

PRs are builders of brands

If PR is so powerful, why does top management continue to favor advertising in budgeting and at the boardroom table? Marketing guru, Laura Ries, keynote speaker at the Media Relations 200 conference held in New York City recently, argued passionately that it's because PR has failed defining and publicizing its own mission.

 By [Sally Falkow](#) 6 Jul 2003

In short, we haven't positioned ourselves as builders of brands, which is the single most valuable marketing function. She spoke of how PR stacks up against advertising in terms of effectiveness, how can we elevate PR's image, seize the marketing reins, acquire brand-building skills, and finally, how we can convince management of PR's superior value in building a brand.

Laura Ries is the daughter of marketing guru Al Ries - who wrote the benchmark texts on positioning back in the 70s. They have just co-authored a book titled "The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR", which once again beats the drum for the use of PR first in a slow build up of awareness and interest, as the only way to start the fire and build a brand.

Ries mentioned Botox and Viagra as two of the most successful PR campaigns to build a brand and rock sales. Botox did eight years of PR before they ever spent a cent on advertising. Now they are launching a \$50 million advertising campaign to cash in on the credibility and buzz created by PR.

Ries advocates that advertising should only be used once PR has run its course and done its job - use advertising to accelerate your success. "PR builds perceptions in the mind," she says. "Ads should follow PR both in timing and in theme. An ad campaign is successful when it repeats the perceptions created by PR program."

She cites as examples Red Bull, Jet Blue - one of the very few profitable airlines in the US today, Harry Potter and Starbucks. Jet Blue used only PR for the first few years. Starbucks did not advertise until recently. Red Bull sales started slowly and then rose exponentially - it is now a worldwide success story.

Ries emphasized the importance of a charismatic and credible spokesperson for your PR campaign. "You can't interview an airplane or a hi-tech gadget," she says "You need a person who is media savvy and interesting."

Commenting that large ad campaigns don't work the way they used to, she pointed to Chevrolet who had the highest ad spend in the US last year - \$780 million. Yet most people don't have one clear perception of what a Chev is - it's a large, small, expensive, cheap car - or truck.

The Achilles heel of advertising is that it lacks credibility says Ries. PR builds credibility because it is a third party endorsement. Volvo can run ads about safety because they built that position through media coverage.

As people ask the wrong question says Ries. "Ad agencies are always looking for how are we better. PR people ask where is the news angle."

Building a brand means you have to be first in the mind. If you can't be first, then make a new category and

be first in that. And that 'new and different' will get you the buzz and the media coverage.

Rolex was the first expensive watch. Then Piaget created the first ultra-thin elegant watch. Swatch created the first fashion watch.

Ries outlined the steps to a successful PR program:

1. Create controversy - identify the enemy and be different.
2. Leak the news to the media. Build up interest over time.
3. Start small - use email newsletters first, then weeklies and build the buzz till you get attention from the major media outlets.
4. Recruit allies. Use others to help you get the message out.
5. Collect feedback. Watch how the media covers your message. Make changes to increase effectiveness.
6. Once you have successfully created the perceptions, then launch your ad campaign to reinforce the results of the PR.

As a PR person you should be in those strategy board meetings, advises Ries. Only PR will build the brand and create successful campaigns that reap rewards over time. When you position yourself as a brand building expert, you will be more likely to convince your CEO that PR can deliver the goods.

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