Digital PR and Communication with B2B Enterprises in the Digital Era

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Abstract—There is an evident need for the rapid introduction of digital public relations (PR) at Russian enterprises, so as to raise brand awareness. The essential features of digital PR as a social medium are discussed; the basic concepts are defined. Particular attention is paid to the use of digital PR at B2B (business-to-business) enterprises, as reflected in published articles and authoritative expert opinion.

Keywords: digital public relations (DPR), benefits, systems, communication channels, tools, technologies, trends, B2B enterprises

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The global coronavirus epidemic has been challenging for national economies, populations, and businesses, as reflected generally in communications media and specifically in public relations (PR). In enforced social isolation, with increased reliance on information channels such as the Internet, PR departments have been exploring new ways of reaching potential clients. In these changed conditions, adaptation of PR communications has been costly. To be effective, PR specialists have been forced to use the tools of digital PR (DPR), also known as electronic PR (e-PR) and online PR.

In Russia, experiences with digital PR date back to the beginning of this century, but widespread use only began in 2020, with the pandemic constraints. At that point, traditional PR approaches still predominated, although many specialists were aware of specific digital PR tools and some had the necessary skills. At first, a very limited set of digital PR resources was employed. Today, we may speak of a new conceptual approach based on new devices and specific digital PR channels, tools, and technologies for communication with the target audiences in different economic sectors. There is a clear trend to digitization: transition to digital communications and the digital representation and transmission of data.

Soon these trends will bring PR to a new level of activity, as confirmed by the research described in what follows, which is based on content analysis. Content analysis permits the identification of trends on the basis of facts and figures. It is enlightening to consider expert opinion and media such as Pressfeed.ru, B2B-journal.ru, Likeni.ru, Bi-school.ru, Sostav.ru, Mediabitch.ru, and Cossa.ru.

BASIC CONCEPTS

Digital PR is a set of public relations practices utilizing online media, search engines, social networks, and other web technologies [5]. The World Wide Web (www) is a system of interconnected hypertext documents (websites) located on computers and connected to the global Internet.

Essentially, digital PR is a new type of communication in the current digital era, when the main link between the enterprises and its customers and suppliers is the following chain: information—digital devices—tools and technologies—online channels—knowledge—opinions.

Like traditional PR, digital PR has an indirect effect on company profits. A good reputation affects customers’ decision to purchase a particular product or service. Hence, sales and profits may be increased by disseminating knowledge regarding the company, its leaders, and its brand and thereby inspiring the confidence and loyalty of the target groups. The goal is the same as in traditional PR: by distributing truthful information, to create a favorable social, political, and psychological environment benefiting specific economic actors (companies).

We may regard digital PR as traditional PR in a new format, incorporating digital technologies in the quest for the same goals. The capabilities of these technologies offer new possibilities for successful outcomes.

1. They are timely. Real-time delivery of information is possible.

2. They are multichannel. Individual online channels are integrated into a single system for communication with the target audience.
3. They are interactive. They permit dialog and information exchange between all the participants. (Most Internet users are very willing to share opinions as long as the information is real and has the ability to go viral and reach new audiences.)

4. They are viral. Rapid spread of information through the Internet is possible, for example, through links, through social networks, and through instant message (IM) services. In Russia in 2021, the most popular IM services were WhatsApp (2 billion users), Facebook Messenger (1.3 billion users), WeChat (1.2 billion users), QQ (648 million users), Telegram (500 million users), Snapchat (433 million users), Discord (300 million users), Viber (260 million users), Line (250 million users), and Skype (50 million users). The audience is enlarged by chain reaction: for example, free redistribution of information arriving through various online channels.

5. They generate loyalty. With online familiarity, the audience’s confidence in the company and brand increases. The audience receives interesting, useful, and truthful content. A company today must go where the audience is.

6. They are popular. As the company’s content is cited on third-party sites (social media, blogs, etc.), search engines rank that material higher in the feed and, once again, it is shown to more users.

7. They are personalized. Users are sent information that is tailored to their interests, which intensifies their response.

8. They build lasting relationships. If the content provided is interesting and of high quality, users will continue to pay attention.

9. They are measurable. It is possible to track practically all information regarding the company, including media mentions of its leaders and brands. Their tone may be noted. Comparison with the other characteristics of a particular site is possible by means of digital services and tools, quantitative metrics, and special indices.

The following resources are available in digital PR: devices for PR communications; digital PR communication channels; digital PR tools; digital PR technologies; and communications specialists with evolving competencies. We now consider those resources.

1. The basic devices employed are TVs and radios, computers, notebooks, tablets, and smart phones, as well as other devices that may store information and distribute it digitally.

2. Digital PR communication channels encompass the capabilities of digital devices available for the communication, transmission, and exchange of information with target groups, such as digital TV and radio; online media; websites, social networks, influencers (bloggers and opinion leaders); video hosting; search engines; review portals; messaging services; and forums (special sites or areas of a site or portal organized for the exchange of views on a specific topic).

3. Digital PR tools are messages addressed to a target audience for the transmission of text, visual, and audio information. The messages are adapted to the digital format of the specific communication channel, by means of specific methods and algorithms.

The basic digital PR tools are messages (posts) placed on the company’s site, in social media, in forums, in blogs, and on video hosting services. Depending on the communication channel, they may contain text, images, links, graphics, or audio and video materials. They may provide news or generate discussion. They may contain updates on future product releases, promotions, or contests. Posts may provide competitions to attract new customers or may contain stories, business cards, portfolios, surveys, or memes (entertaining digital images). They may include quizzes (for example, on the company’s history), instructions, or reviews. The PR department may organize online events (conferences, presentations, webinars, live broadcasts, or digital art viewings.

The tools for working with online media include the same list of informational materials as for traditional PR, taking account of the specifics of the digital format. Some important tools are press and video releases, backgrounders, biographies of the organization’s leaders, feature articles, case histories, signed articles (byliners), roundup articles, and interviews. Others include official documents, expert commentaries, opinion pieces, and information bulletins.

4. Digital PR technologies are sequences of procedures and working methods tailored to Internet services and automated systems so that communications with the targeted audience can be optimized and efficiently managed. Examples include the following. (This list does not include technologies for digital marketing and advertising.)

4.1. Technology for deriving information regarding online users of the company’s website and web analytics based on services such as Google Analytics, Yandex.Metrika, and Rating.Mail.ru.

4.2. Search technologies for the target media and specific journalists writing on specific themes relevant to the company’s activity, on the basis of services such as World-newspapers.com, HARO (Help A Reporter Out), Nutcall:PREX, Pressfeed; HackPack, Katalog SMI Yandex, and Deadline.Media.
4.3. Technology for monitoring and analysis of references to brand and enterprise names in open sources (media, blogs, social networks, specialized forums, review sites, etc.) using automated systems such as Angry Scan, Babkee, Brand Analytics, iQBuzz, SCAN, SemanticForce, YouScan, Katyusha, and MedIALOGY.

4.4. Technology for managing the reputation of the company’s brand and image, with the goal of neutralizing indifferent and negative reactions from the target social groups and generating positive responses, by means of SEO (search engine optimization), ORM (online reputation management), and SERM (search engine reputation management) systems. These are of primary importance, since the goal of corporate communications is to create a positive impression, thereby ensuring the company’s success in the future.

SEO (search engine optimization) systems optimize the site for Yandex, Google, and other search engines so as to ensure that materials regarding the company and its products appear at the top of the search response.

ORM (online reputation management) permits expansion of the positive material regarding the brand and company that is available in the Internet SEO. It facilitates identification and neutralization of negative comments; and locates complaints and claims against the company, so that they can be eliminated.

SERM (search engine reputation management) addresses similar problems in the Yandex, Google, and other search engines. Pages and sites with negative comments regarding the company and its products are moved to remote positions in the list of search responses, and positive comments are moved forward. As a result, Internet searches provide predominantly positive information. This technology relies on well produced and organized PR, techniques for search engine promotion, and coordination with ORM technology.

4.5. Technology for content creation using various services, including free services. Content is any significant information on an information resource, such as a website. Video is created using the following popular services: Supa, Clideo, Coverr, Pexels, and Online Video Cutter. Pictures and photos are produced by means of Canva, Picture Plus, Stock Up, Gtatisography, and Kaboompics. Text may be produced by means of Google-doc, Text, Advego, and Glavred. To download and save content, we may use Savefrom, Joxi, and other services.

5. To master the details of social communications using digital PR, specialists with new competencies are required. They must not only be familiar with the tools and technologies already noted but also be adept in related areas such as SMM (social media marketing), which provides assistance to clients, buyers, and business partners; SEM (search engine marketing), which helps users find a website that is appropriate to their query; and web analytics, which analyzes the effectiveness of methods of promotion and assesses their results, thereby providing a measure of the company’s online advertising for its product. Other necessary specialists include a copywriter who creates biographies for social networks and apps; a manager of expert groups; and opinion leaders in certain communities (community managers).

In the near future, PR specialists will need to be retrained so that they are up to speed with the available digital technologies.

**DIGITAL PR IN THE B2B SECTOR AND FUTURE TRENDS**

Today, economic competition is expressed in terms of intangibles: brands and brand loyalty. The positive image and reputation of enterprises in the B2B (business-to-business) sector are created and popularized by both traditional and digital PR. That provides additional resources in the ongoing global information wars. A significant advantage of digital PR is the quick and effective dissemination of information. That permits prompt response to competitors’ attacks. By means of digital PR, a B2B enterprise will have a global presence and can influence opinion with timely and targeted materials for groups of distinct social and geographic types.

B2B enterprises generate complex high-tech products. In assessing company prospectuses, buyers need detailed information regarding the product’s characteristics, so as to make an informed choice. For this purpose, they use online resources: for example, corporate websites, search engines, review portals, social networks, and so on. However, as already noted, these are channels of information distribution in digital PR. Communications and PR specialists use them to convey messages aimed at shaping the opinions of specific target groups.

In 2019, Fresh Russian Communications provided data regarding digital communications in the B2B departments of various commercial organizations (in its report *B2B Communication Vector 2020*). We may itemize the following digital PR trends in the B2B sector on the basis of those findings [2, 3] and other specialist data [4—9].

1. Problems in digital B2B communications include inadequate budgets, because marketing is favored; extreme communication for the attention of the target audience, since digital PR resources are now generally available; limited use of digital PR resources, for lack of skilled professionals (the available staff may be deficient not only in technical knowledge but in creativity); and problems with contractors, especially in failure to meet deadlines for outsourced projects and poor product quality.

2. The most popular communication channels in the B2B sector are corporate websites; and social net-
works (in order of popularity, Facebook, Instagram, Vkontakt, and YouTube video hosting). While there is still interest in Instagram, which regularly adds new features and functions, attention has been shifting to TikTok and similar channels. It is promising for B2B applications.

3. The future belongs to digital PR. Therefore, most companies should prioritize digital developments, so as to more effectively strengthen the corporate reputation and expand the online presence of the brand, company, and management.

4. The following are the short-terms trends for digital PR in the B2B sector.

4.1. Continued active use of text and voice formats to reach the target audience.

4.2. Messaging that is accessible, concise, comprehensible, relevant, and valuable.

4.3. Primary use of social networks for information transmission.

4.4. Use of services such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Viber, since most Internet users prefer brief messages that appear as onscreen notifications.

4.5. Increasing use of video, which is the most popular format among Internet users.

4.6. Parallel use of online and offline formats in PR. Offline events include conferences, excursions, presentations, and exhibits.

4.7. Continued popularity of webinars and live broadcasts, especially if contagion-related social distancing continues or recurs.

4.8. An emphasis on online formats in media work.

4.9. The appearance of new online approaches to reaching target audiences.

4.10. Expanded use of influencers and bloggers, within a strategic framework.

4.11. Large companies’ growing use of Yandex.Zen, a relatively new platform for brand promotion with considerable potential.

4.12. Growing demand for PR specialists fluent in digital media. Specialists will need up-to-date digital skills in order to prosper in a competitive labor market.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Digital PR supplements traditional techniques. Today, information technologies must be constantly upgraded if an enterprise is to communicate success fully with potential audiences.

2. The development of digital PR will incorporate not only existing resources for reaching the target audience but also valuable new tools. That will expand companies’ capabilities for reaching audiences and shaping public perceptions of their brands and management. The speed of PR communications and responses is constantly increasing, and communication prospects are rapidly expanding in the current era of digital information.

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