with the public is a smart move for marketing and PR purposes. It tells me, among other things, that the empire is trying to be a little less evil.

After companies decide blogging is a good idea, they have to come up with a corporate policy that includes what employees can say and how they can say it. They should also decide on a writing style and come up with policies of how to respond to offensive statements and threats. Finally, and most importantly, the leader of the organization has to be committed to the process. He doesn’t have to write a blog, but he must make it clear that blogs and other kinds of lateral communications are important.

In 2003, Scoble posted a manifesto for corporate bloggers on his own blog.¹⁰⁹ Some of his suggestions may not be practical for most companies (and it’s evident to me, at least, that Scoble’s own company frequently ignores his suggestions), but the list has some valuable ideas. Here are several of the better ones:

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- Tell the truth. The whole truth. Nothing but the truth. If your competitor has a product that's better than yours, link to it. You might as well. We'll find it anyway.
- Post fast on good news or bad. Someone say something bad about your product? Link to it—before the second or third site does—and answer its claims as best you can. Same if something good comes out about you. It's all about building long-term trust. The trick to building trust is to show up! If people are saying things about your product and you don't answer them, that distrust builds. Plus, if people are saying good things about your product, why not help Google find those pages as well?
- Have a thick skin. Even if you have Bill Gates' favorite product people will say bad things about it. That's part of the process. Don't try to write a corporate weblog unless you can answer all questions—good and bad—professionally, quickly, and nicely.
- Talk to the grassroots first. Why? Because the mainstream press is cruising weblogs looking for stories and looking for people to use in quotes. If a mainstream reporter can't find anyone who knows anything about a story, he/she will write a story that looks like a press release instead of something trustworthy. People trust stories that have quotes from many sources. They don't trust press releases.

Skilled professions may be the most ideal for this kind of communication. For example, over the past several years, the number of high-quality legal blogs has exploded. Most started out simply because the author enjoyed writing about the law. But legal blogs turn out to be superb marketing tools as well. Ernest Svenson, a New Orleans lawyer, didn't have marketing in mind when he started his blog,¹¹⁰ but it's been modestly helpful there, too, he told me, generating referrals and requests for bids on services.

“In general, I do it because it puts me in touch with attorneys who are interested in how technology is changing the practice of law,” he said, noting that there aren't very many lawyers in New Orleans who are eager to talk about such things.

THE CELEBRITY BLOG

Wil Wheaton is not, repeat not, Wesley Crusher.

Now in his early 30s, Wheaton isn't a bit sorry he played the role of the brainy but somewhat annoying teenager on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* back in the 1980s and early 1990s. He's proud of it. But some fans of the show utterly loathed the Crusher character. A once notorious Internet discussion group was called "alt.ensign.wesley.die.die.die"—and the tone of the postings fit the newsgroup's title.

In 2001, the Pasadena resident launched a weblog,¹¹¹ in part to "undo a lot of the misconceptions directed toward me because of the character I played on Star Trek," he said. His online journal mixes intensely personal observations with commentary on modern life, politics, technology, and entertainment. It tells you a lot about who he really is: a thoughtful and intelligent family man, with a bent toward geekiness and political activism.

The blog has become Wheaton's portal into a new career as a writer. And Wheaton has established a new kind of connection with his audience. Call it the Celebrity Blog. And think of it as the evolution from the celebrity as a manufactured product to the celebrity as something more genuine in a human sense.

Wheaton's is highly personal. It's helped people get to know him, as opposed to the *Star Trek* character. (A personal observation: *The Next Generation* remains by far the best of the many series in the long-running franchise.)

Wheaton was no fan of the Hollywood system that creates stars and spits them out after using them. The blog has reflected that sentiment. "I'd struggled so much as an actor, and felt like I was running out of time to be a successful actor," he said. "I'd done lousy movies to support my family. I started writing about that, the ups and downs, mostly downs—what it's like to be someone whose first half of life is being famous, and the second half, being famous for being famous."

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Nor is he a fan of the Hollywood trade press, to put it mildly. “I’m cynical about entertainment press,” he said.

“I don’t think the press on the whole is truly objective with researched, hard-hitting journalism. It’s basically an extension of the studio publicity machine.” When new films are released, there’s lots of coverage, but hardly anything negative, because writers who express skepticism tend to lose their access in the future.

And while the trade press won’t beat up on popular actors, Wheaton said, “they’ll beat up on me all the time because I’m a minor celebrity. What am I going to do, threaten? I don’t have a publicist.”

He recalled an *Entertainment Weekly* story about blogs. “The writer was snotty and dismissive and condescending,” he said, taking some quotes “totally out of context, and portrayed me in a really negative light. In the grand scheme I could care less. It’s just lazy journalism. But everyone in the entertainment industry read it. So perception is important.”

“In a situation like mine, having a blog is useful,” Wheaton said, “because it allows me to get my story out.”

He lost his passion for acting and found a new one in writing. The blog has spawned one book, *Dancing Barefoot*,¹¹² and another was on the way in early 2004. He was making a living from his writing, an enormously satisfying turn of events. (Disclosure: Wheaton’s new publisher is also the publisher of this book. He was self-publishing when I first wrote about his blog in my newspaper column.)

Wheaton has been using computers much of his life. He’s conversant with the Web’s current programming languages of choice, he’s an advocate of open source software, and he uses the Linux operating system at home. He’s also taken up some causes dear to the hearts of many in the tech community, such as reform of the copyright system that has been tilted so drastically toward copyright holders and against customers and users. He’s a strong supporter of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF),

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which fights for liberties in a digital era; he stirred up the crowd at a 2002 EFF fundraising event with a rousing call to arms against industry abuses and an endorsement of EFF's mission.

Writing a weblog like his carries a responsibility. Authenticity matters. Lots of his readers "feel they know me, which is weird," he said, citing an email that had just arrived when we spoke in mid-2003. The correspondent mentioned an incident in his book, which Wheaton calls "a love letter to my wife." As Wheaton recounts the story, the couple was on a Santa Barbara street as it began to rain. He opened an umbrella. "She grabbed the umbrella, closed it, and said, 'Let's walk in the rain,'" he recalled. "I wrote about it. It was definitely sappy. I'm head over heels for my wife and have been for eight years."

Wheaton's online correspondent wanted him to understand something: "He said, 'We read this for your honesty, and if we find out this is being written by some clever writer, we'll all feel betrayed.'"

"They always say to write what you know," said Wheaton. "That's really good advice."

TALKING TO THE AUDIENCE

What business needs to use from-the-edges technology most of all? Public relations. Yet in the past few years, the PR industry has graduated from mere cluelessness to only a semi-conscious understanding of the Internet's possibilities. To the extent that PR professionals view their jobs as only pretending to give out genuine information, what follows will not be useful. I have a more charitable view of the industry, and suspect there are plenty of PR pros who see the possibilities in entering this new era in a smart way.

It's astonishing to see how bad most corporate web sites are after all these years. In my "Dear PR People" letter on my weblog, I offer the following simple guidelines:

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Make sure your clients have a ton of information on their Web sites. This should include not just press releases but also links to articles written about the client by other publications; bios and high-definition photographs of leaders and detailed information, including pictures (and videos) of products; and anything else you think might be useful.

Don't bury the PR contact information so far inside the website that no one without an advanced degree in Library Science can find it. I look for the "About the Company" page, then look for the "Press" page and then for the "Contact Information" page. Maybe there's a more logical place for such information, but wherever you put it, don't hide it.

I used to request email contacts instead of phone calls, faxes, and snail mail. Now, unless someone has some news or a pitch aimed specifically at me—and I mean me alone—I no longer want even email due to the spam plague. I want RSS. Even if a company doesn't want to create a weblog, it absolutely should create RSS feeds of its major news. This is not optional anymore; it's essential.

On April 2, 2002, networking giant Cisco Systems' "News@Cisco" PR operation created RSS feeds of its press releases.¹¹³ The intended audience, said Dan Teeter, the engineer who set them up, was just about everyone from reporters to analysts to investors to partners to customers. Microsoft has RSS feeds aimed at developers. Slowly but surely, companies are learning.

If public-relations people start creating RSS feeds of releases, journalists and the public at large could see the material they want, and the PR industry would be able to stop blasting huge amounts of email to people whose inboxes are already over-cluttered. There will continue to be a use for email in PR, but the volume could be cut substantially—if PR people can be persuaded to do so. In 2002, Jon Udell, an *Infoworld* columnist, described (in his blog, of course) a communication he'd like to receive: "Hi, I'm [NAME], [CTO, Architect, Product Manager] for [COMPANY] which does [PRODUCT

OR SERVICE]. I have started a weblog that describes what we do, how we do it, and why it matters. If this information is useful and relevant, our RSS feed can be found here. Thanks!”¹¹⁴

The spam scourge has also made life next to impossible for email newsletters. By some estimates, somewhere between 15 and 30 percent of legitimate email is now blocked by spam filters. If a newsletter is treated as spam, it’s no good to anyone. Thank goodness for RSS, said Chris Pirillo, publisher of the LockerGnome newsletters. “RSS is evolving as a replacement for email publishing and marketing,” he told me.

There’s a right way to do RSS, and a distinctly wrong way. Some companies do both. Apple Computer, for example, has an RSS feed of its press releases. But when you look at them in my RSS newsreading software, all you see is the headlines, without text, so if you want to read the things, you have to go visit Apple’s site. Stupid. Conversely, Apple’s iTunes people have created an RSS feed of the top-selling new songs. In the pane of the newsreader that contains the body of the message, you see the album cover and some details about the song. Not stupid.

FINE-GRAIN PITCHING

In April, 2001, Apple Computer’s public-relations agency got a request from a blogger, Joe Clark, who wanted to interview someone inside the company about the Macintosh operating system. Clark had written for tech magazines, and his now dormant NUBlog¹¹⁵ was an increasingly popular site, but the PR agency didn’t know this. Frustrated by the negative response, Clark posted the email exchange on his site, which in turn prompted a cease-and-desist letter from the agency’s regional vice president. The entire episode showed how fundamentally clueless Apple and its PR people were about a medium that was growing in importance.

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To be fair, this was 2001, before weblogs were well-known. Clark, a tech writer and published author, was a relatively early player in what Azeem Azhar, a principal in 20six, a European weblog tool company, calls the “eBay-ization of media—everyone can be a buyer and a seller.” Others call it “nanopublishing”—small sites, run by one or very few people, focusing on a relatively narrow niche topic. A niche blogger may lack the influence of a major publication. According to Azhar, a niche blogger in this context is “a teenage boy who drives the mobile-phone purchase decisions of his group of teenage friends; or the London yoga practitioner who has 60 or 80 fellow yogi readers on his blog, and who influences their yoga-related purchasing.”

But they do make a difference.

For example, people in the Wi-Fi wireless networking arena have learned that at least two weblogs—Glenn Fleishman’s Wi-Fi Networking News, which I discussed earlier, and Alan Reiter’s Wireless Data Web Log¹¹⁶—are as important to their readers as any print publication. These sites provide the latest Wi-Fi news, along with highly informed commentary by their authors. In fact, they’re better than any print publication I’ve seen.

The influence of effective bloggers transcends technology. In the world of baby strollers, a southern California woman named Janet McLaughlin moves markets.¹¹⁷ “While she doesn’t earn a dime for her efforts,” *The Wall Street Journal* reported on September 2003, “Ms. McLaughlin—better known to her followers as Strollerqueen—has attained celebrity status in the underground world of stroller watchers and gained outsize influence on new buyers. Shoppers around the globe seek her counsel with Internet postings titled ‘Wise strollerqueen give us your expertise!!,’ ‘ALL HAIL THE STROLLERQUEEN!,’ and ‘Stroller queen: thanks for making me look normal.’ She has referred so many customers to two West Coast stroller stores that they both periodically offer ‘Strollerqueen discounts.’”¹¹⁸

Another influential niche publication is Gizmodo, a weblog about the latest and greatest electronic gadgets. It’s part of the

small but growing collection of sites run by Nick Denton, a financial journalist turned entrepreneur. Gizmodo's influence far exceeds its relative size, and its first writer, Peter Rojas, was an experienced tech journalist who worked at publications such as *Red Herring* magazine. Rojas, who has since moved to another niche blog, Engadget,¹¹⁹ said companies did pick up on what he was doing, though "it took a few months to really get noticed (except for Microsoft, they picked up on Gizmodo within days of our launch)." He told me in mid-2003:

I'll have to say that the pitches aren't exactly pitches *per se*, more like PR people emailing me to let me know about a new product or to invite me to have lunch with someone who is going to be in town, that sort of thing. I do get a lot of press releases that aren't relevant to Gizmodo, that's mainly because I made the fool mistake of registering for CeBIT America [a giant trade show], so now I get all sorts of "enterprise application" bullshit. Still, I very rarely blog something because a PR person "pitched" it to me. Most of the fodder for Gizmodo comes from trawling my trusty newsreader a million times a day, with the rest coming from tips from readers (who I supposed could be PR people in disguise. You never know).

I'd have to say, though, the PR people who do contact me seem smarter and more respectful than those who barraged me back when I was at Red Herring. Whether that's because they're clued in to the world of blogs, and thus have a better understanding of how they work, or whether the tech bust left only the best flaks in business, I can't say for certain. But overall, my experience with PR people has been pretty positive, and those I've dealt with seem to be taking Gizmodo very seriously as a technology news outlet. I even once had the VP for Global Marketing at Kyocera write me an angry email after I dissed one their new phones.

Denton thinks blog pitches are ideal for "marketers who are inclined toward a PR-centric word-of-mouth strategy." He offers an example: a maker of high-end bicycles can't effectively

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advertise in newspapers or television, which go to a mass audience; the coverage from bicycle magazines doesn't meet the manufacturer's needs either. Without the resources to hire an expensive PR agency, the bicycle maker might look online for "the 15 people most influential in writing about bicycles and extreme sports—to identify who writes about this stuff, who's listened to [by the Web community] and who spreads memes," and approach those bloggers for coverage.

Or businesses can find the influential bloggers themselves. As noted, the blogging world has spawned services designed to help bloggers—and others—keep track of things. Technorati and Feedster are probably the most useful among the early entrants.

SOME RULES FOR NEW-WORLD PR AND MARKETING

I'm always glad not to be doing PR or marketing. Unless I was pitching something I genuinely believed to be important, I'd have trouble making the pitch. And never mind the chore of dealing with journalists.

But if I were doing this, given the tools now available, I'd offer to my boss or client the following rules for using tomorrow's media:

1. Listen hard, because people outside your organization may know things you don't. Keep an eye on chat rooms, discussion boards, email, blogs, and everything else from the edge, both outside and inside the operation.
2. Talk openly about what you're doing, and why. Start a weblog, or 10 weblogs, from inside the company. Explain, in plain English (or whatever your local language), what's going on inside the place. Get the CEO to post, too. Create internal blogs and Wikis behind the firewall.

3. Ask questions, because there will be people who are willing to answer. After you've listened and talked, take the next step and turn on the comments feature in your weblogs so customers can post back. Ask for help from your various constituencies. Set up discussion groups, but don't censor them except to remove libelous, obscene, and totally off-point postings.
4. Syndicate your information to the widest audience in the most efficient way. Create RSS feeds for everything useful to journalists and the rest of us, including press releases, speeches, blog postings, and other material.
5. Help out by offering more, not less. Make sure your web site has everything a journalist might need. This includes pictures, audio, video, charts, and plain old text—and make sure it's easy to find. If journalists can find it, customers can, too. That's a good situation, not a negative one.
6. Post or link to what your people say publicly, and to what is said about you. When your CEO or other top official gives an interview, transcribe it and post it on the web site. If it's an interview being broadcast, put the audio or video online as well. If an article about you is unfriendly, link to it anyway (because other people will find it even if you pretend it doesn't exist) but also post a reply.
7. Aim carefully at people who really care. Find out which micro-publishers are talking about your product or service. (Use Google, Technorati, Blogdex, and Feedster, not just Nexis and clipping services.) Also ask around about whom you should be contacting. Then make sure you keep these people well-informed. Treat them like professional journalists who are trying to get things right, and they'll be more likely to treat you with similar respect.

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8. Correct your mistakes promptly and honestly. When a major news outlet or serious blogger posts something inaccurate, respond immediately. Point to source material that backs you up. Send an email to bloggers who have pointed to the errant item, and tell them about your response. If it's a matter of opinion, not fact, be judicious in your replies.
9. Thank the people who teach you new things. Congratulate them publicly when they offer a great suggestion, and do it again when you put it into effect. And when someone finds your mistake, don't be defensive. Tell the world—and the person who told you—how much you appreciate the assistance.
10. Experiment constantly, because risk is a part of growth. This is a new medium we're all learning. As Esther Dyson says, "Always make new mistakes."