

Public Relations Quarterly

Integrating the Strategic Benefits of Public Relations into the Marketing Mix

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Public relations practitioners — in agencies and in corporations — have always known that well conceived public relations programming helps organizations achieve diverse goals, which range from gaining recognition for a company and nurturing employee morale and loyalty to managing issues and crises to moving products and services through the marketplace. Public relations practitioners also know that public relations techniques — unassisted by other marketing tools, such as advertising — can effectively introduce and sell products, build brands, and effect strong market positions. After all, the highest order of public relations is to shape public opinion and influence behavior. Show me a marketing executive who would not want this power. What other marketing tool delivers third-party credibility, respected opinions and the believable views of market makers?

It seems odd that only today are advertising departments and agencies alike clamoring to bring the power of public relations to the marketing mix — often with predictably half-hearted results.

Public relations cannot simply be slipped into a marketing communication program.

It must be integrated when marketing plans are conceived and developed.

As consumers continue to get smarter, they also are becoming increasingly harder to reach. Many studies have shown that consumers are taking shelter from the commercial rain of advertising messages that are endlessly being poured upon them. And the unfortunate business person is also deluged by this commercial barrage at the office. Client demand for reaching target audiences, getting results and being accountable have always put public relations practitioners into the role of program strategists. Herein lies our strength and strategic contribution to the marketer.

Skilled, experienced public relations professionals, more than any other type of marketing “tool” manager, monitor the prevailing issues that impact public opinion. Just look at any auto supplier who hammers on the fuel economy, weight savings and low cost of his product. More often than not, it is strategic issues and related public opinion that drive companies and their marketing strategies.

To the marketer, public relations should be viewed as the thread that holds the marketing communication bundle together.

Public relations can weave the singular marketing message that may begin with a new product rollout speech by the CEO extending down to the copy on the side of the packaging. Marketing is more than getting the word out—it’s what’s being the product—loyal, happy employees and a good corporate culture that stimulates quality products and timely delivery — all of which are shaped by good public relations strategies.

It is at the front end, during the planning, when public relations must be plugged in if it is to succeed in performing functions we are all familiar with. That is:

- Softening the market place, predisposing consumers to accept advertising and promotional messages;
- Building credibility and nurturing public sentiment for the company, its service, products and brands;
- Extending the impact and reach of marketing programs, and;
- Delivering cost effective, often inexpensive support to external marketing budgets.

Also, the big bang that can be delivered for every public relations dollar spent can be strategically powerful during tough economic times.

Marketers must also learn to trust the ability of public relations to cut through the clutter and to create new channels of communication that reach opinion makers and thought leaders. The press release and feature articles of yesterday are now being complemented by the practitioners' ability to create new platforms for putting together purchasers with products. Seminars, workshops, co-op educational programs, online events and a whole host of other strategies are being deployed by public relations experts to put an organization's message before target audiences—in a credible, believable manner.

Public relations is also in the wings as a powerful counter force when special interest groups, industry watchdogs and other prominent opinion shapers surface to shake public confidence in a product, service or even the company and management behind the product. How many marketing plans have a crisis management component?

Too frequently, publicity is the widely held definition of public relations as well as its erroneously assumes limitation. By focusing only on the tactical (publicity, interviews, etc.) rather than the strategic (planning, issues identification, crisis control, etc.) contribution of public relations, the marketer misses an opportunity to increase the success rate of marketing programs. Success is tough when you consider the hundreds of new products that are introduced each year only to fail in the next.

Whether you are the vice president of marketing at a leading corporation or an ad agency executive heading a major account—integrating public relations into

your marketing arsenal should be standard operating procedure. Remember, the right opinion leader placed before the right audience is worth more than all the advertising in the world.

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Here's how to get started:

- Establish a system for integrating marketing communications services. Whether you hold a corporate marketing position and manage several outside communications vendors or you work at an agency and serve as the “gate-keeper” of services, the key is having a workable method to bring all disciplines together to complement one another.
- Take advantage of public relations counsel (corporate or agency) when you first decide to bring a product or service to market.
- Allow assessment and analysis of the marketing environment from a public relations point of view. Issues and obstacles that may surface as problems later can be identified and planned for early on.
- Program specific public relations components into your marketing timetable, identify emerging issues, potential points of conflict between the marketplace and the company, its management, products and services.

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- Encourage special targeting techniques of public relations. Lead with credibility builders and techniques that can cut the clutter of commercial rain.
- Keep an open mind, allow advertising to take a back seat if necessary. In fact, advertising, for many products may be viewed as too self-serving, particularly with the emergence of “green” and the other “conscience” products.

Integrated marketing was certainly the buzzword for the '90s. Today it's more than a catch phrase for bundled services, all components of an integrated marketing program, including public relations, must be given equal consideration by the marketer during planning to eke out every competitive advantage.

