

The Role of Public Relations in the Marketing Mix

Advertising is so often "in your face" and those of us that are interested are normally aware of a company's advertising campaigns, but how often are we familiar with the associated public relations activities?

By [Keith Schorah](#) 8 May 2002

Costs are fixed for placing ads, booking air time, planning media schedules etc and the marketing manager that I talked about in my last article often finds it easy to work out his annual ad spend but not so easy to work out how much to allocate to public relations. I feel that this is because the value of public relations, as an industry and a marketing tool, is often misunderstood by many.

Marketing focuses on products (or services), and their price, promotion and place (distribution.) These collectively are known as the marketing mix or "the four p's". Britain's first professor of public relations suggested that added to the classic four Ps of marketing should be for P for perception and this is where PR would come in. I would like to expand on this statement and propose that public relations can be applied to every part of the marketing mix, of which advertising, the one the public are most familiar with, is but one ingredient.

It is sometimes said that public relations is new, as if it had been invented during the last few years or since the second world war, or just this century. In countries, such as Botswana, which have gained their independence during the last thirty years, public relations may well seem new. Amongst those who associated public relations with the older industrialised world it is sometimes claimed that public relations is an American invention. The Americans may have invented Mickey Mouse, Coca Cola and Hollywood, but they did not invent public relations.

Perhaps the reason why there is a mistaken idea that public relations is something new, is because in recent years we have enjoyed so many new ways of communicating. Before the advent of newer techniques such as television, videos and satellite broadcasting, a vital part was played by press, radio and cinema. It has, as a result, become both easier and more necessary to explain and create understanding about so many more topics as the target audience becomes ever larger. Today more than ever, public relations has to deal with the facts as they are - good, bad or indifferent and in that sense public relations has to be as new as the world in which it operates.

Let us be clear about the meaning of public relations. Essentially, public relations is about creating understanding through knowledge, and this often involves effecting change. Public relations is therefore a form of communication. It applies to every sort of organisation, commercial or non commercial, in the public or private sector. Public relations consists of all communications with all the people with whom the organisation has contact.

Public relations should be to the marketing practitioner, an integral part of the marketing mix, and for this to be the case, the confusion as to its role, as opposed to that of advertising, needs to be clarified.

One definition of advertising is as follows "Advertising presents the most persuasive possible selling message to the right prospects for the product or service at the lowest possible price." Advertising presents this message through the creative skills of copywriting, illustration, layout, typography, scriptwriting and video.

making based on a theme or "copy platform". The emphasis is on selling, which differs very much from the public relations role of "informing, educating and creating understanding through knowledge."

There is however a major relationship between advertising and public relations in that advertising is more likely to succeed when prior public relations activity has created knowledge and understanding of the product or service being promoted. This is sometimes better known as market education and is a practical example of how public relations can help the marketing strategy. It is wise business practice for public relations to work with advertising, rather than relying solely on advertising to break into a new market or to introduce a new and unknown product or service. A number of new products have failed to sell simply, because there no build up or market education and hence the advertising spend was a waste of money. I wonder if this is also true of the many dot.com business that did not manage to see their first year out?

Public relations can almost be regarded as a bigger activity than advertising, because it relates to all the communications of the total organisation, whereas advertising, although it may cost more than public relations, is mainly limited to the marketing function. Public relations is certainly not free advertising, if done well, it is time consuming and time costs money. Whereas the cost of an advertisement is always known, the cost of securing editorial space or radio/tv air time is difficult to quantify but its benefit is often of great value.

Advertising may not be used by an organisation but every organisation is involved in public relations. For example a fire brigade does not advertise for fires or even advertise its services, but it does have relationships with many publics.

Another difference lies in the finances of the two - advertising agencies usually receive their income from a commission based fee structure, with monies received being spent on media and production costs. Public relations companies however derive income from time and quality of work performed, with monies received being spent on staff salaries.

Public relations embraces everyone and everything, whereas advertising is limited to selling and buying tasks such as promoting goods and services, buying supplies and recruiting staff. Public relations has to do with the total communications of an organisation; it is, therefore, more extensive and comprehensive than advertising. On occasions public relations may use advertising, which is why public relations is neither a form of advertising or a part of advertising, but a misunderstood, crucial tool that cuts right across the marketing mix.

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