



Optimizing PR Strategy in the Age of Consumer Control

NOW THERE'S MUCH MORE AT STAKE THAN THE IMPLIED ENDORSEMENT THING...

Every dollar you spend in these challenging times needs to work effectively towards building share and sales. Therefore, PR leading to awareness is not as useful as PR leading to behavior change. How? Read on.

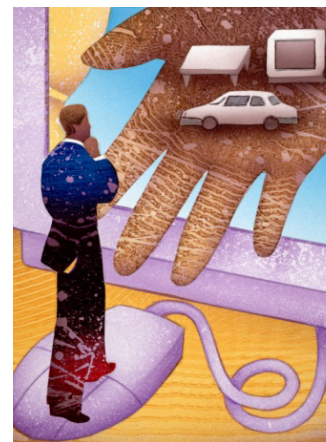
In the days of yore, PR was commonly positioned within the brand marketing mix as a comparatively cost effective source of added audience impressions (a.k.a. brand awareness) with a lovely parting gift: implied endorsement of an outside and respected third party – the editorial media.

While “earned media placement” will continue to be a centerpiece of client expectations from their agencies and internal staffs tactically, the substantive strategic contribution of PR has transitioned. Why? It is no longer possible to dictate consumer behavior through sheer tonnage in conventional push, interruptive, repetitive media tactics.

How, when and where consumers consume media has dramatically shifted (online) to places

where their self-interests are better served. Add the consumer's requirement for lifestyle relevance and personal engagement, along with a generous dash of palpable hunger for the authentic and honest. Stir briskly. What you have is a recipe for re-appraisal of the relationship between brands and consumers. Therefore the outreach techniques of the old command and control model have been replaced with strategies aimed squarely at working to earn a valued place in the consumer's life and menu of preferred brands.

This should be the driving focus of your PR investment: development, care and feeding of authentic brand relationships. This mission is accelerated by emergence of the Internet, the most PR appropriate content-centric, conversational media platform ever devised. So now the role of PR in the go-to-market toolbox moves from added awareness layer, to the tip of the spear in aligning brands with consumer interests and passions – **an effective path to building preference and preference drives sales.**



The outreach techniques of the old command and control model have been replaced with strategies aimed squarely at working to earn a valued place in the consumer's life and menu of preferred brands.



Brands must re-define their strategic mission to accommodate not just the requirements of commerce (sell more stuff) but also embrace the relationship building prerequisites that now underlie how brands achieve their meaning and value.

Simplified, PR's strategic role in the brand building mix should center on **experience creation and message validation**:

One: How consumers feel about a brand has great bearing on their willingness to buy. This means brands must re-define their strategic mission to accommodate not just the requirements of commerce (sell more stuff) but also embrace the relationship building prerequisites that now underlie how brands achieve their meaning and value. *Said another way, brands must behave as enablers and facilitators of consumer lifestyle interests.* It is through demonstration via authentic, relevant experiences that a brand can become truly real to its target and thus gain traction.

Two: Nearly everyone agrees word of mouth (WOM) is the most credible and persuasive channel of communication. Tracing the path of authentic, organic WOM to its source we find a collection of influences including mainstream editorial media, blogs, chat rooms, social media platforms, consumer product reviews, pundit opinions and other content mediums that together form the basis of prevailing views and impressions of brands and their value. *Consumers demand external validation of what brands assert about themselves and benefits of use from sources they believe are authoritative and credible.*

Brand Experiences – Making it Real...

PR is in the experience building business -- a skill set that no longer resides on the outer edge of

significance to brand development. Rather it is front and center in bringing brand relationships to life. Experiences help fuel the twin engines of authenticity and engagement, both key to opening the dialogue between brands and consumers. Experiences by the way are often served up in places where the distance between brand and consumer can be measured in feet (events) and inches (Web environments).

Brand Message Validation – Affirming the Truth...

Consumers want respected, trusted sources to "validate" assertions and representations made by brands and businesses. PR is the best path to drive demonstration and validation of essential truths. There remains a built-in "truth" value that springs from confirmation by respected sources in various media channels. PR strategy can cultivate and mine what we call the Circle of Influence. The Circle essentially consists of the consumer's Board of Directors -- those they routinely look to for advice on things they buy. Media (all channels and all forms in the new media age), especially citizen journalists, play a central role in the vital process of information flow to and through the Circle.

So to optimize your PR investment, look first at the strategic foundation: your plans and programs should address both experiences (online and off) and message validation. In doing so, the outcomes will far exceed the low-cost awareness benefits and more directly impact preference and sales.

