

Playing with Fire – Communicating in a Wiki World



By Chris Lukach

What if I told you a web site exists that houses in-depth, thorough information about your organization, and is used by millions of people across the globe?

Now what if I told you that you have the power to edit this web site's content? Correct misinformation... steer your mes-

saging, ensure it is accurate and complete?

You're in luck!

Now, imagine that professional communicators are welcome to participate on this web site... encouraged, even. The site's users value the credibility and expertise that organizations and their representatives bring to the dialogue.

Keep dreaming.

Despite Wikipedia's open-editing, self-policing infrastructure, the Wikipedia community (Wikipedia.org) is making its stance clear – "No spinsters allowed!"

Need proof? Look no further than WikiScanner, a tool that uses a database of IP addresses to connect anonymous Wikipedia edits with the organizations that created them. On his Web site, Wikiscanner's creator, **Virgil Griffith**, says its purpose is to "create a fireworks display of public relations disasters in which everyone brings their own fireworks." According to his tool, more than 187,000 organizations (or representatives from) have edited their own Wikipedia pages since 2004.

In a recent profile of WikiScanner, *PRWeek* told the story of a PR firm representing Pizza Hut which had come under fire for editing its client's Wikipedia entry. Using WikiScanner, someone traced the origin of these edits to the PR firm's IP address.

An executive with the PR firm immediately wrote this off as an isolated incident – editing Wikipedia was not something his firm did with regularity. In a tone that might be interpreted as apologetic, he claimed to set a policy within the agency that no one at his firm would interfere with Wikipedia ever again.

What were they editing, exactly? Were they "spinning"? What was the egregious misuse of social media that garnered them international attention? According the article, they were correcting the number of Pizza Hut restaurants in Europe. Amazing!

In a social media world, any interference from communicators is frowned upon. Many see it as manipulation of a pure channel; others, as "poisoning the well." But Wikipedia is too powerful, too relevant to ignore! So here are some things to keep in mind (continued on Page 26)

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when playing with fire – when working within Wikipedia.

- Rather than directly editing a Wikipedia page, whenever possible, offer edits and suggestions in the "Discussion" area of the Wikipedia entry. This way, other users can make the corrections you otherwise would have. This may not work for pages that receive less discussion or traffic, and in instances where you must edit the page itself, clearly identify yourself in the edit descriptions.
- Try to edit only for accuracy, not for wording or preferred messaging. Remember, Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia; it is not a place for ad copy or marketing messages. Before making any edits, read a number of Wikipedia pages to familiarize yourself with the style and tone. It's a tough pill to swallow, but an important one... in a Wiki World, truth about your organization is not defined by your boilerplate copy. So pick your battles, and try to blend into the Wikipedia community.
- Consider your ethics. While the easy answer for many communicators is to just edit the page from a personal computer (so the IP address would be difficult to trace by WikiScanner), others might argue that this is

deceitful and violates their communications principles.

- Prepare yourself for backlash. Wikipedia is such a gray area you really don't know what kind of response you'll receive from the Wikipedia community. So you'll have to weigh risk vs reward. Is there such an egregious error on your Wikipedia page that you feel you must correct it, even if you'll take abuse for it on blogs and message boards? There may be!
- And, most of all . . .
- Be patient! Wikipedia is a gray area now, but we can expect... we can hope... that some day professional communicators will be a valued part of the Wikipedia community (much like they have become within the blogosphere). Trust in social media is earned, and it will take some time before the Wiki World responds well to PR.

For an interesting read about the "don'ts" of Wikipedia editing, visit Wired Magazine's "Wikidgame" blog (wired.reddit.com/wikidgame/), a compilation of some of the more outrageous corporate Wikipedia edits found using WikiScanner.

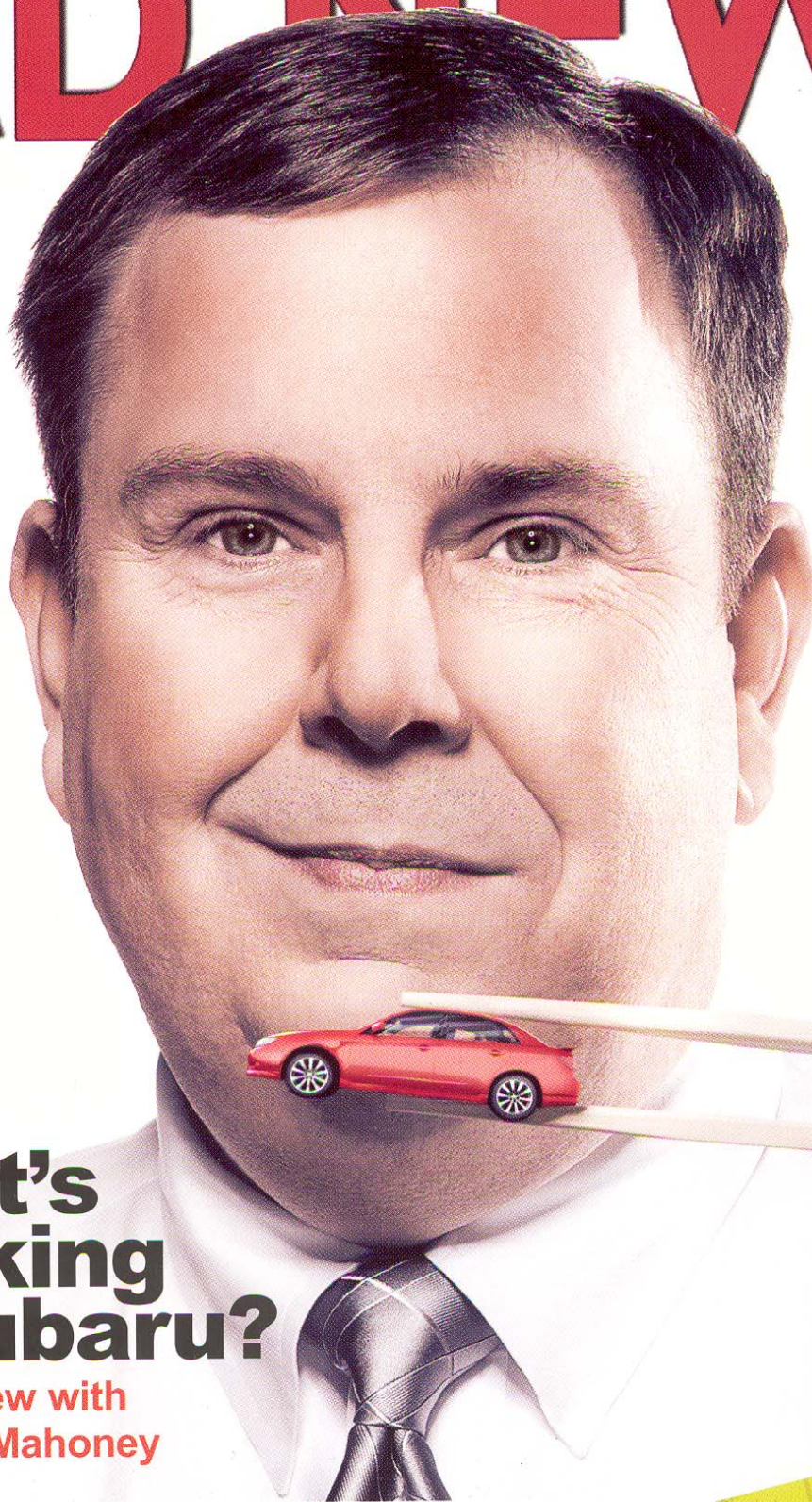
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