

PR Sill underrates web 2.0 potential

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An article in the New York Times before Christmas said the web attracted a bigger proportion of advertising spend in the UK than in any other country. The figure might soon overtake press advertising, it said – also confirmed that Google could now lay claim to being the world's largest media company.

Advertising gurus will no doubt have their own view of this, but the statistic demonstrates, given that web use by advertisers is bigger here than anywhere else, the willingness of UK companies and practitioners to try out new ideas. We are a lot more innovative, creative and advanced in our thinking this side of the Atlantic than sometimes we give ourselves credit for. But if advertisers are will to embrace the challenge, what about PR?

I don't know how much PR spend has moved to the internet but people in the business say the shift is comparably smaller than in advertising. There are some firms – Chime's Bell Pottinger Group being one notable example – that have plunged wholeheartedly into the new world, with internet-based activity accounting for a fifth of PR-derived revenues in some cases. But this is relatively unusual. Much of the PR industry is still offering a traditional service in the traditional way.

Surely this cannot last. A US advertising magazine recently voted the consumer as 'agency of the year', reflecting how sites such as YouTube have made the web the place to plug into public tastes, spot trends and influence behaviour. The future for PR companies – and those who gain the edge in the client pitches – must surely lie in an understanding of web mapping, broadband TV and all the other aspects of online media.

To do the UK industry credit, there is more happening here in this regard than in the US, perhaps because the Americans find responding to PR crisis on the web culturally rather difficult. As a nation they don't do irony, so bloggers' criticism of clients often leaves PR practitioners floundering. Nevertheless, there is a sense that the industry as a whole remains slightly asleep at the wheel – or perhaps clients are.

Regardless, PR professionals need to further talk up the benefits of web-based comms, or the industry could be in for a rude awakening.

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