

How media relations helps the marketing plan

You're the product manager or marketing director responsible for marketing a new product, let's say for sake of argument, a new high tech device.

You have a limited budget to promote the new product, say \$20,000, and you wonder what will give you the better bang for your buck, media relations or advertising?

Your strategic planning to date has definitely satisfied the "new, better, different" criteria, has an identifiable niche, has clearly defined target markets, has a strong point-of-difference from your competition. In short, offers strategic merit.

You wish you could do both media relations and advertising, and have seen the effectiveness of integrated campaigns that have ten times your current budget.

You have research data that clearly indicates which media your target markets consume. You realize you can't even come close to getting enough repetition on the broadcast segments highlighted, and that even purchasing print advertising at the frequency and size you think is needed may be quite limited.

So what value can media relations bring to the table?

First of all, a seasoned media relations practitioner will help you see the product from the news media's point of view. Your strategic thinking should be focused in the direction of what an editor and/or freelance journalist will see. In short, where is the real story? In what context does it fit? What does your product offer their audience? Development of this kind of strategic key messaging is imperative to give your product's key messaging a chance to get through the journalistic gatekeeper to the desired end audience, your ultimate target.

Media relations is one of the few marketing communications disciplines that has to go through such a gatekeeper exclusively. But in that end lies its true value. Because the gatekeeper is charged with the formidable task of informing his or her audience with third-party, relatively unbiased information, the value of that information is considered far more believable by an audience than an advertisement. And as the pace of technology development explodes logarithmically, journalists realize the value of helping their audiences with making crucial technology acquisition decisions. In many ways, the opinion of the journalist is that of a trusted family member, neighbour or friend.

The ultimate goal of good marketing communications is generating favourable word-of-mouth advertising through product trial. Good media coverage is that: word-of-mouth from a trusted source, comparable to a family member, neighbour or friend who has tried the product and says it's good. So make the media an integral (if not primary) part of the

product trial/word-of-mouth advertising process. (Just make sure to provide an adequate supply of the new product for news media demos).

Many marketers equate news media coverage with what it would cost to fill a similar amount of airtime or space with an advertisement. It is very important to remember one cannot buy editorial coverage. It's not for sale. For that reason, its believability with an audience is far greater than the content of an ad. How many times more believable requires a lot more space than here to deal with properly, and frankly, a lot more work by the PR industry to develop academically endorsed, empirical paradigms to determine the true value of an impression. Just remember, media relations, unlike advertising, is more than counting impressions, it's a major step in building long term relationships with the gatekeepers who have access to your target markets.

Canadian news is somewhere in the middle with you

Public relations (PR) professionals who practice media relations in Canada should be aware of the Canadian news media's distinct peculiarities. They are parked somewhere between media practices in the United States and the United Kingdom. While Canadian journalism has deep roots in the British scene, it is also influenced by what Canadians read and what they see south of the border.

Canadian news media are middle-of-the-road in terms of the severity of their coverage. They are also generally more difficult to deal with than American reporters, especially when it comes to corporate spin or product publicity. There is a more profound distrust of Big PR in Canada.

The British news media seem to generally hate everybody – big government, big business, celebrities, the Royal Family. Go into any Canadian newsroom, you will find oodles of Brits.

Canadian news media are far kinder to politicians, distrust big corporations and tend to ignore our celebrities unless they've made it big in the U.S. or U.K. Where else could a prime minister actually clobber a protester without a media circus? "That kind of story I think probably would have had a great deal more play and commentary in the United States and Britain if it had happened there," notes Michael Nolan, a journalism professor at the University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Information and Media Studies.

He says the personalization of news has not been as intense in Canada. A good exercise would be to "compare our Canadian news media treatment of Margaret Trudeau's behaviour during the break-up between her and the prime minister with the closer scrutiny of the Clinton-Lewinsky coverage," he notes.

One anecdote from my days as a radio reporter in Alberta stems from the inadvertent presentation of fur coats to Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson before their honeymoon in the Far North of Canada. In fairness, Alberta's premier did not check with his protocol officer and paid for the honeymoon gifts out of his own pocket. The British press nearly