

Maximizing P.R. Within a Marketing Communications Environment: Snagging the Mako Shark

Public relations is coming up a winner as major advertisers like P&G and American Express continue to slash their TV advertising dollars and look at new ways to reach consumers. “I believe today’s marketing model is broken,” said Jim Stengel, P&G’s chief marketing officer, recently. “Brands that rely too heavily on mainstream media will lose touch.”

But marketing executives who apply the same staffing, management and evaluation practices for public relations as they do for advertising are doomed to frustration, if not downright failure.

Public relations and advertising practices and people are as different as Mako and Great White Sharks; they are both powerful animals but they behave quite differently. Sports fishermen prize the lesser-known Mako Shark, but, like public relations, it can be a tricky little creature. Based on our experience managing both advertising and public relations organizations, here’s what marketing executives need to know to get the most value from public relations.

People: Evaluating the skills of your PR practitioners

Good PR people have skills that are different than those of other communications disciplines. Their “nose for news” is becoming more highly valued as all forms of media become more “journalistic;” their understanding of the influencer chain is unmatched; and they know how brand and reputation complement each other.

But PR people have traditionally not been sophisticated marketing or business people. To use PR most effectively within the marketing mix, you’ll need to understand the general strengths and weakness of most marketing PR practitioners. Here are the essential skills to keep in mind, with those at the top of the list least likely to be found.

- Focus on delivering outcomes vs. outputs (An overall marketing problem)
- Knowledge of fundamental marketing principles and practices and where P.R. adds value within this context
- Extensive planning, message development and creative experience within a multi-discipline environment (PR has not been integrated well in the past)
- Analytical and problem solving skills (Unless they have extensive crisis experience)
- Understanding of industry, business and relevant current and emerging trends (PR people are “trend” experts but less so on business/industry issues)

- Understanding of influencer-driven campaigns and affecting public opinion
- Experience in news environments and how to make news

Where PR people can lead the marketing effort are in the last two-areas, where their skills will be the best on the team. But careful assessment will be needed to determine if you have an overall A, B, or C player.

Process: Understanding PR's role

There are a lot of theories – most unproven – as to how to best incorporate public relations within a “morphed marketing” campaign. Here are some considerations to help evaluate the place PR should play in your communications mix.

- *PR adds reach:* Public relations can reach many different audiences with targeted messages cost-effectively. It is the “cover all the bases” answer in a 500-channel world. It also complements other mediums for marginal targets, increasing overall effectiveness.
- *PR struggles with frequency:* Unless you’ve got a killer story or you’re able to link your brand with a news story that has a long shelf life, PR has to be more creative in keep the same basic product/message story alive. A good PR program has many story angles aimed at difference audiences and one story after another ready-to-go.
- *PR lacks control:* PR has limited control over exactly what is said, when and in what context, especially in the media. Good PR people, however, can plan well enough to have an idea of when coverage will appear and can influence the shape of stories. But to do this PR needs early involvement in the planning process to properly frame the story.
- *PR adds credibility:* The biggest upside is that public relations still provides the most credible marketing vehicle. This strength is important in three strategic ways. As the first element of a campaign, it sets the tone for future communications. As an on-going element it provides air cover for products that may be controversial. And it adds an influencer stamp-of-approval that builds reputation.

Product: Going beyond traditional print media relations.

Tactically, print media continues to represent a majority of the marketing public relations non-paid media coverage. This represents a serious limitation on the role that public relations can play in maximizing marketing impact. Broadcast PR, the web and influencer programs are all powerful tools in the PR toolbox.

As a general rule, when evaluating the public relations component of a “morphed marketing” program, marketing executives should ask the following questions.

- Is the PR program a combination of print, broadcast and web media relations as well as an influencer component, with the right emphasis on each element?

- Is the PR budget large enough to allow for all of these elements to be used effectively?
- Is the PR program providing input into and taking advantage of the visual, print, celebrity and other assets used in other elements of a marketing campaign?
- Has the PR staff provided a complete analysis of the issues and trends affecting the marketing campaign and proposed a multi-faceted influencer program to support the marketing goals.

Measurement: Moving beyond a stack of clips

While PR may still be more art than science, it's not voodoo. The old-line thinking that you can't measure PR or that the volume of "clips" determines the success of PR is going by the wayside. Goals connected to business objectives, measurement and accountability are more common today than ever before and should be part of any public relations initiative.

Here are factors any marketing manager should consider when establishing accountability guidelines for the public relations part of the marketing communications mix.

- Are the programs goals directly connected to business results?
- Is there an evaluation methodology agreed to in advance of the campaign
- Are the skills/money available to execute the measurement
- What impact did the activity have on the business goals established?
- Is the program cost-effective – both as a stand-alone discipline and in relation to other disciplines?

Cost-effectiveness. That's one of main reasons marketing executives are enlarging the role of public relations in morphed marketing campaigns. When compared to advertising, it's a steal.