

Myths vs truths

The perennial battle between advertising and public relations tends to keep both sides in a state of muted - or overt - hostility. However, many people do not know the difference between the two, much less do they recognise that they are actually complementary aspects of one aim: to communicate effectively. Some of the misconceptions are because of bias, some are because of mistakes made by practitioners of either industry but the end result is that there is often a mutually destructive tension between the "ponytails" and the "spin-doctors".



By Marie Yossava 13 Apr 2003

Many advertisers tend to look down on public relations practitioners, seeing them as a poor relation in the marketing family. This is largely a hangover of the early 1980s when PR and communications were perceived as not serious careers, involving an endless round of glamorous parties, launches and functions. From their side, many PR professionals see advertisers as egocentric award-chasers, concerned more with winning gongs than with serving their clients. There is some truth in both views, but when practised correctly, by committed professionals, the stereotypes are irrelevant.

Correcting errors in perception is an educative process - of company executives, of advertisers, of PROs and of the media. In a recent interview, John Farquhar of Marketingweb, discussed a book, 'The fall of advertising and the rise of PR', by marketing gurus Al and Laura Ries. "The standard procedure in new brand launching has always been to put your money into media advertising," said Farquhar. "This book says that that is not true any more. Today, public relations can do a far better job than normal advertising. The basic reason for that is, quite honestly, the American public is drowning in the load of advertising, and public relations comes to the market on a much more genuine level."

Marie Yossava, Director of Grapevine Communications, says neither industry is better than the other. "Yes, there has been a swing towards public relations as an essential marketing tool, but it will never displace advertising." But recognition is slow. A 2000 study on public relations practice in South Africa found that although internationally 51% of communications management reports direct to the CEO, in South Africa less than a third of companies regard PR as board level responsibility. This was borne out by Sej Motau, then PRISA President, who said in an interview in PR & Communications Africa (April/May 2000), that "many in-house practitioners are quite low on the corporate hierarchy".

Speaking from the public relations point of view, Yossava points out that one of its biggest advantages is flexibility. Advertising is often not able to change its messages quickly, partly because of expensive campaigns. PR, however, can be used when a company needs to adapt its message to a rapidly changing environment without compromising the integrity of the business.

Another area in which public relations excels is in selling a concept or idea, rather than a widget. While advertising toothpaste can concentrate on concrete benefits and features, a public relations campaign can promote a company's philosophy, social commitments, achievements and successes through newsworthy articles in the mainstream and special media. "Advertising is constrained by limits of time, budget and space," Yossava points out, "whereas effective PR can promote a company through judicious, in-depth articles and opinion pieces."

What are the common criticisms aimed at public relations practitioners? Firstly, says Yossava, some PRs do not make an effort to learn about the media. "Every channel has a different focus and 'feel'. If you, as a PR do not understand these nuances, you are only going to irritate the journalists who will automatically bin everything you send them." Secondly, and related to the first problem, is sending reams of identical emails off to every possible media outlet, regardless of relevance. Thirdly, some PR companies and individuals do not make an effort to learn about their clients. "In-depth knowledge of the company you are working for is not negotiable," says Yossava. "At Grapevine we use a range of tools to learn about our clients, from visiting its premises, to meeting as many people, in as many departments as possible, to reading annual reports and media coverage."

Another aspect of knowledge that is essential in the PR industry is current affairs. "If you cannot tie your client's news to what is relevant in the wider society, no journalist is going to accept your press releases. A newsworthy piece has to be

informative and up-to-date and must have some comment or view on a topical subject." All of these demand time, effort and experience, but the rewards are huge, both for the PR and for the client.

Yossava has great respect for those advertisers who have integrity and are committed to their clients. "Advertising and PR can help each other in their common aim which is publicising a company, an organisation or a brand, and transmitting the message the client wants to send. Each may become active at different stages of the marketing process but ultimately they rely on each other for the client's success."

ABOUT MARIE YOSSAVA

Marie Yossava, founder and owner of Grapevine Communications, embarked on a PR/communications career more than two decades ago. In the past twenty years she has built a solid media relations consultancy, which focuses exclusively on media relations.
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