
ROLE OF PR IN BRAND BUILDING

PR's Powerful Role in Brand-Building

Top management is increasingly recognising corporate reputation as an important asset an organisation has and is turning to public relations counsellors to manage this asset. Simultaneously, public relations is achieving unprecedented attention for the essential role it plays in marketing.

In his foreword to the book titled Value-Added Public Relations by Thomas L. Harris, Philip Kotler, professor of international marketing at Northwestern University says that of the five major components of marketing, public relations and direct marketing are receiving the most attention and achieving the most growth at the end of the century. He attributes the growth of public relations to its great versatility, its aptitude for drama, and its ability to break through the information clutter to capture attention and interest.

Marketing guru Al Reis, who with his partner Jack Trout authored the landmark marketing books 'Positioning' and 'Marketing Warfare' says that in the past two decades public relations has eclipsed advertising as the most powerful force in marketing and branding. He says the rise of public relations is the biggest story in marketing and is amazed that the media has ignored it. We could, of course, tell him that reporters never reveal the source of their stories, especially if it would require them to admit that their sources most often have the initials P and R. In his latest book 'The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding', Reis says that the birth of a brand is achieved with publicity, not advertising. Reis declares that "publicity is more powerful than advertising" because "what others say about your brand is so much more powerful than advertising."

Public relations is being increasingly considered a vital component for building brand value, maintaining brand vitality, and establishing brand credibility. A study undertaken in the US in 1999, based on responses of more than 100 brand managers, provides new evidence that public relations is a valued marketing partner in building brand equity.

Of the majority of brand managers polled, 51 per cent, believe that public relations, when compared to advertising, sales promotion and new media, is critical ("very important") for establishing brand credibility. By comparison, 44 per cent characterised advertising as "very important," 21 per cent said sales promotion, and 17 per cent described new media the same way.

Furthermore, brand managers feel that public relations is the best way to garner third-party endorsement: 39 per cent said public relations was "very important," compared to 17 per cent for advertising, 13 per cent for sales promotion, and 10 per cent for new media. According to the survey findings, more than nine of 10 brand managers are using public relations in an integrated approach to help achieve brand presence." Just over a third of all brand managers believe that public relations is "very important" for its return on the marketing dollar spent, followed closely by advertising, sales promotion and new media which ranked 32 per cent, 30 per cent and 28 per cent respectively.

The report also examines how brand managers are using the Internet, and how public relations can work with an interactive marketing strategy. More than nine out of 10 managers reported they use the Internet in some way to help build their brand. But two thirds—some 66 per cent—believe that they use the Internet “not very extensively” or “not at all.” Despite media coverage of the online industry, only three per cent of brand managers reported using the Internet “very extensively” to build their brand. 83 per cent reported that they do little more than maintain a brand web site. Public relations (42 per cent) leads the way as the most popular discipline when using the Internet to build a brand, followed by advertising (banners) at 32 per cent, one-to-one marketing and database usage both tied at 35 per cent, and sales promotion at 29 per cent.

Most brand managers (86 per cent) allocate less than 10 per cent of their marketing budgets on Internet brand activity. Nine in 10 brand managers expect to increase their budgets.

That said, even the most forceful advocates of the role of public relations in marketing cannot claim that PR is the all-purpose solution to every marketing problem or that PR can do the job alone. Public relations is more integral to marketing in some industries than others. There is a reason why technology, healthcare, and entertainment are the fastest growing sectors of public relations. Every marketing situation is unique. There are situations in which public relations drives the process. Conversely, there are others in which public relations plays a less important role and some instances where PR may be inappropriate altogether. In assessing the PR potential of a given situation, it is important to realistically assess what MPR (Marketing Public Relations) can be expected to do and what it cannot be expected to do.

A SWOT analysis would help understand what contribution marketing public relations can realistically be expected to make in helping them achieve marketing goals. The underlying strength is the ability of PR practitioners to bring a unique perspective to strategic marketing planning. This perspective is grounded in the understanding of all the company's stakeholders, not just its customers. It is a perspective that takes into account the total business and societal environment that impacts brands. The tactical strength lies in our ability to manage the communication process not only through the media but also in cyberspace and by direct person-to-person contact.

Strengths of Marketing Public Relations: It is a cost-efficient way to reach target markets. It employs a spectrum of direct and indirect media to reach consumers and influencers. It uses technology to facilitate person-to-person direct communication with target individuals. It makes information available on demand around-the-clock. It benefits from endorsement of media, analysts, thought leaders and other independent third parties with no commercial axe to grind. It has a great potential for drama. It achieves credibility through all of the above. It makes advertising messages more credible. It is not perceived as self-serving. It circumvents consumer

resistance to salesmanship. It breaks through advertising clutter. Its reach is unlimited by budget constraints.

Weaknesses of Marketing Public Relations: You can't control the media. You can't control words and pictures. You can't control placement time and place. You can't repeatedly use slogans/other advertising devices. You can be bumped by breaking news. You can't repeatedly reach the same consumers in the same media with the same words and pictures. The Net is not as intrusive as broadcast media. Consumers don't come across information. They must seek it out. There are no standard effectiveness measures.

Threats to Marketing Public Relations: Newspaper readership is declining, especially among younger consumers. There is declining trust in all news media. The Net lacks credibility as a news source. Consumers must distinguish information from misinformation, fact from fiction, truth from gossip and rumour. Unverified attacks on companies and brands will accelerate. The cyberspace jam will require consumers to cut through a chaotic cluttered information superhighway. Public relations could become subservient to marketing and advertising. However, trends in both the media and the practice of public relations are converging, creating exciting new opportunities for marketing public relations to gain in importance in the years ahead.

Media Opportunities for Public Relations: Around-the-clock news coverage optimises opportunity to reach target audiences. Business coverage will continue to expand on television, as more consumers become shareholders. Proliferation of specialized print and broadcast media will be directed to special interest audiences. The Internet will grow exponentially as a major information provider. Online media will gain in importance as a supplement to, or replacement for, traditional newspapers, newsweeklies, and network TV. The convergence of computers and television will greatly strengthen the Net as a primary source for information.

Practice Opportunities for Marketing Public Relations: Public relations provides complete information that helps consumers make informed purchasing decisions. It can reach all key stakeholders with consistent complementary messages. It excels in building marketplace excitement, anticipation of products, and receptivity to advertising. It enhances and verifies advertising claims. It is a powerful generator of word of mouth. It can counter misinformation quickly and effectively. It can build relationships by using technology to connect companies and consumers. It enables instant and direct communication with consumers, thought leaders, and media. It can employ database technology to reach targetted individuals through E-mail, voicemail, and direct mail. It combines strategic counsel and crisis communications expertise to control damage and restore consumer confidence. It builds preference for trustworthy brands. It closes marketing credibility gap by substantiating salesmanship with information consumers want and need.

In this century, a better-educated consumer will reject slick slogans and salesmanship. They won't want to be sold. They will want to be told. They will have the tools to seek out information that will help them make informed

choices. The explosion of information about products and the companies that market them will be strongly supported by public relations.

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