## DIGITAL PR



### PRCA PRACTICE GUIDES

## DIGITAL PR

## by Danny Whatmough



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### **FOREWORD**

PRCA Practice Guides are a series of uniquely practical and readable guides, providing PR and communications professionals, new and experienced alike, with hands-on guidance to manage in the field. Written by experienced practitioners who have been there and done it, the books in the series offer powerful insights into the challenges of the modern industry and guidance on how to navigate your way through them.

Most people will agree that digital has been a game-changer in marketing and PR. At a time when no-one has all the answers, this book will help PR and communications professionals to understand the areas they need to consider using in digital communications, and the questions they need to ask in order to excel in this new digital age. This book charts the progress of digital PR – where we've come from, where we are now, and where we are going. It mixes practical advice and tips to guide the modern PR practitioner. It isn't designed for digital specialists but those working in the PR industry that need to ensure they are on the right path. It contains thoughts and opinions from someone working at the forefront of the industry and helping to shape its future.

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Integrated Media at Weber Shandwick and previously headed up social and digital for Proctor & Gamble at Ketchum. He is currently Chairman of the PRCA's Digital Group, a member of the PRCA PR and Communications Council, and sits on the AMEC social media measurement committee. Such is the level of his digital expertise that he was handed the Outstanding Contribution award at the PRCA Digital Awards 2018. Indeed, he plays an active role in the wider PR industry and is a regular speaker, commentator, and blogger on digital PR and the future of the industry.

Francis Ingham Director General, PRCA Chief Executive, ICCO

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### INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as 'digital'. That might seem an odd first sentence in a book about digital Public Relations (PR). However, the reality is that digital is so pervasive in our daily lives that the sheer task of trying to divorce it from what is not digital is fruitless.

Let us think about this in a more tangible way. If you receive a piece of media coverage in a national newspaper, there is no doubt these days that the coverage will also appear on the newspaper's website. Therefore, is that digital PR or not? It is both and neither.

This conundrum is a tricky one when approaching a book on the subject. Thus, rather than trying to define what exactly digital PR is or isn't – a purely academic or semantic exercise with little profit – I am instead trying to approach this more in a way that gives a sense of how digital technology has caused a shift in the PR profession.

What are the strategic approaches and tactics that the digital age has ushered in? What are the ways in which organisations and businesses have had to change the way they talk to their audiences? In addition, what are the new skill sets and training we need as practitioners as a result?

#### AN INDUSTRY SLOW TO ADAPT

The criticism of the PR industry has often been that it is slow to adapt to changing technological developments. There is perhaps a fair amount of truth in this critique. I genuinely believe the PR industry failed to see the opportunity that search engine marketing – and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), in particular – offered. As a whole, the industry did not see or respond to the potential of SEO and it did not bring in specialists who could meaningfully create a new offering.

Of course, it is easy to taint a whole industry with one brush. The reality is that some have adapted quickly and benefitted as a result. It is also easy to be hard on yourself. In addition, the reality is that many industries have struggled with digitisation. Moreover, many of our sister disciplines within the marketing sphere have had similar challenges when it comes to the adoption of digital – and social media, in particular.

#### NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER

Therefore, just as it is impossible to divorce digital from 'not digital' in a communications industry sense, it is also impossible to divorce digital from the world in general.

Over the last 15 years or so, the digitisation of the world at large has been rapid and disruptive. The evidence of it is everywhere. How could we have predicted being able to pay for goods in a shop using our watch? Could we have foreseen hailing a taxi through a mobile device? Would it have been possible to anticipate ordering a product and having it arrive at your doorstep within two hours?

There is no industry or person on this earth that has not been impacted by this phenomenon. Therefore, what is the role for communications within this environment?

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It is easy to look at the disruption in our industry, but it is actually the disruption in consumer consumption that we need to focus on, which will be a major theme of this book, starting with a look at the use of data in Chapter 2.

Where disruption reigns, communication becomes more and more important. The innate human desire to make sense of things requires clear and consistent communication to bring clarity and comfort. There will be no slowing of the pace of change. The next 15 years will make the last 15 look tame; and on, and on.

#### SOCIETAL SHIFTS

Society has been confronted with some major challenges driven in part by technological advances. Trust in large organisations, businesses and public figures is at an all-time low. Much of this is due to a lack of effective communication.

We live in a time when consumers have unparalleled power. They can find information out more easily than ever before. They can contact those in authority in a very public way and, should these attempts fail, they can make their displeasure felt for the whole world to see. These public comments are always just a few retweets away from viral sensation.

This has brought forth a whole array of ethical considerations. A clarion call for transparency has been the biggest defining communication shift in the past decade. In addition, it has signalled a move away from PR spin across the board. From the world of politics to that of celebrity and business, the masks have, and are still, being torn down. Those that have anticipated this and changed their relationship with their publics have survived. Those that have not, have felt the full power of public pressure.

Of course, this has also spurned debate and discussion around privacy – or lack of privacy. In addition, this is not

something that just affects the rich and famous, but hits at an individual level too.

#### TRUST AND THE DECLINE OF THE THIRD ESTATE

Many have started to use these shifts to their advantage. At the same time as the move towards a more transparent way of acting, others have used this trend to create their own untruths and embraced self-publishing technologies, such as social networks, to reach mass audiences and alter global power structures.

This has been driven by – and has contributed to – an erosion of the established media. There are a number of factors at play here, but central to a lot of what has happened has been distribution. The analogue approach to the distribution of news was something that worked well for the publisher business model. Newspapers controlled their 'product' and could therefore control everything around it, from the price you paid to consume to the adverts you saw on the printed page.

The web changed everything. Distribution was unbundled. Advertising became ubiquitous and therefore diminished in value. As social networks (which were never originally intended to be a source for news) started to offer new opportunities, publishers were sceptical and reluctant participants in the inevitable shift. Now, vast swathes of people get their news from social media every day. In addition, far more telling, despite the fact that most people can remember the social platform where they encountered a piece of news, only 47% can remember the publisher brand that served them the piece of content (Reuters Institute, 2017).

Those that want to manipulate the public have used this to their advantage. At a time when the traditional media are

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losing their power and authority – for all the reasons presented thus far – the void that opens up is easily filled.

#### MASS INFLUENCE IS WITHIN REACH

Witness the rise of the influencer. It has always been true that we are each able to influence those around us. However, the web has brought the potential of mass influence to each one of us. We live in an age where a teenage girl, broadcasting from her bedroom, can amass an audience big enough to prompt a cosmetic product to sell out. We live in an age when teenagers from Macedonia can write a totally fake news story about a US Presidential candidate that helps influence a democratic election.

Gone are the checks, the balances and the rigour that governed and self-governed professional news organisations. It is painful to see established and respected news organisations being reduced to click-farms catering to the lowest common denominator in a race for eyeballs. Moreover, it is scary to see how 'fake news' can be used as a critique as well as a justification of a viewpoint – whether true or not.

Shifts in consumer consumption mean this is a societal issue that will only increase, due in large part to sophisticated use of data. The filter bubble is a concept that is not actually that new, but has come into modern vernacular because of the 2016 US Presidential Election and the Brexit referendum of the same year in the United Kingdom. In the past, we would create a filter bubble of sorts by selecting a certain daily newspaper over another. Today, filter bubbles mean that we can end up only being exposed to information and 'news' that meets our selective worldview. Moreover, these articles can be from respected sources or not.

#### THE DEATH OF INTERRUPTION MARKETING

Moreover, as we will see throughout this book, traditional marketing has not been immune to these shifts either. Consumers are voting with their eyeballs. Marketing communications that interrupt an experience are being rejected, even if many platforms are still pursuing advertising products in this domain.

Content marketing is often touted as the solution to this problem; however, the endless challenge here is that the content itself needs to be good enough to stand out in a world where information (and content) overload is a problem that is growing exponentially.

There is a creative opportunity here – the content needs to be better to cut through and, in an era of information overload, it is only the best content that will win. Of course, it has to be delivered in the right way, which is why the success of digital ad formats like display are plummeting in effectiveness. Earned media has a powerful role to play in this new content ecosystem.

#### THE DIGITAL STATUS QUO

It is easy to be downbeat by all of this. The truth is that this is an evolution of the environment we currently find ourselves in and new norms will be established, ready for disruption by the next macro shift.

The reason for walking through some of these trends is to set a backdrop against which modern PR exists. As communicators and consultants, we have a professional duty to help businesses and organisations navigate these choppy waters, not only to help them communicate to their publics in the Introduction 7

best possible light, but also to ensure that they uphold ethical responsibilities around transparency and authenticity.

At a time when 140 characters (or even 280) can cause share prices to plummet, the need for agile, responsive PR is pivotal.

As the above discussion hopefully proves, and as I shall continue to argue through this book, there is not an opt-out for digital PR. Digital is not a silo; it is the status quo. It is a reality of the world and industry in which we work. An understanding of the challenges and opportunities that digital presents is the only way to safeguard our industry and the work we do for the businesses and organisations we work for and with.

#### TOWARDS AN EVOLVED APPROACH

Therefore, in conclusion, it is probably easier to tell you what this book is not. It is not a how-to guide. It is not a manual. What it does, is look at the changes digital technology has ushered in, giving some ideas or recommendations for how to proceed if you have not already, or question again if it is something you've already tackled. Every chapter ends with a series of questions to ponder – things that might spark new ideas or new ways of looking at a problem.

The final thing to note before we begin is that, as with all things digital, this book will be out of date before it is even published. Therefore, where possible, I have tried not to focus on specific technologies or applications. I prefer to talk about broader trends or approaches that will still be relevant in the years to come, even if the way they are used are things that we just would not be able to predict, even if we wanted to.

# THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME

It would be easy to summarise this book as being all about change. However, it is really about evolution. Although digital has changed the day-to-day activities of most PR practitioners in terms of what they tactically do, most of the theory and strategy around constructing a PR approach has stayed surprisingly constant.

Therefore, as we talk about the future and the cutting edge, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater and remember that effective communication with a brand or organisation's publics is still the number one goal and something that we as an industry should continue to uphold.