

Tools of the trade

Using advertising, marketing and public relations to achieve results

BY REBECCA HART

You're not alone if you're unclear about the differences between marketing, advertising and public relations.



There are entire bodies of knowledge for each of these strategies, and the clear-cut distinctions are disappearing as different awareness-building efforts become more and more integrated.

Here are some basic guidelines. If the end result is to match goods or services to a customer need (a marketing function), advertising and public relations become tools for the marketing function. However, if the desired objective is to advance the entire organization (a public relations function), marketing and advertising become public relations tools.

There is an old joke that highlights the differences between the three. Imagine you see a person you would like to get to know. Advertising is when you go up to the person and confidently talk about how fantastic you are, how you are the greatest person on earth and perfectly equipped to make every dream come true. Marketing is when you strike up a conversation and, during the conversation, you explain how he or she needs a friend and you are the right person for the job. The result of public relations is when he or she comes up to you and says admiringly, "I've heard how wonderful you are and I'd really like to get to know you."

Working as part of an overall effort enhances each function, but here's a quick overview of the differences and where each falls in the awareness-building spectrum.

Marketing

Ask five people to define marketing, and you'll get at least 10 different responses.

Marketing is different from direct mail, infomercials, business cards, telephone solicitations, signs or banners, classified advertising and promotional items. If you combine all these, you'll begin to scratch the surface about marketing.

Jay Levinson, author of "Guerrilla Marketing," says to "see marketing as a circle that starts with your idea for generating revenue and completes itself when you have the blessed patronage of repeat and referral business." His books are filled with real-life examples of people using "guerrilla tactics" to build their business.

The five basic components of marketing are product/service attributes, marketing communications (this is where advertising, sales promotion

you need quick results. Basically, if you have a large enough budget, you can buy the time or space to say whatever you want about yourself and your business and sometimes even about your competition.

When designing an ad, remember that the most important elements are the size, placement and creative message. Larger ads generally have more impact because they dominate the eye and have more room for persuasive text and graphics. You also want to consider ad placement. Requesting placement near editorial rather than opposite another ad also will make your ad stand out on the page. Smaller ads can have significant impact if they are developed and placed effectively.

Marketing matches products and/or services to consumer need; advertising creates and places paid media messages; and public relations builds mutually beneficial associations with the public.

and public relations can support the marketing effort), market research, customer service and sales management.

Marketing looks toward the future to determine which products or services should be aggressively promoted, which should be maintained and which should be abandoned. It also helps businesses decide whether or not to acquire or sell and establishes priorities for new product development.

In this process, research is critical and you should analyze market share, segmentation, product line extensions, pricing, distribution and cost efficiency. You should also spend time investigating your market for size, growth, competition, captive customers and the opportunity to segment.

Advertising

Advertising is the best tool to use if you need to control message delivery, if your message is sales-oriented or if

Your ad copy must be credible and persuasive, and it should prominently feature a "call to action." You want to talk benefits, not features, in your ad copy. Don't tell your prospects how fast your product or service is - tell them how the speed will benefit them.

"The key to selecting the right media for your company is to match the qualities of each medium with your target audience," says Kristin Perry, president of Spark! Communications, a full-service marketing communications agency. "For telecom providers, a business-oriented newspaper or magazine would be an ideal choice, and direct mail can also be effective if you can tightly describe your target market and can find a mailing list that closely matches your customer profile."

Remember that even at its most effective, advertising can only induce

continued on page 106

continued from page 104

your target audience to try you once. So make sure you're ready to deliver when the customers come calling.

Public relations

If you think marketing is hard to clarify, try defining public relations.

Perry has a good explanation. "Public relations is about developing and maintaining beneficial two-way relationships with the people who can influence your success – it's not just about writing media releases," she says. "Members of the media are a big influence, but so are customers, employees, distributors, investors, analysts, industry leaders, government regulators, community leaders and others."

The tools of public relations are varied. They include media relations/publicity, customer relations, advisory groups, financial relations, employee relations, industry relations, speaker's bureau/speaker training, community relations, crisis communications planning, special events, sponsorships and promotions.

The best scenario is when all three of these disciplines are understood and used to support each other in an overall branding effort.

Public relations is diverse, and that's why it's probably the least understood tool of the three. As with any other form of communication, public relations objectives that support your company's overall strategy should be determined before plans are developed.

Public relations objectives may include increasing awareness, changing behaviors or shifting mindsets. But be sure you don't make the mistake of tying public relations objectives directly to sales. Take a longer-term approach and use the tools of public relations to establish credibility, increase awareness and build competitive distinction.

Selecting the right strategy

What is the right strategy to reach your objectives? That depends on a number of factors, including the nature of your product or service, means of distribution, audience demographics and budget.

A key to selecting the right strategy is to include key internal and external audience members in the planning

process. These might be salespeople, dealers, distributors, service employees or customers.

To determine the correct strategy, you need to know the following:

- Your overall goal
- Your measurable objectives
- The opportunity – the sales or performance increase you expect and the value of that in profits
- The cost – what percentage of incremental sales will you have to invest? Keep in mind that 5 to 8 percent is standard. No amount of positive promotion can make up for an inferior product or service.

With all your marketing communications efforts, you need to ask yourself an important and obvious question: Are our efforts generating reasonable short and long-term returns on our investment?

"Unfortunately, businesses of all kinds open their doors, buy a few ads and then expect the customers to come

calling without a concrete plan of action," adds Perry. "Most don't make it, but the ones that figure out you've got to get creative and do more than run an ad – that you need to develop a long-term, strategic plan and stick with it through good and bad times – are more likely to be successful."

How does this relate to telecom providers? It means you need a targeted awareness-building plan, and this applies to whether your business is conducted on a local or a national level, whether you have internal staff, work with agencies or freelancers or whether your budget is big or small.

When developing your plan, remember it's not just about selling a product or a service, it's about everything you do. Look at the bigger picture to figure out how to truly help your customers. This involves creating the right environment for a sale, responding appropriately to customer cues before and during the sale and providing follow-up after the customer

has placed enough trust in you to commence a sale.

In addition to paid advertising expenditures, it's about being out in your business community, speaking to groups, writing informative how-to articles, providing free seminars and sponsoring small business organizations. It's about communicating a consistent message each and every time.

Branding: working together

Marketing matches products and/or services to consumer need; advertising creates and places paid media messages; and public relations builds mutually beneficial associations with the public. The best scenario is when all three of these disciplines are understood and used to support each other in an overall branding effort.

Branding is a popular buzzword today, and it is often confused with "corporate identity" or "corporate image," but these actually have very different meanings. Corporate identity refers to a company's name, logo and tagline that creates its visual expression or its "look." This is most often affected by advertising.

Corporate image is the public's perception of a company, whether that perception is intended or not, and it is most often affected by a public relations campaign or the lack of one. Corporate branding is planned, strategically focused and integrated throughout the organization. It combines these efforts to create leadership, inspiration and clarity of messages.

The powerful branding process affects all forms of communications and is the strategically thought-out declaration of who you are, what you believe and why your customers should put their faith in your products and services.

All of these efforts require time and commitment, but they build the intangible, yet valuable, assets that can influence customer and employee preferences and ultimately strengthen your organization's bottom line. **ICN**

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