

PR

HELEN OSTROWSKI REMEMBERS the days when public relations was treated essentially as an afterthought by ad agencies working on a marketing communications plan for a consumer product or service. “When I started 14 years ago in this business and found myself working on a consumer campaign, the ad agency would call a few days before the pitch and ask for a couple of ideas and slides,” says Ostrowski, CEO of the New York–based global PR firm Porter Novelli. “Later we progressed to a week’s notice, and we were allowed to go to the meeting.”

Nowadays, PR has taken a considerably more prominent place at the big table as an increasing number of marketers are recognizing the discipline’s value and contributions as an important brand-building tool. An ANA survey of its members conducted earlier this year confirms that fact. When asked to rank the value of several above- and below-the-line marketing disciplines, 89 percent of survey

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Steals the Spotlight

AS COMPANIES GRAPPLE WITH HOW TO REACH INCREASINGLY DISTRACTED CONSUMERS, A CONVENTIONAL MARKETING DISCIPLINE IS GAINING FAVOR WITH MARKETERS **BY JOHN WOLFE**





Marketing executives say that PR relates more effectively to the current fragmented media environment than do other disciplines.

respondents rated PR as either “very important” (59 percent) or “important” (30 percent) to their overall business. It’s the highest such ranking of any discipline.

“Public relations has come a long way as a marketing tool in the past few years,” says Anthony Rose, associate director for global beauty external relations at Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble Co. “As media inflation proceeds unchecked and marketing noise increases, the credibility that PR and editorial provide cuts through the clutter.”

A Sense of Control

There has been no shortage of successful marketing campaigns in which PR has played a role. One of the most recent and highly visible occurred when Fisher-Price launched its new Elmo doll via a segment on ABC’s *Good Morning America*. The piece ran September 19 and dolls started flying off retailers’ shelves that very day. Other examples include McDonald’s use of PR to launch its premium salad line, in the wake

of childhood obesity claims, and Unilever’s Campaign for Real Beauty, for Dove, featuring women who weren’t ultraslim models.

Although the reasons for PR’s growing popularity are many, most PR practitioners and marketing executives say the primary reason is that PR relates more effectively to the current fragmented media environment than do other disciplines. Because media usage has changed dramatically with the advent of new media platforms, the variety,

speed, and facility of digital communications has put consumers in control of media. They now decide when, where, and how they obtain information of every stripe, be it news or entertainment.

From a marketing viewpoint, the result is that advertisers are no longer in control of their commercial messages the way they once were. Although advertisers still create and air 30-second TV spots, digital video recorders have forever altered when, or even if, those ads are ever seen by their target groups. And the Internet has opened entirely new vistas on how consumers receive and use information that are less and less under the control of any marketer. “As an advertiser, you don’t have the control you once had, and it makes marketers uncomfortable,” says Ostrowski, who also serves as chairman of the U.S. Council of Public Relations Firms, the industry trade organization. “You don’t have the standard people controlling the message anymore, and companies will need to adapt to the new

ANA MEMBER Q&A

IT’S ALL GOOD NEWS FOR PR

Anthony Rose, the associate director for global beauty external relations at Procter & Gamble and coleader of the company’s Influencer Marketing Center of Excellence, recently spoke with *The Advertiser* about the role of public relations in consumer marketing and how P&G strategically applies the discipline to some of its brands.

Q. What advantages does PR have over other marketing communication disciplines?

A. Credibility is a big one. As consumer mistrust of business and organizations increases, [consumers] are looking more and more for independent and credible sources that can help them ratify and calibrate their purchase decisions. PR plays a key role here by offering up relevant and credible information directly and indirectly through influencers. Also, it’s often more cost efficient and offers

maximum return on investment. This is a huge criterion when it comes to taking communication programs to a scale that can create true trial for a product with consumers.

Q. Do you think PR could serve as the lead discipline in an integrated marketing strategy?

A. It could. It depends on the consumer that is being targeted and the role of the strategy in question. When there are very clearly identified barriers to trial for a brand, PR often has an advantage as a lead player. A couple of years back, we developed a unique strategy to shift perception of Head & Shoulders shampoo to a much more cosmetic hair care brand. PR played the lead role in this strategy through a unique endorsement



that was secured from the icon of beauty — *Cosmopolitan*. In this situation it made sense for PR to lead. Another great example is the Pantene Beautiful Lengths campaign (pictured above) currently running in the U.S. It’s a cause-marketing effort that encourages women to grow, cut, and donate their hair to create wigs for women who suffer from cancer. PR has led the integrated strategy, and the program has been a hit with consumers. »



space because the paradigm has changed.”

Ostrowski and others believe that public relations is uniquely poised to take better advantage of this brave new world than any other marketing communications disciplines that rely on pushed messages. “This is a powerful place for PR to be because PR has never had the kind of control that other disciplines have had,” she says, pointing out that the very nature of PR is to build support for a position, brand, or service through credible, trusted influencers. Every time a PR person pitches a story to a reporter, for example, risk is involved. PR practitioners have never had the control that, for example, traditional advertising, sales promotion, and direct marketing have enjoyed, because they’ve always relied on third-party endorsers to deliver their message. A TV ad delivers a controlled message to a consumer, but a newspaper or magazine article placed by a PR person has been filtered through the eyes of a writer and an editor before it hits its target. As

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— *Andy Cooper, cofounder of CooperKatz & Co.*

such, the theory goes, PR people are accustomed to working in such a “wild west” environment and, therefore, are better equipped to achieve results.

Well Connected

Another reason PR works for marketers, experts say, is because it allows them to cover more bases with their brand messages than is true for other disci-

plines. “Public relations has a very broad view of all the audiences that impact an organization and its brands,” says Andy Cooper, a principal and cofounder of CooperKatz & Co., a New York–based PR firm that counts the ANA among its clients. “It includes all the stakeholders beyond consumers, like shareholders, policymakers, advocacy groups, and others in the public arena. So when a PR person thinks about strategy driving a brand, he or she is cognizant of how that brand will impact, engage, and potentially alarm all of those constituencies.”

P&G’s Rose agrees: “Large companies and their agency partners have understood that to truly connect with consumers they must reach them where and when they are most susceptible to the message. This necessitates using a variety of media to reach the consumer, and in recent years PR has increasingly become part of a much more customized approach that brands are taking with their consumers.”

Cooper also maintains that PR practitioners must exercise a very different type of creativity when crafting a marketing message than their counterparts at advertising agencies. “PR people don’t buy the media that presents our campaign to the public, so we have to be creative to sell our marketing campaign through the editorial media,” he contends. “In order for our marketing ideas to reach the public, we need to find creative ways to make them newsworthy and lifestyle-beneficial.”

Paul Woolmington, founding partner of New York–based Naked Communications, believes that PR has the opportunity to enjoy tremendous growth as a consumer marketing tool. “The honest truth is that I couldn’t think of a situation in which I would not recommend PR to a client,” says Woolmington, whose company, a strategic communications planning agency, works with both clients and marketing services agencies. “It’s a very valuable tool.”

Woolmington asserts that PR people bring a special perspective to the table because of their direct experience with media. “When you talk to PR professionals they have a very unique and valuable perspective on media because they are media people themselves,” he says.

ANA MEMBER Q&A

Q. Does PR work better for some brands or product categories than it does for others?

A. Conventional PR practitioners would probably argue that it works better in some product categories, but I disagree. While the leverage of PR is most prevalent in the beauty and health categories, I believe there’s a huge unexplored opportunity to leverage PR across businesses. Every business has a set of key influencers, and if PR can identify with precision the set that most influences the strategic consumer target for that brand, these influencers can be scientifically and consistently targeted to drive awareness, trial, and loyalty for a brand. A lot of what I’m talking about is a mindset change for PR practitioners to get out of their boxes and start thinking as holistic brand builders first and PR people second. This will force a sea change in terms of the commercial ideas that PR professionals can bring to the business and break the glass ceiling in terms of what is doable and what is not.

Q. Can you give some examples of where a PR campaign has worked particularly well for one of your products?

A. PR has been a huge differentiator for us in the beauty category. Good examples would be the work we have going on for Pantene, Head & Shoulders, and our Olay work with dermatologists, all with proven business impact. Also, a few months back I spoke, at an ANA conference, of a unique case on Dawn — one of our dishwashing liquids. A campaign was created around the “mileage” benefit of Dawn — how much value could be derived from a single bottle of Dawn. There was also the Ivory Baby contest that we resurrected from 30 years back. It’s a great example of a sustainable PR asset that we can leverage over time to build equity for the brand. Finally, PR has played a huge role in our Crest business, where the leverage of dental professionals was a game-changing strategy for the brand.

— *J.W.*

“They think in channels and media in very interesting ways. When we’re pulling a task force together for a client it’s always fantastic to have a PR person on the team. They just have an intuitive understanding of media.”

For her part, Porter Novelli’s Ostrowski is just glad that clients and ad agencies have come such a long way from the days when PR was relegated to second-class status. “Smart companies who create an effective integrated team will win big,” she says, “and those who use PR in a central way will be more successful than those who don’t.” ■

Next Steps

For more information on public relations, visit the Web site for the Council of PR Firms, prfirms.org. ANA members should also check out ana.net/mic. Keyword search: “Public Relations.”

Best Practice: Integrate PR

One of the best things marketers can do to ensure that their consumer public relations efforts are successful is to make the discipline an equal partner in an integrated marketing communications plan and not put it in a separate silo. Industry experts say it’s up to marketers to make sure this happens, but others believe the PR industry itself needs to speak up and defend its own position.

“My issue with the PR industry is that what clients want and what they’re being served are two different things,” says media and marketing consultant Paul Woolmington of Naked Communications in New York. “They want PR to drive advocacy and word of mouth and help facilitate the other activities they’re doing, but my impression is that much like with other disciplines, the industry is too siloed. It’s struggling to find a broader role that is an integrated role.”

Anthony Rose of Procter & Gamble agrees: “The key point here is that the game is moving from siloed focus on a particular medium to overall holistic brand building. I like to think of the marketing mix as a graphic equalizer — the individual frequencies/media can be orchestrated and moved up and down to meet the needs of the listener/consumer.” — J. W.



The Engine that Fueled Vespa’s Turnaround

In early 2005, Vespa motor scooters were suffering from low market share and minimal brand recognition. To fix the problem, Vespa’s parent company, Piaggio USA, hired the New York-based public relations firm of CooperKatz. CK’s challenge was to elevate consumer awareness for Vespa and ultimately help drive sales and increase the product’s market share.

The firm decided the best approach would be a comprehensive communications outreach program designed to encourage American consumers to consider adding Vespa scooters to their lifestyles. The result was “Vespanomics,” a well-timed initiative that cleverly positioned Vespa scooters to media and the public as a transportation alternative in the midst of rising gasoline prices and growing concerns about energy conservation and the environment.

CooperKatz’s cofounder, Andy Cooper,

said the plan called for building a continuous flow of scooter-focused stories via targeted pitches, special events, reporter briefings, blogging initiatives, media test rides, and curbside interviews that brought Vespanomics to life for the media, as well as for the public. “The ultimate goal was to underscore that scootering is for more than fashionable pleasure rides. Its economic and time-saving benefits offer a new way to think about transportation and mobility,” Cooper says.

Elements of the multifaceted plan included:

- a full-page “open letter” in *The New York Times* from CEO Paolo Timoni of Piaggio North America to the mayors of U.S. cities urging them to help the country reduce its oil addiction, lessen CO₂ emissions, decrease transportation congestion, and save citizens money by

- making their cities more scooter friendly.
- a series of story pitches to transportation and consumer reporters at daily newspapers and broadcast media outlets that included customized press material and access to Piaggio executives and to local Vespa dealers, owners, and enthusiasts for interviews
- taking reporters on tandem Vespa rides to help them experience firsthand what it really feels like to be on a scooter
- customized podcasts that highlighted the economic and environmental benefits of scooter ownership

The results were impressive. Since the launch of the Vespanomics program in June 2005, sales of Vespa scooters has increased by more than 25 percent nationwide. Online traffic to the Vespa Web site has consistently grown more than 100 percent per month, with nearly 1 million unique visitors during the third quarter of 2005. Cooper estimates that, to date, the Vespanomics program has resulted in more than 100 million audience impressions via 200-plus print articles and 50-plus TV placements. — J.W.