

## Online Media Room Best Practices

*Ten valuable ideas to create an effective strategic communications tool*

Over the course of more than a year of research for my book *Cashing in with Content: How innovative marketers use digital information to turn browsers into buyers* I looked at least 1000 Web sites and interviewed dozens of marketing and communications people about the way they build their sites to be successful.

Online Media Rooms are an important part of any organization's Web site and a critical aspect of an effective media relations strategy. Research shows that pages in the Online Media Room are among the most highly trafficked on a site. Done well, a good Online Media Room will turn journalists who are just browsing into interested writers who highlight your organization positively in stories.

*However, the vast majority of Web sites and most Online Media Rooms fail to deliver compelling content.* Sure they may look pretty, but often the design and graphics are in the forefront, not the content that journalists require.



There are ten best practices included here and each possesses the potential to benefit you, your Web site, and your larger media relations goals and objectives. While I have put together what I believe are ten of the most important best practices that emerged through my research, these are not intended to be an all-inclusive list of each and every Online Media Room best practice. However, many Web site content best practices--including paying close attention to spelling and grammar, keeping the site updated and fresh, including an About page and FAQ page, and removing any dead links--are too obvious to warrant focus here. Rather than spend time on basic techniques that are outlined in many general "how to" books on Web site creation, I focus on higher-level content strategies, which fuel successful Online Media Rooms.

### **Best Practice #1 > When launching a new media site, start with a comprehensive needs analysis**

It may sound painfully obvious: When designing a new Online Media Room (or planning an extensive redesign), start with a needs analysis. Yet many communicators just jump right into site aesthetics, organize press releases, or begin to write content before taking time to analyze how the site fits into a larger media strategy and, as such, what the site needs to do and what visitors will require. The reality is that, for many successful sites, the needs analysis and planning phase may take significantly longer than actually building the site.

Talk with friendly journalists so you understand what they need. Build their ideas into your Online Media Room. As you work towards your design try to think a bit more like a publisher and less like a PR person. A publisher carefully identifies and defines target audiences and then develops the content required to meet the needs of each distinct demographic. Graphical elements, colors, fonts, and other visual manifestations of the site are also important, but should take a back seat during the content needs analysis process.

Who are potential readers and what content will be valuable to them? Editors and publishers obsess over readership and so should you. Figure out who your Online Media Room visitors are or who you want them to be. Are journalists varied and should be sliced into discrete target markets? Then conceive of content that will specifically appeal to each of these groups in addition to crafting more generalized content and press releases, which will need to work across demographics. To do this, consider what problems your visitors face that you can help solve through content offerings. Done well, a needs analysis drawing from your research, the knowledge of a cross-organizational team, understanding of your market demographics--combined with the diverse opinions and knowledge of your internal stakeholders--will form the basis of a successful Online Media Room. Needs analysis and planning are important in order to maximize the value of your Online Media Room and your organization should invest significant up-front energy to this phase of site planning and content development.

### **Best Practice #2 > Speak with one organizational voice to create a consistent site personality**

A common theme heard during my research is the importance of creating a distinct, consistent, and memorable overall site and Online Media Room--which can often be attributed to the tone or voice of its content. As the media interact with the content on your site, they should develop a

clear picture of the organization behind the site. Is it young and playful or solid and conservative?

For newer sites, the first task might be to define a personality. But defining and maintaining personality, voice, and tone is just as important for established companies with offline brands as it is for online-only upstarts. However, the existence of an offline business means there's less room for creating something new online, though it may also provide an established personality that can be used as a starting point.

Keep in mind that your media visitors will be well-educated (or at least well-informed) in their areas of interest or they may come to your Online Media Room knowing nothing at all about your organization. Communicators who produce content for the Online Media Rooms need to take audience-members' knowledge into consideration and create content accordingly

Whatever the personality, the way to achieve consistency is to make certain that all of the written material and other content on the site conform to a defined tone that has been established from the start. It is important that even relatively mundane site content speaks with one voice. A strong focus on site personality and character pays off. As the media come to rely on the content found on your site, they will develop an intellectual, emotional, and personal relationship with your organization. A Web site can evoke a familiar and trusted voice, just like that of a friend on the other end of the telephone. This way, users will know from experience who's speaking and welcome the interaction. A site must accomplish this through its tone and style. Just like the welcome and familiar phone call, well-executed Online Media Room content will be perceived as a trusted friend and resource.

### **Best Practice #3 > Encourage browsing by using appropriate self-select paths**

One of the best ways to leverage the power of Online Media Room content is to help journalists find it--which means facilitating browsing. The clearest way to create a browser-friendly Online Media Room is to design navigation and use links that coincide with how site visitors think and that lead them to content appropriate to their needs. When a user visits a site for the first time, the site will communicate its feelings for the user: Does this organization care about me? Does it focus on the problems I face? Or does the site only include information describing what the company has to offer from its narrow perspective? Too often, site navigation simply mimics the way the company or institution is organized (usually by product). Unfortunately, the way audience members use sites rarely coincides with businesses' internal priorities, which leaves site visitors confused about how to find what they really need. One way to facilitate browsing is to create a series of self-select paths for each group of people to follow based on their interests, level of knowledge, or specific needs.

When considering the type of self-select paths that would best lead the media to the point where they are ready to write about your organization, communicators should consider each specific target market and identify the needs of that demographic, then offer solutions to meet these needs. A "target-problem-solution" approach ensures that a site speaks appropriately to the markets it serves rather than simply creating a one-size-fits-all design or navigation that mimics the organizational structure behind the site.

Navigation must be created to reflect the way that the media think and interact with the site. Recognizing different types of visitors and making targeted content easy to browse are hallmarks of useful (and successful) Online Media Rooms.

#### **Best Practice #4 > Push content to media using email and RSS**

Web content is only valuable if somebody reads it. To provide alternate content routes, many companies use digital delivery methods like e-mail newsletters and RSS feeds to push content directly to the media, with the intention of drawing them back to the site and the organization behind it. As an added bonus, this approach allows firms to multi-purpose content, which can be created for a newsletter, or posted on a site. Content can also be channeled into RSS feeds, which are an increasingly popular form of digital delivery that pipes content directly to journalists' desktops via an RSS reader. When a journalist subscribes to an e-mail newsletter or RSS feed, they demonstrate significant interest in whatever you have to offer--getting your foot in the door right from the get-go.

Certain journalists require a longer consideration cycle or need to establish a rapport with an organization before writing. An e-mail newsletter can help build this type of long-term relationship and encourage return visits to a site. Event-specific e-mail notifications can help keep the media up to date on the latest news, but don't just blast every press release – make sure the content is targeted appropriately.

E-mail newsletters and other direct digital delivery methods that push content directly to journalists can significantly aid in building and fostering long term and more meaningful relationships. When your target audiences see your messages via e-mail or RSS feed on a regular basis, they associate a positive experience with your brand without even visiting your site. Done well, the e-mails or RSS posts will come to be seen as a welcome informational tool for journalists and can serve to build your organization's reputation, and ultimately will result in positive stories in the media.

#### **Best Practice #5 > Don't forget images: original photos, graphs, and product diagrams sell your story**

An important lesson is that effective content is not limited to words. Innovative communicators make use of non-text content, such as charts, graphs, audio feeds and video clips to inform and entertain site visitors and the media.

Photographs are powerful content when the images are recognizably an integrated component of the Web site. However, generic "stock" photographs and "clip art" may actually have a negative effect. Neither you nor your users are generic, so generic images simply won't suffice. Too often, marketing people (many who are influenced by advertising agencies) fall back on stock photographs to "add visual interest" instead of being sufficiently concerned that the image have meaning in the context of the other content. Think carefully before you add a stock photo to your Online Media Room. Consider the alternatives to a non-descript image pulled from a clip art catalog or a photo library.

While photos, charts, graphs, and other non-text content make great additions to any site, be wary of very large image sizes and using distracting multimedia content like Flash Video. Visitors want to access content quickly, they want sites that load fast, and they don't want to be distracted from the information they seek. A number of marketers interviewed mentioned that they specifically avoid excessive use of overbearing technologies and images that would have diminished the value of the actual content. In many cases, they actually went against well-meaning expert advice.

Photos, images, and illustrations help tell your organization's story. When used as a component of an overall media relations strategy, photos enhance and add context to text-based information.

### **Best Practice #6 > Consider making proprietary content freely available: don't hide product specs and other valuable data**

The more valuable a piece of content available on a Web site is perceived to be, the better the site is in the eyes of visitors. Communicators who use Online Media Rooms to offer valuable content are more likely to score the positive story. However, organizations often shy away from posting much of the best content they possess because it is deemed "proprietary." On many sites, even information like detailed product specifications and price lists are available only through direct connection with a salesperson or PR contact, a lengthy registration form with approval mechanisms, or by requiring visitors to pay a fee of some sort. Yet this is exactly the sort of content that will move journalists closer to writing a story if it were freely available.

Every communicator and marketing professional working at corporations, government agencies, or non-profits struggles with what content is appropriate to post on its site. However, with well-meaning executives who worry about corporate image, legal departments with a reflexive tendency to say "no," and salespeople who feel it is easier to sell when they're the sole source of knowledge, it might be difficult to gain the necessary approvals to post "proprietary" content. But there is no doubt that the more valuable the content available on your Online Media Room is perceived to be, the more valuable your organization will be perceived to be.

### **Best Practice #7 > If you serve a global market, use global content**

The Web has made reaching the world far easier, but global communications adds incredible complexity to the creation of the Online Media Room message. However, when it is appropriate, the effort to create and offer local content can help an organization better serve both local and global journalists.

Of course not every organization has a pool of dedicated content resources of staff located in far-flung parts of the world. But many organizations, particularly those headquartered in the United States, often make the mistake of including site content only derived from (and reflective of) the home market. Basic approaches to get your site up to global standards might include offering case studies from customers in various countries or spec sheets describing products with local country standards. Or an even simpler approach might be to highlight the speaking engagements or tradeshow your organization is attending in different countries. Sometimes the little things make a difference. For example, don't forget that the rest of the world uses the

standard A4 paper format instead of the U.S. letter format, so having fact sheets and other materials that print properly on both formats is useful to users outside the United States.

Providing content in local languages can also help show the global aspect of your business though this need not mean a wholesale translation of your entire Online Media Room. A simple Web landing page with basic information in the local language, a few press releases, a case study or two, and appropriate local contact addresses and phone numbers will often suffice. Many global sites make use of country flags to clearly denote links to localized content. If your product or service is global, your site must reflect that. As innovative communicators have shown, an attention to global content adds significantly to the Online Media Room appeal within local media markets.

### **Best Practice #8 > Provide content for all stages of the media consideration cycle: basic information all the way to extensive detail**

To be effective, communicators at many organizations specifically design content for Online Media Rooms to support the journalist's consideration process or draw a potential writer into the consideration cycle. Journalists considering a story always go through a thought process prior to making a decision about writing. In the case of something simple, say a mention of a new executive, the process may be very straightforward and only take seconds. But for a major cover story, the media consideration cycle may involve many steps and take months to complete. Much of this may happen at your Online Media Room without you even knowing that your organization is being considered for a major story.

Effective communicators take journalists' consideration cycle into account when writing content and organizing it on the Online Media Room. Journalists in the early stages of the cycle need basic information on the product or organization. Those further along in the process want to compare offerings and need detailed company information and lists of features and benefits as well as customer stories. Of course, those ready to write need easy navigation directly to the content so they get what they need quickly.

A focus on understanding the media consideration cycle and making certain that appropriate content is created and posted that links journalists through the cycle to the point of writing is a particularly critical best practice. Don't ignore this one. After all, if your Online Media Room isn't optimized for your ultimate goal--getting journalists to write positive stories--then you're missing a tremendous opportunity. In my experience, the vast majority of Online Media Rooms are little more than online brochures with a bunch of press releases. Don't let the opportunities that the Web offers pass your Online Media Room by. Help your journalists along the path to their keyboards by offering content directly linked to the media consideration process.

### **Best Practice #9 > List executive appearances, tradeshow participation and other personal appearances**

One of the best ways to positively influence journalists is to visit with them in person. Many journalists attend tradeshows, conferences and events on a regular basis and use that time to meet with representatives of companies that they may consider writing about. The best way to

get your organization on the journalist's calendar is to make certain that they know where your executives will be appearing.

List all appropriate public speaking appearances, tradeshow and conference participation, and other events in a separate section in your Online Media Room. Make certain that all appropriate events in the future are listed and remember to include any international events. Keep the older listings up for at least a few months after the events to show that you are in demand as experts in your field.

### **Best Practice #10 > Avoid jargon, acronyms and industry-speak unless you define what you mean**

I review several dozen press releases in an average week. Some releases are sent directly to me from companies that want me to write about them in a magazine article, an upcoming book, or my blog and others I find by checking out Online Media Rooms. I visit many Online Media Rooms in an average week and read the other content available as well as press releases.

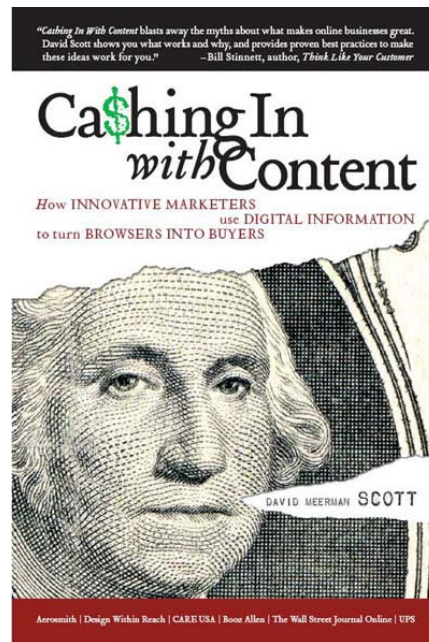
Unfortunately, most Online Media Rooms are chock full of jargon, three-letter acronyms that I don't understand and other egocentric nonsense. I'm interested in what companies are up to, but I'm just too busy to decipher gobbledygook. I normally give a press release ten seconds to catch my attention, but the surest way to get me to delete a release in frustration is to write in a way that I just can't understand.

The vast majority of press releases and Online Media Rooms are rather, well, let's just say less than interesting. Most focus on—you guessed it—the tangible trivia of products and services. Having authored at least a hundred of the damn things myself, I'm embarrassed for my colleagues on the PR side of the house and of the ways some of us choose to market to the media via press releases. I know, I've been there before and done that myself. But now that I'm spending more of my time on the receiving side and often find myself pouring through a wide variety of media bulletins with an eye for interesting nuggets about the marketing world, may I respectfully ask for fascinating stories about how your product or service is used? What do your customers find most interesting or compelling about your offering and why? Our readers (and your potential customers) are more interested in learning about your products and services through actual customer anecdotes rather than the fact that you can deliver, say, "the XYZ market for ABC products in an EFG environment that offer a flexible, scalable, cutting-edge blah, blah, blah..." well, you get the picture.

## About *Cashing in With Content*

The typical Web site fails to convert visitors into loyal customers, leaving a potential fortune in new and repeat business on the table. A site may win awards for graphic design, but it can still fall short. The key to Web success is compelling and useful information content, delivered in new and surprising ways.

In *Cashing In With Content: How Innovative Marketers Use Digital Information to Turn Browsers Into Buyers*, David Meerman Scott shares the secrets of today's most innovative marketers. He shows how they use content to turn Web browsers into buyers, to encourage repeat business, and to unleash the amazing power of viral marketing.



**“Cashing In With Content blasts away the myths about what makes online businesses great. David Scott shows you what works and why, and provides proven best practices to make these ideas work for you.”**

—Bill Stinnett, author, *Think Like Your Customer*

**“A treasure chest of ideas for making your website more interesting and compelling.”**

—Al & Laura Ries, Bestselling authors of *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, *The Fall of Advertising & the Rise of PR*, and *The Origin of Brands*.

**“I love the fact that every case study in this book is based on in-depth interviews with top executives at the Web sites profiled. This isn't theory or opinion—these are real-life marketing lessons.”**

—Anne Holland, Publisher, *MarketingSherpa*

**“Content is the life blood of the information economy. *Cashing in with Content* is full of ideas to get your heart pumping.”**

—Alex Hungate, Chief Marketing Officer, Reuters Group

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### **About David Meerman Scott**

David Meerman Scott is a writer, consultant, contributing editor at *EContent Magazine*, conference speaker and seminar leader. David's latest book *Cashing In With Content: How Innovative Marketers Use Digital Information to Turn Browsers Into Buyers* is a riff on using Web content to drive revenue and other action from Web site visitors. David specializes in using online content to market and sell products and services to demanding customers worldwide. He has lived and worked in New York, Tokyo, Boston, and Hong Kong and has presented at industry conferences and events in over twenty countries on four continents.

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