

Golden Ruler Award for Excellence in Public Relations Measurement
“You Are Now Free To Link PR and Sales”
Southwest Airlines and SEO-PR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each month, millions of people use Yahoo News, AOL News, Google News, and other news search engines to find the latest information about a wide range of topics that interest them. When they conduct a news search, they often find relevant and recent press releases from companies along with articles from thousands of traditional and non-traditional news sources.

Recognizing that many consumers gain information to inform their airline travel purchase decisions online and that press releases distributed by wire services are directly searchable, Southwest Airlines, the nation's largest domestic carrier in terms of scheduled domestic departures, has been working since January 2004 with SEO-PR to optimize their press releases for the major news search engines.

The undertaking involves use of free and inexpensive tools to identify popular search terms relevant to the news that is being announced. Then early drafts of press releases are edited to include these terms and increase the likelihood that the press releases will rank high in news search results. They also embed unique URLs in the press releases that offer further information or link consumers to the point-of-sale. This link provides a means for tracking sales directly attributable to the press releases. The company distributes the press releases using wire services that are crawled by the news search engines. Over a 15 month period, Southwest Airlines was able to generate an estimated \$2.5 million in ticket sales using this method.

Challenge

Since the first press release was distributed in 1906, corporate communications executives have yearned for a measurable way to tie public relations to actual sales. You can hand your CEO a pile of news clippings and estimated reach counts, but at the end of the day, proven leads and sales are what matter. While increased brand awareness ultimately leads to sales, it was virtually impossible to prove that a particular press release made a sale happen -- until the advent of news search engines.

Millions of people use search engines to find news articles and press releases from the past seven to 30 days. In October 2005, Yahoo News had 25.4 million unique visitors, AOL News had 15.1 million, and Google News had 7.1 million, according to Nielsen//NetRatings. By comparison, MSNBC had 23.2 million, CNN had 22.4 million, and Gannett had 12.1 million unique visitors that month. In fact, Yahoo News ranked number one, AOL News ranked number four, and Google News ranked number 14 among the top current events and news sites in the U.S. in October 2005.

When users conduct a news search, they often find relevant and recent press releases from companies along with articles from thousands of traditional and non-traditional news sources. While journalists use news search engines to find press releases, most visitors to Yahoo News, AOL News, and Google News are consumers.

In January 2004, Linda Rutherford, then Director and now Vice President of Public Relations for Southwest Airlines, began working with Greg Jarboe, co-founder of SEO-PR.. They both wanted to find out if there was a way they could reach that consumer audience directly through search news engines. And if so, how to measure results?

Campaign

At the start of 2004, the Southwest Airlines/SEO-PR team set up a five-step process to conduct and measure their campaigns in news search engines.

Step 1. Conduct keyword research so you know what people are looking for.

The team used online tools such as Wordtracker and Yahoo Search Marketing's bidding research tool to find out what terms consumers tend to use when conducting a search. These tools are mainly used by pay-per-click advertising agencies, but there's no reason why public relations people can't also benefit from them. There were some surprises. For example, there were 1,259,746 searches in October 2005 for "Southwest Airlines" – a two-word term – while there were only 397,966 searches that month for "Southwest" – a one-word term that is easier to type into a search box. So, using "Southwest Airlines" instead of "Southwest" in a press release makes it relevant for several times more searches.

Step 2. Edit press releases to include search terms.

Although a press release should be newsworthy to maintain credibility online, the team trained themselves to optimize headlines and body copy subtly for news search engines. They would write a standard release, and then edit it, seamlessly including specific search terms (such as "Airfare to Philadelphia") in the headline, first paragraph, and a few more times in the body copy. While some people mistakenly believe that "optimization" involves adding keyword meta tags to a press release, news search engines place much more weight on the "visible" text in the headline and body copy. So, optimization requires copywriting skills designed primarily for humans with keyword research for search engine considerations secondary.

Step 3. Have special hyperlinks on hand, and use them wisely.

Many online news readers won't scroll all the way to the bottom of your press release to find a clickable link or response number. Southwest Airlines made it easier for them by routinely including a hyperlink at the end of the first or second paragraph of each optimized press release. Following best practices in online marketing, these links were not to the company's main URL, www.Southwest.com. Instead, the public relations department worked with the interactive marketing department to quickly and easily get unique hyperlinks for press releases on short notice. These unique links were not only trackable – so PR could tell how many people clicked on them and what actions they took on the site (including purchasing tickets) – they were also deep. This means a release about a particular offer would link directly to the page on the site where a visitor could take advantage of the specific offer mentioned in the press release.

Step 4. Distribute via wire search that is crawled by news search engines.

Most press release distribution services are crawled by Google News, so there is no extra charge for adding this to their regular distribution. However, not all press release distribution services are indexed by Yahoo News or AOL News, and only a few offer advanced features that can help news search engine campaigns. Initially, Southwest Airlines used their standard wire service to send out their optimized press releases. Everything was the same, including the cost. In 2005, Southwest Airlines added a second wire service, which also provided the ability to insert images that Google News indexed and often displayed in its results.

Step 5. Test a variety of press releases.

Starting in February 2004, Southwest Airlines and SEO-PR began a series of tests on optimized releases. Here are notes on three tests involving seven press releases:

Test A. Philadelphia Launch: As Angela Vargo of Southwest Airlines told *MarketingSherpa* during an interview in October 2004, "It was our first new city launch since September 11th. Philadelphia is a huge city and we wanted to get the word out and get high visibility." The team decided to optimize the release for the popular terms "airfare to Philadelphia" and "low fares" which appeared in the headline and body copy. The release hit the wires February 22, 2004.

Test B. Spanish-language launch: To promote Southwest's new Spanish-language online ticketing capabilities, the team sent out two releases on June 5, 2004, one in English and one in Spanish. Since many Hispanics in the U.S. use both languages when conducting searches, the English language release included the term "en espanol" in the first paragraph.

Test C. July 15, 2004 – PR Hell Day: "You don't want your news to get buried," Vargo told *MarketingSherpa* in October 2004. "We typically never send more than one release in a day. If there's big corporate news, you don't piggyback another release." But on July 15, 2004, the PR team had no choice. The Southwest Airlines investor relations department sent out two releases that day, one reporting second quarter earnings and another on the company's 112th consecutive quarterly dividend. Then the company's CEO unexpectedly resigned, forcing corporate communications to issue a third release on executive changes. In the meantime, marketing had scheduled a major fare sale announcement featuring "22 new daily nonstop flights with low fares starting at \$29 one-way." The PR department had to get all four releases out on the news wires at the start of the day. They figured the marketing release had no hope of breaking through the buzz from the other news. But, they optimized the fourth press release carefully for their company name, added a special hyperlink in the first paragraph, and crossed their fingers.

Results

The first optimized press release about the Philadelphia launch directly resulted in \$80,000 in ticket sales, plus stories in more than a dozen media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Dallas Morning News*, and *Philadelphia Business Journal*.

The two releases for the Spanish-language reservation system launch directly resulted in a very respectable \$38,000 in ticket sales.

The marketing announcement about "22 new daily nonstop flights with low fares starting at \$29 one-way" – was distributed on PR Hell Day. It turns out that there was a spike in the number of searches for Southwest Airlines when people heard about the company's earnings and/or the resignation by its CEO. Since the marketing announcement was the only optimized press release, it showed up above the other three press releases at the very top of news search engine results. And, since most investors recognize a good deal when they see it, the marketing release ended up generating more than \$1 million in airline ticket sales.

In fact, from February 2004 to April 2005, Southwest Airlines was able to directly track more than \$2.5 million in online ticket sales to optimized press releases, including the ones described above. "With each release we've seen increased revenues," noted Vargo in her interview with *MarketingSherpa*.

Results tend to start out with a sharp sales hike for the first few days, and then dribble in slowly for the next four weeks. On average, the doubling date (the time by which you can estimate total orders by doubling currently received orders) is roughly 72 hours.