

The Death of Media Relations?

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With the decline in traditional journalism and cutbacks in news staffs, media relations is under pressure. There are fewer reporters, and more competition for attention. It is impossible to “sell” stories to media who are no longer there. This raises several questions. If traditional media disappear, what is left for media relations? Is media relations still worth doing? Is it dying as a PR skill, or evolving? These questions go to the heart of a PR craft used for more than a hundred years. In light of rapid change, the questions should be re-examined.

The functions of media relations

There are two functions for media relations – awareness of a product, service or idea and fostering positive regard for a product, service or idea, i.e. credibility. One can have awareness without credibility. One cannot have credibility without awareness. That is, an individual can say, “I’ve heard of it, and it is a great product.” The individual cannot say, “I’ve never heard of it, and it is a great product.” Most of the time, media relations uses a combination of awareness and credibility-building with strategies for each.

Awareness is threshold communications – from no recognition to some, and it is a formidable task unto itself. Advertisers spend billions annually advertising products, services and ideas just to achieve a minimum level of awareness among target individuals. Few advertisers ever achieve much recognition in spite of targeting.

Marketers often view media relations as a form of cheap advertising and a budget stretcher to raising awareness. They have taken this view since the beginning of modern PR. They are as happy with squibs mentioning a product, service or idea as they are with full-blown articles. Their desire is to gain multiple mentions frequently. From this stems a theory that any publicity is good. Thus, for example, a publicity stunt or media event might garner product mentions without evaluation of the product. Awareness communications require persuasion of a third party (a reporter or editor) to gain a mention but it is usually confined to naming.

Awareness communications uses any medium that is helpful in getting a message out whether newspapers, TV, radio, e-mail, web pages, blogs, twitter, Facebook, MySpace or something else. Awareness is often, but not always, tied to other elements of a marketing campaign as a complement and reinforcement of message-sending. There is frequently, in other words, a timing element to raising awareness. A marketer seeks to reach target individuals as quickly as

possible to gain recognition. Measurement is based more on total exposure than on credibility, although there are ways to evaluate whether articles have positive or negative slants.

Media relations as credibility communications seeks recognition plus setting or changing perception about a product, service or idea. It emphasizes the implied endorsement of a third-party journalist and of the medium itself. It assumes members of the media are not beholden to the message sender, and if they are, credibility is destroyed. Media relations as credibility does not seek to get a message out everywhere but in the right places to the right key opinion leaders (KOL). For example, a media relations practitioner would go to Walter Mossberg of the *Wall Street Journal* before approaching *Engadget* (<http://www.engadget.com/>). If the practitioner could get Mossberg to do a first review, the practitioner would give Mossberg an exclusive and hold further publicity until Mossberg's opinion appears. Or, an electronics gear manufacturer might seek an impartial review from a publication that tests equipment objectively in a lab because of the greater credibility of test results.

Media relations as credibility is often top down rather than bottom up. That is, the media relations practitioner seeks to get the approval of KOLs in the media first before going to the larger marketplace on the assumption that positive statements tend to cascade from respected media to media with lesser credibility. The media relations practitioner assumes a medium is a proxy for those who read, listen to or view it – that is, a more educated, higher-income reader will subscribe to *The New York Times*, than to the tabloid *New York Post*. On the other hand, if the product, service or idea is targeted to a middle or lower market, the media relations practitioner might avoid *The New York Times* in favor of the *New York Post* because it will be the KOL the practitioner needs.

Credibility, however, is a tenuous quality. It depends on the target individual and credibility that person posits in a reporter and medium. Many readers like the *Washington Post*. Others can't stand it. By extension they like or dislike reporters and columnists associated with the *Washington Post*. A medium may also have multiple proxies for multiple audiences with varying credibility assigned to each. Individual readers may assign high credibility to a publisher's international reporting, but low credibility to its sports reporting, high credibility to its arts reviews and low credibility to its movie reviews. – or vice versa, or some other combination of credibility.

Credibility attaches to those reporters, reviewers and media whom a target individual considers trustworthy. With thousands of readers a newspaper is a variegated proxy with patches of credibility spread through its columns. So too, TV and radio news and web sites and all other media with one exception. If a medium publishes about one topic only, a media relations practitioner can measure its total credibility on the basis of those who read, view or listen to it. Consider, for example, a web site that only does movie reviews, such as

rottentomatoes.com (<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>) or aint-it-cool.com (<http://www.aintitcool.com/>) . Their readership and credibility are a direct result of readers who are passionate followers of cinema.

Does media relations check the proxy relationship between medium and target individual? Yes, but not well. Practitioners check circulation and demographics but have little idea who an individual reader is, nor how valuable that person is to the client, nor whether the target individual saw the report on a product, service or idea, nor whether the individual considered the report credible. To paraphrase John Wanamaker, 50 percent of media relations is wasted, but one never knows which 50 percent. Lack of accuracy and an inability to control message frequency hamper media relations as a credibility tool. This explains why marketers prefer more rather than fewer mentions because they can measure frequency. Yet, empirical observation proves that conferred credibility of KOLs in the media works. KOL reports can change debate, launch products and services successfully, spotlight issues that were previously ignored or hidden, change perception and provide a dramatic uplift or catastrophic decline to a product, service or idea. There are numerous examples of the positive impact of the right story in the right place at the right time. There are as many examples of the damage a wrong story has created.

Awareness and credibility – a balance

If credibility has less value in awareness communications, then why do marketers want good reviews? The answer is that credibility has value for most, if not all, marketers. No one likes bad publicity. Marketers who say any publicity is good publicity do not understand human nature and the human tendency to simplify one's life by placing trust in proxies.

What then is the value of credibility and how does one determine its worth? There is no good internal way to calculate this number despite a variety of measurement systems available to PR practitioners. One must make assumptions about the positive or negative tone of an article and based on those assumptions, extrapolate a value that may or may not be close to an unknown but objective value. The cost of achieving precision rises rapidly and may not be worth the time spent in achieving it. There are external ways to measure through use of focus groups, surveys and direct observation. However, it might be difficult to isolate the impact of any one medium, especially if a marketer uses an integrated communications approach.

How does one balance the value of credibility communications against awareness communications? Does one good story supplant a dozen mentions? One good story doesn't reach an entire audience, even if the story is aggressively merchandised as a reprint. Frequency counts. On the other hand, one good story seen in a highly credible medium has more value than dozens of mentions because the prestige of the medium and its persuasiveness. Thus, if

the goal of a marketer is frequency of mention, one good story is not enough. If the goal of the marketer is impact, one good story may have large value.

What is value?

Is there objective value in media relations? That is, is there value that two or more observers can measure impartially and determine a similar worth? Value has more than one meaning or definition. It need not have a dimension in terms of number or frequency. A story that persuades five readers with power to get something done rather 50,000 who don't has enormous value. On the other hand, a story that persuades only five readers when one seeks the collective action of 50,000 has little value. One measures value against a stated goal or objective.

Value has many forms. It comes through repetition. One counts appearances in media and estimates a cost per thousand of exposure. There is value as well through change in perception -- credibility communications. Allied to this is value in the eyes of a gatekeeper: A story might have value to target individuals, but an editor or reporter might reject it as newsworthy. There is value in the eyes of a client, that also can be subjective. A client might consider a placement significant, but a target audience might not, or vice versa. Finally, there is ultimate value in the eyes of target individuals who have the power to act in accordance with a message -- or not. A media relations practitioner negotiates all four levels of value and arrives at consensus value with a client through multi-step persuasion.

What is media relations now?

What does media relations mean in a time of diverse media -- blogs, web pages, twitter, e-mail, instant messaging, news aggregators, Facebook and MySpace?

At its heart, media relations is persuading a generator of content to consider and write about a product, service or issue without paying the content generator to do so. Unpaid persuasion is a distinction that was not part of media relations at the beginning when it was common to pay editors to print stories. However, in most media today, paying someone to write favorably is a conflict of interest that consumers condemn. Media relations relies on a practitioner's talent for selling a story through understanding the content generator's preferences, the needs of target individuals and the ability of the media relations practitioner to bring the two together. This, in turn, depends on the content generator's belief in the message-sender's honesty about the product, service or message. If the generator believes the message-sender is fraudulent, he will only publish material that is negative.

Media relations depends on a content generator's understanding of the information his readers/viewers/listeners want. This in turn depends on the

generator's understanding of the audience for whom he produces content. These are large assumptions but feedback is being made more immediate with two-way conversation through the internet. Citizens of the internet, Netizens, value constant feedback from audiences and adjust reporting and commentary accordingly. Traditional media are doing the same with many today printing a reporter's e-mail address at the end of an article. Feedback is selective, however. Those who shout the loudest are heard before those who and file information for later use. The challenge that a content generator has is to determine whether those who respond are a proxy for all readers of an article. Often, they are not but are interested parties with a stake in what is written or said. Interested parties could easily co-opt a content generator to write for them rather than a broader audience. This leads to "inside-baseball" reporting that appeals only to those who are passionately interested in a topic.

Media relations also depends on transparency on the part of content generators. Readers/viewers/listeners have expectations about those from whom they receive content. If a twitter or blog is ghost-written, as happens now, and readers discover that to be the case, both generators and content lose credibility. The media relations practitioner hews to a fine line. If materials are produced on behalf of a person, the person should approve of them before they are disseminated. In other words, the person should make them his own. There is more than embarrassment to be worried about. Lack of credibility can destroy a media relations campaign.

Finally, media relations depends on the type and complexity of content. Some messages, such as an explanation of financial derivatives, are hard to communicate, even with an interested audience. Other messages are easy to transmit, such as a new consumer product that makes light work of a common household chore. There might no more than 10 reporters who understand the details of derivatives. There might be fewer than 10 reporters who can explain these complexities in layperson's language to a semi-sophisticated audience. The gatekeeper constrains media relations in instances such as this unless the media relations practitioner does most of the work for reporters in advance. The process of story refinement is one of the most important tasks that media relations practitioners do.

How useful?

Is media relations as useful today as it was when there were more journalists in traditional media? This is not a question that would have been asked as recently as four years ago, but the recession has slashed editorial staffs even in the largest US newspapers and TV and radio newsrooms. The answer is two-fold. Media relations is more useful because there are more media when one considers hundreds of online outlets. With more media, there are more opportunities for unpaid persuasion and hence, greater utility for the skill of media relations. On the other hand, more media do not necessarily reach target

individuals efficiently. Audiences are self-segmented more than in the past. There are fewer mass-media news outlets and some of those like Google and Yahoo! are aggregators rather than originators of content. Content originators are having a difficult time finding economic models that will permit large newsroom staffs and broad news coverage. In fact, recent examples are trending in the opposite direction. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, when it stopped printing a daily paper edition, cut back its staff by 88 percent to 20 reporters and editors. Other online content generation sites are relatively small operations constrained by insufficient advertising and other revenue sources. There is concern that it may take years of experimentation to find profitable online formulae that would allow hiring of larger newsroom staffs. That means that the job of media relations will be more difficult. On the other hand, there has been an increase in sites that carry press releases, which are useful for raising awareness, but they have little credibility.

There will never be a definitive answer to the value and persuasiveness of media relations because every client and every individual targeted to receive a message are different. There are alignments of message, media and target individuals in which media relations, both traditional and new, have great impact and change minds. On the other hand, there are complete misses in which the efforts of media relations practitioners sink out of sight. So too with paid media. The goal of the marketer and media relations practitioner should be to reduce the chances of wasted persuasion and to maximize chances of effectiveness. This goal varies by targeted individuals and message: There are no ironclad rules. Hence, the ambiguous nature of media relations among media tools. Media relations practitioners often justify their skill because they are captured by it. They see a media relations solution to everything, even in cases in which use of the tool is absurd. On the other hand, nearly all marketers are captured by their tools and lack the flexibility to adapt messages and media based on target individuals. That said, it is likely that media relations will continue and perhaps, thrive, because it brings twin attributes of low-cost and credibility that other media lack.

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