

## How Good Is Your Online Pressroom?

A good site can boost your company's coverage and cut down on pricey press kits.

*By David Wolkowitz  
for Office.com*

**Jan. 26, 2001** — As journalists seeking information come to rely on Internet-based sources that offer greater depth and more choices, their tolerance for subpar Internet experiences will likely decline. This dynamic will be acutely relevant to companies wanting to appease demanding and time-starved reporters. An effective online pressroom can help a company deal with this shift.

"Reporters have the ability to control themselves; they are not beholden to any particular company. If a Web site is too cumbersome, they can get the information somewhere else," points out Jeff Lewis, senior analyst and consultant with Patricia Seybold Group and co-author of the forthcoming e-business book "Customer Revolution."

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— Julie Landry, reporter  
Redherring.com

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That's a common complaint, says David Sweeney, chief Internet strategist of Chicago-based Internet strategy and design firm Watercolor Group. Sweeney adds that companies should use their online pressrooms to build value for the media by making their jobs easier.

For example, they can help reporters avoid phone tag by allowing them to use the Web to request a call from a company representative. To ease the process of setting up an interview, Sweeney suggests allowing reporters to schedule themselves on spokespersons' Web-based calendars. Password protection can be used to guard against misuse of these special features. Once general Web strategy and design is completed, Sweeney says, companies can build an effective online pressroom for a budget ranging from \$3,000 to more than \$10,000, depending on content and interactivity.

Both Lewis and Sweeney say that the first step in developing an effective online pressroom is understanding the media's job — such as the process of locating sources.

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While reporters frequently need to speak with a specific source at a given company, they also seek sources with more general expertise, and they often have limited time to find them. Redherring.com reporter Julie Landry believes the effectiveness of online pressrooms can be a crucial factor in cases like these, when reporters are choosing from sources at a wide variety of companies. That's not good news for some companies.

Landry says that some online pressrooms save large amounts of time and are quite useful but that plenty of pressrooms need overhauls because they were created by people who "just don't seem to really get it yet."

"Most of them out there are pretty pathetic and hard to navigate," Landry adds. "I don't think I have really ever come across a company Web site search function that has actually got me what I wanted, to be honest."

Brad Spirrison, co-founder and managing editor of Midwest-focused online tech publication ePrairie, is "inclined to return to a site frequently if it is easy to use and if it isolates who the sources are and what he or she can specialize in." While he does recognize the rapid pace of Internet evolution and difficulty of gauging user expectations, Spirrison thinks some companies need to gain a better understanding of the media.

"Some of the press releases aren't clearly differentiated from what's reported from independent news organizations. If I find that the company is trying to position something it manufactures as what an independent source would have said, I get a little skeptical," he explains.

**Next page: Better pressroom equals bottom-line impact.**

Matt Fordham, CEO of Internet search-tool developer Logika Corp., isn't surprised that reporters are often disappointed with poor search tools on the sites they go to. Fordham said that reporters familiar with using search functions will often make the search tool their first stop when visiting a Web site. This makes the quality of a search tool a critical component in creating a positive first impression. While many companies build and maintain their own search tools, Fordham advocates using technology developed by search specialists, such as his firm's FusionBot Intra-site tool, to ensure quality searches and to be more cost-efficient.

FusionBot Intra-site promises to both help reporters find relevant information and, by listing popular search terms and failed searches, help PR people become familiar with reporters' online habits. Companies can also use FusionBot's reporting capabilities to determine the source of queries by tracing IP addresses. FusionBot is free for intrasite searches with basic reporting capabilities; the price increases with additional features and customization. A company using FusionBot for external industry searches pays per query; monthly costs start at approximately \$1,000 and increase based on customization and expected number of queries per month.

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**Divine interVenture's "News Hub" saves the company several thousand dollars annually by minimizing the production and shipping of its media kits, each costing the firm \$5 to \$10.**

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Although FusionBot's search results could potentially lead reporters to competitors, Landry said companies shouldn't worry about that because reporters will always find competitive information anyway. "Everyone loves to claim they have no competitors, which is always a lie. A Web site can be useful if it identifies who the company will run into in the market and how it

differentiates itself."

Rowland Hobbs, senior VP and director of Internet relations at marketing agency Ruder Finn, advises his clients to create Web sites that are comprehensive and take into account the types of people searching the site for information.

While Hobbs generally expects several thousand visits annually to one of his clients' unprotected online pressrooms, he said a password-protected area is ideal for dealing with several hundred qualified visits from targeted media, especially when dealing with sensitive industries such as health care.

"We try to make the Web site a continuing resource for industry information and knowledge that the reporter can use on an ongoing basis," Hobbs said. "We reserve this type of relationship for journalists most suitable to the field; therefore, we expect no more than 20 or so to be using the pressroom continuously."

For Chicago-based Internet holding company Divine interVentures, its online pressroom is an effective way to manage more than 300 media inquires the firm gets each year. Buzz msp, a Divine subsidiary, developed and manages Divine's Web site.

Judy Feinberg, Buzz's Divine interVentures account leader, says that "the primary purpose of an online media kit is to save journalists' time. Many reporters have already visited the Divine's News Hub before they ever pick up the phone to call us."

Feinberg made certain Divine's "News Hub" contained a comprehensive selection of material about the company. Reporters can access background information, management and board-member biographies and a timeline of significant events in the company's history. She is also planning a photo and logo library for the next iteration of the News Hub.

Feinberg says that Divine's "News Hub" also helps the company save several thousand dollars annually by minimizing the production and shipping of its media kits, each costing the firm \$5 to \$10.

Jane Gideon, CEO of PR agency Incendio International also sees bottom-line benefits to being able to refer the media to clients' online pressrooms. This cut her mailings in half and can save up to \$12,000 per client.

Gideon points out one more way well-designed online pressrooms benefit the companies that have them. She says that executives appreciate talking with reporters who have used the company's Web site, so they can approach interviews armed with useful information. To increase the value of her clients' Web sites, Gideon is currently investigating adding market statistics and analysts' data.

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