

Branding through public relations: The often-overlooked springboard for new product acceptance

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“Branding allows a company to differentiate themselves from the competition and, in the process, to bond with their customers to create loyalty. So a position is created in the marketplace that is much more difficult for the competition to poach. A satisfied customer may leave. But a loyal one is much less likely to.”

Kristine Kirby Webster, President of The Canterbury Group, Ltd., Alexandria, VA

All too frequently, products fail to establish a position in the marketplace because the associated marketing communications program is nothing more than a shot in the dark. This is particularly true of those campaigns that tend to burn brightly for a twinkling, only to recede rapidly into obscurity. In lockstep, the products that these programs promote tend to fade quickly from memory.

The root of the problem in many cases proves to be little more than unwillingness to let go of the simplistic and outmoded notion that good products sell themselves. While a few exceptions may prove the rule, the fact remains that only the rarest of products are capable of surviving anymore without the benefit of intelligent marketing and publicity. Even those products that do manage to hang on somehow would almost surely achieve greater success if supported by frequent, compelling communications designed to leave lasting impressions with potential customers.

A lapse in communication between manufacturers and consumers can prove expensive for both parties. Manufacturers often spend as much as 10% of their annual gross revenues on product development—an investment they can obviously ill afford to write off. What may be less obvious is that consumers can also find themselves quite exposed. Besides limiting the options available on the open market, product failures also tend to lead to costly protocol changes. The difficulties this creates can be particularly acute for those researchers who have already committed themselves to the failed product, since they are likely to be faced with developing and validating new methods and qualifying new vendors.

Communications has never been more important, or more challenging, than it is right now. Today's consumer is bombarded with more information than

ever before, much of it flowing through channels that were beyond imagining even two decades ago. Besides being more complex, today's culture has grown increasingly skeptical. In the past, public relations (PR) and advertising were thought to be virtually synonymous. But it is no longer advisable for companies to hang their hopes only on advertisements. Consumers now insist on seeing the hard data, and they also want corroboration from real users. What's more, to convey any sort of message in a world full of info-clutter, it is almost always necessary to make regular use of multiple communication channels over and over again throughout the full product life cycle.

Scientists often find this difficult to accept. However, a couple of case studies may help to illustrate what advertising and publicity can do to enhance the technical performance and value of a product.

In the early 1990s, a company introduced a line of HPLC columns for the separation of proteins with steric exclusion chromatography. The parent firm was already in financial straits. So, to save money, management decided to operate on the assumption that “if the columns are good, they will sell themselves.” The company then proceeded to introduce the columns with very little fanfare, and only a few materials to communicate features and benefits to prospective customers. The fact is, the columns worked quite well but continued to languish in obscurity; the columns ultimately had to be withdrawn from the market after about five years because of inconsequential sales. The company's staff left in disgust and the few customers they had managed to attract found themselves faced with the expensive and time-consuming process of revising and revalidating any methods that had made use of the columns.

On the other hand, **Waters** (Milford, MA) chose

an entirely different approach by which to introduce the Xterra® line of HPLC columns at an HPLC '99 press conference in Granada, Spain. Much of the company's senior technical staff was on hand for the event, with many colleagues connected by phone from company headquarters. The clear message to the press was that the new product line, consisting of over 700 part numbers, not only represented a significant advance over column packings based on conventional silica particles, but also was backed by a solid commitment from a company that was already recognized as a major market player.

Since that introduction, **Waters** has continued to mount an aggressive and effective campaign promoting Xterra by way of numerous technical papers, lectures, and posters at technical meetings. It was, and continues to be, a multifaceted campaign that makes liberal use of PR, consistent product advertising, and image advertising. It also helps that the Xterra columns live up to the company's benefit claims, but that alone would not have made it possible for the Xterra line to achieve an annual run rate of more than \$5 million in sales within 18 months of introduction. Had the Xterra line fallen short of that mark, it is possible that it would not have survived since **Waters** alone offers at least nine other brands of HPLC columns.

That the Xterra line has proved a splendid success is all well and good for **Waters**, of course, but how is it that consumers stand to benefit from **Waters'** well-executed communications campaign? Let us count the ways: 1) The products will now be available for years; 2) the products have gained broad acceptance throughout the peer community, contributing to the reproducibility of method results; 3) **Waters** now has the resources to develop the technology further; and 4) **Waters** can afford to provide high-quality technical support.

Besides illustrating the power of a well-conceived PR and advertising campaign, we believe an important lesson to be drawn from these two scenarios is the advisability of using PR directly in order to kick off the creation of a product brand identity. Brand identity and loyalty, it turns out, is just as central to sales in the research community as it is to sales in the consumer market. In fact, firms that lack the resources or the will to mount a PR campaign in support of a new product should seriously consider whether it even makes sense to invest in product development in the first place.

Developing a successful brand

The first misconception to set aside is the notion that brand awareness can only be built by way of advertising. Although advertising certainly has an im-

portant role to play in any brand-building effort, the fact is that an intelligently conceived publicity campaign is the most effective and credible way to introduce a product to market. The reason for this is quite simple—credibility is the single most important ingredient in any brand-building exercise, and the claims set forth in any advertisement tend to be viewed with skepticism. On the other hand, a methodical PR campaign can carefully document claims and present corroborative statements made by customers and partners—all of which build credibility. Then, an advertising campaign can proceed to effectively reinforce and underscore those same claims, laying out the product's positioning in simple, compelling, and memorable terms.

As renowned marketing guru Al Ries commented in a recent interview, "The real purpose of advertising is no longer to build a brand, but to defend a brand once it has been built by other means, primarily public relations or third-party endorsements."

The PR plan

The first thing senior marketing management has to understand is that it would be a huge mistake to allocate almost all of the company's marketing communications resources to advertising, leaving PR to operate off a shoestring budget and hearty words of encouragement. To follow that well-worn path is to follow all the other lemmings into the abyss, since it must be reasonably obvious that a company must first establish a proper forum for communicating with the target market before it can even begin thinking about lobbying messages at it.

So we start by developing a good PR strategy. And how to go about that, you might ask? From the very outset, the marketing department must be able and willing to supply information that will allow the PR group to articulate comprehensive answers to the following questions:

- What exactly are the business results we expect to enable for our customers?
 - Who exactly is in the target audience and what concerns are most likely to move them to action?
 - What are the central tenets of which we hope to convince them?
 - What points need to be raised over time—with the right messages, right positioning, right influencers (including critical third parties), and compelling enough execution—to successfully move the audience from their existing mind-set to the desired mind-set and move them to action?
 - How will we know we have succeeded?
- As indicated by these questions, the marketing and

PR departments must analyze and understand the psychographic segmentation of the target audiences they hope to address. Only then can they methodically come to terms with the needs, aspirations, and motivators associated with each key target group. The generally accepted product adoption life-cycle model indicates five distinct groups of customers for whom to account. Of these, the three most important groups can be differentiated by attitude and motivation.

The first is the “early adopter” or entrepreneur. These customers are generally recognized as visionary, with a strong need for new technical capabilities and a well-refined sense for exactly what they want out of a new product. Their interest almost always lies in creating the means to consolidate a competitive advantage. This indicates that they are almost always looking to get very detailed product information, with a particular emphasis on performance specifications. Accordingly, the best publicity strategy for reaching this group is to supply compelling new product stories that include visible wins with vocal customers, rave product reviews and technology endorsements from recognized gurus, all the price-performance information you can possibly muster, and a well-recognized third party that is willing to champion the product.

The second major group of customers are the “early majority” or mainstream customers. This class is identified by its pragmatism and market focus. In assessing products and vendors, these customers are looking for evolutionary capabilities rather than revolutionary ones, and so they tend to respond best to news of productivity improvements. By and large, they also seem to set the most store by word-of-mouth endorsements and the positions taken by industry groups. Thus, the publicity strategy for reaching mainstream customers revolves around compelling market stories that either demonstrate dominant success in one market segment, a superior fit for certain applications, and/or the endorsement of a great market champion.

The third and final major customer group to appear is the “late majority,” identified by its conservatism and acute focus on the bona fides of the vendor company. These customers are seeking safety and security, and their buying behaviors generally reflect price sensitivity and an affinity for cost reductions. They generally seek the information they need through the business press. Thus, the PR strategy for addressing this segment is best driven by compelling company stories that demonstrate dominant market share, visible financial success, adherence to critical *de facto* industry standards, and the support of a great corporate champion.

The other two groups that have been ignored in this discussion can be found at either end of the adoption cycle and are “innovators” and “laggards.” Both are very small markets and tend to be dominated by pure technical curiosity in the first instance and extreme resistance to change in the latter.

With adherence to the guidelines indicated above, a PR campaign can go far to establish effective branding for a company and its products. Once you have managed to establish that beachhead, the company can follow up with heavy artillery bombardment—namely, an intense advertising campaign that serves to reinforce, sustain, and corroborate the key messages set forth in the PR program. Another point worth remembering is that development of a PR plan should always take place quite early in the product development cycle so that adequate time can be invested in carefully crafting appropriate messages. Public relations, after all, always requires lead time in order to gain leverage with the press—especially the trade press. Thus, any notion of leaving the PR planning to the very last moment, while undeniably commonplace, is also patently self-defeating.

Closing thoughts

Skilled scientists and managers of development programs cannot afford to overlook or ignore the PR requirements for new products. Even the most brilliantly designed product can be quickly consigned to the dustbin of history, unless intelligent efforts have been made to gain brand visibility in key target markets. To succeed, most PR programs must make use of many different communication channels to ensure that people in each major market group receive messages tailored according to their priorities.

It is the nature of competition that firms with the most successful product development teams and effective PR managers will greatly improve their chances for emerging as market leaders. Their customers also stand to benefit, as does society-at-large, as productivity gains ripple throughout the overall economy.

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