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## **Microblogs and PR**

By Bartek Lewicki, Senior Account Manager, Multi Communications, PRGN POLAND

Late last year the owners of the American tourism portal TravMedia were thinking of ways to increase their brand's recognizability, the number of unique visits and, most importantly, revenue, all on a limited budget. They were aided by the Boston-based Castle Group agency from the PRGN network. Their advice was simple: Twitter. A focused use of the micro-blog service as a marketing tool proved extremely useful, and helped increase the number of portal visitors by 150%. More importantly, revenues in the first five months of this year twice exceeded the budget prognosis.

There are many more such examples. Not surprisingly, the eyes of PR consultants in Poland are on Blip – the Polish equivalent of Twitter – a service which allows you to post messages of up to 160 characters. This amounts to a message about as long as the previous sentence. Can such short messages be useful in building effective and efficient communications? Opinions vary, not only among Polish PR specialists, but also their global counterparts.

No one doubts that micro-blogs are becoming a very important tool in the everyday work of communication specialists. Abbie Fink of HMA PR in Phoenix, Arizona believes that Twitter will become a staple of most communication strategies developed by her agency, enabling them to directly involve consumers and journalists. "We use Twitter every day to communicate with the media. We use it to signal a story that we elaborate on by e-mail or over the phone." David Landis of LCI, San Francisco-based agency, emphasizes: "I follow the media, and the media follow me. With Twitter I have a good sense of what journalists may be needing at a given moment and I do my best to provide it to them." Landis believes that Twitter is an indispensable tool in everyday communications. "The way we access information is changing rapidly. As communications professionals we must speak where people are listening," he says. As an example, he describes a project carried out for the San Francisco symphonic orchestra. "Twitter helped establish a loyal group of lovers and sponsors of the Orchestra, as well as fans of its conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas. With daily updates, music lovers became more attached to the orchestra."

Twitter is also invaluable in crisis situations which require fast reactions and ongoing monitoring of the development of events. Patricia Pérez of VPE PR in Pasadena California says: „We have been following Twitter on behalf of our clients and report on ongoing discussions, especially if they are negative. With the shrinking of traditional media, we have less opportunity to place our clients' opinions. Twitter enables us to reach the public directly.” For Pérez it is also important that micro-blogs help her keep in touch with opinions on the client side, which is invaluable when cooperating with large corporations.

But not everyone is equally enthusiastic about micro-blogs and public relations. Mark Patterson of Australian-based Currie Communications believes Twitter can only serve as a source of information for monitoring potential crisis situations, and emphasizes that: “The majority of our receivers do not take this form of communications seriously. There is also insufficient proof that it can influence audience attitudes and behaviors. We find it hard to encourage our clients to invest in such activities.”

The TravMedia portal mentioned in the beginning of this article had no reservations about investing in communications via Twitter. Mark O'Toole from The Castle Group in Boston admits that the biggest challenge lied in establishing the initial group of people who would follow the company's Twitter account. In the first month, the agency managed to attract several hundred people from a database of opinion leaders. This initiated a viral marketing campaign into social media. Less than six months later, the @TravMediaUSA address had over 3400 followers. This enabled the company to rank among the top 400 tourist portals (from among 20,000) in the Twellow ranking. The Twinfluence ranking placed this microblog in the top 15 000 - which is a success considering that Twitter has 10 million users. With Twitter, TravMedia reaches out to over 5 million people.

Uwe Schmidt from Hamburg-based IC AG believes that Twitter may be used to communicate with consumers, but it will not be successful in B2B communications. “In Germany this tool is still looking for its place in the PR professional's toolbox. We are beginning to introduce it slowly in our services to selected clients, because it speeds up communications and provides support for classic PR” – he says. Representatives of other agencies agree with his opinion. “Social media like Twitter are another communications tool, but they will never replace materials developed by professional journalists, who continue to prefer traditional ways of developing and verifying information” – believes David Landis. Abbie Fink adds that this isn't about replacing “traditional methods” but about applying different strategies that must be planned, tested and developed. “You cannot just open a Twitter account, make a bunch of entries and call it a strategy. You need to manage it like any other

communications plan”, she emphasizes. “You need to remember the three basic premises: involvement, dialogue and fun.”

Poland’s most popular micro-blog – blip.pl – is approaching half a million user, but it is hard to find evidence of successful marketing campaigns in the medium. Rather, agencies are testing the capabilities of the new service and focusing on building a network of contacts, referred to as “observers”. Lively discussions are underway to integrate the public relations community. Mariusz Pleban, president of Multi Communications admits he is interested in what goes on in Blip.pl. “I currently see two benefits for businesses that open accounts in Blip. Firstly there is the opportunity to talk directly to the consumer, which translates into the second benefit – imagebuilding. However, there are no tools to precisely verify effectiveness, which chills our enthusiasm somewhat. Fortunately, we have access to the experiences of our global colleagues associated in the Public Relations Global Network. Their experiences with Twitter have been very valuable for us”.

The benefits of twittering and PR are there for... Twitter itself. The monthly value of its advertising equivalent is around \$48 million ([http://adage.com/digital/article?article\\_id=138004](http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=138004)). Hard to believe? Not if you got 2.73 billion quotes over several months in CNN, Fox News and the press all over the world.

Independent of whether the PR industry has fully embraced the possibilities offered by micro-blogs, the phenomenon of Twitter and similar service is undeniable and cannot be ignored. Agencies which come up with the right idea and persevere in including social media (micro-blogs in particular) into their communications strategies, will be successful.

/The PR agencies and firms quoted above are part of Public Relations Global Network associating 40 independent agencies operating on 80 international markets.