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Branding and the Role of Public Relations: A Bottom-Dollar Proposition

By Julie Gross Gelfand

It used to be that advertising was king. If you had a product or service you needed to sell, you went to an advertising agency and developed an advertising campaign to get your item to the public.

Then marketing joined the fray, and advertising became an extension of other things you were doing to market yourself, like trade shows or mailings. Eventually branding assumed center stage. Now everything you did to promote, market or sell your product or service, your company or even yourself emanated from the branding mandate. As it should be! The critical importance of strategically focused, consistently delivered messaging cannot be overstated.

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One of the very interesting aspects of the rise of branding is the shift in priority of the elements that constitute an integrated branding campaign. For example, since the Internet emerged as a powerful new medium, the development of interactive web sites has rightfully become a standard component of the communication line up. Creating a venue for your customers and prospects to engage with your company 24/7 is unprecedented as a marketing opportunity. As marketplace clutter has become denser, and print and broadcast media have become increasingly costly—prohibitively so for many advertisers—non-traditional communication of all kinds has commanded an increasingly larger percentage of the total branding budget.

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Public relations has been a key beneficiary of this new order. Where once public relations was defined as "publicity" and was nearly an afterthought in the marketing line-up, today public relations can be the driver in a campaign. The two key reasons for this are the relatively low cost of public relations and the credibility it delivers as compared to traditional paid advertising or other types of marketing.

Examples of Successful Marketing and Branding Strategies

Procall Technologies, Inc. is a startup company with a proprietary technology called SoftwareToGo, which is the first electronic delivery system designed for retail software sales. HLD/Blankman Public Relations were initially engaged in 1999 to support the first beta test. With a very limited budget, the company could not afford to launch a national advertising and marketing campaign. So they relied on the team to orchestrate a public relations program to build awareness and help drive interest from software retailers, publishers and consumers. HLD/Blankman Public Relations also provided the marketing basics—logo, brochure and web site—as well as the design for the point-of-purchase display.

The team went to work, issuing press releases, pitching editors, developing story angles and uncovering new places to direct these efforts to reach key constituencies. They also created a newsletter and nominated the company for an Innovator of the Year Award from the leading business journal in their market, which they won. Within six months, the company had doubled the number of software publishers utilizing their distribution system from 22 to 44, including five of the top 10—without ever running a single advertisement. That's the power of public relations.

After a three-year hiatus during which the second beta test of the system was completed, HLD/Blankman announced a national contract with CompUSA as well as the company's entry into the online fulfillment end of retail software sales. More recently, HLD/Blankman Public Relations helped launch the company's IPO.

In less than five years, Procall Technologies created a powerful new market niche and went from starving startup to capitalized public company—all driven by blood, sweat, tears and strategic public relations.

Another example of success can be taken from this year's Gold Quill Award winners. The Saskatchewan Industry and Resources is a provincial government department that works with private and public sector stakeholders to strengthen and diversify Saskatchewan's economy. The department's marketing and public affairs team leads promotional efforts to help improve perceptions about the career and business opportunities available. Due to a variety of factors, including an economic downturn in key sectors such as agriculture, public confidence in the future of the province began to decline in 2001. The team established a need to increase optimism among Saskatchewan people and increase awareness of the province's recent impressive economic growth.

By focusing on in- and out-of-province audiences, the public affairs team used television advertising, increased partnership initiatives, and is planning a centennial in 2005. Through their efforts, they generated 107 positive media items, and in a national poll conducted in June 2003 of 1,639 senior business people across the country, 43 percent recalled seeing the campaign's advertising. Out of that number, 38 percent were more interested in conducting business in the province, and 47 percent said their attitude toward the province became more positive after viewing the ads.

How to Use Public Relations in Branding

The job of public relations is to get your message out in ways that create layers of value for your target audience(s) while stretching your marketing dollars as far as possible. At its best, public relations is a strategic marketing and branding tool used to accomplish a stated business objective.

Let's say you issue a press release about your new product with a photo to a key trade publication. Now your prospects will see your product in the context of the publication's editorial coverage and therefore perceive a recommendation from the experts who put out the publication. That's a giant step better for you, both in terms of cost and credibility, than running a paid advertisement.

Of course the difficult part is that unlike in advertising, where you have absolute control over copy and layout, you have no direct control over how your product will be treated in a publicity article. That's where science meets art. You need to reach the appropriate editor with a persuasive message that provides a service to his or her readers—preferably in conjunction with the publication's editorial calendar needs.

The reason the effort pays off is that editors need content. By recognizing their needs, you have provided a valuable service that serves you well, too.

Where are you most likely to find the reporters and editors you want to reach? True, you can call or e-mail them at their offices. If you're lucky, they may even respond.

But think about where the reporters and editors you want to reach are likely to congregate—at the industry trade shows, for instance. Have you explored all the avenues to reach the press room (literally and figuratively)? Do the registered journalists know who you are and where your booth is? What are you waiting for?

Seeking public relations opportunities out in the market is one way to go. Looking inside your company for potential story ideas is another. There is probably a wealth of material waiting to be mined, which you haven't taken the time or initiative to recognize. One new marketing client was dragging their feet in making the decision about whether or not to take the public relations plunge. "We're a boring company in a boring industry," they claimed. However, a treasure trove was waiting to be found. In the first month of service, the company landed in the most important trade newspaper covering their industry, as well as the most important business periodical in their geographic market. A double play in the first inning!

Many of the same public relations principles that apply to business-to-business marketing also hold true for business-to-consumer marketing. For example, one client's approach to marketing was very grassroots oriented. They were very active participants in and contributors to their community. Their advertising reflected their community commitment as well. But the stool was missing the third leg! Without public relations, the company was foregoing the tremendous

opportunity to tell their story.

We exploited every opportunity to promote the company's extensive community relations activities, right down to the weekly newspapers that are often the backbone of community life. Our program became a critical foundation in their entire branding initiative over the following five years, and set the stage for the next phase of the company's evolution.

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Public relations can also be utilized to promote acceptance of an idea. HLD/Blankman once represented a trade association in the segmented generic pharmaceuticals industry. The public relations mission was to establish our client as the recognized voice of the industry, to broaden public dialogue about the issues and to win a seat at important congressional hearings that would determine the industry's fate. What complicated the challenge was that the generics industry not only lacked cohesiveness, but was also completely overshadowed and outspent by the brand pharmaceuticals industry. Despite the obstacles, a focused, consistent and aggressive public relations campaign successfully achieved all of the stated goals. The association became a regular source of commentary in news stories about pharmaceutical prices and was invited to give testimony in every major hearing in Washington.

The moral of the story boils down to this. When it comes to communication, branding is everything. Consistent, strategic messaging that reaches your target audience(s) at the right time, in the right place, in the right way is the only way to fly. In deciding what tactics to employ, look at the big picture, prioritize your objectives and put a budget against it. Chances are, public relations can be a key contributor to the branding mission and the business plan. You can bet your bottom dollar on it.

Julie Gross Gelfand is Vice President & Director of Public Relations for HLD/Blankman Public Relations, a division of Harrison Leifer DiMarco. She has counseled clients from Wall Street to Main Street in strategic branding through public relations, and is an expert in creating and protecting the branded image. She can be reached at (516) 536-6811 or jgelfand@hldblankman.com.