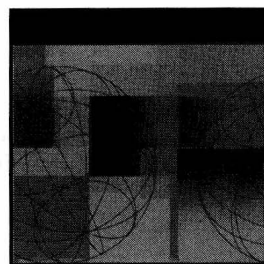# COMPLETE GUIDE TO INTERNET PUBLICITY

CREATING AND LAUNCHING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE CAMPAIGNS

STEVE O'KEEFE

Complete Guide to Internet Publicity: Creating and Launching Successful Online Campaigns

Steve O'Keefe

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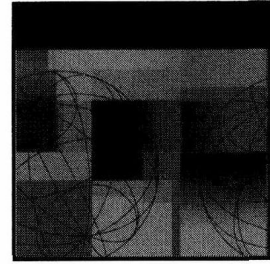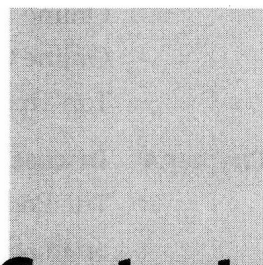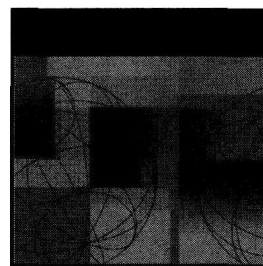
Acknowledgments

Throughout this book, I use the arrogant pronoun "I" when, in fact, a cast of thousands was involved. To list them all here—or even the major actors—would compound that arrogance, allowing me to bask in their brilliance. Yet, intellectual honesty requires that I share the credit while claiming all errors as my own.

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The Power of Internet Publicity

Five years ago, I put the finishing touches on my book, *Publicity on the Internet*, and shipped it off to the publisher. It was a good book. It became a bestseller at Amazon.com. It earned dozens of rave reviews from the media and one bad one. I received hundreds of letters from fans thanking me for writing the book. The ones I cherish most are from colleagues in the trade—marketers, publicists, and public relations professionals—who used the techniques in the book and reported that "it worked." But that's not why it was a good book.

Publicity on the Internet was a good book because money had nothing to do with it. Don't get me wrong; I'm an unapologetic capitalist. But I've been around the publishing profession long enough to know that good books aren't written for money. They're written because they *have to be*. They are written out of compulsion. And while we're used to thinking this way about great works of fiction, it applies equally to modest how-to books.

I wrote *Publicity on the Internet* in self-defense. At the time, I had a small business which provided online publicity services to book publishers and authors. When I started the business in 1994, I starved. But soon enough, like everyone else in the industry, I had more clients than I could handle. Analyzing my time sheets, I learned I was spending 25 percent of my working day turning away clients. Publishers thought they could do an end-run around wholesalers, distributors, and retailers and sell directly to the public. Authors thought they could do an end-run around publishers. They all thought the Internet was some kind of magic wand, and they wouldn't take

no for an answer. So I had to explain how online promotions can only *supplement* traditional marketing, not *replace* it. It took time for the message to sink in, and some people still don't get it.

I wrote *Publicity on the Internet* because I realized that most people couldn't afford to buy these services. They needed to learn to do the work themselves. So, in the spirit of the free sharing of information (which is a hallmark of online communications), I spilled the beans. I didn't write platitudes about the potential for this new medium; rather, I wrote an instruction manual with detailed, step-by-step procedures for locating the target audience online, crafting promotions that appeal to that audience, and deploying them with near-surgical precision. With the book as my shield, protecting me from educating the public one at a time, I ducked back into the trenches doing the campaign work I love so much.

In the five years since *Publicity on the Internet* first appeared, I have launched campaigns for more than 1,000 books, several dozen Web sites, and a smattering of non-publishing clients. I graduated from a publicist to a manager of publicists, but I hated being even one step removed from the action. Ultimately, I burned out from the relentless pace of four launches every week. I took a sabbatical but couldn't resist the siren song of the dot.com startup. After skillfully avoiding several opportunities to become a millionaire, I hooked-up with the people at www.myjobsearch.com, who I felt had the right stuff to pioneer a whole new industry: personal career management. Myjobsearch.com gave me a palette and asked me to paint a picture of the company it wanted to become. They stiffed me on my fees, and my stock options are worthless, but I will forever be grateful to them for the opportunity to sketch a vision of the future.

This year, when my publisher asked me again if I might be interested in revising *Publicity on the Internet*, I said yes. A few months earlier, I had written reviews at Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble Online, advising people against buying my book. It was hopelessly out of date—so much so, in fact, that instead of updating it I rewrote the whole thing from the bottom up. What you are holding in your hands is a completely new book. Why my publisher would want to bring it out in the present market is a mystery to me. Why I wrote it is not. And it has nothing to do with money.

The Complete Guide to Internet Publicity is the culmination of a career spent in the trenches. Writing it has given me the opportunity to step back from the fray and reflect upon a large body of work, to tally my successes and failures, to extract what I believe are the core principles of online communication, to share my mistakes with my colleagues so they won't have to repeat them, and to share my small victories so they can surpass them. Although no one wants to talk about online marketing right now, they will again someday soon, and they will be glad that someone with as much experience as I have has bothered to step back, assess his work, and write honestly about what the Internet can and can't be expected to do.

Don't worry—I'm not about to drag you into another soul-searching, what-went-wrong memoir. As always, I remain obsessed with the minutia of *how to do it*. The remainder of this book is full of the nuts-and-bolts tips that my readers have come to expect. When I started in the publishing business decades ago, I was floored by the amount of detail in Dan Poynter's seminal *Self-Publishing Manual*. Instead of saying, "Pack your books carefully before shipping them," Dan expounded on the relative merits of three different types of strapping tape: how much they cost, how easy they were to use, and how they withstood a round trip through the post office. I relish that

style of microscopic attention to detail that reeks of real-world experience, and I strive for it in my own writing. Others might wax philosophical about the advisability of using e-mail news releases; I tell you what font to use and the maximum number of characters per line.

But before I dive into the wonderful nitty-gritty of this *magnum opus*, I hope readers will forgive the indulgence of surveying the field and summarizing the lessons learned. In writing *The Complete Guide to Internet Publicity*, I have been forced to do a thorough inventory of the practices in our profession. I think my readers would be cheated to see only the trees and not the lush forest that contains them. Here, then, is a summary of where this profession all started, where it faltered and flourished, and where we are likely to go from here.

The Promise

Do you remember the moment the light bulb went on, when you first recognized the potential of the Internet to transform business practices worldwide? I do. I had been online for eight years, beginning in 1986 when I bought my first 300-baud modem and used it to explore local bulletin board services. In 1992, I joined CompuServe and The Well. I was working as editorial director at Loompanics Unlimited, a counterculture book publisher located in the quaint Victorian village of Port Townsend, Washington. The Internet was where my working day went to die.

In those days, I used the Internet for research and to participate in discussion groups, trolling for writers, graphic artists, and translators. The Internet was fascinating and frustrating. While I was able to locate people with similar interests, such as obscure jazz recordings, communicating with them was stilted and misleading. The Internet was limited to text messages in those days. As I writer, I felt comfortable in that environment, but the commands for communicating there were too confusing. I didn't think the Internet had the potential for mass appeal, and I resented how much of my time it took up.

In early 1994, my opinion changed. I was promoting a book called *Secrets of a Super Hacker* when a friend posted a favorable review online. I asked permission to reprint it, inserted ordering information, and posted the review to several Usenet newsgroups devoted to computer security. Within minutes, the fax machine started humming with orders for the book from Sweden, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. A U.S. spy agency bought a dozen copies of the book. I received an inquiry from a firm in South America about the Spanish-language rights to the book. In a few weeks, I sold those rights, negotiating the whole deal through e-mail. The day I posted that review was my magic moment. I knew the world of commerce would never be the same.

In the following months, I built one of the first book catalogs ever put on the Internet. It was housed at a gopher server on The Well. I remember telling my boss we could now compete on equal footing with Random House. Nothing they put online would look any better, or work any better, than our catalog. When I left Loompanics later that year to start Internet Publicity Services, Inc., I asked my boss to be generous with my replacement about time spent online. "This is the future of publishing," I wrote in a letter left on my desk.

This future was the promise of the Internet: All geographical barriers to the free flow of information would be eliminated; people would quickly be able to find material related to even the most obscure topic; that information would come with a purchasing opportunity, ending the disintermediation between the marketing message and the buying moment; people would be able to find other people with similar tastes and interests; the costs of delivering information would drop to zero; business intermediaries such as wholesalers, distributors, sales representatives, brokers, and even retailers would be cut out of the loop; and manufacturers would sell directly to consumers, reducing prices while increasing profits.

No longer would the world's brightest people be landlocked. The Internet would give everyone access to the best doctors, lawyers, teachers, and leaders. We would no longer be dependent upon the media for news, with its built-in biases. Now, we could go to the source and communicate directly with people of talent. The playing field would be leveled, and businesses would have to compete fairly for employees and customers. As the costs for storing, delivering, and retrieving information disappeared, a global agora would blossom.

I didn't buy all the hype then, but I was on board for plenty of it. To me, it seemed like the world had finally made a place where all voices could be heard, where the little guy had a chance, and where people with unusual interests would no longer be lonely or discriminated against.

When Mosaic debuted in the fall of 1994, leading to the modern World Wide Web, the promises shifted. Having come up in the world of book publishing, I was conditioned to the concept that color reproduction is expensive and should be avoided. Suddenly, color was free. And you no longer had to be a computer scientist to navigate the Internet. Documents could be displayed—not just retrieved—and a five-year-old could operate the point-and-click interface. It became clear that companies with bigger budgets would be able to produce better Web sites, so the playing field tilted a little bit. But the tradeoff was that ease-of-use would hasten worldwide adoption of the new medium.

After the Web came Java and application servers, and new promises were made. Now, we were told that content could be customized and personalized. Everyone would get *exactly* the information they wanted and wouldn't be bothered with stuff about which they couldn't care less. The consumer was in the driver's seat now, and marketers had the ability to focus their pitches with laser-beam precision. People logging onto the Internet would enter a world custom-tailored to their interests, tastes, preferences, and whims—a world designed by themselves, for themselves.

These were the promises.

The Problems

When every voice can be heard, it doesn't take long to get noisy. From the start, online discussion groups reminded us that there are a lot of voices in the world we *don't* want to hear. Usenet newsgroups erupted into arguments while mailing lists became bogged down in petty squabbles. With no cost for message delivery, marketers saw no reason to tailor their messages and unloaded a steady torrent of spam, choking discussion groups and e-mail.

People retaliated against spam with blacklisting and sabotage, and spammers responded with hacking and sabotage of their own. It seemed the only way to get merciless marketers to reconsider their behavior was to increase their costs of sending unwanted messages. It would soon cost plenty to defend a business against the repercussions of disregarding netiquette.

When the Web appeared, corporations began setting up Web sites with zeal. Hoping to cut out intermediaries while selling directly to the public, they damaged vendor relationships that had lasted for centuries, only to find that the public wasn't buying—at least, not directly. Still, companies worked harder to improve their content and search engine position, chasing a retail customer who wasn't interested while turning their backs on their best customers—those intermediaries who bought in bulk and sold to end users.

With the explosion in the number of Web sites, finding quality information online got harder and harder, leading to the rise of Internet directories and search engines. Today, these guides are flirting with uselessness, are hampered with broken links, and often lead to sites that don't contain the desired content or to sites that haven't been updated in so long that they're a waste of time. Today, with so many sites going out of business and search engines and directories starved for cash to maintain quality control, the situation is only getting worse. The rise in paid placements has reduced the value of these guides even more. Today, the results of search inquiries are more likely to contain ads than relevant leads.

The great free forum that is the Internet has exposed both individuals and companies to dangers never before imagined. Malicious hackers vandalize systems out of vengeance or just for fun. People are afraid to open e-mail even if they requested it, much less if it's unsolicited. Companies dependent on e-commerce and e-communication find that their systems are fragile and can be completely shut down. People online are reluctant to pay even the smallest subscription fee for access to information. And folks who would never shoplift from a store think nothing of duplicating and distributing copyrighted material.

The dream of a perfectly customized world has morphed into a nightmare of access restrictions and offensive, off-target advertising. Consumers say they want personalization but won't disclose the kind of personal information that makes it possible. They have good reason to be cautious, however, because private information about their identities, surfing habits, and purchases is being used by people to make their lives miserable.

Like the stock market's estimation of dot.com value, our own expectations for the Internet have crashed. From a free global marketplace, some now see a cesspool of pornography, crass commercialism, hackers, vigilantes, deviants, thieves, and saboteurs. No wonder companies have retreated to reassess their strategies toward this powerful but dangerous tool.

The Principles

What lessons can we draw from this seven-year experiment with the commercial Internet? From a marketing perspective, and with a view from trenches based on hundreds of campaigns, here are the attributes I consider when designing online promotions.

Transactional

For the time being, the Internet is still a transactions-based medium. With a few exceptions, it is not a good vehicle for entertainment. People have been conditioned by television to expect a level of quality that can't be delivered online—even with what passes for a broadband connection. People expect their entertainment to contain beautiful, clear video streams, backed with quality acting, writing, lighting, sound, music, animation, and graphics. In some future world where it is possible to deliver this level of quality to a decent-size screen/monitor, most companies won't be able to afford to produce this kind of programming. Perhaps only then will it become apparent that most companies should stay out of the entertainment business and focus on handling transactions through their Web sites.

Companies are spending most of their online budgets improving the efficiency of operations, and that's the way it should be. Rather than eliminate market intermediaries, the Internet makes it possible to economically serve trade customers and suppliers. Maybe seven years of experience has taught us the value of intermediaries in organizing markets? The number one missing ingredient on book publishers' Web sites was the *purchase order form*. The purchase order became a symbol for me, an example of how companies turned their backs on their biggest customers—those who already had a relationship with the firm (and in most cases, an account with a credit line). Instead, they chased a retail market they had little experience in serving.

The broad online audience follows a grab-and-go pattern, hunting for solutions, gathering documents, and heading home. Retail customers prefer to shop at stores where they can not only find good prices, service, and selection, but where they also have an account relationship. Money spent turning your e-commerce site into an entertainment site is largely wasted. If the Internet is a transactional medium, it makes sense to devote your online budget to serving the transactional needs of your business partners and to export your promotions to the high-traffic entertainment and information sites where your target audience gathers.

Filtering

In a world where every voice can be heard, nothing is so valuable as a good set of filters. From an unbridled infostream, we are entering an era of filtered content again. The public has learned to value the role of the media as judges of worth. They gravitate to sites where the filters are set to favor their tastes. They draw from a variety of sources to make sure they are getting the full story and the right spin, but they also demand access to source documents so they can make up their own minds about how well the media is doing its job. Finding these key media properties, and working together with them, is part of the publicist's agenda.

The public will use e-mail filters to lock the vast majority of online users out of their mailboxes. Journalists will use filters, too, to keep from having their e-mail clogged with the pitches of indiscriminate publicists. Filtration can be a death sentence for publicists, forever banished from the inboxes of the media. The trick for publicists is to learn to court the media in a way that doesn't trigger filtration. One method is to work through the Web sites where the press gathers. Another strategy is a return to printed

publicity, where a poorly targeted news release doesn't carry a price tag of irrevocable shunning.

Targeting

Targeting is the natural reaction to filtering. Publicists need to be careful about what messages they send and to whom they send them. If they can't impose this discipline themselves, their audiences will impose it. Better targeting comes from knowing the detailed interests of the people with which you are trying to communicate. As we've seen, the public is leery of revealing these details of their private lives. It makes sense to export promotions to those sites that are able to capture enough information about their users to target effectively. For press relations, publicists have to do a better job of tracking the stories in which contacts are interested. They need to actually read the publications journalists are writing for, watch the programs that producers put together, and note changes in direction signaled by new jobs or job titles.

Layering

One of the unique hallmarks of online communications is the layered message. The marketing chain begins with a simple query to find people interested in a topic, with a button to press for more information. These initial salvos have to be brief and on target, so those who are not interested in one particular message will ignore it instead of filtering you out permanently or retaliating against you. Those who find the message of interest should easily be able to dig deeper for more information.

At each stage of the marketing chain, this pattern is followed by an easy opt out for those who are not interested in going farther and by a depth of information available for those who will follow. People drilling through this process expect a payoff at the end. Journalists expect to find good source documents, artwork, interview prospects, and contact information. The public expects to find detailed, relevant, up-to-date information.

Universal Access

Web surfers really don't care if you provide a variety of viewing options for your content as long as you provide the one that *they* want. Each format decision you make can shave a few percentage points off the audience. Make enough of these decisions, and you end up with an inaccessible promotion. The solution is to offer alternatives to meet the needs of different users: newsletters in text, HTML, and *America Online* (AOL) formats; streaming media optimized for three different speeds; artwork displayed in low resolution for fast browsing but available in high-resolution for the media; Web sites designed to look appealing with any browser; and promotions that don't require an arsenal of plug-ins to enjoy. Add foreign language translations and time-zone sensitivity to the list, and you have a set of variables that can overwhelm any Web master.

Universal access is another reason to partner with high-traffic sites on promotions. It could be prohibitively expensive for you to offer the features desired by your target audience. Take payment and shipping options, for example. If you buy books from publishers' sites, chances are your choices are very restricted. Go to Amazon.com and you'll find numerous ways to have your books shipped and a corresponding number of choices for how to settle the bill. The complexities involved in serving a large—and largely unknown—universal audience argue for a strategy of focusing your own Web site on a core audience of business relations and exporting promotions to sites capable of serving the diverse needs of the general public.

Self-Protection

Every promotion has to be examined through the lens of self-protection. People can no longer be expected to open unsolicited e-mail and will certainly resist opening file attachments. You also have to assess the likelihood of a promotion to result in criticism and/or an attack. One of the problems I have with calculations of *return on investment* (ROI) is that they seldom take into account the negative impacts of poor promotions. What price do you put on damage to a brand or strained relationships with consumers? Does ROI take into account the costs of repairing computer systems infected with viruses or installing and maintaining security software? I'll talk more about the problems of calculating ROI at the end of this book. Internet marketers need to do a better job of assessing the short-term and long-term risks to their companies from botched online promotions.

Sharing Value

Marketing messages by themselves are ignored online or retaliated against. A more successful strategy is to offer the public and the press something of value in exchange for accepting your promotional pitch. When you approach the media, you should offer a compelling story and back it up with documents, statistics, artwork, and interview subjects. When you approach the public, you should offer content that satisfies, in the form of articles, tip sheets, helpful files, and offers of expert assistance. When you approach high-traffic Web sites, you should offer programming that will help them attract and retain an audience.

Every company has something of value to share with the online audience. Usually, it is expertise in the field. One of the jobs of the publicist is to uncover the value locked inside a company and format it for online delivery. The knee-jerk route is to advertise—to pay to place the marketing message online and hope enough of the audience responds. The tactical route, with a more lasting impact, is to publicize—to create something of value and donate it to the online audience, letting your marketing message ride along for free.

Partnership

As the number of Web sites online explodes, the ability for small sites or standalone promotions to draw an audience dwindles. All of the characteristics of online commu-

nication point in the same direction: the need to promote products and services through high-traffic channels that the online audience has embraced. Filtered content has come to the Internet, and you need to get inside those filters by going to sites that are trusted. This book will show you how.

The Practice

From these principles of online communication, I have developed a set of practices for effective promotion. This book is a guide to creating, deploying, and measuring the impact of these campaigns. Here are some of the highlights of this new text.

Media Relations

E-mail has replaced print and telephones as the preferred way to pitch stories to the press. In order to have effective communications with journalists, you need to find the e-mail addresses they really use. Commercially available databases simply do not contain these personal addresses. In the chapter on news releases, I show you how to economically locate journalists' e-mail addresses and maintain them in a database. Also missing from most commercial media directories are new media contacts, including discussion group moderators, chat show producers, e-zine editors, and Web site content editors. I'll show you how to find these contacts (who can make or break an online promotion).

Once you have contact information, you need to write news releases that will not result in filtering. In painstaking detail, I will show you how to write and format news releases for e-mail delivery that will appeal to journalists interested in your story without bothering those who are not. In the chapter covering online newsrooms, I'll describe the content you need—and don't need—at your Web site. It's surprising how many online newsrooms lack the simple, cheap elements that journalists want while spending vast sums on features the press is unlikely to use.

Another way to reach the media (who either don't respond to e-mail or who have filtered you out) is to move your media relations to the Web sites that journalists use. In the chapter covering online newsrooms, I talk about two promotions that are suitable for export: online news conferences and online presentations. I'm particularly keen on this last item—bandwidth-friendly, narrated PowerPoint slide shows that can be easily updated and shipped out to media sites. In the online newsrooms chapter of this book, I describe how to build a small newswire service to increase your value as a source for stories, and in the syndication chapter I show how one company used this strategy to generate 10 times the coverage they garnered from press releases.

Web Site Promotions

Whether you are trying to attract an audience for your own Web site or lure browsers to a partner site, I'll give you the latest tricks of the trade. Web site registration techniques have changed a lot in the past year as several key sites have gone out of business and the survivors have started charging for position. I'll cover the well-worn turf