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The Evolution of PR Branded Content

April 23rd, 2010

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A few weeks ago I wrote a blog post about the differences between the tools in the traditional PR toolkit and the resources we use today in the **PR 2.0 toolkit**. However, there was one tool that I completely overlooked. I've used this tool in the past. And, it's definitely worth discussing how this tool has evolved over time to provide us with branded content and good PR results.

The tool that I inadvertently left out is the matte release. For those of you who don't know about the matte release, it's been around for quite some time. In its original form, the early matte release dates back to the 1950s. I was first introduced to matte releases by a company called **NAPS**, which mailed formatted articles on glossy paper to participating newspapers and the newspapers would choose among dozens of articles from that particular mailing.

The matte release is a formatted, consumer-related article that newspaper editors can use when they want additional content in their publication. I've used matte releases in the past to get a targeted type of story published in newspapers across the country. The concept behind the matte release is that you are able to draft the story for the publication and use your own content and information in a preformatted template. For a fee, the matte service would format the article and get it published in journals and newspapers, sharing your story with hundreds of thousands of people who met your audience demographics. The result was a lot of media coverage. Although I haven't used a matte release in several years, it's morphed from a traditional format into a more web friendly resource that offers great visual impact with branded content.

How has the matte release changed? Let me introduce you to a company that has done a very good job with its successful transformation. The company is **ARANet**, which has been around since 1996. ARANet has embraced changing technologies to provide its clients with distribution of customized content to print and online markets. Disclosure: I have no affiliation with ARANet other than the company was introduced to me by friend and I feel that the work this organization has done in the area of the matte release places this tool back on the map!

I took a look at the history of the company to get a better picture how it gave the matte release a facelift over time. When ARANet first started, it came out with a service called **ARAcontent**. ARAcontent entered the fray in 1996 and "automated" the matte release process by creating a system for electronic selection of articles by editors at newspapers and web sites. ARAcontent specialized in professional content creation to highlight a company's products and services that is distributed and placed in top media outlets.

In 2010, ARAcontent is further digitizing the release of feature articles through an increased focus on media web sites and backlinks to client sites. Content is search engine optimized and the company also helps to generate real engagement with consumers via social media. From ARAcontent, evolved a new platform called **Adfusion**. ARANet's experience with feature article distribution through ARAcontent (the more PR-related product) inspired the Adfusion business model, which is a blend of advertising and PR.

I found Adfusion to be interesting, as it is a hybrid product. And, as you may know, I'm a big fan of the **hybrid approach**. The product delivers brand communication in ways that don't look like advertising. The next-generation solution combines the measurement and control of Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising with the credibility of content-rich articles, resulting in a greater return on investment than traditional advertising (or advertorial) methods.

With all of the changes in media it's critical that we use the most useful tools in our toolkits. The matte release in its traditional form is not as effective as it was years ago. Branded content had to morph with a more sophisticated technology to create awareness and catch the attention of the web savvy consumer. However, there will always be value with a well-written story supported by branded content.

According to ARANet's president, Scott Severson, it was important to take PR branded content to the next level to "work harder for the client by delivering multiple backlinks and guiding the interested reader directly into online resources that can result in a sale, a trial or a request for more information."

I think the matte release has made a stunning transformation into ARAcontent and also this new hybrid solution called Adfusion. What do you think of the evolution of the matte release? Do you think this tool has a home in today's new PR 2.0 toolkit?

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