

Why public relations could – and should – take over the brand function

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There is a confluence of good branding practices and corporate reputation management in the success of modern companies. (I say companies, but the same can be said for associations, organizations or institutions.)

This article attempts to show why PR practitioners, with their experience in managing corporate reputation, are in an excellent position to take over the brand function as well — and what they must do differently if they wish to do so.

I came up on the advertising side of the business and have always believed that a brand is the link between what a product is and what it stands for. However, the “what it stands for” dimension is much more intricate than advertising’s inclination to simplify things down to a 30-second television spot or a print headline. Entertaining such heretical thoughts had me unceremoniously dismissed from the temples of advertising.

Likewise, many in the PR world believe corporate image is, in and of itself, a goal (rather than a means to an end). Suggesting that noble public relations should dirty its hands in the pursuit of selling something has had me unceremoniously dismissed from many a temple of public relations as well.

Yet, I persisted in thinking that a brand is a complicated, multidimensional animal and that all communications disciplines should be brought to bear in linking it to customers and other constituents.

Well, I may have lived long enough to be proved correct.

There is mounting evidence that customers do care about “what it stands for” — they care about the people and practices behind the product.

Take Wal-Mart, for instance. Everyone likes low prices every day. Who would argue otherwise? But some people are not so comfortable shopping at a retailer with alleged predatory competitive practices and unsavory personnel practices. Wal-Mart puts such pressure on its vendors to cut costs that efficiency-minded manufacturers are forced, among other things, to lay off scores of workers.

Effect on the Wal-Mart brand: Who cares if Tide costs only \$3.88 every day if people are unemployed and can’t afford to buy anything?

Another example: I had a significant

portion of my 401(k) in Putnam Securities. I liked Putnam and the 20 percent return I got during the good old days. But I don’t like Putnam so much anymore having learned that big institutional brokers earned more by taking advantage of after-hours trading and market timing. Effect on brand: You cheat people like me.

It works both ways. People trust products from Johnson & Johnson because the company has earned a stellar reputation for quality products and a highly ethical corporate culture.

So, why does reputation matter?

- Given equal choices, customers want to do business with people they like.
- The shift from manufactured goods to a service and information economy has moved the emphasis from products to people, and a corporate ethos that is customer-centric.
- In a marketplace of rapid commoditization and unsustainable product advantages, something other than features and benefits has to be the differentiator.

• With rare exceptions, there are few products for which one singular aspect is enough to define the brand: If there were a full-size sedan that got 100 miles per gallon or a pill that made you sing like Sarah McLachlan, you wouldn’t need to do much else. But most brands are a bundle of interrelated practical and emotional factors. In that complex network, the makers and distributors of the brand play a significant role.

• There is no one customer for any product. Beyond customer types segmented by demography and psychography, there are distributors, influencers, gatekeepers, pundits and financiers, all of whom have some stake. Multiple constituencies call for multilayered brands.

The PR advantage

Why should PR counselors be in any better position than ad managers, marketing managers or sales managers to manage the brand?

PR people usually have access to the top executives because they work on many projects of importance to the higher echelons of a company. Advertising agency account executives work with ad managers and rarely see the president.

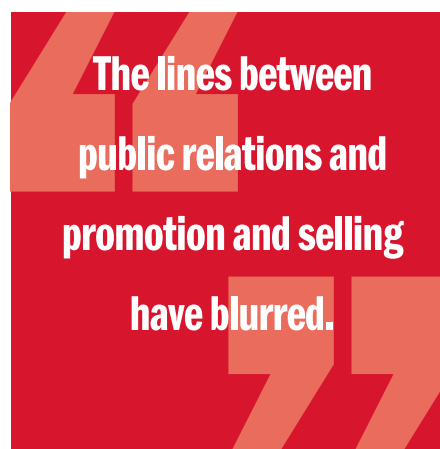
PR counselors also often manage complex, thorny issues that affect the viability of the company.

When “Dateline” shows up at the door, nobody calls the ad manager or the

IT department — they call public relations. In the course of crafting messages and speeches, PR counselors cannot help but shape the policies they are articulating for the CEO.

PR counselors, for the most part, look and act like the executives and directors they serve. There’s something comforting about that, and being comforting is essential to bonding.

PR counselors offer extraordinary value. A \$100,000 PR fee that keeps the brand in the news is a lot easier to commit to than a \$100 million advertising campaign that may or may not become the next “Got milk?” promotion.



Necessary changes

If PR counselors want the job, several strategic things need to change.

It isn’t about ink; it’s about change. The goal of old-style public relations was clips and sound bites. The role of public relations in branding is shaping opinion, reducing dissonance, making contact, opening channels of communication and facilitating understanding.

Media relations is being replaced with customer relations — remember who counts. Public relations itself is an outmoded term. In branding, there are no large, homogeneous publics. The brand must link with the needs and wants of individual customers. It’s more a game of private relations.

Avoidance, subterfuge and diversion cannot be tolerated in the transparent 21st-century marketplace. There are few jobs for spin doctors in brand world; we need internists who can make companies healthy from the inside out.

Several tactical elements must change as well. For instance, consumer research and planning need to be applied. PR people could borrow a page from the

advertising agency account planners who make a career out of understanding everything about the customer so they can make that connection relevant.

In branding, there are more publics or stakeholders to manage. PR counselors need to understand sales cycles, sales sequences, distribution channels and the role of other middlemen and influencers beyond the media.

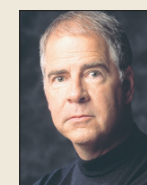
Since there are no more big-three networks or national magazines that can deliver enormous blocks of the population, PR counselors need to expand the menu of channels to include niche outlets, the Internet, blogs, out-of-home events and other means of reaching customers when they are most open to suggestion.

The main — perhaps only — tool of the traditional PR counselor was the press release. PR professionals need to get a bigger toolbox. The lines between public relations and promotion and selling have blurred. It’s better to be a jack-of-all-trades nowadays.

It’s important to become more multicultural. The multicultural market we play in includes people of different genders, ages, ethnicities, as well as other differences that are not so apparent: sexual orientation, political and religious convictions, liberal or conservative views, cultural and environmental influences, life stage and lifestyle issues, phobias and biases, and so on. Such factors may have huge bearing on attitudes toward your products and your company.

PR people have strong writing skills (though there is always room for improvement). We write for a living. Unfortunately, people under 30 grew up on TV and, worse, MTV, and relate more to images. PR counselors must also learn to communicate in pictures and simplified idioms.

Make friends with the people in other departments, including advertising and IT. Public relations has been an isolated field, harking back to J-school purism. Integration of communications disciplines is the key to linking multidimensional brands with the multicultural, multimedia-driven marketplace. You can lead it, but you can’t do it alone. **T**



Tom Robinson came up on the advertising side of the business, but is a card-carrying integrationist who believes in the power of public relations to drive brands. E-mail: trobinson@hjgr.com. Web site: www.hjgr.com.