

# Public relations versus search marketing – clash or collaboration?

The future of PR in an online world

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## Setting the scene

The year is 2017. The Chartered Institute of Search Marketers (CISM) has just celebrated its 20,000th member, more than double the peak membership of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) ten years earlier. There are only three national newspapers still publishing a daily print edition. The tabloids are now weekly glossy magazines that generate less advertising than their online versions. Research reveals companies are spending in excess of 50 per cent of their marketing budgets on online activity and PR spending is at an all-time low. Leeds Metropolitan and Bournemouth universities are considering closing their public relations courses because of a shortage of applicants.

This is, of course, a work of total conjecture. And no doubt it is a work of fantasy too – as the public relations industry will ultimately adapt to a world where traditional media becomes subordinate to online media. But the speed at which this adaptation happens will dictate whether or not PR becomes the lead element in marketing strategy or simply a sideline.

The worst case scenario for PR, and this is in the real world and not fantasy, is that PR loses significant ground to an apparently more dynamic and imaginative profession – search marketing. The danger is that this new discipline will take a bigger slice of the marketing budget at the expense of PR and search marketing agencies will start to take on communication roles which were previously part of the PR function.

There is already some evidence to support this. Look at the media. Traditional publishers are pouring millions into online, either buying established community websites or building their own portfolio. They believe this is where future advertising profits lie and where there is a rich seam of personal information that can be sold on or used for cross-promotion. Let's face it, it makes sense – most people would agree that the first thing they do when looking for a new product or service is to use an internet search engine rather than read a magazine or newspaper. Companies are getting wise to this and switching advertising budgets from print to online. And they're investing in search marketing to drive traffic to their websites. Where does this leave PR?

Look at the search marketing sector. This is a boom industry that is maturing but retaining its sense of adventure. Many search marketing agencies now talk of 'best practice', helping to legitimise the sector, but at the same time adapt constantly to the ever changing online world. They're using their initiative to maximise what they can do for their

clients. One of the top 20 search marketing agencies has hired a team of ex-PR people to implement initiatives that cross the narrow divide between search marketing and PR.

Search marketing budgets look similar to PR budgets – ranging from retainers for small clients of around £700 a month up to £50,000 a month for major companies. But search marketing has one major advantage over PR – it can demonstrate return on investment (ROI) fairly easily and objectively, while the PR world is still struggling to establish standards for calculating ROI. This is a very compelling issue, particularly for small- to medium-sized companies which must make their marketing cash go as far as possible. Smaller companies can dip their toe in search marketing and see almost immediate returns. These are people who would probably never consider PR but paradoxically may well be introduced to PR by search marketing agencies – many search marketing agencies are already routinely offering PR-style services, such as editing clients' press releases and distributing them online.

I've had a lot of conversations with PR professionals about my fears that search marketers may grab the communications agenda away from PR, and many accept the evidence but either like to think 'it will never happen' or point to client behaviour as an excuse not to act. It is true that many PR clients just want to get their name on the front page of the FT and don't look at PR necessarily as a revenue-generating activity. And although there are many marketers out there who really do want PR to be lead-generating, they quite rightly don't believe PR can deliver this in the short term and inevitably fall back on measuring PR results in 'column inches', in print. So at the moment there is a perception among clients that offline coverage is more valuable than online – though in time this will inevitably switch. In the meantime I believe it is the responsibility of every PR consultant – agency or in-house – to understand the online world and to consult their clients appropriately, even to argue for resources to be moved away from traditional media to online media. If they do not, then search marketing agencies will, and therefore may begin to influence the marketing agenda more than PR.

The PR community continues to display its lethargy towards online – take for example the CIPR conference in November 2006 where not one of the 14 sessions focused on online PR or social media and there was little more than a brief reference in the opening address. One explanation is the inevitable inertia created by the false-start online media had as a result of the web 'bubble burst' around 2000. There were promises of total transformation of the media by venture-funded entrepreneurs in the late 90's, but when this came to nothing it gave everyone in PR an excuse to ignore online media. And now it is really happening (yes, it really is) the PR industry is on the back foot. The transformation of the media by the internet was not a revolution, it was a slow burn. Now it is a raging fire.

In the full whitepaper "[Public relations versus search marketing – clash or collaboration?](#)" I offer some some practical advice in the form of some new objectives for PR professionals.