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Media Roundup: Print press expands PC coverage

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US consumers might have lost some fascination with PCs, but as the technology grows, there is still room to win attention from an array of outlets. David Ward reports.

There's little doubt that the advent of affordable desktop and laptop computers helped fuel much of the current technology revolution going on in American homes, schools, and offices.

But have the media and the public finally lost their 'gee whiz' fascination with the PC? The answer is both yes and no.

GolinHarris SVP Lisa Falcetti says that technology reporters are casting a wider net. 'These reporters are actually covering a lot more than computers.

If you look on CNet, you'll see stories that run the full gamut of personal technology.'

'Speeds and feeds alone are not going to wow people anymore,' adds Mark Coker, president of Dovetail Public Relations. 'Now in order to get that attention, you need to be first to market with a product that allows you to do something you couldn't do before.'

But Bob Maples, president of Maples Communications, which represents Toshiba's laptop division, argues that, because PCs play a major role in several current trends, such as blogging, it has actually become much easier to pitch the hardware story.

'Everybody has a PC, so there are more and more outlets looking for cool applications for these computers,' he says.

Dual coverage

When it comes to coverage, there are two distinct worlds, divided between enthusiast titles, such as PC World and Maximum PC, and the general-interest press.

'When you're working with more of the technology-based publications, like PC World or Maximum PC, they're definitely more interested in the speeds and feeds, such as the data transfer rates, so they can be compared against the other products in the space,' says Jennifer Olson, SAE at Atomic Public Relations, which represents PC up-grade product maker Apricorn. 'With more general tech or tech/business reporters, they're more interested in the functionality.'



But Maples says many consumers often look to both sides before they choose a new desktop or laptop. 'Consumers may read a Good Housekeeping or Time or Forbes (article) and learn about the applications, but when they get ready to make a purchase, they'll go to PC Magazine or PC World to look for reviews on new products,' he says.

Even though many newspapers rolled back or ended their dedicated tech sections several years ago, Brian Solis, founder and president of San Jose, CA-based agency FutureWorks, says the majority of general-interest publications will make room for the right PC story.

'Even within newspapers, such as The New York Times, you see stories aimed at different levels of tech savvy,' he adds. 'So your PC story might end up appearing in different sections.'

'The reporters at the dailies may not do the benchmarking that the enthusiast publications do, but they still want to get products for review so they can try out the true consumer experience,' says Caitlin Donahue, account supervisor with Porter Novelli's Seattle office, which represents Hewlett-Packard and Compaq computers.

In addition to its products getting smaller, faster, and cheaper, the PC market is also adapting to the consumer's desire for anywhere, anytime connectivity. Therefore, notes Michael Volpatt, partner with Larkin/Volpatt Communications, reporters are looking for rugged computers that can withstand the elements no matter where they're used.

Volpatt represents DRS Tactical Systems, which is introducing the WalkAbout line of rugged tablet PCs. 'When we're pitching WalkAbout, it's all about who's using it and what problems it will solve,' he says. 'So we're looking at a lot of vertical publications, especially those aimed at people who are outdoor enthusiasts, and with those outlets you need third-party testimonials in order to be effective.'

Waning broadcast attention

Though the opportunities for PC stories might be growing in print, broadcast and radio have arguably become a bit of a tougher sell.

Tech TV, for all intents and purposes, has been completely absorbed by video-gaming channel G4, and many of the local call-in computer talk radio shows popular in years past have similarly been scaled back. 'Even CNN recently collapsed its entire technology coverage and is not reporting on it as much as it used to,' notes Volpatt.

But Christiaan Brown, a Porter Novelli account manager who also works with HP and Compaq, says, 'A lot of those discussions that used to take place on TV and radio have moved over to an online discussion, whether it's a blog or some other internet-based dialogue.'

PITCHING ... PC MEDIA

- There's less interest in CPU and hard-disk size now, so instead of stressing tech specifications, focus on the unique applications of a new PC



- Outside of enthusiast outlets, it's hard to get dedicated product reviews, so pitch trend and wrap-up stories that involve your client and his or her competitors
- Especially in the portable space, it's as much about design as it is about functionality, so position your client's laptop PC as a lifestyle accessory.

