

PRWeek

(c. 11,328)

Keeping in Touch With the Right People

June 25, 2007

By David Ward

Contact management systems have evolved, but core capabilities are still essential.

Having made considerable inroads in getting PR agencies to toss out their Rolodexes and adopt external contact management solutions, leading PR software vendors have now set their sites on a new horizon: corporate communications departments.

"Most of the world's largest - as well as increasing numbers of midsize and smaller - agencies have moved to an automated platform for contact management," says Bill Wagner, CMO of Vocus. "But where we're seeing the biggest growth is on the corporate side."

"As a lot of in-house teams have been built up, they want to use the same kinds of tools their agencies have been using," adds Peter Granat, EVP for Cision. "They also like having a historical archive of outreach."

This new market also means the heated competition for new business among various contact software management companies is likely to remain fierce for years to come. But instead of competing on price, increasingly vendors are looking to differentiate themselves by their feature sets.

Vocus recently added podcast interviews of journalists into their profiles, enabling PR professionals to hear in the reporters' own words what they cover and how they like to be pitched.

Cision is promoting tools that allow PR staff to segment out top-tier reporters from other media and then enable more one-to-one outreach campaigns with key journalists. "You can track how often you're contacting that journalist, what the pitches are, and share that across the group," explains Granat.

These features are certainly useful, but most PR people should judge a contact management solution primarily on the depth and accuracy of its database. "The biggest hurdle we face is inconsistency of the data," says Jason Ouellette, senior account manager with Andover, MA-based PAN Communications. "You want to have complete confidence that [the] correct information [is] listed in the database."

That accuracy issue will likely grow in importance with the increase in truly global PR campaigns. "I think the trend is not so much that a US-based agency wants a database for another country," explains Samantha Hurren, USA business manager for UK-based Rebus Software. "But they may be working with agencies in other countries that have their own localized databases, and what they're looking for is the ability to have a consolidated view of all of them."

But what PR professionals should want most of all from a contact management solution is peace of mind, especially when it comes to knowing about all the new blogs and Web sites that have emerged. Noah Mallin, senior product specialist for BusinessWire's PressCenter software, says contact management solutions can help track the staffing and content of blogs and Web sites even if a PR professional is not yet interested in pitching those types of journalists.

"Sometimes our clients find they have a lot less control with blogs than traditional media in terms of what they do with the information you provide them and how your client is going to be portrayed," he explains. "So we allow blog monitoring within our media contact database so they can see what's been said about not only their clients, but also their clients' competitors."

Regardless of whether it's simple spreadsheet-based contact information or a robust software suite, Anoop Sahgal, director of product marketing for Waggener Edstrom and its WExView solution, says contact management should never be a stand-alone product. "You want to make sure you're not just focused on the contact management solution," he says, "but how that software is integrated into your overall campaign management program."

Technique tips

DO

Look for contact management software that can separate journalists who are more valuable to your clients from the media pack

Work with your clients' corporate comms departments when they decide on their contact management solution

Integrate your solution into your entire global campaign management system

DON'T

Get too enamored with cool feature sets - contact management solutions should be judged on the completeness and accuracy of their databases

Use contact management software for just domestic outreach

Coddle lone wolves - make sure every employee is committed to a single contact management solution