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PR walks the walk as it continually evolves

Some pundits have criticized the PR industry as being too slow to seize opportunities that have resulted from the rise of digital and social communications channels and the fragmentation of the mainstream news market. These views might even apply to some firms. However, this year's PRSA Counselors Academy Conference, from which I just returned, included numerous presentations that highlighted how agencies are chock full of not only the seeds, but also full blossoms, of a genuinely transforming industry.

The sessions included talks by Indra Gardiner, founder and chief influence officer at i.d.e.a.; Bryan Scanlon, president, Schwartz MSL; and a panel discussion I was privileged to moderate that included Dave Anderson, CEO of Off Madison Ave; Elise Mitchell, CEO of Mitchell Communications Group and the Dentsu PR Network; and Ed Moed, co-CEO Peppercomm.

These talented leaders shared evidence of their firms' transformations, displaying the industry's evolution. Here are some examples:

■ **Data and measurement.** Each of these leaders spoke about the investment their firms have made in measurement. Some, such as Peppercomm and Off Madison Ave, have either developed or acquired measurement solutions. All the firms have made data and measurement a "horizontal activity" throughout their organizations, since "data touches everything."

Many examples were offered to show that measurement is providing insights. Insights are, in turn, driving creativity and data-based recommended programs. This is causing clients to invest in those programs, crossing beyond "traditional PR" and into marketing, reputation management, sales, and employee communications.

■ **Integrated and content marketing are king.** Firms are implementing communications programs that are channel-neutral among paid, earned, and owned media, while adding creative sizzle to the content of their programs. They are doing this in a variety of ways – whether through a merger with other firms with different, but complementary marketing disciplines, such as branding and advertising (which has been the course taken by i.d.e.a. and Off Madison Ave); by merging with an existing firm (such as Peppercomm's acquisition of a multimedia and graphic design shop), or by significant organic growth of their digital, video, and cre-

ative services departments (as evidenced by the actions taken at Mitchell, Peppercomm, and Schwartz MSL).

The most important factor is that these firms are getting it done: not just "talking the talk," but also "walking the walk."

■ **The visualization of storytelling.** Another common theme at the conference was the ways in which firms are choosing to tell their clients' stories. Gone are the days when PR agencies were mainly using words to tell stories and influence target audiences. Now, leading firms are combating the fact that there has been a nine-fold increase in the volume of digital information shared in just five years by making their client's stories stand apart.

How? By using video, multimedia, infographics, and "creativity on steroids" to develop brand-generated content and curate content, creating a "content symphony." As just one example, check out i.d.e.a.'s brightly painted human motorcycles to promote the Progressive International Motorcycle Show.

■ **Recruiting talent differently.** Several presenters stressed that PR's evolution has caused their firms to hire individuals with more diverse skills and prior experiences. Several CEOs have recently recruited candidates with backgrounds in branding, advertising, marketing, licensing, and research and measurement, to name a few.

"Diversity in today's PR firm has a new meaning," said Ed Moed, who along with Scanlon stressed that their search for talent now includes finding candidates with knowledge of the specialized industries in which their clients operate. "There's a need for candidates who have worked directly in industries, not just PR," added Scanlon. Similarly, Moed noted that Peppercomm's work for Ernst & Young and other financial-services clients includes analysts on each of the teams that know the industry and "could be working on Wall Street, but thankfully they like PR."

These action-oriented CEOs made clear that no one firm has a monopoly on great ideas and that agencies of all sizes have ample and equal opportunity to seize today's possibilities. ■

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