Chapter 1.21
Mobile Public Relations Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Public relations is about the "ethical and strategic management of communication and relationships" (Johnston & Zawawi, 2004, p. 6) with individuals and groups ("publics") important to an organization. At one time such publics could safely be thought of in relatively static terms such as geographic location. This is, of course, still possible—but such fixed categories are of diminishing importance when it comes to building relationships with modern publics and communicating organizational messages to them. Even the motor vehicles that facilitate physical movement are becoming "smarter" and converging with technologies such as mobile telephony, personal entertainment systems and handheld computing (Sherry & Urry, 2000, as cited in Sheller, 2002).

This article aims to explore the idea that mobile technologies mean PR practitioners must rethink both the notion of publics and also how to relate to them. A "mobile PR" will undermine taken-for-granted views about the nature of media, messages, and the kinds of relationships public relations people can expect to create on behalf of their clients. Many practitioners are still getting to grips with the online public relations they have known—through activities such as arranging the building of corporate Web sites, monitoring online discussions relevant to client interests and both disseminating company information online and responding to inquiries about it. The idea of an even more flexible communications environment enabled by mobile technologies may seem very daunting. No-one has so far worked out how to "do" PR in this new communications climate—there are no prescriptions or generally accepted approaches. Yet if practitioners do not confront the dilemma of how to reach mobile audiences they risk becoming irrelevant to many clients who must communicate in the mobile space or face unacceptable decay in their business.

BACKGROUND: WHY MOBILE IS DIFFERENT

The Internet and mobile marketplaces have important differences. As Lindgren, Jedbratt, and Svensson note, "The mobile marketplace has a much wider reach than anything before it. It becomes synonymous with everywhere" (2002, p. 5). Siau, Lim, and Shen agree that, "the emerging mobile commerce operates in an environment very different from e-commerce conducted over the wired Internet" (2003, p. 2). It is important that PR practitioners understand the differences and adjust their thinking and practice accordingly.

Siau et al. list mobile market features they consider are *not* characteristic of "traditional" e-commerce:

- **Ubiquity:** Users can get any information they want, whenever they want it, wherever they are (including, now, RSS feeds delivered via mobile internet services).
- **Reachability:** Businesses can reach customers anywhere, anytime—equally, a user can be in touch with and available for other people anywhere, anytime.
- **Localization:** Knowledge of a user's physical location allows locality-specific services to be provided.
- **Personalization:** Mobile commerce applications can be personalized to represent information or provide services in ways appropriate to a specific user.
- **Dissemination:** some wireless infrastructures support simultaneous delivery of data to all mobile users within a specific geographical region. (Siau et al., 2003, pp. 2-3)

As wireless technologies evolve, customer relations will experience dramatic change (Siau et al., 2003, p. 16). To what extent can these relations be called *public* relations and be the domain of PR practitioners rather than marketers? Lines of demarcation can be very blurry. But PR is foregrounded when the prime purpose is to use mobile technologies to create connections–relationships—where the end game is the nature of the relationship rather than an immediate output such as a purchase decision. Examples include:

- Viewer voting via SMS or mobile calls associated with television pop contests, where the goal is to create a broad community of fans who feel they are helping shape the outcome. Their sense of involvement and connection to the contestants—and to other contest followers—is something the promoters hope will morph into long-term enthusiasm for, and purchasing of, products associated with the winner.
- Free delivery of information to mobile devices where consumers have opted-in to receive it—such as notifications of airline or public transport schedule changes. Individuals who are thereby saved a fruitless trip to the train station will value such a convenience—and the organization which provides it, enhancing the organization's reputation for being accessible (if not always for making the trains run on time).
- Personalized, user-specified content delivery. This can range from downloading a daily prayer to getting top news points from the daily paper sent to a mobile device. The organization providing the service is extending its reach to consumers who may not otherwise stop to access their content, or in fact may not be able to access it by other means. This extended reach is valuable to the organizations concerned as a larger pool of customers creates more opportunities to piggyback paid services on free ones.
- Research conducted by SMS, where members of a group which may be dispersed through several countries both receive and respond to researchers' questions through their mobile devices. The group is connected

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