

Tech Talk with News Direct founder and CEO Gregg Castano

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News



Photo credit: Pam Rouleau

Did your career at Business Wire demonstrate the need to create something like News Direct?

I spent pretty much my adult life at Business Wire, 32 and a half years. The last few years I was there, I saw the rise of the digital era. What Business Wire does, it does well, but I felt there was more that could be done if we were able to use the new technologies that were available.

Because I was starting at ground zero with News Direct, I had the ability to design exactly what I wanted. The first thing I desired in the product was the ability to send out digital multimedia assets, like short-form video and infographics, without having to embed them within a press release. Newswires have the ability to embed videos and photos in press releases, but that’s the only way they can distribute them. We can just send out the multimedia, so that offers another option for PR people for all the content they’re creating.

The next piece was the platform. I felt that the platforms used by wire services were very manual. Some of them had made a philosophical decision not to offer a self-service model, but in my view, the generation that’s emerging is used to doing things online on their own. I wanted to differentiate by building a platform that’s not so much do-it-yourself as the platform does it for you. The technology in the platform will format your content, apply [Associated Press] style, do the spelling and grammar checking. A lot of things humans now do can be automated with some technology and some AI.

Did you retain any aspects of traditional newswire services?

We did research early on and found that most practitioners had mixed feelings about the editorial process with newswires. On the one hand, it was somewhat slow and cumbersome. On the other hand, they really like the interaction with someone knowledgeable when necessary. We decided to replace the parts that could be replaced with technology, but keep the human interaction part for people who needed it. We have a customer success team available via live chat, another thing no one else has at the moment.

I really think it’s disruptive and revolutionary for the wire-service industry to do these kinds of things. We deliberately didn’t put the word “wire” in our name; we wanted to stay away from that language and call ourselves a platform, because that’s what we really are.

What you call “actionable analytics” is part of your offering, too. What does that mean?

There are three things that those reports deliver to customers. One is the posting report, which shows where things appeared and that people did see them. Most newswires will give you a logo to click on, which should lead to the content. Unfortunately, they rotate content very frequently, so that can be a dead link. We provide a screenshot of the content as it appeared. Another thing we’re doing is providing actual traffic to your specific piece of content, not just aggregate numbers of visitors to the website on which it appeared.

The next pillar is social media. Right now, most customers using wire services will use a separate service for social media management. When you get to the social media part of our measurement report online, you’ll be able to put in your credentials, which we can’t see and don’t store, and that enables us to go into your social media accounts and extract all the metrics being generated from the press release, or whatever was sent out, and incorporate it in our report.

Finally, based on what I know, none of the wire services will report earned media coverage and pick-up unless you buy it separately. We’re putting that into the report we already give you.

You seem to have a lot of functionality, including workflow, permissions and version-tracking in the same dashboard. Is that another differentiator?

The thing that’s a little different is the collaboration piece. You can invite in other stakeholders if you need them to help with content you’re already working on. Those people get a secure link that allows them to work simultaneously with whoever else is involved. You can schedule and do things like that on other platforms, but in our case it’s the collaboration tool that makes us different.

How are you serving communications professionals in the environment of COVID-19-related information overload?

In this particular crisis, the ability to send out multimedia without having to write a press release around it is an advantage, because time is of the essence in what’s being distributed. You don’t have to depend on a third-party editor at a newswire to be available. Although I know newswires have done a very good job of mobilizing their editorial teams remotely, in our case it’s just not necessary.

Where people are trying to convey fairly complex concepts, probably the fastest and most digestible way to do that is through some kind of visual. The best example is the now-iconic image of the flattening of the bell curve. You don’t have to put a lot of words around it.