

A Public Relations Role in Brand Messaging

Ron Prindle, Ph.D.
Gonzaga University
502 E. Boone Ave.
Spokane, WA 99258-0017
United States of America

Abstract

A role for public relations in organizational brand messaging is proposed. An increased involvement by public relations in organizational advertising and marketing communication strategy has been the result of the consumer cynicism and loss of consumer confidence evident in the current marketplace. The merging of communication activities should also include a role for public relations in the transmission of the organization, product, or service brand. Public relations practitioners are skilled and experienced in storytelling and social media, both of which have become important tools in successful brand communication. Moreover, public relations acumen in relationship- and trust-building contribute to the organization's authenticity, another key factor in branding in the contemporary marketplace.

Key words: Public relations, marketing, organizational messaging, branding, social media

1. Introduction

Public relations is generally associated with communication activities designed to craft and preserve an organization's image and relationships with its publics. Recently, the role of organizational public relations has expanded as evidenced in the blurring of the once precise boundaries between public relations, advertising, and marketing communication activities. The convergence of these communication activities are in response to an evolving business environment characterized by a "loss of shareholder value and declining customer confidence and organizational support" which, in turn, has led many organizations to "reexamine their core communication processes and ways of doing things" (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2009, p. 383). This communication convergence involving public relations has also been driven by corporate belt tightening in response to the current economic recession. For example, American Airlines, one of the world's largest air carriers, believes that public relations can help to maximize shrinking advertising budgets in tight economic times (Bush, 2009).

Another factor has been the exponential growth in social media fueled by consumer demand. Serving again as an example, American Airlines believes the integration of marketing and public relations activities is primarily the result of the arrival and acceptance of social media and an increased social consciousness by consumers (Bush, 2009). Recent research also reflects these sentiments. Specifically, a *Text 100 Global Public Relations* study noted the importance of public relations in managing brand value during a recession and suggested that public relations may be more important than advertising to brand value (New Study, 2010). In general, there is evidence within the current marketplace that "clients are looking for integrated programs and consistent brand messaging across every point of contact with their customers." (Baruzzi, 2010).

2. The Brand

Skinner (1994) defined a brand as "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (p. 324). A brand goes beyond programs, services, and products, displays; rather, it encompasses everything else about an organization including reputation, culture and core values. As such, it is not simply advertising or marketing. Branding has been referred to as a messaging instrument which helps the business reach its goals and encompasses the promotion of everything associated with the business (Checco, 2005, 2006; Fritz, 2011). The functions of a brand include creating an identification and brand awareness; guaranteeing a certain level of quality, quantity, and satisfaction; and, helping with promotion (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1997, p. 426). The brand can also serve as an organization's spokesperson as part of that organization's search for legitimacy (Fredriksson, 2009). The brand affects consumer attitude and perceptions toward the product and, especially applicable to public relations, toward the organization that produces the product. No longer isolated to for-profit businesses, the past decade has witnessed brands increase in prevalence and importance in the areas of sports, politics, culture, and the nonprofit segments.

There is a common misconception that branding and marketing are synonymous terms. That is not the case. Marketing is differentiated as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (Skinner, 1994, p. 7). While the role of marketing and concepts of marketing and market planning have not changed in the current business environment, the manner in which businesses and their customers communicate has changed dramatically. Central to this perspective is the recognition that marketing communication in the current business environment is now a two-way (vice one-way) process. Social media greatly encourages and facilitates this manner of communication. While the rapid expansion of the Internet and associated social media platforms present organizations greater opportunities to connect with publics, this channel expansion also requires organizations to monitor their “electronic brand”, i.e., what people are saying online about their brand (Meredith, 2010). Equally as important has been a raised social consciousness among consumers facilitated in large part by social media. In this respect, Finchum (2010) signaled the increasing trend of the consumer expectation of brands to “stand for something beyond their own attributes” (p. 16).

3. A Public Relations Role

The role of organizational public relations is expanding with the changing times: “PR doesn’t just focus on your business product; it also . . . assists in shaping strategic messaging . . .” (Anonymous, 2010, p. 28). Consistent with this line of reasoning, Winchell (2010) cautioned that brands are “being evangelized, dismissed, measured and documented in real time” and admonished businesses to “join the conversation” in social media, “a mission perfectly suited for the PR professional” (p. 10). It is proposed herein that the role of public relations role in brand management is two-fold: As creator of the narrative, i.e., the conversation; and, as the purveyor of the medium to facilitate the conversation, i.e., social media.

3.1 The Narrative

The current business environment is characterized by consumer cynicism and a loss of consumer trust and confidence, a situation poignantly described by Moxham (2008) as the “faltering of the old-fashioned trust economy.” An example of growing cynicism by consumers are found in the findings of a Starcom USA 2005 research study that revealed 65% of magazine readers believed that the advertisers pay to have products placed or featured in magazine articles (Starcom Study, 2005). This represents a significant change in consumer attitudes and perceptions because, historically, media placement been viewed by consumers as more credible and lacking subterfuge. Hynes (2009) also pointed out that “one of the notable characteristics of this economic downturn is a focus on transparency” (p. 22). To this end, Finchum (2010) warned that business reputations are now “more fragile than ever” and emphasized the importance of word-of-mouth in the “brand conversation” given the rise in social media (p. 16). Consumer-related and product-related issues are freely discussed among consumer communities of interest in the blogosphere in what is now a conversation economy.

As such, the concept and practice of business authenticity has become even more important to the success of the business. Hynes (2009) believed that the authenticity to elevate a brand should come from public relations. Allen (2005) pointed out the existence of connection between authenticity and storytelling. Storytelling has a role in almost every aspect of the organization and “leading research has shown the importance of the narrative in branding . . .” (Storytelling, 2011). Completing this thread is the fact that public relations profession has a heritage in storytelling (Byrne, 2008). McClellan (2010) pointed out that stories provide a medium of communication to customers and reported a growing organizational use of stories as a public relations and marketing tool. Along this line, the narrative “is increasingly recognized as central in branding” (Denning, 2006, p. 42) and has even been referred to as the “unsung hero of successful branding initiatives in any industry” (Anonymous, 2009a). The objective of branding is to communicate who the organization is and requires a story that “is usually told by the product or service itself, or by the customer word-of-mouth or by a credible third party” (Denning, 2006, p. 43). The result has been “brand storytelling – that is, blending the branding value of advertising, the credibility of public relations and the measurability and ROI of online tactics” (Anonymous, 2009b).

The narrative is a powerful communication method that has always been a public relations competency and public relations “at its core . . . is the art of storytelling” (Moxham, 2008, p. 7). While it has been argued that a public relations role in branding is more commercialism than journalism, this is not the case when it involves organizational storytelling – itself a form of journalism. Storytelling fits the traditional public relations role of creating connections with its publics through relationship and trust building.

And, given the conversation economy, the focus has become an organization's connections with its publics rather than the organization itself (Schipul, 2009). Social media provides the communication medium for such connections to occur.

3.2 Social Media

Reflecting the current state of the blogosphere, Bandura (2001) prophetically wrote, "Extraordinary advances in technology of communication are transforming the nature, reach, speed and loci of human influence" (p. 287). Such is evidenced in today's conversation economy, whereby having meaningful dialogue with customers is crucial to the success of the business. When engaged in this dialogue incidental to brand messaging, Moxham (2008) admonished businesses to "[t]ell the same story to your customers and empower them to spread the word." This is best accomplished through storytelling in the medium of social media.

Recently, social media has helped to "usher in a new era of public relations" (Finchum, 2010, p. 16). Heretofore, the public relations profession traditionally used a sender-oriented approach to communications by addressing publics through the traditional mass media outlets of television, radio, newspapers, and magazines (Helder & Kragh, 2002). In the digital age, however, unrelated individuals are linked by communication technologies, such as social media, in a social network where mediated interaction leads to mutual sense making (Fulk, 1993). An excellent definition of social media germane to this discussion is provided by Thornley (2008):

. . . online communications in which individuals shift fluidly and flexibly between the role of audience and author. To do this, they use social software that enables anyone without knowledge of coding, to post, comment on, share or mash up content and to form communities around shared interests. (p. 1)

The growth and popularity of social media has also changed the game for advertisers and marketers. Because social media is receiver-oriented and involves having two-way conversations, it is diametrically opposite of the traditional one-way, sender-oriented concept of advertising and marketing communications. This source- or sender-oriented communication focuses attention on the sender's own communications needs and intentions as opposed to recognizing the needs of the sender's publics. Specifically, sender-oriented communication theory assumes that message design is the key to communications success and that the communication of the message occurs because the sender intends it as such.

In the traditional one-way, sender-oriented marketing and advertising communication protocol, communication occurs because the sender intends it to occur, that message design is the key to successful communication of the message, and that communication has not occurred if the receiver does not understand the meaning of the message (Stidsen (1975). This process is commonly referred to as the one-way model of communication involving only the speaker's action is believed it to be the most widely held view of communication (Griffin, 2003). Also referred to as the transmission view, it is inherent in most people's thinking and is the most common communication perspective in Western culture (Heide, 2009). While this change appears to have still confounded some marketing and advertising practitioners, such is not the case with public relations. As skilled relationship-builders, public relations practitioners are highly proficient in the art of the two-way conversation and as such, bring significant value to a branding initiative.

Furthermore, while the transmission view addresses the notion of 'information' it does not address 'meaning' or context (Chandler, 1994). To this end, the intended meaning of the sender may differ from the interpreted meaning of the recipient and social context are key to perception of messages. Thus, in the transmission model the recipient may see the exact same message delivered by the sender, yet the receiver's evaluation may differ widely from the sender's intention. Severely lacking in this process, however, is a requirement of the sender to determine if the effects of the message were misinterpreted by the receiver. As proficient interpersonal communicators, public relations practitioners are adept in the concept and construction of meaning-making. Unlike the traditional advertising and marketing campaigns, whereby the marketer is sending a one-way message to a consumer, social media is about having a two-way conversation (Anonymous, 2010, p. 28). The receiver-oriented, two-way concept of social media represents a radical change as receiver interpretation and the creation of meaning play paramount roles. As such, the perceptions and attitudes of brand messaging are determined in part by the individual, such perceptions and attitudes are significantly influenced by the attitudes and opinions of social network community members. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Smith (2004) wrote, "Passed via peer to peer, 'word of mouse' messages can help endorse a brand among like-minded consumers, thus spreading its influence." This context represents a significant shift in credibility sourcing.

Whereas in the past, third-party endorsement credibility originated from a captain of industry in the contemporary business environment, it now resides with the consumer in their role as member of an online social community. Today's emerging social media has been described as "uncharted territory" by scholars and practitioners alike (Anonymous, 2009c). Unlike many universal business practices, social media lacks a governing body and wide-ranging and consistent protocol, policy, and convention. Organizations are more often than not left on their own when considering a social media presence as part of their communication strategy. Especially problematic is the conventional wisdom that while online sources are playing a significant role in influencing perceptions and opinions of consumers, organizations are losing control of their conversation with consumers (Hynes, 2009, p. 22). Social media online communities now allow consumers to communicate in real-time and share opinions as to how well an organization is meeting their needs and expectations.

In this vein, social media is one of the many areas of corporate business areas in which the organization's public relations department can assist (Anonymous, 2010). Theoretically speaking, "Foucault's work on recreating the self can be deployed to theorize and critique the role of public relations practitioners in identity work or branding for individuals or organizations" (Motion & Leitch, 2009, p. 97). From a more practical standpoint, there has been recent advocacy by the public relations profession for the public relations department to assume ownership of an organization's social media effort (Subervi, 2010). It makes considerable sense given the proficiency and skill that public relations possesses in two-way conversations and meaning-making.

4. Summary

Although public relations is used for a wide variety of purposes in organizational communication, that of the representation of the organization, its goals, and its self-understanding has been increasingly influential with publics (Fredriksson, 2009). This has become increasingly important given the marketplace transition to a consumer-driven, conversation economy characterized by two-way (as opposed to one-way) conversations between consumers and between the consumer and the organization. Moreover, there is increasing social consciousness among consumers who now place more emphasis on what an organization is about rather than simply what that organization produces in the form of services or products. Moreover, widespread consumer cynicism and loss of consumer trust and confidence driven by events of the past decade have forced businesses to reexamine their marketing and advertising communication strategies. One outcome has been the integration of the public relations department into organizational branding initiatives.

For example, in some organizations, such as IBM and American Airlines, the "chief communication officers (CCOs) and their teams are playing a strategic role more closely aligned with the marketing function . . . Some companies think the two—advertising and communications—are so closely linked that their CMO and CCO are one in the same" (Bush, 2009, p. 1). And, because public relations creates awareness, promotes and protects corporate reputations, influences public opinion, and reexamines the ethics and the values of the organization (Anonymous, 2010), this situation presents the public relations profession with a tremendous opportunity in both in communication coherence and ethics "that can elevate a brand, bridging the trust gap in ways that advertising cannot" (Hynes, 2009, p. 22). Given its relationship and trust building acumen, storytelling heritage and social media proficiency, public relations is positioned to significantly contribute to brand management. Accordingly, public relations play a key role in establishing the trust and authenticity necessary for a successful branding messaging.

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