Australian book publishing and the internet: How two Australian book publishing companies are using the Internet to engage with customers

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Abstract

The online environment has indeed changed the way that public relations is practised by Australian book publishing companies. Although still a work in progress, attempts are fostering a return to the fundamentals of public relations. This is because the online environment suits a focus on building relationships that — for many public relations practitioners and scholars — should have been at the core of public relations all along. For the purpose of this paper two book publishing companies were chosen — Penguin Australia and Lonely Planet — and the ways in which they are using virtual communities to engage with customers examined.

Keywords: book publishing, customer, online community, Facebook

In their paper, ‘Applying communication theories to the Internet’, Fawkes and Gregory (2000) contend that the advent of the Internet has fundamentally altered public relations and the way in which it is practised. This paper draws on Fawkes and Gregory’s contention as a stimulus for the exploration of online customer engagement in the Australian book publishing industry. (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000: 109).

Virtual or online communities have been described as ‘aggregations of Internet users who form webs of personal relationships’. (Kannan et al, 2000; Rheingold, 1993. Quoted in Spaulding, 2010: 38) Online communities may be established and maintained by companies themselves. Alternatively, businesses attempt to leverage already established and successful communities for their own purposes. Spaulding describes four types of virtual communities: transaction-oriented (for example, sales or trading focussed); interest-oriented (users committed to a common topic); relationship-oriented (for example, business relationships in Linkedin); or fantasy-oriented (virtual worlds such as Second Life). (Spaulding, 2010: 40–41) To see how public relations practitioners could use virtual communities to engage with users, we must turn to definitions of public relations and how it is, and should be, practised.
The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) recently reworked their definition of public relations in light of the changes occurring in the industry during the ‘information era’. Their new definition is:

‘the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.’ (PRIA, 2010: ‘About Public Relations’)

This definition suggests that community engagement is about ‘earning public understanding and acceptance’. According to some, the Internet changes more than this. For example, Solis and Breakenridge (2009: 32), believe that we are currently experiencing a ‘renaissance’ in public relations, that we are headed back to what public relations’ pioneer Ivy Lees believed the industry was fundamentally about. Lees is quoted as saying:

‘The people now rule. We have substituted for the divine right of kings, the divine right of the multitude’ (Hiebert, 1996: frontispiece, quoted in Mackey, 2006: 13)

In 1984, Grunig and Hunt took a different tack in their influential text *Managing Public Relations*. They describe four models of public relations which the authors claimed reflected the history of public relations and how it was practised at the time of writing. (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 21) Their contested concept of two-way symmetrical public relations — the closest framework to the idea of ‘community engagement’ — is later clarified by Grunig in this statement: ‘the concept of symmetry directly implies a balance of the organization’s and the public’s interests’. (Grunig, 2001: 15) Trent J. Spaulding, in his discussion of virtual communities, appears to agree with Grunig when he stresses the importance of strategic partnerships. (Spaulding, 2010: 46) Thus it would appear that older — or at least, pre world wide web — definitions of public relations are still relevant to the new online environment. This paper also utilises the framework of Kent & Taylor’s (2002) ideas about dialogic communications in order to add insight into the quality of the conversations occurring in the online communities under investigation.

However, in the history of public relations activity not all practitioners have operated according to Grunig’s ‘normative’ two-way symmetrical model. Indeed, public relations practitioners are often seen to be in the service of hegemonic interests — large corporations, the media, the government of the day. Steve Mackey, citing Habermas’ concept of ‘lifeworld colonisation’, describes public relations as:

‘ideological intervention — interdiction by the strategic action of powerful, self-interested cliques’ (Habermas, 1984. Quoted in Mackey, 2006: 2)
Does this scenario change with the advent of the Internet? Do the two book publishing companies examined here engage in ‘strategic partnerships’ with their publics? Is there evidence of Kent & Taylor’s dialogic communication or even Grunig’s two-way symmetrical communication? Or have the companies reverted to one-way modes of communication? I will now turn to public relations in Australian book companies, as it has traditionally been practised.

Until recently, public relations activities by the larger book publishing companies in Australia were limited to publicity, and overseen by the respective marketing departments. In the 2005 edition of *An introduction to Australian book publishing*, Daniel Ruffino, the marketing director of Penguin Group Australia stated that:

‘the marketing department will arrange for the author to give radio, television and press interviews, and if appropriate offer them for in-store appearances, signings, literary lunches and dinners and writers’ festivals. High profile books may also have a budget for paid advertising in press, magazines, and occasionally for radio and television.’ (Ruffino, 2005: 18)

Books may also be ‘reviewed, featured or extracted’. (Reid, 2005, 22) Indeed, most of these activities are still carried out. *Media Extra*, a supplement to the Australian *Bookseller + Publisher Magazine*, still publishes media mentions of recently-published book titles. (Thorpe Bowker, 2010)

In *An introduction to Australian book publishing*, websites are described as ‘a means of delivery for online publishing … and as a shopfront for customers’. (Magee, 2005: 47) The benefits of a website are ‘convenience and customisation … [meaning] that a customer can search for what they want in the way they want’. (Magee, 2005: 47) Referring back to Spaulding’s types of virtual communities, this description of websites is transaction-based. However it is a one-way transaction. Customers cannot become sellers, and the company is not positioned as a buyer, at least not of public goods.

There is little in these two scenarios that suggests community engagement. It may be that book publishing companies in Australia would view such engagement as inappropriate. Traditionally, they have been positioned as literary gatekeepers, and most seek to keep the public at bay. Many do not accept unsolicited manuscripts, and provide minimal information about their activities and plans to the public. They may view two-way symmetrical public relations activity as difficult to handle. Despite this, the book publishing industry, known for its conservatism and cautious attitude in the face of change, have begun to utilise new approaches to dealing with their publics. Penguin Australia and Lonely Planet are examples of these. They have addressed the problem of online customer engagement in quite different ways. We shall now examine their approaches.

Rather than set up a dedicated online community, Penguin Australia has utilised their website (which functions as an online brochure and
catalogue) as a springboard for users to jump to a Penguin presence on the popular online communities, Facebook and Twitter. From the Penguin Australia website, users can click to Penguin Australia on Facebook (Penguin Australia, 2010: ‘Facebook, Penguin Books Australia’) or to a Facebook page dedicated to the ‘Popular Penguins’ campaign. (Penguin Australia, 2010: ‘Facebook, Popular Penguins’) For this campaign, fans were invited to participate in over 500 photo shoots across Australia. According to Head of Marketing, Daniel Ruffino, fans themselves ‘did the marketing’. (Ruffino, 2010, ‘Online Sales and Marketing’) Fans had their pictures taken, each holding a different title in the Popular Penguins series. The marketing team then chose 75 shots to highlight on the Popular Penguins Facebook page. Fans then got involved with the campaign by searching for their own photos on the specially-created video available on the Penguin dedicated YouTube channel. They also added their comments such as:

‘101ginni: The girl holding the Arabian nights book has a great smile!

kasio99: wouldn’t trust the guy at 1.02

kaesler28: That young lady holding the’ wizard of oz’ is quite cute...’

(Penguin Australia, 2010: ‘YouTube, Penguin Australia’)

Despite the paucity of comments on the YouTube channel, the statistics seem to support Penguin Australia’s investment. In April 2010, Popular Penguin Facebook ‘fans’ numbered 11,101 and the video had had 8,804 views.

In addition to a presence on Facebook and YouTube, in April 2010 Penguin Australia had no less than fifteen Twitter accounts, categorised by psychographic or topic of interest — for example, @PenguinBooksAus/mumsandbubs, @PenguinBooksAus/media or @PenguinBooksAus/ya. There is considerable overlap in the content added by the Penguin Australia staff as the same snippets of literary and historical information and news appear on most of the Twitter pages as well as the two Facebook pages. This would suggest that the social engagement coordinator and publicist who are employed for this role (as stated by Ruffino in his 2010 talk, ‘Online Sales and Marketing’) are having difficulty creating new content and keeping up with the multiple platforms on a daily basis. Examples of staff input on the Facebook site are:

Penguin Books Australia: We like this! Betty DeGeneres reads Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes by Mem Fox and Helen Oxenbury at the White House.


None of these prompts generated comments or fan ‘likes’. In April 2010, visitors to Penguin Australia’s FaceBook page were generating their own discussion threads that were at odds with Penguin’s attempts to direct the conversations. This outcome was obviously accidental, because by June 2010, Penguin Australia
had changed their approach on both FaceBook and Twitter. Still present, but no longer ubiquitous, are the ‘Did you know on this day’ literary facts. Penguin Australia now attempt to stimulate discussion and comments with links and direct questions about their products. For example this request generated 4 fan ‘likes’ and 52 comments:

Penguin Books Australia: We love this book so much we want to get the cover absolutely right for the next edition coming out in September. Please tell us which one you prefer (by commenting on, or liking) – the birds or the nannies? Here’s what the book is about: http://pen.gy/dmy4Ha

Here are three of the comments:

Del Elizabeth: The ladies - although some people will see it as racist (which it’s not)
Celeste Rebucas: having the “Nannies” would be good, however the “Birds” would be a brilliant cover:)
Jenna Pearce: The birds it’s only coz of the purple cathes ur eyes.. Need the purple on the ladies then it would be awesome

(Penguin Australia, 2010: ‘Facebook, Penguin Books Australia’)

Revisiting Penguin Australia on Twitter in June 2010, the 15 Twitter accounts had been consolidated into one — PenguinBooksAus — which has evolved into a forum for literary quizzes with prizes and links to extracts from the Popular Penguins series. This has resulted in some success as visitors are now participating.

Although Penguin Australia’s approach on both FaceBook and Twitter generates interest from visitors, there is little conversation occurring. For the most part, the communication is one-way. Their online strategy is dominated by a marketing mindset whereby online visitors are ‘instruments for meeting … marketing needs’ rather than ‘equal with the organization’. (Botan 1997: 192. Quoted in Kent & Taylor, 2002: 23) Where Penguin Australia’s strategy may fall down is in generating repeat visits and keeping people engaged. Tom Kelleher points out that:

‘encouraging people to become “return visitors” and not just “repeat customers” is a public relations function that means offering something of value beyond a marketable product. It means inviting them to get involved in a conversation’. (Kelleher, 2007: 52)

In addition, Penguin Australia’s marketing focus limits possibilities for engaging with publics in diverse ways. For example, they have not yet developed standardised ways for their authors to communicate directly with readers in the online environment. Even book publishers are not immune from crises and the Internet is an ideal place to communicate with publics in a crisis or issues management situation. In April 2010, Penguin Australia published a cookbook containing a recipe with the typo: ‘freshly ground black people’. (Olding, 17
April 2010) The company acted promptly, communicated with booksellers, and destroyed the offending books. However the incident was still being ‘tweeted’ by horrified Twitterers around the world ten weeks later — and without any followup response from Penguin Australia.

In contrast to Penguin Australia, Lonely Planet chose to establish and maintain their own online community. The Thorn Tree travel forum has been in existence since 1996 when it was a newsgroup. Nowadays it is a thriving, global forum with thousands of participants. This user visited the forum in April 2010 and at that time there were 267 users and 417 guests online. One subtopic, ‘Kids to Go’, had 5,112 posts. (Lonely Planet, 2010: ‘Kids to Go’) Using Spaulding’s types of virtual communities, the forum is interest-based. (Spaulding, 2010: 40–41)

The forum is moderated, and staff have provided general website terms of use and guidelines for each branch. The forum itself is well-structured and easy to navigate. Finding specific information proved a little difficult for this user. How the various social media channels — twitter, RSS feeds, a magazine and newsletter, mobile phone applications and a wiki — fitted in with the Lonely Planet ‘home’ website and Thorn Tree travel forum were clear. In contrast, the blogs seemed like an awkward add-on to the forum. Possibly dedicated users would become familiar with the site map, or at least the spaces that interest them the most.

The travel forum has generated a level of momentum that will enable it to thrive. Users were assisting other users in a product support function. (See Spaulding, 2010: 44 for further discussion of this type of forum.) Of interest from a public relations perspective, is what happens when users complain or ask questions. Do the Lonely Planet moderators respond, and if so, how?

‘A complaint

As much as I love LP, I have a few complaints. Last year, I gave many feedbacks and comments to Lp on www.lonelyplanet.com/contact for guidebooks. They said my name would come in the guidebook, along with my comment. This was done to France and Italy amongst others, I believe by the name ‘Ansh Jain’. Checked the new LP guide to Italy and no name of mine has come. No comment. I sent thejm a comment on this and I’ve not gotten any response. Can any staff tell me why this si so? Thanks. Ansh Jain.’

This comment received no replies. However the following did:

‘Hello

I am no longer receiving email alerts from my watched threads. I haven’t changed my settings (at least not deliberately) and I have checked and updated the settings but this has not worked. My email account is receiving mail from elsewhere. Any help will be appreciated. Stupidity, on my part, cannot be ruled out!
Thanks’
Here is the moderator’s response:

‘Hi guys,
We’re looking into this now. I’ll let you know where we end up.
Cheers.’

(Lonely Planet Australia, 2010: ‘All About Lonely Planet’)

Questions which required relatively simple or straightforward answers were answered by the moderators. Questions that were more complicated, or had emotional content, were not. This would indicate that although there is some two-way symmetrical communication occurring, it is not dialogic. Kent & Taylor (1998) explained this key difference. Two-way symmetrical communication is ‘a procedural means whereby an organization and its publics can communicate interactively’. Dialogic communication, however, is ‘a particular type of relational interaction’. Kent & Taylor draw on the writings of philosopher Martin Buber to further explain dialogic communication: ‘parties must view communicating with each other as the goal of a relationship’. (Buber 1982. Quoted in Kent & Taylor, 1998) The moderators at Lonely Planet’s Thorn Tree have adopted a practical, ‘traffic cop’ approach at odds with Buber’s definition. While Moderators will occasionally ignore ‘too-hard’ questions they are quick to jump in to censor, direct and provide rational explanations of technical issues. The following illustrates a little of this approach:

Sarah55 said on 11 Jan 2009

I’ve had a rant on YC about what appears to be a sudden change in moderation styles. Whole threads seem to be being deleted where before, only the offending posts would go. Also, topics and robust conversations that would have passed moderation with no problems before, seem to go missing. Why is this happening? Is a particular poster reporting things rather than just scrolling by topics they don’t like - and the mods not questioning it? Or have the rules (albeit they’re ‘informal’ ones) of moderating YC been changed? I really hope not.

As I said in my YC post, I neither swear nor post anything contentious myself - but the censorship recently has been annoying me intensely.

Irene_Adler (a Lonely Planet moderator) replied on 12 Jan 2009

Hi Sarah, I’ve posted on your other thread about this. We haven’t changed the rules of moderating YC recently, but I suspect more comments and threads are being reported by community members.

I understand the irritation of contributing to a thread that is subsequently removed (especially when your posts follow the rules), but sometimes it’s necessary from a moderation standpoint, particularly on YC. Believe it or not, we’re still removing plenty of individual posts from YC as well, in order to salvage discussions. (Lonely Planet, 2010, ‘Moderation FAQ’)
It is obvious from a number of posts on the Thorn Tree travel forum that Lonely Planet staff are mindful of legal problems and issues with community ‘harmony’ that may ensue if users are left to their own devices. Overzealous ‘patrolling’ by the moderators could result in users coming to mistrust the organisation and leaving the site for good. On the positive side, Lonely Planet have implemented the idea that social media such as online communities are about ‘participation, sharing, and collaboration, rather than straightforward advertising and selling’. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 65)

Penguin Australia and Lonely Planet are unusual in the Australian Book Publishing industry. Their investment, commitment and willingness to experiment with virtual communities indicate this. Whether or not they can evolve to new levels of community engagement, user relevance and genuine dialogue is still in question. Has the way that public relations is practised in Australian book publishing changed due to the Internet? There are still literary publicists who use traditional methods of promoting books and authors to the exclusion of the Internet. Most Australian book publishing companies continue to use one-way models of communication rather than conversing with their publics. Even Penguin Australia has not broken free of a marketing perspective when it comes to online engagement. On the other hand, the popularity and size of Lonely Planet’s online community requires continual commitment and policing in order to contain potential legal issues. Solis & Breakenridge (2002: 32) believe that public relations ‘has yet to reveal its true promise and potential’ in the online environment. Aside from the introduction of new technologies, what this promise and potential might be, could be revealed by close and ongoing analysis of what is currently occurring in online communities. Some publishing companies and public relations practitioners will take advantage of the new medium, while others will miss out. (James, 2007) If PR practitioners do not grasp the opportunities in new media, others will.
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