

Social media as a customer service tool

Baltimore PR council gets advice on craft from a Web pioneer

By Liz Farmer

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Texts, tweets, blogs, status updates — the proliferation of social media available today has created a barrage of information in front of the public.

How a public relations professional can cut through that so a client's message is heard above the din was the topic of a conference Tuesday featuring the founder of one of the most widely known networking Web sites for journalists and PR agents.

"Social media is nothing more than a customer service tool," Peter Shankman, founder of the Help a Reporter Out site, or HARO, told a group of about 90 people attending a conference hosted by the **Baltimore Public Relations Council**.

Shankman, an entrepreneur who founded his New York-based marketing firm The Geek Factory in 1998, is now widely known as a speaker on the value — and sometimes misguided use — of social media tools.

Using HARO as an example, Shankman, 37, said the site grew by being transparent for its users, staying relevant, maintaining "top-of-mind" presence and delivering a succinct message. Founded in March 2008, Shankman started the site to connect reporters searching for a source for their stories, a need he said had yet to be filled on a mass basis.

Since then, the site has grown to more than 100,000 members, 25 percent of whom are PR professionals. Shankman said 97 percent of journalists who use the site to find a source come back for another story. In the last 12 months, HARO has generated \$1 million in advertising revenue. Shankman said he has never paid to advertise the site

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PETER SHANKMAN
Help a Reporter Out



RICH DENNISON

Peter Shankman, founder of Help a Reporter Out, speaks Tuesday to a meeting of the Baltimore Public Relations Council.

but let it grow through word-of-mouth.

That's a case where social networking and media can be used in everyone's favor, Shankman said. But where the technology can go wrong is when the information output isn't focused or relevant to the intended audience.

"Everyone's running around and it's all about social media," he said in an interview before his keynote address. "People think they've got to stop whatever they're doing to do the new thing ... but it doesn't mean you have to give up what you know how to do."

That's especially true when it comes to the basics of public relations — learning how to

succinctly craft a message, he said.

"The e-mails I get that where you're eight paragraphs in and I still don't know what the hell you're trying to ask me, those get closed — but not deleted because that's rude — and forgotten about until the next time I'm cleaning out my inbox," he told the audience.

Brevity and writing skills are key, he said. Without a clear message that's relevant to people, PR professionals could be doomed to tweet, e-mail and update their client's Facebook page with minimal results.

That message was echoed by other conference speakers.

Don Bates, director of the

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DAWN WARD
PR Council

graduate program in strategic public relations at George Washington University, noted public relations professionals have the difficult task of translating industry jargon into words that are relevant to everyone else.

"When you're writing press releases, think about writing it for the news audience instead of writing them for the business," Bates said.

Social media has changed the old one-way relationship that existed among a public relations professional, a reporter and the public, noted Dawn Ward, president of the PR Council and a communications marketing director for the American Cancer Society. Instead of a pitch to a reporter who turns the story into an article for an audience, information is flowing back and forth among all three groups.

"Now somebody can send out a tweet and we get called instead of vice versa," she said. "There's so much buzz about social media I think everyone's still trying to figure out how best to use it and how to work with the media on it."

Shankman said he believes social networking will proliferate to the point that after posting you're headed to a Jiffy Lube, you'll automatically get an alert about a friend's experience at the same shop.

"For the first time, it's no longer about issuing the big press release," he said. "Companies are going to have to be more proactive with their consumers instead of just reactive."

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