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## The evolution of public relations as brand tool Jun.07, 2006

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By Tom Robinson

*Robinson coined the term PRanding to differentiate a talk at the PRSSA Conference in Miami in December. BBranding >>>PRanding, get it? OK, it is pretty corny; but it's so corny, it makes the point that public relations has evolved into a powerful (perhaps the most powerful) branding tool.*

Professionals who embrace public relations as a brand tool have pushed through the old paradigms, accepted that they can utilize more than standard-issue PR wrenches and recognize that the PR bandwidth covers not only traditional media and non-traditional media, but events, education, product placement, self-generated content, blogosphere, paid components, you name it. There are circumstances under which public relations won't and can't be a branding tool. There are circumstances under which public relations could and should be a branding tool, although one might have to do some things differently.

Why public relations won't work as a branding tool

Public relations will break down if we follow a strict interpretation of the media relations model. First of all, the news hole in traditional media is shrinking. Most of us PR troglodytes were conditioned to measure success by numbers of clips and column inch equivalents. We fixated on print, and while the media spectrum has changed, colleges preparing the next generation are still steeped in a newspaper journalism approach.

Public relations will succeed more if we accept that branding is not journalism, but commercialism, tawdry as that might be. We are not looking so much for ink as we are for changes in attitudes and behaviors. The key relationship is with the customer, not the media; and a relationship with the "public" is not as valuable as one with individuals.

Public relations will break down if we follow a publicity model. Publicity is too dependent on the stunt itself. Branders cannot count on the interest of editors or what they consider newsworthy. Publicity is short-lived; branding is not. And, of course, there's the Katrina Factor. The best-laid plans can be ruined by freakish events that dominate the newsroom and make normally clever things look silly or distasteful. More important is the correlation between publicity and the brand essence; will it relate to the brand or overshadow it?

It will certainly break down if we follow the investor relations model. It's too narrow a channel unless your client is the New York Stock Exchange or Bloomberg. Wall Street is not Main Street. Investor Relations is all about the quarterly nut, and what's good for investors is rarely good for consumers.

Why public relations will work as a branding tool

BBranding is the link between what a product stands for and what the customer wants from it, rationally and emotionally. PRanding is the conscious application of PR fundamentals on branding. What's good about public relations is good for branding because PR professionals have inherent strengths in dealing with the essentials of branding.

Issues, ideas and messages

Craft customer-centric communications. The story needs to be told from the point of view of the customer — not the company — and not the reporter, although it still should pass the IDB test of being Important, Differentiating and Believable. Be relevant. Borrow a page from the advertising agency planners. Get to know the targets really well.

Enhance the message by adapting it to the context of the channel's tone and style — straighter for the news hour, sassier for E!, more practical for Martha Stewart Living, more erudite for Scientific American.

Most PR professionals are well-educated and gifted writers. Most of the people you want to talk to are not. One fifth of the adult population is functionally illiterate. Young people grew up on TV, not newspapers, so visualization is essential to story-telling. Make friends with the art department. Don't dumb down your ideas, but smarten up the presentation and approach.



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## Communications channels

Identify appropriate vehicles that not only deliver impressions, but make an impression.

In the old days, there were three TV networks, true national magazines and most people read the morning and afternoon newspapers. Now we have 500 channels, 19,000 magazine titles and Howard Stern on Sirius. More important, we have message boards, blogs, wikis, webcasts, podcasts and wireless.

We know intellectually that the medium is often the message. Do we practice our craft with respect for the new channels, or are we still writing press releases for newspapers?

Here are some key points to effectively use new media channels:

- Identify the audience accurately so you can narrowcast.
- Take advantage of bandwidth to seek out multiple touch points.
- Tailor the message and leverage the power of the medium; if it is two-way, be two-way.
- Anticipate the outcome.
- Don't be caught off guard with success or unexpected results.
- Media begets media; be prepared to adapt plan tactics rapidly to avoid disaster and capture opportunities.

## Complexity

Layer messages. Brands, like their customers, are multidimensional.

Advertising people love to oversimplify brands to meet the limitation of 30-second TV commercials and outdoor boards. Sure Volvo stands for safety, but Volvo owners also look to define their quirkiness and intellectual superiority via choice in a car.

For multidimensional brands and multidimensional brandees (not a word), use multiple touch points, mixing and blending messages and media. Consider the sales sequence for the product — the process of acceptance the customer will travel through. How does it happen? How long does it take? Is it a considered or impulse purchase? Does the use occasion vary? Is it a one-time or a repeat purchase?

## Credibility

Third party credibility — information from a trusted source — has been the bedrock of PR value and protected by the impenetrable wall of editorial integrity. A recent Starcom study cites 65 percent of magazine readers as saying they already believe advertisers pay to have their products featured in stories.

How does one now overcome such cynicism? Tell the truth yourself. Be open. Do the right thing. Interestingly in this age, the customers have become the credible third party. Actively embrace them. "By building online communities around products or brands, marketers can harness the power of social networks and encourage peer-to-peer endorsement, and also build confidence and credibility in the minds of increasingly skeptical and fickle consumers," says Julian Smith of Jupiter Research.

## Relationships

Create a relationship with the customer, not the media. Create shared experiences, not fabricated fantasies.

Relationships by definition are two-way. With the emergence of new tools and channels, PRanding can take Customer Relationship Management (CRM) to the next level.

Bart Decrem, with a new browser Flock, reveals great insight into this: "The Web is not just a library of documents, but a stream of events and people. And people are spending a lot more time sharing on the Web."

## Conclusion

Branding is the art and science of cooking a rich organic stew of ideas, messages, channels and healthy reciprocal relationships. Who can make that better than PR professionals?

In the 1980s, "positioning" was the precursor of branding, although it was largely an advertising concept. In the 1990s, "integrated marketing" was an attempt to make messages consistent across communications disciplines. Today, the independent and cynical customer has assumed the marketing director's role. Maybe it is time for "PRanding."

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