

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

January 2010

Riding the Breaking Waves: *Managing the Business News Shakeout*

Public relations professionals may have had a good excuse to forego New Year's resolutions this time around. Many were too busy updating their rosters of media contacts to bother with any other lists.

Business journalism finds itself plying some rough waters these days. *The New York Times* bid farewell to four prominent business reporters who accepted buyout offers amid the newspaper's staff reduction plans. *The Washington Post* shuttered its remaining U.S. news bureaus outside of the Washington area. The editorial exodus continued at *Business Week*, now under Bloomberg ownership.

Has business journalism hit an iceberg? Or has it already been spirited away onto a lifeboat?

Divorce and Reinvention

Perhaps the industry is reinventing itself as it did during the economic rollercoaster ride of the 1980s. It was at this time that the Financial News Network was launched as the first national financial channel, predating by several years the introduction of the Consumer News and Business Channel, or CNBC, which later acquired FNN.

Television jumped into the fray as the growth of individual and institutional investors drove demand for more business news, which in turn spurred the growth of financial PR, investor relations and corporate communications.

Is something similar afoot on the Web now? Consider the buzz surrounding AOL's recent corporate divorce from Time Warner and its rebranding as a content provider. AOL continues to shed its former image as an Internet service provider by focusing on becoming a content publisher, as seen in the 2009 launch of the *Daily Finance* site.

With a full-time staff dedicated to original reporting on traditional business news, *Daily Finance* differentiates itself from AOL's other business-oriented properties. Sister sites *money.aol.com* and *Bloggingstocks.com* are a content aggregator

and specialty publisher of stock and investing information, respectively.

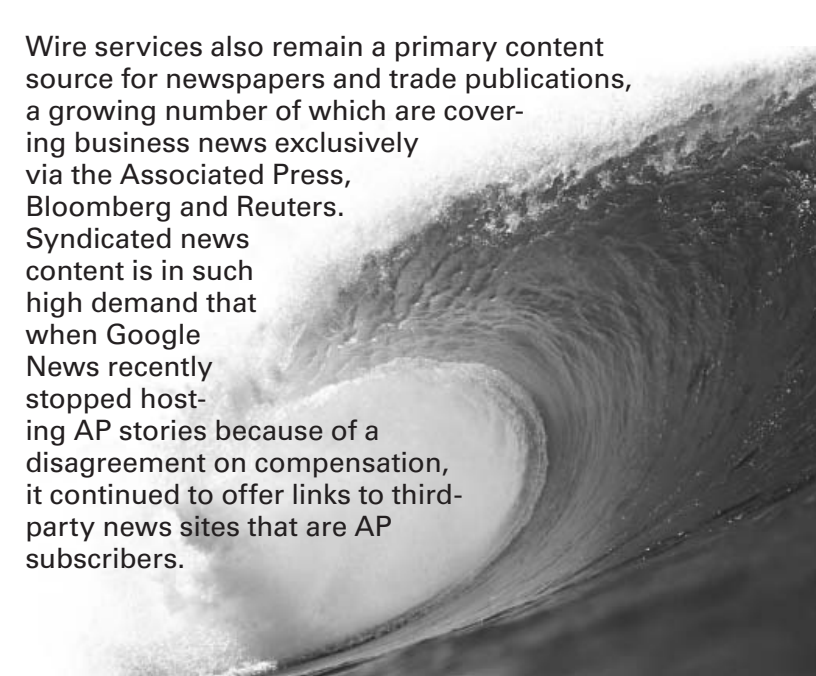
PR communicators will also observe that *Daily Finance* is creating a new home for some displaced business journalists. A closer look at the editorial roster of *Daily Finance* reveals refugees from Condé Nast's *Portfolio*, *Financial Week*, Bloomberg and *Forbes.com*, to name a few.

Bombardment

As the business news landscape evolves, media relations strategists will find even greater competition for share of voice with traditional media sources. With the constant bombardment of remaining reporters, PR practitioners will need to be more savvy and relevant to stand out as trusted news sources and to strengthen relationships over time.

Understanding changing newsroom operations can help to further pinpoint the needs of a journalist or publisher. As an example, many above-the-fold, print bylines now belong to freelance reporters who should not be ignored, especially since they also may be influential bloggers – newly credible through their affiliations with major business and trade media outlets.

Wire services also remain a primary content source for newspapers and trade publications, a growing number of which are covering business news exclusively via the Associated Press, Bloomberg and Reuters. Syndicated news content is in such high demand that when Google News recently stopped hosting AP stories because of a disagreement on compensation, it continued to offer links to third-party news sites that are AP subscribers.



Beacons for the Confused

For business news, the connection between print and digital media channels is a vital one, and may be a reflection of both audience preferences and the publisher's business model.

In some cases, the ever-expanding digital maze of online news sites, blogs, e-zines, Web sites and Twitter feeds may actually serve to elevate print publications that position themselves as "beacons" to guide confused audiences.

For example, *The Economist* continues to boast a loyal readership of its weekly glossy print edition. According to Publisher's Information Bureau, the highly regarded news and public affairs magazine grew its print advertising revenues by double digits in 2009, a rare performance as compared to its struggling peers.

As Michael Hirschorn writes in the *The Atlantic*, "Unlike practically all other media 'brands,' *The Economist* remains primarily a print product, and it is valued accordingly. In other words, readers continue to believe its stories have some value. As a result, *The Economist* has become a living test case of the path not taken by *Time* and *Newsweek*, whose Web strategists have succeeded in grabbing eyeballs... while dooming their print products to near irrelevance."

The magazine's secret to success may be its own editorial mission as stated on its Web site, "Being an *Economist* reader is not about being successful – it's about stimulation. It takes your brain for a walk, leap or a jump."

Outside Opinions

Whether they choose to reinvent or stay the course, business media companies will certainly attract their share of outside opinions. Recently former *Business Week* reporter Gary Weiss looked at the magazine's first issue published under Bloomberg and posted a

review on his personal blog, "The magazine takes no position. Now that's objective, but magazines aren't objective. It's a different kind of journalism... You may agree or disagree, but you knew where BW stood. Apart from the writing style, this all-Bloomberg-wire effort further substantiates that the BW acquisition is fulfilling a major editorial function for Bloomberg, by giving its reporters a forum for their best work."


Riding the Wave of Change

Understanding where your target audience seeks its business news and how that outlet delivers value to them remains the guiding principle for earning coveted media exposure. Riding the wave of change in media relations will require some adjustments in your outreach:

- **Get to know your reporters and bloggers.** Follow a key contact on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook to find out what's of interest to them and adjust your pitch accordingly. Some reporters' feeds offer straight news, events they'll be covering or requests for interviews with experts on specialized subjects, like maritime law or alternative investing.
- **Establishing direct, genuine relationships with a few key reporters is now more important than ever.** Staying in touch with your clutch reporters and following them on social networking sites will strengthen your relationships and keep you alerted on career moves. Providing updates outside of story pitches lets them know you're aware of their need to remain informed, especially when their reporting responsibilities broaden to include some unfamiliar sectors.
- **There's more to life than sitting at a computer - really!** Get out there and join the professional industry and trade groups with your clients. Many business reporters are doing the same thing to stay in touch with their

most reliable sources and develop new contacts to help them compete for stories.

It's obvious that those of us fortunate enough to have made contacts prior to the recent dismantling of some media organizations should hold onto them more closely. As professional communicators, we must balance the responsibility to serve as our brand's advocate with our commitment to provide useful, timely and accurate information to the media.

It's a mix of old school, common-sense PR basics and adoption of new technology tools that may help communications executives navigate their media relations strategies toward calmer waters. 

G&S Contact Information

Cos Mallozzi
CEO
+1 212 697 2600
cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

Luke Lambert
President
+1 212 697 2600
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

New York
Luke Lambert +1 212 697 2600
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

Chicago
Doug Hampel +1 847 519 9150
dhampel@gibbs-soell.com

Raleigh
Kerry Henderson +1 919 870 5718
khenderson@gibbs-soell.com

Zurich
Jeff Altheide +41 (0) 44 205 5565
jaltheide@gibbs-soell.com

Beijing and Shanghai
Amanda Zhao +8610 6530 7783
amanda_zhao@inhere.com.cn

Tokyo
Rachel Barrow +81 3 5561 2915
barrow@cosmopr.co.jp



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www.gibbs-soell.com