

Steve Rubel: Edelman

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—Steve Rubel

Steve Rubel is on the cutting edge. Always has been. And to Steve the cutting edge of online marketing isn’t email or even blogs; it’s social networking and whatever else captivates those known as Generation Y these days.

Steve has been on the cutting edge since the dawn of the computer era, and a fixture in the PR industry for almost as long. Today he works with Edelman, the largest world’s largest independent PR firm, in their me2revolution practice. He also writes a regular column for *Advertising Age Digital* and has his own influential Micro Persuasion blog. Not surprisingly, he’s a popular speaker on the tech and PR circuits and has been named to several prestigious “best of” lists, including *Media Magazine’s* Media 100, the AlwaysOn/Technorati Open Media 100, and the CNET’s News.com Blog 100.

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Online Marketing on the Cutting Edge

Steve isn’t wedded to the past; he’s one of the most forward-thinking marketers I’ve met. It’s not surprising, then, that my interview with him covered everything from PR research to blogging to next-generation social networks. Read on to see what’s on Steve’s mind today.

You've been in the PR industry your entire career. How did you get involved with technology?

I've been a technology enthusiast for almost exactly 25 years now; I got my first computer 25 years ago this month. I've just been hooked ever since. It's always been a huge interest to me, huge, because it's ever-changing and so dynamic. It's just continued to be, all these years.

What was your first computer?

I got an Atari 800 when I turned 13. Since then, I've had too many computers and devices to name.

I understand that.

Way too many!

When did you first get interested in and involved with the Internet?

Let me think. I was on CompuServe and GENie in 1985. I ran a BBS in 1985. And then I was on AOL in 1992. I got a broadband connection in 1999. So I was an early adopter.

That's a good thing to do, to keep on top of trends.

Always. And that's virtually what led me to really be in the position that I am now. That background did not converge with marketing, in a powerful way, until about late '03.

Let's talk about that a little bit. When did you realize that marketing and technology could work together, and how they could do it?

“What's happened in the last few years is that technology has become more powerful and free.”

I've always been following the impact of technology on marketing, but it wasn't very applicable to me because it wasn't DIY [do-it-yourself]. It's when technology really became a DIY scenario, where you could really use the technology yourself in a very efficient way—to become more efficient and

more effective at what you do—that was when it really began to catch my attention in a big way.

In '98 and '99 there was email marketing, and search marketing in the early part of this decade. I certainly watched that and I was intrigued by it, but it wasn't directly applicable to what I was doing as a PR professional.

I was using online databases and research tools, starting in the late '90s, for PR, but if the organization didn't buy it for you, you had to rely on what they gave you. I was fortunate to work in places where I had that, but still, it wasn't DIY.

It was in 2003 and 2004 when I saw that you could really do a lot of amazing things with free stuff, and what you could get out of that, that I became increasingly intrigued. Obviously, the advantages steamrolled, because of a number of different things that people are doing now. I really believe that a lot of the tools are free.

Early on, you were probably using LexisNexis, that sort of thing?

Yeah, and those tools are still widely used today by PR professionals, but you're right: it was Factiva and MediaMap and Bacon's. That was the lifeblood of the PR professional, and still is for many PR professionals. But what's happened in the last few years is that technology has become more powerful and free.

I think it's extremely disruptive on a number of fronts. One is that all these guys who sell high-end solutions are really going to have to worry about the lower-hanging fruit coming in and how that might impact them. And two is a lot of companies have big IT departments that spend a lot of money on initiatives and influencing information solutions, and Google can have something that's free—or Microsoft or Yahoo! or anybody.

Look at the content management systems that companies have implemented to put stuff on their web site. That was great, but it took many, many years to implement a lot of that stuff. Now, you know, if you have your own web site, you can do it with WordPress for nothing.

The whole open source movement and also the big players have really pushed technology down into every person's hands. I don't think that people fully realize what you can do with free stuff.

“From an infrastructure perspective, the cost of doing business... is going down to zero.”

On one hand, that enables a small company or an individual, even, to compete effectively with the big companies.

Absolutely—and it's global, too. I think that what you get from the big global companies, when they work well, is you get incredible smarts and brainpower together in networks. And expertise, specialized expertise, that allows them to maintain their business.

But you're right. My feeling is that, from an infrastructure perspective, the cost of doing business—the actual cost of it, not the people cost, but the cost of everything—is going down to zero.

So it's leveling the playing field for the little guy. What's the big guy doing?

The big guys, if they're smart, they have people who are on the cutting edge of all the new stuff, and are able to figure out how to apply it, ASAP. I think that's what our group does, in part.

How is a PR professional using technology today?

It really depends; it runs the gamut. I believe that people have to up their digital acumen in a hurry. The problem is, just when you learn something, the whole thing will change.

“Everyone is struggling with...how to work with Gen Y.”

Everyone is using Google, that's for sure. And I think a lot of people are using Google News. A lot of people are starting to use RSS, but it's not as much as I would like. I think wiki's used, but

it really depends on the culture.

Email is still king, for everybody. Email is king for how we interact with everyone from the media to bloggers to social networks to each other, and so forth. This is just, the world is like this. I don't think everyone's moved off of email yet. I think email's still king and continues to be and might be for the foreseeable future—although there's obviously inherent problems with it.

Email now is, what, 15 years old or so? To many younger people, it's an old technology. The young people I know think of email as what the old people use—and they don't use it.

It's funny—they use it, but they don't call it email. To me, text messaging is a form of email. Facebook emails are emails.

But I think you're right. They certainly don't call it that, and they think it's old-school. They use IM a lot, also. For me personally, I used to love IM; I hate it now. I hate IM, because I like being able to control my time. When I use IM I'm instantaneously putting myself on somebody else's agenda.

I'm with you. I don't like other people to be controlling what I do. That's why I like email; I can do it on my own schedule.

Having office hours for IM is a good idea. An hour or two hours a day you put it up, so that people have instant access to you. But for the most part I try not to use it. On the one hand it's very efficient; on the other hand, it's very inefficient.

With the new generation being so instant message—and text message—addicted, is there a way to exploit that?

I think what everyone is struggling with is how to work with Gen Y. They have a certain level and kind of expectation that you and I just don't have. They expect to be able to come and go from work as they please, for example, as long as they get their job done. Companies that want to hang onto their talent, if that's where the talent's going to come from (and it is), they're going to have to figure out how to bend their culture accordingly. And I think people are doing that, but it's progressing slowly. *Fortune* did a whole cover story on that recently.

“It's not a matter of adapting your message; it's a matter of adapting your approach.”

The other thing that's happening with the high schoolers and college kids today is the whole social networking thing—Facebook, MySpace, and so on. How do you take advantage of that?

What you use it for is as a platform for collaborating towards some sort of shared outcome. You figure out where you and your community overlap, what you want and what they want, and how you use the social networks to make that happen.

Do the kids of this generation accept traditional marketing messages, or are they wary of that sort of thing?

“[Blogging] is a great consumer insights tool.”

I think they accept it, but it's a matter of where you put it. If you were to put it in TV advertising, they accept it there. But if you start to put it into a social network, in a very intrusive way, they don't like it.

So how do you have to adapt your message for that type of media?

It's not a matter of adapting your message; it's a matter of adapting your approach. You need to figure out how you use these different channels and what some are good for and what others are not good for.

Speaking of channels, let's talk a little bit about blogs; that's a big part of what you're doing these days. How do blogs fit into a company's marketing mix?

Blogs are a great way to communicate very efficiently, to engage in conversation, and to work towards a shared outcome.

Do you recommend a company start their own blog?

It really depends. I think you have to find out where your community is and figure out what tools and channels are going to resonate with them, and use them accordingly. It's not right for every company.

Aside from starting up their own blog, how else can a company utilize the blogosphere?

It's a great consumer insights tool. It's a great way to research what's on the mind of the populace and figure out what the trendsetters are thinking.

So are you using blogs more for research or to put forth a marketing message?

We're using it for both. We're using it for research but also to build a closer relationship with consumers. Absolutely.

Let's say a company decides to put out their own blog. What sort of common mistakes do you see when that happens?

They're thinking about them and not thinking about the readers. They're not thinking about how to provide value, what people really want. They're using it as a place to just talk and less of a place for action.

They're focusing on themselves instead of focusing on the customer?

It's not even a matter of focusing on the customer. It's what other bloggers are talking about, and how to build connections with them. They're not doing it that way; they're viewing it as a sort of push talk.

“The way you get smart about any community...is to spend time there and understand what the ethos is.”

How does a company get smart about this?

Honestly, you should just spend time in the community. The way to get smart about any community, whether it's a social network, a blog community, a message board, whatever, is to spend time there and understand what the ethos is.

Your own blog is a very popular blog in the PR community. How did you get started with that?

I've always been curious about technology, and I started hearing blogs in '01. I found it interesting but really didn't pay a lot of attention to it. In 2002/2003 I really started to read blogs and play around with the platforms, and saw just how terrific they were and what you could do with them and how flexible they were and how free they were.

In my last job I worked with some clients to help them launch their own blogs. After that I said, look, if I'm reading blogs and I'm working with clients to help them launch their own blogs, then I really should have my own. One morning I just woke up and started Micro Persuasion.

How much time do you spend on the blog?

You know, it's changed a lot. For three years it was a lot—it was probably two to three hours a day, and I was blogging absolutely every single day, with a high volume of posts. But in the last six months or so I've changed, for a few reasons.

“I believe that community is going to be a river that runs through absolutely everything we do online.”

One is that I just had to cut back, because my workload became so high that I just couldn't do it all. Two is the nature of the blog changed after I joined Edelman. Edelman has 1,500 clients; everybody's either a client, a competitor of a client, or a prospect. It became very difficult for me to put up any kind of news about stuff because it

was very possible I could run into trouble. So I had to find a way to blog about trends and be more substantive about it, and obviously that requires a lot more time and energy.

In addition, all these other places where you can spend time popped up. In particular, Twitter, and the whole mobile aspect of that and how it connects to your mobile device, really was appealing to me and I began to publish there a lot more.

Through that, now, I probably have it down to maybe two or three hours a week.

You brought up something interesting there, that a company with its employees blogging, not necessarily official blogs, there's certainly the potential for conflict. How much control does a company have over its employees and their personal blogs?

It's a matter of being upfront with them, giving them a blogging policy and helping them understand what the rules of the road are—the dos and don'ts, and how to think about it as it relates to the company. It's just being open about it.

The concept of video blogging—do you see that having much of an impact?

Less so, because video is very difficult to scan and it's very difficult to search. Nothing flies like text.

Blogging to me is a means to an end. It was the earliest thing, it was exciting, but the action's elsewhere now. It's still very powerful, but the action I think is in social networks and communities. I believe that community is going to be a river that runs through absolutely everything we do online—whether it be standalone communities or company web sites.

While there's a lot of hype and interest in blogging and video blogging and so forth, I'm more interested in the social change that it's creating, and that social change is the ability for like-minded people to connect around topics that they care about, no matter how they do it. Some people will connect over video, some people will connect through audio, some people will do it through social networks, some people will do it through blogs. But the bigger story here is that the fabric of the Net has changed; it's a place for people to connect up around shared interests and then collaborate towards some sort of action.

What advice would you have for a company that recognizes these trends and wants to take advantage of them?

You need to live it. You need to live in it, or you need to hire somebody who lives in it. It's like no other space and it changes every six to eight months.

The advice I give is to really live in it and understand it, and to know the motivations of the communities that you care about. You got to figure out where your audience is and where they hang out, which sites are important to them and what they do with those sites. Know what the ethos is and what they're trying to achieve. Only after you've done all that can you really begin to build programs that help engage them.

Sound Bites

So what's on the cutting edge of marketing today? As Steve notes, it's not the individual technology itself as much as it is how the technology is used—what people want to do online. And what Steve sees as the “killer app” is community, via whatever medium matters to the consumer—blogs, audio, video, social networks, you name it.

Some more points of note:

- Technology works best when it takes on a do-it-yourself character—and when it becomes free.

- Google's free search has replaced the PR professional's traditional paid research tools.
- Generation Y is abandoning earlier technology, such as email, in favor of text messaging, instant messaging, and social network communication.
- To take advantage of social networking, figure out where you and your community overlap and how they want to communicate.
- Going forward, the concept of community is the common element running through all online media and technologies.

If you learn only one thing from Steve Rubel, it should be this: Technology is constantly changing. What you might think is a new technology is already old-school for a younger generation. If you're just now getting involved with email marketing or blogging, somebody somewhere has leapfrogged you into social networking or whatever the next big thing may be. To stay in step with your customer base you need to be aware, be involved, and keep focusing on the cutting edge.