
PR MAKEOVERS

Public relations image makeovers are not new for personalities and sporting stars, but the concept is growing more popular among corporations particularly when they are rebranding, repositioning or managing a crisis - when a bank of reputation or goodwill can play a pivotal role.

This is the very core of what PR does and is really about building a reputation for organisations and individuals. PR cannot provide a makeover for any organisation or individual in isolation. If there is to be a change in the image, there must be a real organisational change. You can't dress up a dog and expect everyone to be fooled by it. An image change has to occur over the long-term with a consistent communications plan. Bad opinions form faster than good ones and it takes longer to erase people's memories.

Only when the strategy is clear in terms of where the company is headed, can clearly articulate messages be formulated to explain the reasons and benefits - and the messages need to be explained again and again. It is similar to how an opinion is formed of an individual: first awareness is developed, then an opinion. Later, when you endorse the person/organisation or recommend them, that's the beginning of a relationship and that takes time.

At the end of the day, the organisation has to 'own' a position; other companies shouldn't be able to use the same descriptive terms as "company X" because it *"owns"* that positioning statement. Too often companies try to resolve image issues themselves, when they should be looking for objective advice. It is a constant evolution by companies. It is important for companies to understand how stakeholders view them and to stay relevant in (their) minds. Consumers change and so do governments - companies need to change with that or take the lead.

Corporate reputation is indeed important. Consumers are definitely buying products or changing the way they think about a company, based on how a company has acted. Consumers as well as investors are willing to take a stand and look for a company that has an ethical platform. People are particularly attuned after World.Tel and Enron and corporate reputation is high on the list of things being discussed by boards.

There are several compelling commercial reasons to redefine or make over the brand:

- Perception: when stakeholder perception contradicts how the company wants to be perceived or thinks it is perceived
- Relevance: for stakeholders to respond to an organisation, its products or services, the brand must be relevant to them

- Strength: a strong brand is the best competitive advantage and a company's best defence

So what is involved in a PR makeover?

First, a PR evaluation is required. To do this the organisation needs to have:

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A detailed plan that evaluates the company's image -- what has been done, and includes specific recommendations on how to project the right image to the right people.

Second, input from senior management on what the company wants to achieve and why. This is a very important part because it will be the "steering wheel" of the whole PR re-charge campaign.

Third, the organisation needs to come to a conclusion or make a forecast on what it thinks the economic and political environment will be in the coming year. It makes sense for the company to shout more during the economic downturn just as it's crucial to show that the company is strong and is here to stay.

Fourth, conduct a brief survey of public and customer perceptions about the company. Never take things for granted and this means not falling for the belief that just because complaints are not received, it automatically means the public have a good impression of the company.

Makeover Material

This handy checklist can help the organisation determine whether it is a good candidate for such a makeover. Reading carefully through each statement will help decide whether it applies to a particular company.

- The company has never developed a detailed PR plan, either on its own or with a PR firm
- The company has a PR plan, but it hasn't been through an annual check up and re-evaluation in more than a year
- The company hasn't sent out a news release within the past three months
- The company does not have a media list updated within the past six months that includes titles and addresses, and specifies how those on the list want to receive their news

- The company does not have a specific PR plan for its online presence
- Competitors receive more news coverage
- The marketing and advertising plan doesn't include a detailed section on public relations
- The company's customers don't agree about what the company stands for
- The company has not been proactive and provided written material for the trade press in its particular industry

If there is agreement that at least three of these statements apply to a particular company, then it should probably think about a PR makeover sooner rather than later. If more than five of them apply to it – then the company needs to start today!

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's Seventh PR Workshop held in New Delhi on December 10, 2002)