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The Firm Voice

## New Survey Yields Powerful PR Lessons: Consumers Want Engagement and Control Online



By Scott Severson, President, *ARAnet*

If people can shout their opinions through numbers in a survey, they just did so in the second year of Adfusion's consumer study tracking online habits.

What are they being forceful about? They're saying they want personal engagement in the marketing methods being sent their way. And while the study focuses on advertising online, the lessons for PR pros are powerful.

Before we get into the PR-specific results, here's the basic information. In a national study of 1,053 adults conducted in March by Opinion Research Corporation, survey respondents rated their likelihood to read and act upon five types of online advertising: banner ads, pop-up ads, e-mail offers, articles that include brand information, and sponsored search engine links.

Respondents said they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to read and respond to

- Articles that include brand information: 53 percent compared to 51 percent a year ago
- E-mail offers: 51 percent compared to 47 percent last year
- Sponsored search engine links: 40 percent compared to last year's 39 percent
- Banner ads: 28 percent compared to 25 percent in 2009
- Pop-up ads: 19 percent compared to 13 percent last year

Here's where it gets tantalizing from a PR point of view. When asked how frequently they conduct Internet searches for products or services they read about in online articles, the results were dramatic. Frequency increased from about 50 percent a year ago saying they initiate a search "very frequently" or "somewhat frequently" to 57 percent this year.

The data reinforces a basic tenet of PR—consumers prefer a diet of solid information which they can digest and react to, rather than being force-fed sales messages. The degree to which consumers stated a preference for advertising messages delivered via articles reinforces what we've been hearing from our customers. After all, we've been weaving corporate or product messages into articles for distribution to websites or newspapers through our ARAnet content feature article distribution service for almost 15 years. But a few years ago, we established a system to place sponsored articles on the nation's top news websites through our Adfusion article advertising product. Again, consumer response has demonstrated that people like articles where they can learn something, then decide to click through for more information.

Highly desirable demographic profiles are even more appreciative of the article approach, according to the survey:

- Younger people showed a considerable propensity to conduct a search after reading online articles. Seventy-two percent of 25-to-34-year-olds said they were likely to conduct a search for products or services based on an article, up from 66 percent a year ago.
- The data is similar for consumers with higher incomes. Seventy percent of those making more than \$75,000 per year expressed their likelihood to perform a search—13 points higher than last year's 57 percent.
- Other coveted demographics reported their likelihood to search is higher than the national average of 57 percent: 65 percent of households with three or more people; 72 percent of households with children in the 13-17 age group; and 63 percent of college educated respondents.

We're all dealing with the convergence of public relations, advertising, marketing, social media, and digital communications. The consumers in this survey were shouting loud and clear: "Let me decide what's important and what I'm going to act upon."

That's good news for the PR profession, thanks to the power of PR as an educator and information-provider. The enhanced content value of PR is delivering information in a method that the most valuable consumers are telling us they want—in a context that respects their intelligence and gives them control.

Even in our current cowboy era of digital communications, the data validates that PR's content-driven approach appeals to customers—and engages them—online.

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Highlights from the Summit: BurrellesLuce's Johna Burke interviews Richard Goldstein, CPA, Partner Buchbinder, Tunick & Company LLP, who discusses how agencies are maintaining their profitability with clients.



## THE LEADING EDGE

### Media Relations in a Web 2.0 World



By Sally Falkow

Last week 150 PR practitioners gathered in Palm Springs at the PRSA Western District conference. One of the keynote panels was about the media and their needs in today's Web 2.0 world. After hearing for years that the press release is dead, it was refreshing to hear them say it most certainly is not dead – in fact reporters need information from us more than...

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5/19/2010

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