The Information Age of Public Relations

Technology is opening new doors
For Rotary clubs promoting their projects.

By Jane Lawicki

As Webmaster of the awardwinning Web site of Rotarians in Belgium and Luxembourg (districts 1620,1630, 2170), Belgian Rotarian Philippe Luyten came up with the idea of reporting on the R.I. Presidential Conference in Brussels (held 8-10 October 1999) as it was happening. While Philippe, a member of the Rotary Club of Keerbergen Demer Dijle, hoped that the site would prove popular, he could not have foreseen how popular. The number of people viewing www.rotary.belux.org increased exponentially from the usual 40,000 "hits" (visits) per month to more than 10,000 a day. Since then, Rotarians and other users from more than 80 countries have clicked on the site's multilingual pages.

"Five years ago when we considered starting a Web site, some Rotarians told us that we were playing with the devil and his instruments. Today, the governors and governors-elect ask us to provide an email service to all the clubs," says Philippe. "Five years ago, only two percent of all Rotarians in Belgium had access to the Internet. Today, we can reach 60 percent of them."

The Internet's increased accessibility -now more than 200 million people are online globally-allows Rotarians to think differently about how they shop, make investments, plan activities, help the community and promote Rotary to the general public. Mastering technology for the benefit of Rotary allows club members to get more "bang" for their "byte."

"E-commerce and knowledge management are the technology trends of the future," says Marlene Brown, a business trends expert and a member of the Rotary Club of Utica, New York, U.S.A. She manages five Web sites for her club, including www.rotarydistrict7150.org and www.rotaryyouthexchange.org, which

incorporate advanced interactive technology."I write a weekly Rotary News Memo, which has a large worldwide subscription, and the links I include drive people to various parts of the site," Marlene says. "We constantly have news on the site in a number of various categories as well as digital pictures taken at various Rotary events." Fresh content remains the key to attracting repeat Rotarians to the site, says Marlene. She notes that good club Web sites should include updates and information on ongoing community projects, current humanitarian efforts, upcoming club programs and profiles of program speakers, outstanding volunteers, visiting scholars or Group Study Exchange team members.

"While many gizmos exist, having a site with cutting edge design doesn't generate any sustainable audience if the basic services don't meet basic demand," explains British Rotaractor Patrick Alberts, founder of the Global Rotaract Information Center (www.rotaract.org/central). "The strategy is to be a constant mover-not necessarily in terms of technology but in terms of market demand."

Rotarians and clubs can also use their Web sites to reach the general public by providing a calendar of local community events and links to other useful sites. Nelson Pena, a member of the Rotary Club of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, handles his club's Web site (netdial.caribe.net/~njpena), which provides photographs and descriptions of the community as well as a link to the Web site of the nearby Arecibo Observatory.

Another way to promote Rotary is by hosting "live" Internet events. Clubs can sponsor either a one-time or regularly scheduled "chat room" where participants connect to a designated Web site and type messages to one another. Although they

require special software, chat sites allow Rotarians to host speakers such as the town mayor, school superintendent or a business leader for a community-wide open forum.

Rotarians can draw media to their sites by registering with search engines, which serve as a directory to other Web sites. (Two of the most popular are Yahoo and AltaVista.) To promote your site, place your Web address on business cards, club stationery and literature, and when using an electronic signature or sending e-mail. Promote your Web site as an "electronic press kit" it will help boost Rotary's visibility in the community.

"Living in a developing country, most of our projects are geared towards health and education," says Christopher Montero, who manages the Web site for his Rotary Club of Metro Iloilo, Philippines (www.rcmi.cjb.net). "Our site has an indirect effect in promoting Rotary and helping the community through the positive public relations it generates." Describing club projects and providing relevant links also can provide a service to the media. You can target a specific journalist with email when you have a compelling human-interest story, fundraising event or significant accomplishment to share. Here are some tips for using technology to share your Rotary story: Research the Web site of the publication or broadcast outlet you'd like to see print or air your story. Note the e-mail addresses of reporters who cover community events or general-interest features. To promote stories to national media organizations, for example, research the nationwide list of reporters on Yahoo's extensive index to the Web (www.yahoo .com/News_and_

Media/Journalism /Journalists). Limit your e-mail to a 10-line description of your story. Avoid sending a formal press release via e-mail, and include a digital photo when possible.

But technology goes beyond the Internet. In many parts of the Rotary world, the increase in cable and public access television outlets offers extensive public service and public relations opportunities. For example, the Rotary Club of Park Forest, Illinois, U.S.A., has made arrangements with a local cable station serving 4O,000 community viewers to air 40 club meeting programs each year. For the TV

feature, called "Rotary Today," the cable company tapes, edits and airs the 30-minute programs for free.

"Speakers come much more prepared and are more vivacious when they know they're going to be taped," says Dick Smith, the Park Forest Rotarian responsible for the programming. He adds that the real benefits are to the public, who learn from educational programs on subjects ranging from the local library to health issues. Rotary videos, available through the R.I. catalog, can also serve as possible programs for your local TV station. Technology also has affected the use of radio. Stations now accept Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on compact disc. Both radio and television stations broadcast these short community oriented messages for free as a public service. Rotary International offers new radio PSAs-which encourage citizens to immunize their children or volunteer their time-and also offers broadcast-quality television PSAs on a variety of topics. You can order copies through the R.I. catalog and offer them to your local stations. "When it comes down to it, technology doesn't change the fundamental message of Rotary," says Dick, who makes the analogy of moving from horse and buggy to the automobile. "We're just using technology today to get where we're going-but in a much more convenient way."

Jane Lawicki is a senior public relations specialist with the R.I. Public Information Department.