

10 rules for brand builders in the age of social media

- Narayan Madhavan, Associate Editor – Hindustan Times



Last week, the Public Relations Consultants Association of India called me for a panel discussion on, "Social Media--Its Impact & Challenges."

Luckily, my home PC conked out and I had an official excuse to skip a PowerPoint presentation. After a long-drawn, patient do-it-yourself kind of persuasion by Rajesh Lalwani of Blogworks (who has emerged as a pioneering figure in approaching blogs from the other side of the media fence!), and some words of wisdom from Nikhil Pahwa of Medianama (who sounded more like a good investigative journalist than a I-am-having-fun blogger), I got to speak --and felt a bit like the Prime Minister speaking in parliament on a bridge in Nagaland: half-the house had left. But then, I decided to have fun and rolled on with a 10-point programme for brand-builders, written on the back of the invite-sheet for the session (Backs of envelopes are hopelessly out of vogue, you know!).

So here are my 10 points..actually there are only 9 but I made up the last to complete the magic number. Here goes my two pennies for brand builders, modified on the fly as I write it. I tentatively called it "Blogs and Banter in the world of brands" -- so the rest of the social media gets mentioned only in passing.

1) Blogs are not about the media, but about democracy

Everyone is a reporter, you know. You gotta deal with it. Imagine a world where everyone had a secret diary which everyone else could read. It is nearly that bad.

2) Blogs are not about recall -- they are about reputation

"Recall" is a 20th Century expression, smugly portrayed by ad men and monopolistic publishers and broadcasters. People will remember your brand, but HOW THEY FEEL depends on what these blogger types think. Think about it.

3) Blogs wear pyjamas

No blue-suits, pinstripes, jhola-carrying kurta journalists, whatever...blogs tend to be informal in general, and defy stereotypes. Media persons and professional corporate-types blog, but so do NRI moms, housewives, whoever..and guess what? Everyone mentions brands, somewhere, somehow. Go figure.

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4) It ain't just about blogs; instruments abound in the world of social media

E-mails are part of it all-- if someone forwards them (they do!). Chats, RSS Feeds, widgets, Twitter, social networking pages, random remarks, discussion forums, message boards. Sounds complex? It is simple, really--instruments have multiplied, like TV channels and mushrooming PR agencies. (If some of the things mentioned in these instruments sound alien, it is time for you to learn)

5) Influence the influencers

Does it matter if it is Kantabai, the most glam maid in your block, sending a vernacular SMS? Things are getting there, sooner or later. You've got to understand. Special correspondents are kind of passe (I am trying to be humble, you see!)

6) Kill the press release, make corporate blogs happen

Tell your clients to type. Ghost-write, if they insist. I see a future in which the informality of the medium must be matched by a counter-informality. Google has already done it with its blogs. I am told the world follows Google these days. Even Bill Gates does.

7) Beware of mobiles and big mouths

I have kind of hinted this already. Somebody, somewhere is talking about those brands and it is not all systematic. I have coined a term called "feed-on" to replace "feedback" (I have written a separate post on it) Market research, word-of-mouth, customer referrals happen on the go over the Net to just about anyone, not necessary companies or dealers or shopkeepers. And mobile handsets, cheaper by the day, will make it all multiply. Confused? You should be.

8) It is not about relationships. It is about Truth, Transparency and Tact

Okay, the PR profession must now stop behaving like lawyers. Hee, hee. You gotta face the truth and tell it like it is. It was always this way, but now you have NO PLACE TO HIDE. Some quantity of spin may just be allowed, though. If you are lucky.

9) Mix now, fix later

Be yourself. That point number eight about relationships ain't all over but relations only help you take the message forward, not fudge the message.

10) Read MediaWatch India

(That is the name of this blog and it needed to be mentioned in order to take the number of points to 10. Not sure if it will improve my brand).