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In 2009, Twitter and Google alter face of PR

By Christine Kent

Social media to be followed and feared; journalists set up their own shops; these predictions and more for PR and media relations

If you were hoping you could ignore social media for another year, forget it.

In 2009, you have no excuse for remaining a Luddite. As traditional media accelerate their death spiral, social media might be the *only* media left to pitch. Here's what some prognosticators say about media relations in the coming year:

Google reigns: Your prominence on Google—or lack thereof—could make or break your 2009 PR program, says Andy Murphy, principal of [Davies Murphy Group](http://DaviesMurphyGroup) in Burlington, Mass.

“Agencies that don’t understand this, or fail to educate clients in how media relations plays into organic search engine optimization, will have a difficult 2009,” Murphy predicts. “In a tough economy, traditional media relations usually wind up on the nice-to-have list when companies consider budget cuts. Search engine optimization, now experiencing its first recession as a standard marketing function, will be near the top of the must-have list.”

Don’t go hog-wild over social media: “I really hate it when people write about ‘PR is going away and being replaced by social media,’” says Julia Tanen, president of [Tanen PR](http://TanenPR) in Franklin, Mass. “Social media *is* PR!” Tanen suggests that flacks balance their social media strategies with a healthy dose of traditional PR.

Traditional media drive results: Tanen adds that in 2009, tried-and-true mainstream media will still pull better results than social media.

“Social media are still struggling for measurement,” Tanen contends. “When I place a product in *Family Circle*, my clients always sell product. Same thing with *Traditional Home*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *O Magazine*. Like it or not, there are many magazines and print [publications] that are not going away.” And there’s still plenty of TV and radio to pitch, Tanen says.

Fire your PR firm: OK, that sounds a bit drastic, but Mike Volpe, VP of inbound marketing at Hubspot in Cambridge, Mass., forecasts more “insourcing” of PR.

“The trend toward more inbound marketing makes things like search engine optimization and blogging much more important, and companies tend to find they themselves—not their PR firm—are best at producing the content and integrating it,” he says. “Most media today seem to prefer a direct relationship with the company, rather than an agency.”

YouTubes multiply: “People just can’t get enough of well-produced, creative and humorous videos to get their message out, whether internal or external,” says Chris Sciole, partner at [Zan Media](#) in San Francisco. “I predict clever folks will take one step forward and launch *Saturday Night Live*-type Web programs and smooth over the bleak economic news with entertaining content to effectively communicate.”

Everyone’s a content owner: Today’s consumers exercise tremendous control over online content, says Dan Cohen, principal of [Full Court Press Communications](#) in Oakland, Calif.

“Yahoo, Facebook, cable news, blogs—people will continue to seek out information from sources that agree with them,” Cohen says. “That poses challenges in PR and public affairs work if part of that job is to change a position held by a majority of the target audience.”

The new world of instant feedback: Don’t like it when your audiences talk back? Too bad, says [PR Newswire](#) president Dave Armon.

“PR in the Internet age is omni-directional, so you get a real-time focus group by jumping into the fray, rather than relying on gatekeepers,” he says. “The old structure of walling off an organization’s thought leaders will lead to isolation and obsolescence.”

Twitter will fly higher: “Reporters left on Media Street will love to hear the bluebird go tweet, tweet, tweet,” deftly parodies Karren Jeske, director of PR at [Primum Marketing Communications](#) in Milwaukee. “Twitter is going to soar higher and higher as a media-relations tool.”

... And we’ll learn to tweet like pros: Twitter demands new skills from PR people—notably, crafting a pitch in 140 characters or fewer, says Dan Cohen. This “new shorthand,” he adds, “will place greater emphasis on PR folks to define, message and control the shorthand, and get creative on how we influence the Zeitgeist.”

For example, Cohen says, “I can see Russia from my house!” became shorthand for Sarah Palin’s failings. (By the way, those weren’t her own words but comedian Tina Fey’s parody that stuck to Alaska’s governor.)

... But don’t give up on writing: Even though we’ll need to know how to communicate Twitter-style, says Leslie Holland, director of PR at [Power Creative](#) in Louisville, “Good

writing will be more important than ever. If information is not easily understood, it will be very easily tossed into the virtual trash.”

Journalists embrace their brands: More and more laid-off reporters and editors will start blogs and social networks, predicts Brenda Christensen, PR manager for [Servoy USA](#) in Thousand Oaks, Calif. One who has done so successfully is Harry McCracken, most recently the editor in chief of *PC World* magazine.

“He’s even built his own social network on Ning around his new brand, *Technologizer.com*, and he’s got a lot of fans who have already followed him over there,” Servoy says.