

networking moving into business. With social networking collaboration, we won't have to travel to work together. That's part of the second wave of the Internet.

People want information, but they don't want to pay much for it, according to Carol Loomis, senior editor at large, *Fortune*. The question is how to get customers to recognize they need to pay for reliable information.

She offered this advice to journalism students as they graduate and look for work: Stay flexible. The first job is a matter of luck, and you'll be changing to something else soon.

News organizations and public relations will survive, predicts Dave Senay, CEO, Fleishman-Hillard. When the telegraph began in 1852, a newspaper editor said newspapers would disappear. Instead the telegraph led to wire services. News organizations will adjust to technology today as they always have.

Like the Internet, PR is about relationships. Marketers will have more and more information on individuals and know how to reach them to build those relationships.

The Internet and social media have changed business, and one of the challenges is working with both digital immigrants (those educated before computers) and digital natives (those who grew up with computers).

Nothing, Senay says, will revolutionize the Web like mobile communication.

Online Publishing

Avoid common mistakes on your Contact Us page

If Web site visitors have to puzzle over how to get in touch with you, they're likely to move on to your competitors' sites.

Imagine running a business without talking to your customers. Companies with poorly conceived Contact Us pages can give the impression that they avoid communicating.

In an age when many businesses limit their customer contact to e-mail or voice mail, organizations inviting interaction stand out.

"A company can really differentiate itself by being overtly available to customers and potential customers. You'll look even better by comparison," says marketing strategist Mona Zemsky.

Ideally, your e-mail and phone number appear at the bottom of every page on your Web site.

The most common mistakes she sees on Contact Us pages follow.

■ **No phone number,** or one hard to find. A business site without a phone number signals to visitors that the business is hard to get in touch with. People of all ages still like using the phone. It's more

personal than e-mail and engenders more trust in your company.

■ **No street address.** Even if you rarely get visitors, you should list at least your city and state. It makes your organization appear more credible to potential customers. It also lets them know your time zone so they know when to call you.

■ **A registration form to fill out before they can contact you.** It's understandable to want to identify questioners so that you don't answer questions from an anonymous e-mailer and possible competitor. "It would be worse to have a potential customer leave the site in frustration because he doesn't want to fill out a form," Zemsky says.

In an age when many businesses limit their customer contact to e-mail or voice mail, organizations inviting interaction stand out.

If your company insists on forms, make these more enticing by offering visitors incentives to register, such as a coupon or a discount on their next purchase. But also give visitors the option to e-mail you without registering.

To qualify unregistered e-mailers, revise your software code so that when they click on your e-mail address, it automatically generates an e-mail subject line. For instance, a subject line that reads, "Here is my name and address. I want to know how to buy

■ Should you communicate via Chat?

Chat lets you respond to customer e-mails in real-time via text.

Offering a Chat option on your Contact Us page can be particularly helpful when you need to answer complex technical questions. If you aren't totally committed to monitoring the comments and questions that arrive via Chat, you're better off not offering the option.

If you can't have employees available to answer queries throughout the business day, consider offering live Chat during certain hours. Post those hours on your Contact Us page and make sure that knowledgeable employees respond during those hours.

items without a credit card" tells customers that you expect to receive their name and address.

■ **One e-mail address for every situation.** When all questions and comments are funneled through one e-mail address, one or two employees must sort through that mound of e-mails and redirect them to the appropriate people. A more efficient strategy is to list on your Contact Us page the e-mail addresses of employees who can answer the most commonly asked questions.

If you aren't sure what those questions are, ask your receptionists what callers most frequently

inquire about. You can also mirror your frequently asked questions page on your Contact Us page, listing the FAQ topics followed by the appropriate contact information. For example, "If you need a replacement owner's manual, contact Randy at randy@abccompany.com."

Encouraging interactions through your Contact Us page can draw first-time visitors in and bring them back.

WTW West Coast correspondent Judy Artunian interviewed Mona Zemsky, president, M.Source. 773/600-7740; mona@msourcemarketing.com. The company develops marketing strategies for small business owners.

and ask what they're working on. Think about completed projects or developments in your organization's pipeline that may fit their topics.

Stay current on what reporters who cover your field are writing about. If they've been covering issues or trends relating to your company, call them and say, "I notice you've been writing about X. Here's what we have to offer."

Get to know the expertise of your organization's employees. Make sure journalists have easy access to those experts by posting their profiles and contact information on Web sites listing experts available for media interviews, such as www.ProfNet.com and www.businesswire.com.

Look for places to spread your silver lining.

WTW interviewed Shannon Troughton, president, VoxPop Public Relations, LLC: 317/504-7251; shannon.troughton@voxpoppr.com.

PR & Marketing

Point out the silver lining in financial news releases

Whether business is booming or busting, the news media want to hear from you. If you have to report negative earnings, balance the bad news with the good.

During a down economy, news releases about quarterly earnings test struggling public companies, but your releases needn't make your company sound inept, according to publicist Shannon Troughton. After all, outside factors affect how well a company does.

Put earnings announcements in the context of the state of the economy at large and of your sector and industry. For example, health insurance company publicists should keep tabs on how the recession is impacting not only their industry but also medical device companies. Look at such

factors as whether patients can afford to pay their co-pays to physicians and hospitals. Your industry associations can help you determine what's affecting your industry.

On the other hand, if mismanagement causes your company's financial loss, don't blame it on the economy. "People will see right through that," Troughton says.

Be careful about attributing quotes to your CEO and CFO. Maintain their credibility by making sure the information in the quotes is accurate. If you report an earnings downturn, don't quote executives in delivering the news.

Troughton says investor relations releases tend to be overly technical and don't tell a story. "When you're reporting bad news, let the editorial tell the negative parts of the story and allow executives to talk about their vision and their mission, where we're going and how they're going to fix things."

Find good news to share with the media. Watch for trend stories in trade journals, business media and elsewhere. Maintain solid relationships with reporters so you can call

■ Protect your PR budget

If your organization wants to cut costs, you can't guarantee that your budget will be spared, but you can take steps to make a cut less likely.

Shannon Troughton recommends quantifying the value of the department's activities by reporting your monthly return on investment to your executive leadership team and senior managers. You can get these numbers by converting your media impressions into advertising dollars. Services like Biz360 and Locus can help you do that. Armed with that data, you can say,

"The media exposure we earned this month would have cost X in advertising."

Make sure your PR team is visible so executives don't see them simply as people to call when a crisis strikes or a press release needs to be written. "You need to be at the table, offering solutions and strategic ways to grow the businesses," Troughton says.

Start now. Present the case for your PR team's importance before the budget cutters make up their minds.