

CORPORATE

Effective public relations helps produce sales, profits and long-term benefits

Over the years, hundreds of highly respected professionals, analysts and educators have developed comprehensive and sometimes complicated descriptions of public relations and corporate communications. There have been heated discussions regarding the separation of public relations from advertising, public relations from marketing and the role public relations should play in a company.

What is most counter-productive has been public relations desire to distance itself from the “distasteful” task of actually “selling” the company, its propositions, products, technologies and services. If public relations doesn’t help perpetuate the company, what value does it serve...regardless of the definition?

We recently read a clear, concise and easy to understand description of public relations. It stripped away all of the rhetoric and lofty philosophies. “Effective public relations is simply applied common sense.”

Common sense says that a company must achieve sales and must produce profit if it is to survive. If it doesn’t survive, it stands for nothing and is worth nothing. Done properly, public relations adds value by employing people; providing a return to shareholders; supporting our governmental institutions; and by delivering product/service value to customers.

Common sense says that for programs to be successful they must be founded on business objectives, not “PR” objectives. They must focus on the company’s brand equity, not on individual products. This branding activity must extend beyond media relations, charitable giving, legislative relations and other niches.

Accomplishing all of this is no easy task. It means that the company’s PR team—internal or external—has to truly understand and be involved in building and promoting the company’s brand franchise. Some people like to refer to this process as integrated marketing communications. We prefer not to apply a label, but rather to think of it as doing what is necessary to ensure the company survives and prospers.

It requires public relations people to become involved in building trust with all of the company’s buyers and sellers. Don’t think you can just go to senior management, plead your case, and get a mandate to be responsible for the establishment and vocalization of the company’s total activities, won’t happen.

Start slow and take small steps. Public relations is a service and support function. Advise and assist in branding activities online and offline. Become involved in assisting purchasing, HR, sales activities, face-to-face encounter training, trade show activities, web activities including customer

service/support and other efforts that involve the company’s brand franchise and the organization’s bottom line results.

Often PR people waste their efforts because they are so busy “practicing” public relations they forget their primary mission. The success or failure of their “practice” is weighed by the pound. For example, how many published releases, how many website hits? Because they weigh more, too many PR people justify that 50 hits, which don’t further the company’s goals, are obviously worth more than five that support and extend the company’s brand franchise.

Effective PR

Effective public relations is much like a three-legged stool: 1) understanding the company’s anchor value; 2) understanding the customer value propositions; and 3) understanding the marketplace positioning of the products or services. Understanding the three will help the company, help tangibly produce sales and profits and long-term benefits.

Anchor Values

The company’s anchor values should control and guide every strategic and tactical PR activity. From the day it opens its doors, every company is based on specific purposeful and fundamental values that highlight the company’s strategic ambition, direction and future plan.

Without a good understanding of these values we contend that it is impossible for public relations to effectively deliver for the company. Without a clear understanding of what the company is trying to achieve, public relations simply goes through the motions. By being on the same wavelength they can ensure the right basic message is always delivered, that it is delivered to and through the right channels, and that it achieves the desired impact and objective.

Customer Values

The second leg of a sound PR program is to clearly understand what the anchor values mean to the customer. This means you have to translate the company’s values into general and product/service specific customer values and benefits.

PR people tend to list the tangible, technical and functional benefits and stop. Often referred to as specsmanship, the focus is a one way stream from the company to the marketplace rather than taking the time and effort to understand and project this information in customer terms.

Intangible and tangible customer values must continuously support each other and reinforce the company’s anchor values.

COMMUNICATIONS: All About Delivering Value

About the Author



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Positioning

The third leg of the PR program is product/service positioning which will vary from market segment to market segment. If the dotcom trials and tribulations of the past years have shown us anything, it is that there is no such thing as one global market.

There is a different positioning proposition for dealers, first time buyers, corporate buyers, professional users, manufacturer management, engineers and buyers, as well as other markets.

Service organizations like legal, financial, venture capital, market research, and yes, even public relations are tailoring their messages to specific market and client segments.

A Program with Legs

When a PR program is based on clearly defined anchor values, customer values and positioning, the actual implementation and tactics are easier to manage and carry out. Or to put it in the vernacular of the day, it's a program with legs or a program with traction.

Suddenly it becomes easier to establish and manage the relationship with the company's many audiences.

The most difficult aspect of the program will be the internal management issue. We increasingly live and operate in an instant results, instant gratification environment. No part of the public relations or communications program is instant. It

requires consistency and continuity.

Too frequently management is willing to approve a given tactic or activity and immediately expect positive results.

The effort or activity may build awareness but awareness seldom develops an initial relationship and certainly doesn't develop a long-term relationship. That only comes with a consistent and continuous program.

At the same time, public relations people have to continuously manage, monitor and question every tactical aspect of their programs and the individual messages. Internal and external forces are in a constant state of flux. What was effective last month or yesterday can be totally ineffective, or worse, counterproductive today. *wqp*

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