



## How an online media room significantly improved the quality of a company's communications program

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In an ever increasing Web-based world, consumers, investors, the media, and others are increasingly looking at corporate Web sites as a primary source of information. It is therefore of paramount importance that organizations provide a wealth of information in an easy to access format on their Web sites. Because there are a variety of different audiences seeking a variety of information, it is incumbent upon the organization to consider the information needs of each group—both in type and format—and create easy access to their information online. A leading provider of radiation technology, Varian Medical Systems, tackled this issue a few years ago and has seen significantly positive and measurable results ever since.



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## Background

As a leading provider of radiation oncology technology, over 5,200 of Varian's cancer radiotherapy systems and medical linear accelerators are in service around the world, being used to treat thousands of cancer patients every day. With reported sales of \$1.7 billion and more than 4,600 employees worldwide, Varian is the international leader in the design and manufacture of equipment and software for treating cancer and other medical conditions. The company is also a premiere supplier of X-ray tubes and flat-panel digital technology for imaging in medical, scientific, and industrial applications. In addition, its Security and Inspection group is the market leader in high-energy X-ray devices for non-destructive testing and cargo screening.

## Challenge

Varian's Web site, [www.varian.com](http://www.varian.com), is used primarily as a resource for product managers to offer technical information about Varian's equipment and software to their customers— hospital administrators, oncologists and medical physicists. The corporate IT department is focused on company operations, and the marketing department, with the help of an external Web development vendor, manages the Web site, keeping it up-to-date with content that is highly technical and industry specific. Three years ago, Varian's corporate communications team faced a problem: visitors to Varian's site who did not have an understanding of the industry were hard pressed to find information they could easily comprehend.

The corporate communications team needed a way to communicate what Varian does to people who don't necessarily speak the industry's language, such as the media and investors. They also needed a way to help their customers, i.e. cancer treatment centers, communicate the benefits of the Varian equipment they had purchased to their own key audiences—local media, patrons, and even patients.

Varian's corporate communications team decided the best vehicle for their needs was an online media room. They knew, however, that the corporate IT team already had its hands full with a plethora of mission-critical projects, and could not be diverted to focus on building a media room. Plus, the team didn't relish the idea of creating a media room architecture from scratch. The search began for a turnkey service that would enable Varian's communications team to create a separate area of the corporate Web site that could be populated by them in real time.



## Solution

In May 2005, the corporate communications team at Varian Medical Systems began using PR Newswire's MediaRoom service. This Internet-based service provided a flexible and customizable "skeleton" newsroom site, programmed to look exactly like the company's existing Web pages. It offered an easy-to-learn and-use Web-based interface, password-protected, for posting a company's information online with full control over the content, so authorized contributors could update the site directly from any place with Internet access, at any time of the day or night. An added bonus was that news releases would post automatically to the site once distributed through PR Newswire and be sent to opt-in e-mail lists, and RSS feeds. The site would also collect and analyze information about site usage, to show which areas were being accessed most often, and how users find them.


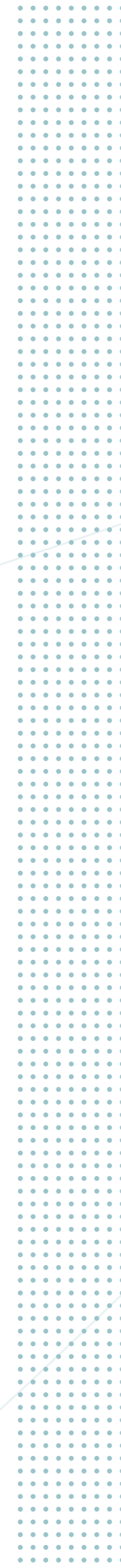
The PR Newswire MediaRoom service came pre-configured with Web page templates for organizing and displaying the elements most commonly found in corporate newsrooms, including organization backgrounders, online press kits, current and archived news releases, management bios, photos and contact information. Almost all of the elements could be reconfigured, moved, or retitled, and there were several "dark" (or empty) pages that could be switched on and off, to be used for uploading information about a new product release, an acquisition, or any major newsworthy event that merited its own temporary Web page. There were also interactive elements, including "send me the news" sign-ups (for people who wanted automatic notification whenever Varian released news), and online survey forms that could be used to poll customers or constituents on an idea or issue.

The MediaRoom service is easy to use for communications professionals who don't have a vast amount of IT "know-how" or support. Most importantly, the user does not need to be savvy in coding language but simply needs to have basic Microsoft Word, Yahoo!, Hotmail, or gmail skills in order to navigate the program. Finally, PR Newswire's MediaRoom service was quite affordable. This new Web-based resource made it easier for journalists and other audiences to find relevant information about the company in one place.

### Why does a company need an online media room?

The purpose of the online newsroom is to facilitate journalists' reporting about the company; however, the newsroom has another important purpose, which is to bypass journalists and other media "gatekeepers" altogether, and present the company's messages to diverse audiences like customers, employees, investors, vendors, and the general public. The Varian corporate communications team believed an online newsroom was a viable and effective means of disseminating the company's news while allowing for complete control of the message.

According to Jakob Nielsen, Ph.D. in human-computer interaction and principal of Nielsen Norman Group, and Kara Pernice Coyne, head of research at Nielsen Norman Group, harried and overworked journalists "don't have time to wade through deep, complex navigation trees or sift factual wheat from marketing chaff." Online newsrooms have been created "to present information in well-organized chunks that are easy to scan." Consequently, journalists' use of the Internet, and of corporate online newsrooms to generate story ideas, find relevant information, and gather background details, has been on the rise. Nielsen and Coyne report, in an article entitled "Designing Web sites to maximize press relations," that all the journalists in their study begin their stories by doing some Web research.



A number of authors point out that, while online newsrooms are ostensibly for the purpose of providing journalists with a service that increases the chances of garnering media coverage, they also serve a myriad of other audiences that may actually be even more important. Jeffrey Geibel, APR Principal for Geibel Solutions Marketing, especially argues for being “market- and customer-centered.” He points out that, when materials “go direct-to-Web,” there isn’t the normal filtering role that the media would play, and so communicators have to be prepared to appeal directly to the end user.”

Another benefit is gained from the use of an online media room; as a number of studies suggest, the use of Web-based public relations tools like an online newsroom confer greater status and decision-making power upon the communication professionals involved. Because a well-designed corporate newsroom becomes an important source of information about the organization for news media, clients, customers, investors, and other users, the team that creates and maintains it becomes increasingly important to the organization, both in their inward- and outward-facing roles. According to Michael Ryan, University of Houston, School of Communication, in an article for *Public Relations Review* (2003), “practitioners who know how to use new technologies...have a greater sense of inclusion in their organization’s decision-making coalitions.” Lynne M. Sallot, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, and research colleagues, agree that media relations via the Web enhances a practitioners’ expert power (*Public Relations Review*, 2004).

### How Varian uses its media room

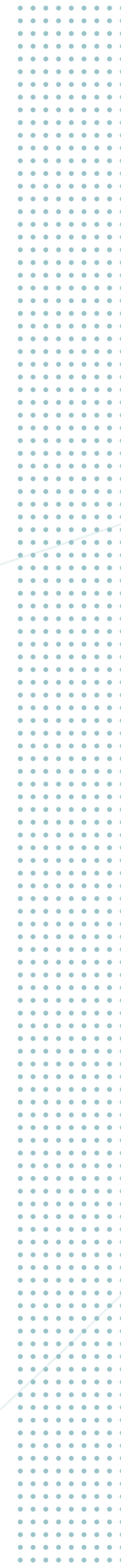

Once the newsroom was put in place, many other new ways of using it evolved, augmenting its intended role as an easy to navigate repository of information intended to help overworked, deadline-facing journalists conduct research at any time of the day or night. Over time, the Varian newsroom has turned into a hub for many different forms of public relations with disparate audiences. Since every element posted in the newsroom, from individual press releases to articles about the company, from fact sheets to images, has its own, distinct Web address or URL, it is easy to link to distinct information from other electronic communications such as e-mails and e-newsletters, taking any recipient who clicks on the link into the newsroom to view the highlighted item. What follows are some examples of this kind of usage and the intended audience:

#### Employees

- Whenever a new press release is posted, the public relations manager sends a company-wide e-mail to employees, with a link to the news. This serves to keep employees apprised of what the company is doing, and helps to tie together otherwise separate business units and employees working in the field or in other countries, who might not otherwise have much opportunity to understand the full spectrum of the company’s activities.

#### Customers

- When a major newspaper, magazine, or broadcast outlet does a significant, positive story about Varian, a copy is posted within the newsroom on the “Varian in the news” page. When possible, this links directly to the story posted on the news outlet’s own Web site, which opens in a new browser window when clicked. These links within the Varian newsroom are then sent to the sales and marketing teams. A number of them now send the links along to customers with a cover note calling attention to the coverage.
- At the request of the sales team in charge of working with major health technology purchasing organizations—i.e. organizations that help hospitals choose and purchase supplies and equipment— the public relations team began sending e-mails with links to company news releases to a list of their contacts. Over 200 of these “customer influencers” were initially put on the recipient list; only three ever asked to be removed. A couple even write back to thank Varian for sending the news!

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- The Vice President of Global Sales initiated a quarterly e-newsletter to customers. The public relations team generates the content by writing short blurbs and inviting the reader to “learn more” by clicking on a link that takes them to material in the newsroom. Varian thinks of this as “repurposing” existing material, so the workload involved in creating these newsletters is really quite small. Almost no new, original content needs to be generated.
  - Patients who are facing cancer treatment often write the company because they want to understand more about the Varian technology that will be used by their clinicians. Over time, the PR department has accumulated a good body of general news stories about Varian technology within the newsroom, as well as articles and white papers that explain the technology. They can send the links to such patients—and their doctors—with just a few keystrokes.
  - Customers who are looking to promote their new cancer treatment capabilities contact the Varian PR team for help in explaining the treatment process in non-technical terms, and how to position the technology against competing systems. The Varian PR team sends e-mail links to relevant materials in the newsroom. An added benefit here is that these customers can become “spokespeople” for Varian technology in their individual markets, conducting media relations on Varian’s behalf when they promote their own use of the company’s technology.
  - Product managers who create Web pages to promote Varian products link their customer-facing pages to stories, images and press releases in the newsroom, or adapt the content for use on their pages.

## Media

- Whenever a new press release is added to the newsroom, an e-mail with a link goes out to a list of medical trade press journalists. Journalists have been often quoted as not wanting to receive attachments (i.e. electronic documents) via e-mail, due to virus and other security threats. Sending a link to an online document within the body of the e-mail gets around this problem.
- The content of the newsroom enabled Varian’s PR department to quickly respond to an erroneous story that appeared in “Investors Business Daily,” which incorrectly stated that one of Varian’s biggest products was not yet cleared by the FDA (a falsehood they probably got from the competitor whose technology they were profiling). Within hours of seeing the story, an e-mail was dispatched with links to numerous press releases, including the ones that had gone out two years earlier when the product was first cleared by the FDA, and also to magazine stories about how major medical centers around the world had been using that exact device to deliver ultra-precise treatments for some time.
- Since the newsroom has had time to fill up with relevant materials, the Varian PR team rarely needs to assemble a physical package of background material for journalists who are working on a story about the company or one of its products. In a single e-mail, the PR team can send a journalist links to background materials in the newsroom, including fact sheets, images, digital videos, press releases, news stories, and magazine articles, including their own—Varian publishes a bi-annual magazine and the stories are archived in the newsroom among the articles and white papers.

# Results

The Varian online newsroom was created during the early months of 2005, and launched in May of that year. Collection of data about newsroom usage began in August 2005. The PR Newswire MediaRoom product comes bundled with an advanced online analytics program by Urchin Software from Google (that allows the user to look at various usage parameters for a day, a week, a month, a year, or any time period the user wants to specify). After the online newsroom had been in place for some time, the Varian PR team reviewed data tracked by the media room service and issued surveys to evaluate its effectiveness. For the purpose of this paper, the following parameters were tracked (definitions provided by Urchin):

- **Average sessions per day.** A ‘session’ is defined as a series of clicks on the site by an individual visitor during a specific period of time.
- **Average hits per day.** A ‘hit’ is a successful request to the Web server from a visitor’s browser for any type of file, whether an image, HTML page, an MP3 file, or any other type. A single Web page can cause many hits—one for each image included on the page.
- **Average bytes transferred per day.** Each file requested by a visitor to the Web site has a certain size associated with it that is recorded by the Web server. By tabulating the size of each file, the total volume of traffic is calculated.

Most of the metrics captured over the three-year period since the Varian newsroom was launched have shown steadily increasing usage of the site, as reflected in the following table:

Timeframe	AVERAGE SESSIONS PER DAY	AVERAGE HITS PER DAY	AVERAGE BYTES TRANSFERRED PER DAY (MB)
August–December 2005	255	3,357	105
2006	344	4,754	170
January–November 2007	633	5,325	213

The above positive increase is reinforced by the survey. According to the responses, the newsroom is working well for people who use it. Respondents were generally impressed by its ease of use, and particularly how easily they can find the materials they are looking for. This is likely—at least in part—a result of the decision to adopt PR Newswire’s off-the-shelf online newsroom product, MediaRoom. The creators of that product had considerable experience designing online newsrooms for corporate clients, and sought to insure that, if a customer did nothing more than populate their basic template, the result would be a solid newsroom with easy-to-find, commonly sought features and elements. Varian reaped the benefits of this work, “standing on the shoulders” of the product developers in structuring the company’s online newsroom.



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