

The Internet Revolution: It came. It went. It's here.

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Sometimes stating the obvious is necessary. The Internet revolution that came and went in a deluge of losses, founded companies, layoffs and broken dreams has not passed. It's here. It's just not in the form that most envisioned, and the riches so many expected did not materialize. But, for practical purposes, we work in public relations today in ways we could not envision in 1995 when Internet growth exploded. And interestingly, the Web, which was supposed to be the province of a young, hip generation, has proven valuable to a graying establishment.

It takes an older person to understand how much things have changed, and it is even difficult for "mature" practitioners to remember how they used to practice PR. People forget processes easily when they adapt new ones, and they don't realize inexorable evolution occurring around them. The Internet revolution was really one part of a larger change from the early 1980s – the digital revolution. By 1995, we were well along in the digital revolution, and worldwide connectivity using a 1969 packet-switching technology was becoming the rocket behind change. The Internet had been there all along – 10 years before the personal computer. Few used it outside of uni-

versities and the Department of Defense. With development of Web principles in 1991, the obscure Internet suddenly became connectivity for the rest of us. Since then, change has been continuous and resistance futile.

In 1995, e-mail was a regular tool, but you didn't contact journalists by e-mail unless journalists worked in high-tech. In 1995, Web pages were growing by hundreds a day, but they were curiosities, and most people didn't know how to code their own anyway. In 1995, PR practitioners wrote letters on paper and printed them on laser printers along with the envelopes that got mashed through the printer rollers unless there was an old IBM Selectric typewriter still around. In 1995, networking was balky. There was scarcely a day and never a week when the internal network didn't go down for one reason or another. In 1995, we kept paper calendars and we didn't know how to use a personal information manager system like Microsoft Outlook or Internet-based systems.

Looking around my office, the difference between now and 1995 is the dominance of the PC on my desk. Everything I do is in the terminal. I manage e-mail, calendaring, research, meeting setups, client contacts, reporter logging, time,

you name it in the machine unless it is packed into the telephone voice mail system. I write a paper letter about once in every six months, and frankly, I've forgotten how to print it. (Let's see, letter-head face down and facing forward...). I store less paper than I ever have. Our filing system now is the system-wide server (backed up daily, of course). Our ability to find things rests on a search engine and not a secretary's elephantine memory. We have paper files, but they have not been updated in months and they won't be. Eventually, we'll store, then dump them.

This is not precisely the Internet revolution we expected. We expected more businesses to be online. We expected older, established companies to be on their knees while "new model" businesses rose to change customer and influential contact, distribution, communications and relationships. Little of that happened. There was change but it was in processes, not business models

Everything has become easier. We e-mail clients and reporters now. We rarely use a fax machine unless a client or reporter insists on it for some reason. We used to scramble for client information, including traveling to the client to bring home box loads of documents. Today, we look on the client's Web site first. We used to research competitors in Lexis/Nexis and print out hundreds of stories that we laboriously edited and summarized. Today, we go to

competitors' Web sites to see what they say about themselves and why. We used to write long pitch letters on paper to sell ideas to reporters. Today pitches are shorter and more pointed for e-mail. It's the headline and lead that count. We used to work with designers and printers to write, illustrate and print brochures. Today, we use Microsoft Publisher and Adobe to make an electronic pdf brochure that we store on the Web page or e-mail to interested parties. We used PowerPoint in 1995, but we didn't consider putting PowerPoint on the Web. That's standard operating procedure now. We scrambled then to get, dupe and ship videotapes to clients so they could see how they performed on the air. There was at best a one-day wait and at worst, three to four days before a tape was sent by Federal Express to the client. Today, the videotape is turned into streaming video and a link is sent to the client for viewing on a protected space in the server the same day.

In 1995, we carried heavy laptops and a pile of hardware and cable to communicate. Today, we have feather-light laptops with WiFi cards that provide instant Internet access in Starbucks. We also have Blackberries, personal digital assistants and digital phones that send messages to us in meetings, in cabs, on airplanes or in trains. In 1995, the secretary-to-staff ratio was about one to three. Today, the secretary-to-staff ratio is one to seven and climbing. There are plenty of empty desks where assis-

tants used to work. They will never be filled again because it is easier and faster to do our own work, including such things as booking travel. In 1995, there were still practitioners who resisted computing. They were few, but they hung on grimly. Today, those folks have long come in from the cold, or retired.

The Internet revolution was and is not the splashy multi-trillion dollar bubble that blew up the American economy and plunged it into years of rebuilding. It was a less-visible change in how we work that infiltrated every office and cubicle and simplified processes throughout all businesses, not just PR.

Looking forward, this is the way that the Internet revolution will continue to unfold. News and information streams have converged. Today, some of my colleagues read newspapers as easily on the Web as they do on newsprint. We check breaking stories online first, perhaps look at TV and read the follow-up in the morning paper, or not at all. We check blogs now to see how respected writers and opinionated columnists react to news or to see the news they break, for they are in competition with traditional media. In 1995, the online diary was new and no more than five people in the world had one. Today, hundreds of thousands do.

Connectivity is the watchword now. If anything, we are too connected. People yak on phones, e-mail, beep and buzz others anywhere at

any time in myriads of ways. There is little time to be alone and less time to think. Regrettably, much of our work is reactive, split-second handling of issues that will be in the public realm in minutes. The long, slow build is subordinated to immediate, opportunistic hits that we hope tie to an overall message objective.

The Internet revolution has profoundly changed the way the PR business is done, but not its principles. Credibility, accuracy and honesty in translating the company to the public and vice versa are more important than ever, especially since the Internet has many charlatans and unethical communicators. Yet, process change has imposed a burden on practitioners to learn the new medium and how to use it to support better, faster and less expensive communications. Regrettably, for most PR practitioners that part of the Internet revolution is yet to come.

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