

Public Relations

How it fits into a marketing and promotions strategy

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Many people ask and wonder what public relations means and how it fits into a company's marketing and promotion strategy. In its basic sense public relations is the art or science of establishing and promoting a favourable relationship with the public. In essence public relations concerns building good relations with the company's various publics by obtaining favourable publicity, building up a good 'corporate image' and handling or heading off unfavourable rumours, stories and events. Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, hospitals, schools etc. To achieve their goals these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and with society at large.

MAIN PR FUNCTIONS INCLUDE

- **Press relations** - creating and placing newsworthy information in the news media to attract attention to a person, product or service
- **Product publicity** - publicising specific products
- **Public affairs** - building and maintaining local, national and international relations
- **Lobbying** - building and maintaining relations with legislators and government officials to influence legislation
- **Investor relations** - maintaining relationships with shareholders and others in the financial community.

Public relations is used to promote products, people, places, ideas, activities, organisations and

even nations. Trade associations have used public relations to rebuild interest in declining commodities such as eggs, apples, milk and potatoes. Even nations have used public relations to attract more tourists, foreign investment, and international support. Companies can also use PR to manage their way out of a crisis.

Public relations can have a strong impact on public awareness at a much lower cost than advertising can. The company does not pay for the space or time in the media. Rather, it pays for staff to develop and circulate information and to manage events. If the company develops an interesting story, it could be picked up by several different media, having the same effect as advertising that would cost millions. It would also have more credibility than advertising.

In the current economic climate PR is playing an increasingly important brand-building role as more and more businesses view good public relations as a powerful branding tool. Many marketing managers are now interested in how advertising and public relations affect sales and profits. A case in point is Anita Roddick, who built the Body Shop into a major international brand with no advertising at all. Instead she travelled the world in a relentless quest for publicity.

PR professionals use several tools:

One essential tool is 'news' - PR professionals find or create favourable news about the company and its products or people.

Speeches also create product and company publicity. Increasingly company executives must field questions from the media or give talks at trade associations or sales meetings. These events

can either build or hurt the company's image. Another common PR tool is special events - ranging from news conferences, press tours, grand openings, hot air balloon releases, multimedia presentations and star studded spectacles all designed to reach and interest the target public. Sponsorship is any vehicle through which companies gain public relations exposure. Corporate sponsorships have become an important promotional tool for companies looking to lift their brand image or introduce new product lines or services. A company's web site can also be a good public relations vehicle. Consumers and members of other publics can visit the site for information and entertainment. Web sites can also be ideal for handling crisis situations. One of the most important benefits of using company web-sites for public relations is a greater control of message consistency.

It is however worth remembering that while the internet has changed the fundamentals of PR work, the internet is no substitute for journalists and their high-impact editors.

As with any promotional tool, in considering when and how to use product public relations management should set PR objectives, choose the PR messages and vehicles, implement the PR plan and evaluate the results. Message themes for the public relations exercise should be closely aligned with the company's PR objectives. The PR campaign must be implemented with care. A great story is easy to place but, unfortunately, most stories are not earth shattering and would not get past busy editors!

Public relations results are difficult to measure as PR is used with other promotional tools, and its impact is often indirect. Ideally you should measure the change in product awareness, knowledge and attitude resulting from the publicity campaign. However assessing the change requires measuring before-and-after the campaign levels of these measures.

Finally, like the other communication tools, public relations should be blended smoothly with the other promotion activities within the company's overall integrated marketing communications effort. For further information on the area of PR please contact us.

