The Online Press Release

How you can use PR services to build search engine rankings as well as press coverage.

BY DON KRESKI

A few years ago, if you wanted to start a press campaign, you would have to build your own list of reporters and editors, either by searching out magazines one by one or by referring to a printed directory.

You can and should still build your own list, but there are a number of good online services you can use in addition, including Business Wire, PR Web, PR Newswire, Ezines, and others. Sending your releases through one of these services gives you much greater reach—great enough that you can use the press release as a tool for building rankings in the search engines as well as for distributing news.

WHAT'S IN AN ONLINE SERVICE

Each of these services offers you access to tens of thousands of potential readers and publishers of your material. PR Web, for example, offers access to almost 300,000 subscribers in its standard packages, including 30,000 journalists. Business Wire, according to Senior Vice President of Marketing Tom Becktold, provides delivery into the editorial systems of virtually every news organization around the world, posts to thousands of consumer websites, and delivers to more than 100,000 journalists and bloggers as well as consumer and investor subscribers.

PR Web offers its subscribers free access to your news release mainly through RSS feeds. Anyone who wishes to opt in can access news via email or an RSS reader such as Google Reader or the live bookmarks feature of Firefox. PR Web organizes the news it distributes into about 300 topics, but subscribers can filter

these topics further by specific keywords.

What subscribers see is two or three lines from your release, generally your headline and perhaps the first sentence or two from your summary, if you include one, or the body of your release. If they click on that short synopsis, they'll see your entire release in an attractive layout, together with any photos or videos you may choose to include. For that reason, according to Becktold, "the most important skill you need to learn, no matter which service you use, is writing an effective headline."

Business Wire offers a similar RSS-based offering with its EON small-business service, although to a somewhat smaller audience than PR Web. What's crucial here, however, is not the list size, according to Becktold, but the way the service interacts with the online news services and the search engines. "In most instances, our EON clients are really looking for a narrow slice of our audience," he says. "They are highly vertical small businesses looking for a specialized buyer who is using the search engines to find them."

To help that process, these services put your releases up on their own websites and send them to search engines through sites such as Yahoo! News. As the search engines index the sending site and start to pick up uses of your release by various online publications, you will see an increase in visitors.

BUILDING RANKINGS

According to Jennifer Hauser, an online marketing consultant for PR Web, a well-crafted release will start to show up on page one of Google in about one to three days if you search by the title of the release in quotes. For example, you may title your release "AV integrator explains value of classroom audio systems," and that's what you would search for to find most of the publications who have picked it up. This title will show up first in the news results of Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. Hauser says the news rankings will peak in about one to two weeks. Because most news sources archive their articles, you can expect some very long-term results in the regular (natural search) results of each of the search engines.

Of course the real value is not for the ranking of the entire title (you may be the only person who ever searches for that) but for specific keywords or key phrases you include in that title and in the body of the release (for example, "classroom audio systems"). Your goal is that some number of online publications will pick up not only your release but the links you include back to your website as well. Each of those placements may show up on page 10, 20, or 200 of Google, but collectively, having a number of links pointing back to your site will help your rankings.

There is a concept of credibility, as understood by the search engines, that comes into play here. When a site that has high rankings links to your website, that link is worth a lot more than one from a site with low rankings. If you pick up 20 links from little-read blogs or portal pages, that's worth something, but links from one or two high-credibility sites may be worth a lot more.

You also need to understand the meaning of anchor text. If you embed your link in a word or phrase in your release, the search engines will associate that word or phrase and the credibility of the linking page to the credibility of your web page when someone searches for that same word or phrase. So for our example, you want to embed the link in the phrase "classroom audio systems" rather than in something meaningless like "click here." In addition, for this link to be helpful, it should go to a page on your website already optimized for that same phrase. That implies two other requirements: 1) You want to use a service that allows you to embed links in anchor text (most do), and 2) You need to tie your press releases into the keyword strategy that (hopefully) you already have created for your website.

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REACHING TRADITIONAL MEDIA

PR Web, EON, and other services can all help you achieve better search engine rankings through inclusion in online publications, but, in addition, if you want to have your release published in the traditional media, the main Business Wire service offers comprehensive access to journalists.

"We've been building our news database for almost 50 years," Becktold says, and the company employs 30 full-time specialists to build and maintain their relationships with news publications around the world. A look through the Business Wire website allows you to see which specific publications could potentially pick up your release. The database includes reporters and editors at virtually every national newspaper, local paper, and trade journal, as well as access to news services such as the Associated Press and online services such as Google News and Bing.

Becktold says the company distributes news releases through a combination of RSS feeds, XML feeds, email, Twitter, and syndicated feeds such as Comtex, Acquire Media, and Morningstar, depending on the preference of each user. "All of those services take our files and redistribute them to their members," he explains. "It's important to us that we deliver all our

content simultaneously worldwide, to provide a level playing field for the media that receive news from us."

This additional coverage does come at a cost. Business Wire prices its service by the regions you choose to target. A distribution that includes comprehensive national media distribution—including local newspapers, national media, the Associated Press network, trades, and magazines—starts at $695. Inclusion of photos or video is available at an additional cost. You can select its smallest geographic offering, however, for about $250. That will give you all the trade publications most AV industry users would want to target plus the local papers and magazines in the town where you are headquartered.

If you're more interested in online publications, PR Web will send the same release with photos and video for $200 to its online subscribers; it is $360 if you include the Associated Press. EON offers similar online coverage for about $250. For an additional charge, you can send your release through PR Web but access the company's Media Database, creating a custom contact list of 200 out of roughly 300,000 journalists based on publication type, title, location, and subject.

TRACKING THE RESULTS

Once you have sent your release, it's helpful to be able to track the publications that use it and the links they create back to your website. All of the major services offer extensive analytics so you can get a good idea of the value of your broadcast.

Each of these services also includes a user education section on their websites to help you understand how best to use their lists and to help you write your releases. PR Web and EON each offer an online tool to help you format your release automatically and choose search terms, and, if you agree to send 12 releases per year, PR Web offers free tech support. Business Wire assumes a little more knowledge on the part of its users, but Becktold says it does have staff check each release before it goes out—largely to keep the quality of its service high for its subscribers—and Business Wire will contact you if you make major mistakes.

Which service is right for you depends on your knowledge level, your budget, and the match between the publications you're targeting and specific service's subscriber lists. It's hard to make a bad choice, however. With a little care, you can use any of them to provide a major boost to your PR program and your search engine rankings. **SVC**

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