

Digital Public Relations: E-Marketing's Big Secret

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INTRODUCTION

What continuing education professional would not want to gain greater online exposure for their credit and non-credit programs? Digital public relations (digital PR) is a financially feasible and sure investment for achieving these results. Digital PR is capable of producing significant increases in visitors to the institution's website and to targeted webpages by prospective students conducting searches that are a close match with the university's professional and continuing education programs. As more users of the web discover valuable content that answers their questions and provides services to match their needs on a university's website, that site gains stronger rankings from the search engines.

Digital PR fits well with academia, which has a longstanding practice of disseminating information through press releases rather than relying primarily upon advertising. Digital PR, however, goes beyond the traditional avenues of public relations by harnessing the power of the Internet to reach a much wider audience of potential students, donors, and referral sources.

This article is an outgrowth of the findings from the concurrent session, "Digital Public Relations: SEO and E-Marketing's Big Secret," which Jim Fong, principal of Fong Strategy, and I developed for the 18th Annual University and Professional Continuing Education Marketing Seminar, "The Great Divide: Bridging the Marketing Gap Between Strategies and Tactics," in Tampa, February 10–12, 2010. Jim shared results from his work with a client, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and I spoke about my work as director of marketing with Linfield College Division of

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Continuing Education, where we are using digital PR as a component of search engine optimization.

Through informal surveying of the 40 concurrent session participants, representing 20 states in the US and two Canadian provinces, we saw a need to inform the wider UPCEA community about the value of digital public relations. Though 40 participants are a small sample of the UPCEA membership, the Annual Marketing Seminar brings together directors of marketing, marketing managers, and professionals who lead and market continuing higher education programs. Of the 40 UPCEA members who participated actively in the concurrent session, only three reported that they had heard of digital PR before the session, and only one person had used it for marketing.

DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Digital public relations involves issuing online news releases to inform stakeholders about an organization's services or updates to these services, leveraging the power of journalism networks and disseminating information through the Internet. Content seekers take the information provided and do one of two things: repurpose the information while citing the source, or pass along the content in its entirety to their constituencies. True information seekers, whether potential students, journalists looking for a good story, or those who are looking for content for their website, will help attract more visitors to an organization's site over time, gaining "the highest ranking possible in the natural search results, i.e., what the search engine algorithm deems important for the phrase entered" (Scott). The natural search results, usually referred to as "organic" results, represent websites that did not pay to be listed and will not be charged by the search engine if the user clicks on an organic link.

A certain percentage of those visitors who discover a website through links created by digital PR will browse the content on the site, others will request information, and some of them will sign up for the programs that meet their professional and continuing education needs. Ranking well in Google, Yahoo, Bing, and other search engines, website optimization strategies and online news releases offer attractive benefits at a nominal cost.

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

When combined with search engine optimization (SEO), digital PR results in maximum visibility and traffic to an organization's website. The goal of

SEO is to make a website more appealing to users and more easily found and indexed by search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing, using appropriate keywords. When a website or a webpage is well-indexed, it will come up more frequently in websearch results. A well-optimized site will be able to gain top positioning in organic search results for relevant words and phrases that describe that site's services, programs, and products.

Research into web usability conducted by Nielsen and Loranger concluded that a website will be more likely to be viewed if it is among the top 10 sites listed in the search engine results page (SERP). Users in the study were asked to locate information from various websites. Ninety-three percent of the participants visited only the first SERP, which usually holds 10 search results plus several advertisements. Further, only 47 percent scrolled the entire first SERP. Fifty-three percent of users saw only what was "above the fold," referring to that part of a web page visible on a screen without scrolling, limiting their viewing to the top four or five results listed.

It is important to understand the goals of the companies that develop the search engines. These companies are in the business of providing materials of value to users who are searching for information they need. If you have valuable content on your site and you want people to find it, so do the search engines. They would like their algorithms to make your site show up in the top 10 results. The algorithms are not capable of reading minds, but they are programmed to recognize such things as how many sites link to the pages being sought and how often these pages are visited (Westfall). The underlying assumption is that if many other websites link to a site, that particular website is trustworthy, and it rises in importance in the rankings (Phillips and Young).

The basic ingredients of search engine optimization are:

- quality content,
- relevant keywords,
- strong metalanguage properties,
- internal links throughout the site,
- and external links (backlinks) to the site.

In order to achieve great organic rankings, each must be taken into account. Quality content provides something of value to the searcher. By understanding the prospective students and program participants we are trying to reach and by asking what problems we can solve for them, we will be able to create helpful content.

The right keywords help the search engines identify the page and the

site as containing relevant information appropriate to the searchers' queries. Search engines consider the keywords in the URLs of the website in similar fashion to the keywords in the content of the site's pages. They are all searchable and therefore discoverable.

Metalanguage properties give the page and the site their titles so that the search engines recognize them. Known as the metadata, this refers to the code that lies behind the page and that the browsers and the search engines read. For example, the title of the homepage of the Linfield College Division of Continuing Education is "Accredited Online College Degrees | Linfield DCE." In addition to the title of the page, metalanguage provides an accurate description and clues about the content of the page. The optimal use of metalanguage requires knowing web design. Marketing professionals and program directors know what they want the title of the page and the description to say. It is important to work with IT professionals in the organization to make it happen.

Internal links throughout the website enhance the user's experience by providing a worthwhile place to go next through clues for going deeper into a subject. A website designer and continuing education manager should work together to create internal links that allow a visitor to move easily through related pages. For example, the homepage may summarize the programs offered, while each program will have more detailed pages that describe in greater depth the career advancement made possible by completion of the program, courses and course syllabi, learning outcomes, and resources for advising, financial aid, etc. A blog may provide users with the ability to create content that raises questions and shares valuable experiences, while linking to specific programs that offer training in this field. When crafted well, internal links enable a university to tell a coherent story of the many programs and services offered by the institution and to provide a forum for dialogue among various constituencies.

Internal links are also valuable connections among the institution's various academic and professional departments, enabling a user who discovers the website through searching solely using the institution's name to locate the specific content provided by their program of interest. As an example, Linfield College has created over 6,000 internal links from the pages of the undergraduate residential campus programs to the Linfield College Division of Continuing Education.

External links are the end result of digital PR done well. Building backlinks is challenging, but the rewards will be greater as the number of

external links from high quality websites grows—link building increases the ranking of a website over time. Adam Audette, President of Audette-Media, Inc., and a leading voice in link building as a tactic of search engine optimization, writes:

Links have two primary audiences: visitors and search engines. You want the traffic and credibility association good links can provide for your visitors, and you want the rankings boost good links can provide for the search engines. Learn to distinguish between these seemingly disparate audiences, but don't forget this guideline: develop your linking (and marketing) strategy with people in mind, not search engines. Just don't be blind to the search optimization factors involved.

Good sources of external links are:

- true news and information,
- bloggers,
- WIFM (What's in it for me?)—partners linking to you for sincere and selfish reasons,
- and social media.

Traditional journalists searching for a good story may come across the online news release and cite it in their article, creating an external link every time the article appears online. Media outlets that partner with a PR distribution service will find the news release and create a link from their site. Online news publications often need to find content, so online news releases meet an immediate need on the Internet.

Bloggers who feed information into their sites through an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed will discover a press release that has keywords and content that qualify it for inclusion in the blogger's site.

Organizations may be searching for specialized information that they can pass along to their constituencies to increase the value of their service. For example, a site devoted to online college degrees placed a link to the Linfield College Division of Continuing Education page that holds the e-book, *Transformations: A Guide to Online College for Adults*.

Social media are starting to play a more significant role and could be a wild card in attracting more links to your site, especially if you can create a little buzz. For some websites, content provided by the public builds traffic to that site and, consequently, rankings from search engines.

CREATING ONLINE NEWS RELEASES

Any newsworthy event should be publicized online, including launching a new program, establishing a partnership, winning an award, celebrating a milestone, announcing the publication of an article or book, setting enrollment records, hiring staff, or recognizing achievements of graduates.

The following should be kept in mind when preparing an online news release:

- Think through the headline / title, e.g., PRWeb allows for long titles.
- The opening paragraph or summary statement is critical to content searchers.
- Place the “who” early in the release.
- Pay particular attention to the anchor text, i.e., the specific wording of the link that users will click.
- Embed links or anchor text links to specific pages.
- Be as timely as possible.
- Use quotes for credibility and interest.
- Distinguish between essential and interesting information.
- Multimedia, visuals, and logos can enhance, as can PDF attachments.
- Avoid over-examination; focus on getting links built.
- Enhance the institution’s brand identity with a logo.

Once the press release is written, optimized for the web, and posted on the university’s site, the news release is provided to an online news distribution service such as PRWeb or PR Newswire, two examples of news release distribution service companies. These providers have extensive online distribution channels, and by contracting for their professional services, the news release will reach the target audience. The distribution channels consist of hundreds of thousands of RSS subscribers, and thousands of web publishers and journalists who have subscribed to receive news releases. Yahoo! News, Google News, and various other news search engines will pick up the news release. The online news release is also archived on the website of the news release distribution service, ensuring a permanent URL for future discovery through search activity.

What are the benefits of using an online news distribution service to optimize your news release? News is one of the pillars of online content and has several advantages for publishers, including wide adoption of syndication (Audette). The news release service reaches hundreds of thousands of potential sources for web sharing, making the cost of the service

quite affordable. The keywords in the news release contain external links to the website and receive important exposure in Google News, Yahoo! News, MSN News, and other news search engines for three to four weeks following the release date.

The news release inevitably increases the number of visitors to the website from news search engines. The visitors to the site include prospective students who provide their e-mail address, request information, or apply for admission. By generating an increase in traffic by qualified prospective students, the enrollments and revenue grow for the university.

DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

Effective digital public relations depends upon effective search engine optimization:

Digital PR goals	Search engine optimization means
Build institutional exposure and credibility to a larger public through press releases	Increase search engine ranking of pages for targeted keywords by means of external links to site pages (more external links = more authority in eyes of search engines and greater traffic to site pages)
Highlight specific aspects or achievements of an institution to an appropriate audience	Select wording of anchor text carefully to control focus of search engines and to boost relevancy of site pages

It is important to include strategically placed links in news releases because these links will increase the ranking of the pages on your website. As previously mentioned, the search engines use external links that point to a site as one of the criteria for their page-ranking algorithms. When your news release appears and the links in the news release are pointing to pages on your site, this increases your own website's search engine rankings (Scott).

The method by which digital public relations builds authority is an example of cause and effect. Digital news releases build backlinks from sites external to your site to specific pages of your site. The more external links to a page, generally the more authority that page will have in the eyes of search engines. The result is a better search engine ranking of that page for targeted

keywords. The volume and quality of external links matter. Search engines give greater weight to sites that rank for authority and credibility.

Having control over anchor text of backlinks into your site gives a huge advantage. Be strategic in deciding on the wording of anchor text so that you will build up traffic to pages where you want to increase the visibility of new programs or maintain the strong ranking of established programs.

Often when conducting a web search, one or more of the results on the search engine results page (SERP) will come from Google News or Yahoo! News. The search engine is ranking the keywords in the digital news release and giving you unique exposure in the search engines. This provides opportunity to be ranked for highly competitive keywords for which you are not currently ranking through the power of the news release.

SUCCESS STORIES

Linfield College Division of Continuing Education (DCE) currently has 300 external links to the homepage from sites other than the main Linfield domain. Having a variety of sites linking to the DCE site indicates to the search engines that many sites find our site important, valuable, and relevant. Digital PR has been an important component of Linfield's efforts in search engine optimization, through which many strategies are being employed, including online new releases.

In January 2009, we published our first e-book, *Transformations: A Guide to Online College for Adults*. The 10-chapter publication serves as a guide to choosing an online bachelor's degree program and provides an overview of how online learning works, not only at Linfield College but also across the public and private higher education spectrum. The e-book cites research from the Sloan Consortium about the dramatic increase in online education, and includes advice and anecdotes from current online college students. Included in the e-book is a self-assessment for prospective students to consider whether they have the profile for success in online learning.

On February 6, 2009, we sent out a news release through PRWeb to promote the book. During the next 365 days, over 10,000 visitors, 75 percent of whom were new, viewed the *Guide to Online College* on Linfield's site. One of our goals was to expand our geographical reach, and visitors to the website were from 20 US states and three Canadian provinces, in addition to visitors from Oregon and Washington.

Effective marketing of the *Guide to Online College* boosted traffic to the Linfield DCE site from visitors searching for information about “online college” (and several variations of that term) by over 130 percent during the year following the guide’s launch compared to the same time period the previous year. In other words, traffic from non-Linfield keyword searches increased by 130 percent for keywords such as “online college for adults,” “online college guide,” and “accredited online college degree programs.”

Digital public relations built links and rankings in search engines. The online news release provided unique exposure in search engines. Google News picked up the press release, giving it ranking for highly competitive keywords. Additional marketing strategies of the e-book that coordinated well with the online news release included a StumbleUpon campaign, posting on forums, and other online PR activities.

On October 1, 2009, Linfield Division of Continuing Education sent out an online news release announcing a significant enrollment increase in the adult degree program. Applications were up by 43 percent over the previous fall, and enrollment by new students was up by 22 percent. Paid registrations for credit hours were up 21 percent over the previous fall. Revenue increased in fall semester, as compared with the previous fall semester, by over 25 percent. There had been a small increase in tuition from one fall semester to the next, which accounted for the 25 percent increase in revenue derived from tuition.

The online news release was sent out through PRWeb to build authority by creating more backlinks to pages on our site. Optimized anchor text in the news release boosted relevancy of pages for targeted keywords, such as “online accounting degree,” “RN to BSN degree,” and “accredited online college degree programs.” We gained unique exposure in search engines: Google gave strong rankings for targeted keywords, and Google News picked up the press release, which gave more visibility for highly competitive keywords, further boosting rankings.

Between December 2009 and February 2010, Linfield’s Adult Degree Program conducted a recruitment campaign—“Education Stimulus Plan”—to encourage adults to complete bachelor’s degrees or a professional certificate online. During the three-month campaign, the customary \$100 application fee for degree programs and the \$50 application fee for certificate programs were waived for applicants who were planning to enroll by June 2010.

In mid-December we distributed an online news release through PRWeb announcing the Education Stimulus Plan. From tracking reports of the campaign, we learned that 182 blogs and websites picked up the press release, which resulted in over 26,280 impressions of the headline or full article through online news sources.

In the year and a half that we have written seven online news releases and optimized them for keywords at a cost of \$200 each, we have received 860 visitors to the linfield.edu/dce website who were referred directly from PRWeb. These were visitors who clicked directly from the title or from an embedded link contained in one of the news releases to the Linfield College Division of Continuing Education site. As a result, 3.84 percent (33 visitors) have converted to leads through actions they took to fill out an online form requesting an information kit, to request a call back from an enrollment advisor, or to apply for a degree or certificate program. The cost per qualified lead was \$42 (\$1,400/33 leads).

When asked about the value of digital public relations, I see positive measurable results. An important factor in measuring the effectiveness of digital public relations as it relates to search engine optimization is in the building of external links to the site. Each time we use an online news release, the result is an increase of an average of six new external sites linked to linfield.edu/dce. When Jim Fong and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) combined online press releases through PR Newswire with a Google AdWords campaign, the unexpected result was that a number of sites using Google's content network showed ads with the releases multiple times, and HGSE doubled the number of backlinks coming to the site within 90 days. In our case, the increased external links resulted in tangible leads. Visitors who were referred by PRWeb converted at twice the rate of typical visitors to the site, which leads to the conclusion that PRWeb news releases are sending us high quality, targeted traffic.

CONCLUSION

Online programs and courses are established presences in higher education, and so are processes such as online registration. Prospective students routinely turn to the web for information to help them decide on the most appropriate programs for their situation. Our audiences and competitors are no longer limited by geography, and we owe it to our programs to make the best possible case for them. Digital public relations is rapidly becoming one of the cornerstones of an effective competitive strategy, and by efficiently

combining marketing, search engine optimization, and digital PR to promote news about the professional and continuing education programs of the university, UPCEA member institutions will reach millions of people searching for information online daily. 🌐

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