

June 2009 Corporate Communiqué

A conversation about business, policy and communication

Revvng the Reputational Search Engines

Phil Gomes

Senior Vice President, Digital, Edelman Chicago

Digital search engines – *not* your official company or brand Web sites – are the new homepages. They have a global active reach of 85.9 percent of all users. And companies increasingly recognize that to get noticed by consumers in the right places and at the right time, they must develop aggressive search-engine visibility strategies. Now a new search-engine visibility discipline has emerged, and it sits squarely in the corporate communicator's domain.

It's *Reputational Search*. It recognizes that any company or brand can apply a search mindset to tried-and-true public relations tactics. In the process, it can influence the search results via keywords. Specific reputational search approaches aren't new to PR professionals. They include press releases, corporate newsrooms, media relations and blogger engagement. Further, all the same rules apply. News releases still must deliver the news. Media pitches need to be tailored to a reporter or blogger's beat.

What's different? Specifically, messaging and the setting of target priorities. PR pros no longer can craft messages and infuse them into press releases that aren't written for searchers. We tend to use different words and phrases when writing than those we intuitively use when searching. For example, if you have a headache, you might search for "headache remedies" and not necessarily "aspirin." Messages today need to adapt.

In addition, media outlet targets usually set priorities based on reach and/or relevance. That's why search-impact potential should now be factored in equally. Some sites have an extraordinary impact on search-engine results pages – and they're not always the usual suspects. Some blogs, for instance, have a higher Google Page Rank than media sites.

According to a May 2009 Edelman Digital position paper on Search Engine Visibility (**insert link**), three basic components comprise a reputational search program: research/planning, content development and measurement. Research proves a fundamental part of every such program. The goal is to determine the natural language keywords that people use when searching and to size up the competition for those words in the search-engine result pages.

As a rule, generic words or phrases such as "coffee" or "hamburgers" and brand-name keywords such as "Starbucks" or "Burger King" face stiff competition in the result pages from brand, media and other institutional sites. This makes success less likely. A smart program more likely will use a set of very targeted keywords, such as "Starbucks recipes" or "Burger King Whopper."

A trained PR professional can develop a deep understanding of how people search through using such free tools as Google Insights or Wordtracker. Another source of keyword insights is conversational research – chatter on blogs and social networks, for example. Using tools such as Twitter Search or Technorati, the PR pro can gain a sense for the natural words and phrases people use when talking about a particular topic.

The objective is to compile a list of keyword phrases – the more the better – that reflects how people talk and search, that doesn't have a tremendous amount of competition, and that generates enough search volume to be worth it. Then integrate this rich list into press releases, media pitches and other materials. Feature keywords up front in news release headlines so

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they become the page's "title tag." Finally, measurement is essential to gauge the impact of a campaign. With some basic training and expert counsel, any company or organization can be well on its way toward making its existing public relations campaigns more successful through reputational search.

Visit Phil Gomes' blog, Blogservations, at www.philgomes.com/blog/
E-mail Phil at phil.gomes@edelman.com