

Using An Online Reference Library: Online-pr.com

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Reference librarians have a knack for pulling the right directory, thesaurus, encyclopedia or dictionary from long shelves of gray buckram-clad books and getting one started in research. No matter what the question is, a reference librarian finds an answer, or a line of inquiry to get near an answer. Today, many PR practitioners use Google in lieu of reference librarians because we don't have access to them. Google, alas, yields more results than we need and frequently, results aren't close to the answer we're looking for. In other words, there is need in PR for an online reference library and for knowledge among practitioners of how to use it. This is especially the case as the requirement for accuracy has risen with the amount of information available on the web. It is less forgivable now to misspell a person's name, to get the date of a law or battle wrong, to overlook similarities between present events and those in the past or to fail to understand a concept or technology. Resources are readily available for practitioners to be more accurate and better prepared and ultimately, more credible with the media and target audiences.

Online-pr.com (www.online-pr.com) was designed 10 years ago as a reference library for PR and marketing. It seeks to provide as many resources as possible in one place, so practitioners do not have to look as hard for answers, especially if they are under time constraints. The idea was to help deliver better, faster and less-expensive PR and marketing communications by placing a wealth of secondary information at the fingertips of working practitioners.

Online-pr.com isn't a first place to go, especially if Google, or another search engine, provides a quick answer, but if an answer isn't readily available, online-pr.com's 2000+ links let one check a multitude of data deposits. The challenge with online-pr.com, as with any reference library, is knowing where to find answers hidden beneath its links. Like reference librarians, one has to use references to learn what they contain. On the other hand, a reference library can still give practitioners a leg up on finding information.

Online-pr.com was an early development of an online reference library, but it is not an original idea. There were and are other general directory sites on the internet such as <http://www.reporter.org/desktop> a one-page collection of reference links to search engines and other resources for journalists. A similar site is *Assignment Editor* (<http://www.assignmenteditor.com>) with a

deeper collection of links. Yet another collection targeted to managers is CEO express (<http://www.ceoexpress.com/>). These along with more than three dozen others are under *General research links* (<http://www.online-pr.com/prdrctmd.htm>) in online-pr.com. You might find one or two are useful, but note that each site designs its library of links differently. *Measure 4 Measure* (<http://www.wolinskyweb.net/measure.htm>), for example, concentrates on measurement sites while *The Educator's Reference Desk* (<http://www.eduref.org>) concentrates on academia.

The challenge with all online reference libraries is determining what to put in the library and what to leave out. There is no easy answer. Online-pr.com is expansive because PR crosses many fields, but the more references there are, the more difficult it is to find information. Reference libraries can have too many reference sources, and online-pr.com can be accused of that.

Structure and content

Online-pr.com is structured around basic goals. The first is that PR practitioners need to know what is going on. Hence, the first groupings of links were news sites. This posed a problem. Listing individual news sources would make the site unwieldy. So, online-pr.com concentrates on listing news aggregation sites (<http://www.online-pr.com/prmedsit.htm>). There are still dozens of these, and most practitioners only need only one or two, but when one is looking for a story, it is better to have several.

A second goal for PR practitioners is to know what is happening in the media. Those who specialize in media relations particularly should be aware of who is working where and what is happening. So, there is a section devoted to media news (<http://www.online-pr.com/prmedsit.htm#Media%20and%20Celebrity%20News>) with celebrity and entertainment news thrown in for good measure.

Beyond general and media news, the question arose of what other news should be collected for practitioners. This was difficult to answer because there are thousands of trade publications and web sites in hundreds of areas. It is impractical to list them all. The solution was to list a few with broad application. These are PR/marketing, financial, technology, medical and political news. Links are collected under separate headings:

- PR/Marketing (<http://www.online-pr.com/markpr2.htm#Public%20Relations/Marketing%20Magazines>)
- Financial (<http://www.online-pr.com/prfinmed.htm>)

- Technology (<http://www.online-pr.com/prcmpmed.htm>)
- Medical (<http://www.online-pr.com/prmednws.htm>)
- Political (<http://www.online-pr.com/exmpuba.htm>)

The intent to list only news sites was not maintained under medical and political headings because there are many specialty sites in these two areas. Hence, both headings mix directories and news.

The next goal was to provide resources about PR and marketing that practitioners need. Here the choice was to be inclusive and to list every useful link, subject to a few exceptions. Online-pr.com does not list PR firms because a better resource exists for that. However, the site provides a link to that resource (www.odwyerpr.com). Online-pr.com does not, for the most part, list sites that require subscriptions or fees. Exceptions in this regard are media directories. Finally, after the explosion in the number of PR and marketing blogs, it became impractical to list them all. Online-pr.com lists a few dozen of each. With these exceptions, under the heading of marketing/PR/IR links (<http://www.online-pr.com/markpr.htm>) there are 12 collections referencing:

- PR/Marketing/Journalist associations,
- PR and marketing news sources,
- Vendors,
- General resources,
- PR/Marketing Blogs,
- News media directories and guides,
- News tracking and monitoring sources,
- Publicity measurement resources and speakers bureaus.

PR job sources are listed separately, since there are so many (<http://www.online-pr.com/prjobs.htm>).

In addition to these resources, online-pr.com provides four other categories of information. These are forms to aid in managing PR projects

(<http://www.online-pr.com/forms.htm>), essays on PR topics (<http://www.online-pr.com/OnlineprWhitePapersAnd%20Essays.htm>), a syllabus for a course on integrated corporate communications (<http://www.online-pr.com/Strategic%20Comm%20Course/integratedcommsyll1.html>) and a guide to media interviews (<http://www.online-pr.com/OnlinePRInterviewPreptips.html>). The forms are tools for practitioners performing PR tasks with which they are not familiar. Essays are on a broad range of communications topics. The course syllabus is designed to help practitioners who need a strategic view of communications, and the media guide is for training and refresher courses for spokespersons.

These resources did not complete online-pr.com's reference library, however. A question arose over what else PR practitioners and marketers need – particularly those who write. One answer was a section devoted to dictionaries, thesauruses and quotation sources (<http://www.online-pr.com/OnlinePRwordquotationcheckers.htm>) and a separate section devoted to classic literature works placed online (http://www.online-pr.com/reference_works.htm) These are essential reference works, particularly for writing speeches

But that still wasn't enough to cover PR and marketing activities. PR practitioners today work around the world and travel frequently. This called for a section on travel information, maps, times, US zip codes and metric conversions (<http://www.online-pr.com/prsrc3.htm>). In addition, three headings were added to account for trade industry information (<http://www.online-pr.com/industry.htm>), for computer and software information to help those who build and maintain an online presence (<http://www.online-pr.com/webref.htm>) and for specialized directories on a variety of topics along with event calendars, encyclopedias, research guides and sources to check hoaxes (<http://www.online-pr.com/directory.htm>). (A reference librarian who read this paragraph cautioned users about relying on Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>) in online-pr.com's encyclopedia section because of the unevenness of its articles.)

Finally, there was a recognition that all these resources are still not enough for practitioners who have particularly knotty questions or need to find people and organizations. Thus, three more headings were added -- one for search engines (<http://www.online-pr.com/prsrcsrc.htm>), one for people and business finders (<http://www.online-pr.com/OnlinePRphonebusinesslocators.htm>) and a final section on paid research resources (<http://www.online-pr.com/OnlinePRpaidsearchservices.htm>) Search engine listings are a recognition that each search engine works differently and the same question will yield different results from engine to engine. People and business finders

list phone books and other online address directories including area code directories. Paid research resources have access to information that is locked off from the internet but may be essential for the work practitioners are doing.

There were once more headings than these on online-pr.com but they were removed after information was no longer pertinent. Online-pr.com, as any reference library should do, has changed structure and content frequently based on the environment and link breakage. In its early days, the site explained online activities to practitioners. As online PR and marketing matured, there was no longer a need for these sections. Link breakage is a constant frustration. Information resources come and go and for no apparent reason other than individuals who had collected them stopped collecting or moved the sites. As much as 15 percent of an online reference library will become dated annually. This means updating is constant, and it is not an easy task in spite of software that tests links. Software can only tell if links have gone dead: It cannot detect if a resource has been changed or abandoned but left in place.

Usability

Reference libraries are only as good as their utility. They are tools to get to answers and not ends in themselves. A reference library doesn't have to look pretty, but it needs to do its job fast. Ease of access is essential to any online reference library. Hence, online-pr.com uses a one-screen opening table with no scrolling. The idea is to help practitioners determine at a glance where to look first. For faster access, there is a search engine link positioned at the top left of the home page table.

Beneath the opening page are sub-headings that break down topics in a tree structure, subject to one rule. There are no more than three clicks to reach any resource in online-pr.com. The three-click rule necessitated a flatter listing of resources that can be cluttered, but provides faster access. In its early days when there was little broadband availability, there was also a size limit on files to speed downloads by dial-up modems, but as broadband matured, this restriction was abandoned.

The entire site is text-driven, and there should be a better way of proceeding. But, condensing reference information doesn't lend itself to visuals, so online-pr.com remains behind the times in presentation. Its spare form allows it to function more quickly.

Familiarity

One learns research by researching. There is no substitute for looking things up. After a while, a researcher becomes acquainted with information resources and places to look for data. Online is no different with the exception that the internet is the largest reference library ever assembled. No one can hope to comprehend it all, nor even gain a thorough knowledge of where information sources are buried. This is why intelligent “surfing” is not a waste of time on the internet. It is through constant familiarization with data sources that one speeds use of these sources later, which is why practitioners should set aside time to visit likely information sites. An advantage of an online reference library is that sites are pre-selected so practitioners can surf more effectively. Online-pr.com can provide a quick introduction to dozens of information sites in less time than it would take to find them through sorting search engine results.

It is the nature of research that once one is familiar with data, it is more likely one will use that data. Research frequently answers unasked questions and broadens topics beyond the point of view the researcher had taken initially. It is this broadening of insight that deepens stories and heightens credibility. It is usually a fruitful source of media story ideas as well as strategy and planning. More importantly, it keeps practitioners out of trouble. They aren't caught advocating positions that long ago were proven to be incredible or infeasible. Or, as writer George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Summary

It is easier to answer 5W questions in depth today because there are available resources online, but PR practitioners have to learn how and commit themselves to performing research, especially when they can't turn questions over to someone. It takes stubbornness and time to track down answers, but with a higher premium on accuracy in the internet age, there is too much personal and business risk in failing to look at the past. For that reason alone, PR practitioners should understand the function and use of an online reference library.

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