

CHAPTER 21

Public relations and the consumer



Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- understand the term consumer public relations
- describe different types of consumer public relations activity
- appreciate the critical factors that drive successful consumer public relations campaigns
- understand how consumer public relations complements other communication disciplines
- appreciate the benefits that can be generated by a successful consumer public relations campaign
- apply the principles to real-life scenarios
- understand the challenges facing practitioners.

Structure

- What is consumer public relations?
- Tools and techniques
- The wonderful world of brands
- Key challenges
- Tomorrow's people

Introduction

The public relations and marketing landscape is changing. In a world of media fragmentation, information overload and a revolution in personal communication – not to mention the rise of the ‘promiscuous’ consumer – the conventional maxims of marketing are being challenged as never before. In this environment public relations, which was once perceived as a rather lightweight addition to the marketing family, has proved that it can deliver results. Many marketing professionals now view public relations as an effective way to win over the hearts and minds of consumers and its status in the marketing mix has grown accordingly. Some (Ries and Ries 2001) even argue that a seismic shift is underway, which will result in a diminished role for advertising in the future as companies look for more sophisticated ways to promote their products and services. Superbrands, such as Virgin and Amazon, have already placed public relations at the forefront of their marketing strategies, as have a host of other companies, although it should be noted that the majority are still a long way from grasping even a slice of its full potential.

Whatever the level of acceptance and application, one thing is certain: consumer public relations has moved from the fringes of marketing communication to a position of credibility and influence. While the lion's share of the marketing budget still tends to be spent elsewhere, the universe of consumer public relations is expanding rapidly and it is a challenging and intoxicating place for a practitioner to be. It is a world of brands, buzz and creative advantage, all of which is driven by a simple business imperative: to

sell their products and services companies must first get them noticed and into the minds of consumers. Only then can they start to forge lasting and productive relationships with their intended targets and it is at this stage of a campaign lifecycle that public relations really comes into its own. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a greater appreciation of public relations in a consumer marketing context and to demonstrate the advantages it has over other forms of communication. Attention will also be given to the strategic and intellectual rigour that is required to deliver an effective consumer public relations campaign that makes a genuine difference by delivering tangible commercial results.

What is consumer public relations?

Public relations is a holistic discipline concerned with the complex relationships that exist between an organisation and those groups that can influence its reputation and affect the way it operates: employees, the local community, government, shareholders, financial institutions, regulators, suppliers and customers. As a result, public relations campaigns can have many different objectives, such as:

- to help attract and retain staff
- to show that an organisation is environmentally responsible
- to change a piece of unfavourable legislation
- to educate people about an issue
- to demonstrate that the organisation is a worthy investment, a sound trading partner or the provider of quality products and services.

This breadth of outcomes means that every type of organisation – whether a company, charity or governing body – should be concerned with good public relations practice in one form or another.

Clearly, public relations does not focus only on the commercial activities of an organisation and its remit extends beyond winning new customers and duelling with competitors in the highly pressurised world of modern capitalism. This chapter is, however, concerned specifically with this aspect of public relations practice and will examine how organisations use the public relations tools at their disposal to interact with consumers in a trading environment (how public relations promotes transactions *between* businesses is discussed in Chapter 22). This commercial focus also excludes discussion of those public relations campaigns in the public sector that are designed to educate citizens about issues such as smoking, recycling and taxation (see Chapter 30), as well as the recruitment and fundraising activities executed by charities.

The world we are concerned with here is where public relations interfaces with *marketing* activities,

such as advertising, to stimulate the sale of products and services in the free market economy. As the chapter unfolds it will become apparent that although the endgame of consumer public relations in this context is to drive sales, its role is often more subtle and sophisticated than more direct forms of communication. By changing the attitudes and behaviour of consumers, public relations can create a more favourable sales environment for a company and its products, so helping to facilitate the path to purchase.

Figure 21.1 illustrates this process by highlighting the stages a consumer can take on the *path to purchase*, the journey from initial awareness to purchase and consumption.

Definition: The *path to purchase* describes the stages a consumer takes in the journey from initial need and product awareness to purchase and consumption.

Definition: *Marketing* is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.

Marketing mix

Definition: *Marketing mix* is the term used to define the four key elements of an organisation's marketing programme: product, price, place and promotion.

In developed countries it sometimes seems that everyone thinks they are a consumer public relations expert (although they often mistake public relations for *advertising*). After all, are we not all

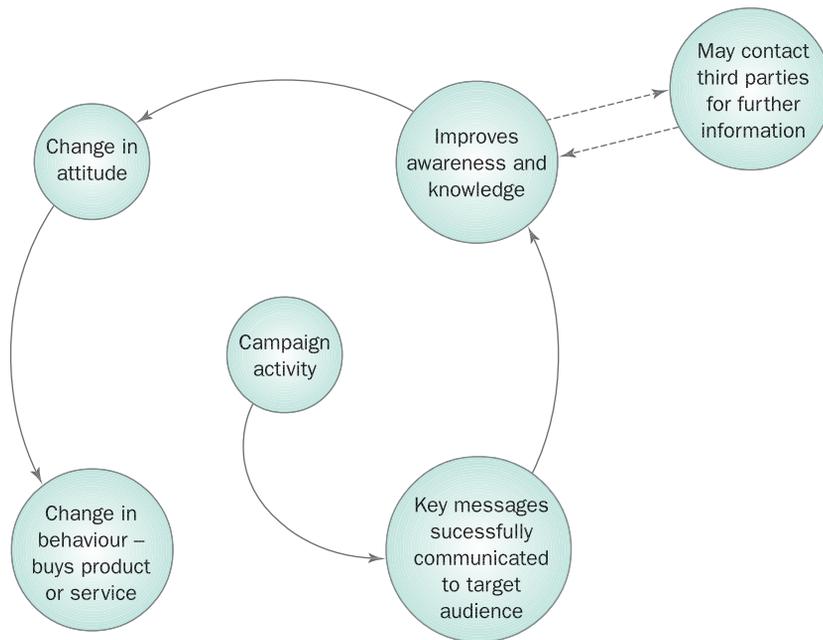


FIGURE 21.1 Path to purchase

consumers and do we not all have valid views and opinions on the communication that is directed at us? It is true that as human beings we all use and consume goods and services to satisfy a complex range of needs. Every day we make countless decisions about the things we buy, from the cheap and mundane, to the expensive and exciting: everything from food, beer, clothing, bus and cinema tickets, to holidays, cars and mortgages. Indeed, it could be said that it is consumers – not companies – who exert the real power in the marketplace, as it is our individual buying decisions that determine the products that succeed and those that fail. It is not surprising, therefore, that most companies appear to be obsessively driven by the need to persuade consumers to buy their goods and services rather than those of their competitors.

Definition: Advertising is a form of promotional activity that uses a totally controllable message to inform and persuade a large number of people with a single communication.

It is increasingly appreciated in marketing circles and textbooks (e.g. Brassington and Pettitt 2003) that public relations is a diverse practice that when successfully applied can grab attention, get people talking and move them to action. These are important

attributes when the goal is to sell something to the man and woman on the street. In this context, public relations has become a valuable part of what is known as the *marketing mix*, an often quoted term that refers to the set of tools that a company has at its disposal to influence sales. The traditional formulation is popularly known as the 4Ps: product, price, place and promotion (Kotler 2003).

Promotion is the area that encompasses public relations, as it is this part of the marketing equation that focuses on the messages that are designed to stimulate awareness, interest and purchase. To communicate these messages and to attract interest and awareness in their products and services, companies use a combination of disciplines – including advertising, *sales promotion*, *direct mail* and public relations – to reach their desired audiences. When used in this way, public relations should become a planned and sustained element of the wider *promotional mix*, working in tandem with other marketing activities to achieve maximum impact and with the potential to meet a range of objectives, such as:

- raising an organisation's profile
- redefining its image
- helping to promote its credibility in a new or existing market
- demonstrating empathy with a target audience
- launching a new product or service
- reinvigorating an existing product or service
- stimulating trial and purchase.

Definition: Direct mail is electronic and posted communications sent to individuals' text phone, email, work and home postal addresses.

Definition: Sales promotion means short-term or temporary inducements, such as price cuts or two-for-one offers, designed to encourage consumers to use a product or service.

Building relationships

Underpinning a host of valid communication outcomes, helping an organisation to build positive and lasting relationships with consumers and those that influence them is the most important role that public relations can play in marketing. While it can be argued that relationship building represents the Holy Grail for all disciplines in the promotional mix, the world we live in is changing. Mark Adams, a founder of high-tech public relations firm Text 100 explains:

Companies boast that they have relationships with their customers, while customers get more unwanted marketing rubbish in the post, and less of the face-to-face contact they really love. Ask them if they have a relationship with companies and they won't just laugh in your face – they'll probably spit. Relationship is being killed by corporate convenience and mass-producing. With it, customer trust and loyalty are becoming outdated concepts. It makes pure marketing sense for companies to spot this and aim to fix it. Those that do will achieve wondrous things. PR people are there to help do the fixing, to build relationships.

Public relations is increasingly showing itself to be a first among equals in the quest to connect with consumers. This is reflected in the growing preponderance of public-relations-led campaigns with marketing spend being diverted from advertising, direct mail and other budgets into what were once regarded as Cinderella activities. In short, the tools that public relations professionals have at their disposal are increasingly seen to have the capacity to communicate with consumers in a way that other marketing disciplines cannot match.

Tools and techniques

Fit for purpose

Before discussing the individual tools and techniques that can make up a public relations programme, it is important to stress that the key characteristics of the

target audience play a big part in defining and shaping the strategy and tactics that are deployed in a campaign. Who do we need to talk to? How can we reach them? What are they interested in? What do we want them to do? By posing a series of simple questions it is possible to refine and sharpen the scope of the planned activity, ensuring a clinical rather than a wasteful, scattergun approach to the tools and techniques that are at the practitioner's disposal. (See also Chapter 10.)

For example, if the purpose of the campaign is to get young mothers to visit their local supermarket, a national media relations campaign might not have the same impact as activity targeted at a local newspaper. Or, if research shows that the same audience is concerned about their children walking to school, then a road safety sponsorship executed at local level may strike a chord and help to establish a positive relationship with the store. One of public relations' great attributes is its flexibility as campaigns can be tailored to appeal to many audiences and modified to accommodate the requirements of different delivery channels, such as the media, events or sponsorship.

Media relations

Getting a journalist to write or talk on air about a company, product or service is an objective of many consumer public relations campaigns. The persuasive power of editorial is much greater than paid-for advertising as the stories and features that appear in newspapers and magazines – as well as on radio and television – tend to be viewed by consumers as unbiased and objective. In contrast, advertising in the same media channels relies on paid-for space and therefore lacks the same credibility as coverage that has been created by an independent third party such as a journalist. Influencing this editorial process is a key task for the public relations practitioner (see also Chapter 16). No advertisement or sales person can convince you about the virtues of a product as effectively as an independent expert, such as a journalist, and if this opinion is then repeated to you by a friend, family member or colleague it has an even greater resonance. Indeed, most of us got to hear about easyJet, lastminute.com, Virgin and Amazon not through advertising but from news stories in the press, radio, TV and online, or through personal recommendation.

While the benefits of a successful media relations campaign are obvious, achieving the desired result is not so easy. As editorial coverage, by definition, cannot be bought and because someone else produces the finished article, the public relations practitioner has no direct control over it (unlike an advertisement). In

addition, although there are opportunities to write straightforward product press releases that achieve positive coverage (a glance at the 'best buy' features in lifestyle magazines or an examination of the motor-ing press will highlight good examples of product-focused editorial), most journalists tend to shy away from commercially driven stories and are certainly not receptive to what they see as *company propaganda*.

Definition: *Company propaganda* is a negative term used by some journalists to describe positive statements presented by an organisation about its beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, to reach many consumers a company needs to be featured in the general news sections of the media rather than in specialist editorial. In this environment, media relations campaigns have to incorporate an additional *news* hook to motivate a journalist to cover a story and this might involve independent research, a celebrity association, an anniversary, a great photograph or a new and surprising angle on a traditional theme. (See Activity 21.1 and Mini case study 21.1.)

Events

It is a common misconception that public relations is only concerned with the generation of positive media

coverage. Open days, workshops, roadshows, exhibitions, conferences and AGMs are all events that can provide a company with the opportunity to interact directly with consumers either on its home turf or out and about in the community, generating enhanced presence for the business and a forum for face-to-face, two-way communication. (See Think about 21.1 and Mini case study 21.2, overleaf.)

Definition: High footfall retail centre refers to a shopping centre that attracts a large number of passing shoppers.

activity 21.1

Media stories

Take two daily newspapers – one quality paper and one popular or tabloid paper. Identify stories that you believe have been generated by an in-house public relations department or agency to promote a product or service.

Feedback

Clues to stories with a public relations source include: staged photographs accompanying the news item; results of research published on the date of the news item; anniversary of an event; book/film/CD published on the date of the news item.

mini case study 21.1

Media relations driving sales – a fishy story

UK supermarket Morrisons agreed to donate a percentage of its takings from fish sales on National Sea Fish Day to the Royal National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen. The objective set for the public relations team was to develop a media relations campaign, targeting newspapers and radio stations within the catchment areas of Morrisons stores, in order to boost awareness of the initiative and encourage shoppers to visit their fish counter.

A number of potential story angles were researched before it was decided that the recently published link between fish consumption and increased brainpower provided the most media potential. Further research of GCSE performance in schools near Morrisons stores identified academic 'hot spots' and this was linked to higher than usual levels of fish consumption.

Photocalls were then held in Morrisons stores to support a fun and entertaining press pack that gave details of National Sea Fish Day and highlighted why fish is believed to boost brainpower. Favourable print and broadcast coverage appeared in all targeted areas and a significant amount of customer interest was generated at Morrisons fish counters.



PICTURE 21.1 UK supermarket Morrisons agreed to donate a percentage of its takings from fish sales on National Sea Fish Day to the Royal National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen.

Source: Used with kind permission of Morrisons (www.morrisons.co.uk)

mini case study 21.2

Connecting with consumers – Quality Street hits the road

Quality Street is worldwide confectionery manufacturer Nestlé's second biggest selling brand. In 2003 the packaging was redesigned to present a more contemporary image and Nestlé stepped up its programme of rolling out giant variants of individual chocolates from the selection. At the core of Nestlé's strategy was the 'de-seasonalising' of the brand (sales had previously been linked heavily to Christmas and Easter) and the broadening of its consumer appeal.

The public relations agency was briefed to develop a campaign that would display the new-look packaging, support the launch of the 'giant' Toffee Finger, create talkability around the theme that everyone has a favourite Quality Street and also provide a means to engage with consumers that would promote trial and purchase.

A car-sized motorised Quality Street tin was commissioned and built, which became the central feature of a four-week roadshow visiting 25 *high footfall retail*

centres throughout the UK. As well as being a strong visual representation of the new packaging, with a high talkability factor ('the big motorised tin is coming to town'), it also featured an electronic vote-ometer through which consumers could register their favourite from the Quality Street selection. A 'walking, talking' giant Toffee Finger mascot was also produced to give children a strong and memorable point of engagement with the new product.

Over one million people saw the giant tin during the tour and almost 20,000 votes were captured. The initiative delivered a structured and creative sampling programme while an intensive media relations programme generated extensive radio and press coverage, with the tin featured prominently in colour photography. This aspect of the campaign used statistics based on the votes cast for Quality Street favourites to give a strong regional edge to the story.

Source: Used with kind permission of Nestlé



PICTURE 21.2 Quality Street is worldwide confectionery manufacturer Nestlé's second biggest selling brand. In 2003 the packaging was redesigned to present a more contemporary image. Nestlé produced giant individual sweets from the selection and set up a roadshow featuring a giant motorised Quality Street tin.

think about 21.1 Events

- Can you think of a public relations event, like one of those listed, that you have attended in the past year?
- What about the open day you may have attended at your current or other colleges or universities?
- What were the factors that made it a success or failure?

Sponsorship

Whether in sport, the arts or in support of a worthy cause, sponsorship is fundamentally about third-party endorsement and as such sits neatly under the public relations umbrella (see also Chapter 27). If successfully managed to maximise opportunities – and this is where advertising and direct mail also play a role – sponsorship can provide a powerful platform from which to increase the relevance of a company and its products among key target audiences. By harnessing the emotions, qualities and values associated with the *sponsorship property* and perhaps providing some form of added value experience, a business can successfully stand out in a cluttered consumer market. (See Think about 21.2 and Mini case study 21.3.)

Definition: *Sponsorship property* refers to the venue, event, activity, cause, team or individual that is the subject of the sponsorship.

By discussing the different tools a practitioner has at their disposal, it soon becomes clear that a consumer public relations campaign can have many dimensions, with media relations, event or sponsorship initiatives supporting one another in an integrated and imaginative programme of activity. Figure 21.2 (overleaf) seeks to show: the components that can make up a campaign; the different audience outtakes that can be generated; and the great potential for overlap and maximisation. For example, a sponsorship might be promoted through a media relations campaign and a series of events.

think about 21.2 Sponsorship

For a sponsorship to be truly effective, does the sponsoring company need to have an obvious link with the property (for example, Adidas and football)?

Can you think of an example of a successful sponsorship where there is no obvious connection between the core activities of the business and the sponsored property, such as Xerox and football?

If you were public relations director of Coca-Cola, how would you justify its sponsorship of the Olympics? Is it about sporting performance, a particular lifestyle statement, credibility by association or none of these?

mini case study 21.3

Maximising a sponsorship – the Nationwide giant shirt

Nationwide Building Society was the official sponsor of the England football team. The aim of the sponsorship was to provide a platform for an integrated communications programme that would enhance the company's profile and consumer appeal in the highly competitive personal finance market.

In the run-up to the 2000 European Championships, Nationwide wished to achieve maximum impact so as to eclipse the activities of all other sponsors. The building society asked its agency to create a campaign that would not only dominate media coverage of sponsors but would also directly involve and excite England fans. The campaign focused on the production of the world's largest football shirt – measuring 30 metres by

20 metres, which became the centrepiece of a national roadshow and was signed with good luck messages by fans and celebrities.

Attendance at the roadshows exceeded 400,000 and the shirt was signed by 10,000 people, including celebrities such as Rod Stewart and Robbie Williams and by Prime Minister Tony Blair. Media coverage generated through photocalls and press interviews exceeded £1.3 million and awareness of Nationwide as the England football team's sponsor trebled during the four-week campaign period.

Source: Used with kind permission of Ptarmigan Consultants Limited and Nationwide Building Society

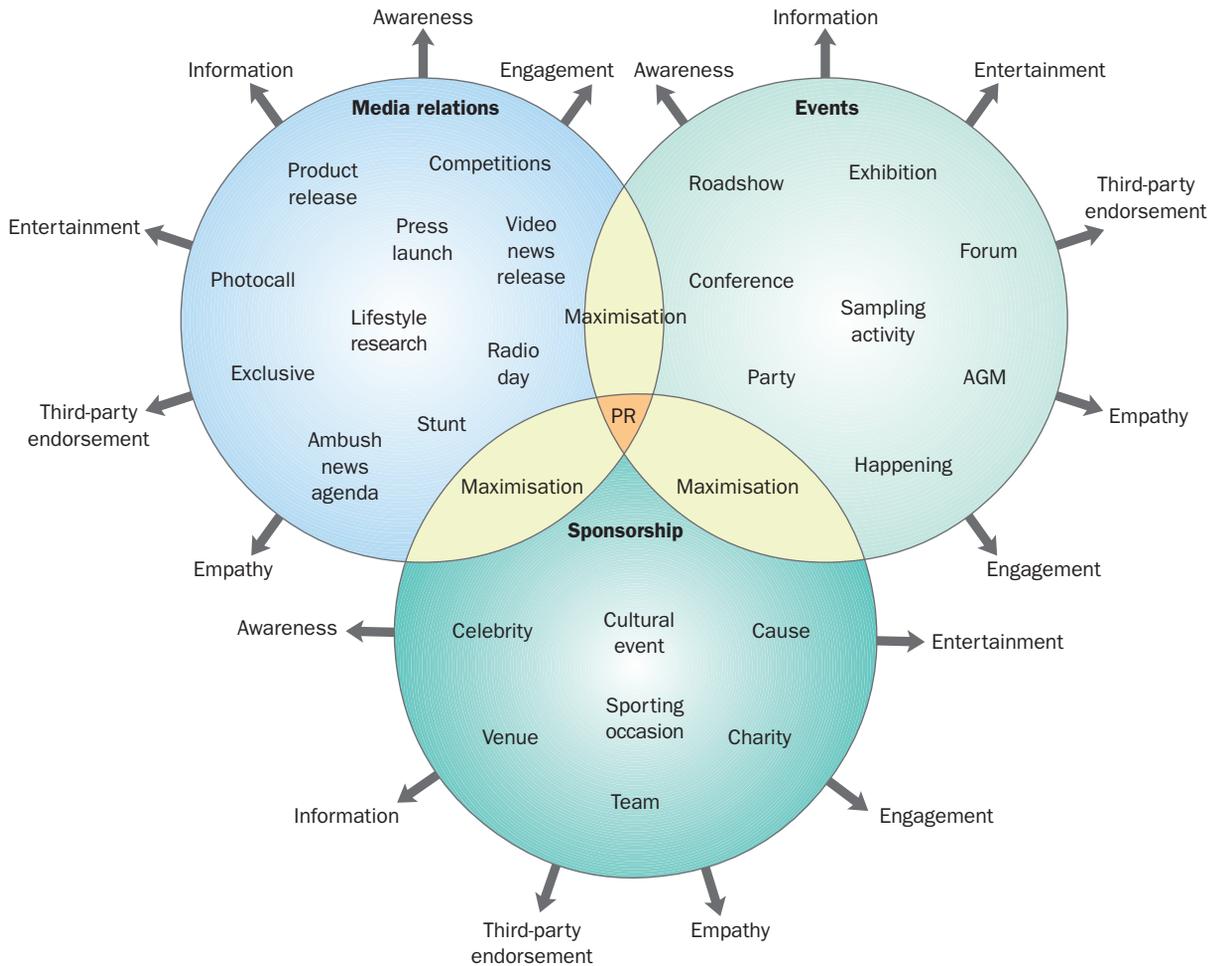


FIGURE 21.2 Universe of consumer public relations

Something extra

The campaigns that have been described were not only concerned with generating awareness and presence but were also driven by the need to communicate a personality and set of values. If a company can communicate these qualities it may succeed in differentiating itself from the competition. (See Activity 21.2.)

By helping to project human qualities on to a company, product or service, public relations can play an

active role in the fascinating world of *brand* development. It is necessary to understand the role and power of effective branding more fully to appreciate the benefits that public relations can generate within the context of a successfully executed consumer strategy.

The wonderful world of brands

Definition: A *brand* is a label that seeks to add perceived value to a consumer product by generating loyalty or preference.

Method in the madness

Our societies appear to be overflowing with brands. In popular culture everything and everybody seems to be referred to as a brand: pop stars, sportsmen, royalty, airlines, places, politicians – never mind the products that line the shelves in supermarkets or fill the shops on the high street. In one sense, everything

activity 21.2

Personality and values

Can you identify the key personality traits and the core values promoted in the mini case studies covered so far?

Feedback

- Morrisons (local and lively).
- Nestlé (part of the family and fun to be with).
- Nationwide (big and exciting).

can be legitimately called a brand because the term does apply to any label that carries some meaning or association. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is necessary to apply a more structured definition in order to fully appreciate the role that public relations can play in brand development.

Adam Morgan (1999) in his book *Eating the Big Fish* usefully defines a brand as an entity that satisfies all the following four conditions:

- 1 Something that has a buyer and a seller (e.g. David Beckham and Kylie Minogue but not the Queen). Morgan also makes the distinction that 'buying and selling' does not have to be a financial transaction to be of value to both sides.
- 2 Something that has a differentiating name, symbol or trademark (e.g. easyJet but not aeroplanes). Moreover, it is differentiated from other similar products around it for reasons other than its name or trademark, (e.g. the name of an elite military squad rather than the standard armed forces).
- 3 Something that has positive or negative associations in consumers' minds for reasons other than its literal product characteristics (e.g. Coca-Cola but not tap-water).
- 4 Something that has been created, rather than is naturally occurring (e.g. the Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal or Nou Camp (Barcelona), but not Niagara Falls or the Amazon River).

(See also Chapter 26 and Think about 21.3.)

By studying different brand definitions, such as the one put forward by Morgan, it becomes apparent how brands can add resonance to a product or service. Successful brands offer consumers tangible and emotional benefits over other products, which consumers not only recognise but also desire, at both a conscious and subconscious level. (See the neuromar-

keting investigation into Coke and Pepsi in Chapter 14.) Furthermore, great brands usually take this appeal a stage further by focusing more on emotional than rational benefits and this ultimately manifests itself in a distinct and consistent personality running through all their marketing activities. (See Think about 21.4 and Mini case study 21.4, overleaf.)

Emotional power of brands

It is not surprising that brand owners are increasingly turning to image and emotional marketing to win over consumers. In today's fast-paced economy, companies tend to copy any competitor's advantage until it is nullified, which is why emotional appeal assumes such importance and why companies such as Nike try to sell an attitude: 'Just Do It'.

The power of brands is also linked to an increasingly strong desire to express individuality through the ownership of goods and services that are perceived to be innovative, different and original. Indeed, psychologist David Lewis (Lewis and Bridger 2003: xiii) goes as far as to say that:

For many New Consumers the purchase of products and services has largely replaced religious faith as a source of inspiration and solace. For an even larger group, their buying decisions are driven by a deep rooted psychological desire to enhance and develop their sense of self.

Given the emotional capital that is invested in some – if not all – purchasing decisions, public relations can be used to demonstrate that a brand empathises with the worries, needs and aspirations of particular groups of people, allowing it to connect and align itself with consumers in an indirect but powerful association. From an implementation perspective, this is one of the reasons why many public relations campaigns hook into lifestyle issues and popular culture,

think about 21.3 Brands

- Can you think of any other examples that fit each of Morgan's four criteria?
- How do these brands communicate with consumers?

think about 21.4 Brands and their personalities

Think of five other brands and the personalities they try to project:

- Do you admire these brands?
- What attracts or repels you about each brand?

Think about different brands of the same product, e.g. mobile phones or record companies:

- Do they carry different personalities?
- How is that personality conveyed?

mini case study 21.4**Communicating a brand personality – MINI roof gardens**

After much anticipation, BMW launched the new MINI to the UK public in 2001, receiving mass plaudits from the motoring press. The public relations challenge two years later was to maintain awareness of the MINI brand in the post-launch phase – keeping consumers talking about the car by emphasising its ‘cheeky’ personality – while focusing on coverage in the non-motoring media.

A feature of the car that supported these objectives was the opportunity for owners to personalise their MINI, particularly through the various roof designs that could be ordered through MINI dealerships. As part of a sustained campaign, the first mobile rooftop gardens were commissioned by the public relations team, using the expertise of one of London’s top flower arrangers

to create real mini gardens on top of two cars: one featuring a miniature maze, including a MINI toy car lost inside, and the other with a floral swirl of colours with a fully functioning fountain in the centre.

In keeping with the car’s irreverent personality, the MINIs arrived unannounced at the Chelsea Flower Show on VIP/press day to ensure optimum media coverage, after which they drove around London to maximise brand presence. The MINI roof gardens were seen by thousands of people visiting the show and the story generated over 50 pieces of media coverage in the national and regional press, online, as well as a special live link to BBC’s *10 O’clock News*.

Source: used with kind permission of MINI



PICTURE 21.3 Mobile rooftop gardens were commissioned by the public relations team, using the expertise of one of London’s top flower arrangers to create real mini gardens on top of two cars: one featuring a miniature maze, including a MINI toy car lost inside, and the other with a floral swirl of colours with a fully functioning fountain in the centre.

mini case study 21.5

Plugging into lifestyle issues – The Kylie Generation

Lifestyle-oriented consumer public relations was traditionally not a part of UK financial services firm Britannia Building Society's marketing mix. The press office handled media relations activity with the emphasis on targeting the personal finance pages with straightforward product and rate news. However, with a raft of modern and attractive competitors gaining an increased share of the mortgage market, Britannia saw the need to freshen its brand image in order to ensure its products and services were seen to be relevant by key target audiences. A brand-building campaign was required that would reach a young professional audience and reposition the building society as a consumer-focused organisation, in touch with modern lives and social changes.

A fun campaign hook, 'The Kylie Generation', was created that would appeal to a young consumer audience by entertaining as well as informing them about what Britannia had to offer. The campaign declared the death of the then popular Bridget Jones theory – the curse of the 'desperate singleton' – and instead celebrated a new generation of 20 to 30 year olds, who, like Kylie Minogue (the Australian actress/singer), were opting to live alone, whether they were single or

not. To ensure the story would make both the news and personal finance pages, research was commissioned that analysed the behaviour of the target audience, carefully intertwining lifestyle attitudes with their views on money and the home.

Britannia's story was featured in five national newspapers, including a full-colour, double-page centre spread in *The Daily Mirror* (including full commentary of Britannia's products, plus details of its telephone number and website) and the lead consumer story in *The Sun*, as well as 40 regional dailies across the country. Radio interviews featuring a Britannia spokesperson were also negotiated with local and regional stations. The story also ran on key consumer websites that met the required profile of the campaign's key target audience, including *GQ*, *Handbag*, *Femail* and *New Woman*, prompting over 3500 online click-throughs to the Britannia website. The overall success of The Kylie Generation idea encouraged Britannia to invest in a series of additional lifestyle-focused public relations campaigns.

Source: used with kind permission of Britannia Building Society

using celebrity association, the services of psychologists, anthropologists, fashion gurus, chefs, interior designers and a range of other experts to add bite and relevance to their campaigns. (See Mini case study 21.5.)

Key challenges

Creativity is king

The biggest danger facing any consumer public relations campaign is indifference. That is why companies seek to gain marketing advantage in the battle for hearts, minds and wallets through the application of superior creativity. The search for an idea that will make busy, preoccupied consumers stop and take notice of a brand is a perennial quest across all communication disciplines. However, achieving 'stand-out' recognition and reaching the right people with key messages is now more difficult than ever before.

Definition: Stand-out means to give prominence to a brand, product or service through a marketing campaign.

Consumers are inundated with print, broadcast and electronic information. In the UK alone there are more than 3000 consumer magazines and 2800 local, regional and national newspapers, not to mention 600 radio and television stations, as well as a plethora of websites (see also Chapters 4 and 16 for more details on the media landscape). It is not surprising, therefore, that consumers have developed routines to protect themselves from information overload. Most direct mail gets thrown straight in the bin, we delete unsolicited emails, leave the room to make a cup of tea during commercial breaks and put the phone down on sales calls. In this consumer counter-revolution, it is difficult to get anyone's attention and as Davenport and Beck (2001) point out, the glut of information is leading to what they call an attention deficit disorder. Indeed, it can appear as if businesses are allocating more and more money in pursuit of consumers who are increasingly likely to ignore what they have to say.

Most people want to be entertained or informed about the things that matter to them, not bludgeoned with seemingly random messages and images. To break through the barrier of indifference,

public relations campaigns need to include at least one of these elements to succeed and the great challenge is to think of an idea that will draw the audience to the brand. Being creative is about generating new and surprising ideas that will connect with the consumer, which is not always easy when confronted with a dull or second-rate product, an uninterested media and a non-existent campaign budget. Furthermore, any idea must fit the brand – particularly its personality and values – and, most importantly, meet the strategic objectives of the campaign. It should never be forgotten that the umbilical cord that links a great idea to a successful outcome is a robust strategy driven by a set of clear objectives (see Chapter 10 for planning and managing a campaign).

Adding value

As public relations has gained more prominence in the marketing mix, so the stakes have generally risen in terms of campaign effectiveness and measuring value. It is one thing to create awareness, another to draw attention to a brand, but still another to trigger action. Sergio Zyman (2000: 4–5), former Chief Marketing Officer at the Coca-Cola Company, highlights the challenge in a typically forthright manner:

Marketing has to move . . . consumers to action. Popularity isn't the objective. I don't want virtual consumption – the phenomenon that occurs when customers love your product but don't feel the need to buy it . . . the only thing

activity 21.3

Public-relations-driven media stories

Look out for public-relations-driven stories in the media, particularly survey material, that has achieved nothing more than a solitary name check for the brand. Has this coverage caused you to think differently about the brand?

Contrast these campaign outputs with public relations ideas that have moved you to action or positively changed your attitudes about a brand.

I care about is real consumption. Convincing consumers to buy your products is the only reason that a marketer is in business and the only reason that a company should spend any money at all on marketing.

Measuring and evaluating the success of a campaign is fundamentally important. By its nature, public relations cannot always be directly linked to a sale but, as discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, techniques can be deployed that illustrate how public relations activity can influence consumer perception, attitude and behaviour, and ultimately create a more favourable sales environment for a brand and its products. (See Activity 21.3 and Mini case study 21.6.)

Elephant traps

As well as demonstrating how a carefully conceived and executed public relations initiative can have a direct impact on a company's bottom line, Yorkshire Bank and the other case studies in this chapter also

mini case study 21.6

Delivering results – the great mortgage rip-off

Yorkshire Bank is owned by National Australia Group (NAG) and has access to a number of financial services products that started their lives in the Australasian market. The Flexible Payment Mortgage (FPM) revolutionised the mortgage market 'Down Under' by offering customers daily rather than annual interest calculation, together with the ability to over- or underpay each month. When Yorkshire Bank first introduced the FPM to the UK market, it did not promote the product aggressively, which resulted in media indifference and low consumer demand for the product. The public relations agency was asked to develop a campaign that would raise the product's profile and help establish the flexible mortgage as a mainstream home-buying product.

It was decided to position the FPM in the media as a product that could revolutionise the UK mortgage market, therefore helping to position Yorkshire Bank as a

consumer champion. Daily interest calculation was the key theme of the campaign as research showed every other lender charged annually at that time, severely penalising mortgage holders. A shock figure of £13.5 billion was calculated to generate stand-out and highlight the total amount of interest that could be saved by all homeowners in one year if their lender changed to daily interest calculation. This research formed the cornerstone of the campaign.

The FPM campaign dominated financial services media coverage for weeks, netted Yorkshire Bank £130 million of mortgage sales in a six-week period (with no advertising support) and eventually led to over 40 mainstream lenders changing the way they charged interest, all to the benefit of the consumer.

Source: Yorkshire Bank

think about 21.5 Brand problems

Can you think of any brands that fail consistently to live up to their promise? For example, think about the Millennium Dome tourist attraction in London or the problems faced by EuroDisney around its launch.

Can you identify any examples where public relations has failed to rescue an ailing brand, such as Dasani Water?

What about when public relations has positively helped to change the fortunes of a brand (did any other factors play a part in this resurgence)? For example, has your attitude to a failing high street store changed (think of Marks & Spencer in the UK)? For better or worse? Is that change connected to the products or the image?

highlight that good campaigns must be built on solid foundations, such as in the bank's case, a genuinely innovative product offering.

Digging for public relations gold is rarely easy and finding an attribute to hook a campaign on is an important skill for all practitioners. At the same time, however, consumer public relations is not about trying to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. Both consumers and journalists can quickly see through vague or misleading claims about a product or service. Although a powerful tool in the appropriate context, public relations is not a panacea that can unilaterally fix a brand that is rotten to the core. However, in the white heat of market competition, more and more companies are trying to emulate organisations such as Nike, BMW and Google to become so-called 'power' brands. Lots try but few succeed and companies can waste vast sums of money on marketing in a vain attempt to dress up their brand and products as something they are not. (See Think about 21.5.)

Tomorrow's people

Rise of the 'marketing refusenik'

The future is bright for consumer public relations. Audience and media fragmentation means it is now difficult for marketers to harness a single communications medium to create and sustain a brand as television once did (see also Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion). At one time companies could reach a large slice of the public by advertising on one of a limited number of channels (for example, in the UK by advertising on the only independent channel, ITV); now they have to spread their budgets over dozens of media outlets. Furthermore, the process of cramming more advertising into traditional media, or even placing ads in new locations, often does nothing more than irritate consumers who are increasingly resisting mass message marketing, either because they are now

immune to its effects, disillusioned with its intent or have simply 'tuned it out'. The rise of the 'marketing refusenik' is inescapable.

Definition: A *refusenik* is somebody who refuses to agree to take part in, or cooperate with, something. The term originated in Soviet Russia to describe people (mostly Jews) who were not allowed to leave the country. For the purposes of this chapter, the term 'marketing refusenik' has been created to describe consumers who are sceptical about marketing claims and make a conscious effort to ignore mass message communication.

Public relations is poised, therefore, to play an even bigger role in brand building, a point supported by marketing commentator Philip Kotler (2003: 145) who claims that advertising is losing some of its effectiveness: 'The public knows that advertising exaggerates and is biased. At its best, advertising is playful and entertaining; at its worst, it is intrusive and dishonest. Companies overspend on advertising and under spend on public relations.'

Public relations does not, however, represent a quick fix. Building a brand through public relations takes time and large doses of creativity, but the results can be dramatic if the tools that practitioners use are in tune with the communications environment of the new century. As we have seen, the weapons in the public relations armoury do not only grab attention but also promote word-of-mouth recommendation. This is particularly important given the growing tendency for consumers to opt out of mass message advertising and instead turn to family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and personal experts for ideas and information on a range of subjects. The buying decisions of these marketing refuseniks are increasingly the result of consultation and conversation within a universe of informal, interlocking networks. For example, brands such as Google and iPod have benefited hugely from positive one-to-one personal recommendation.

Clearly, a key challenge for brand owners is how to target and influence the growing number of people

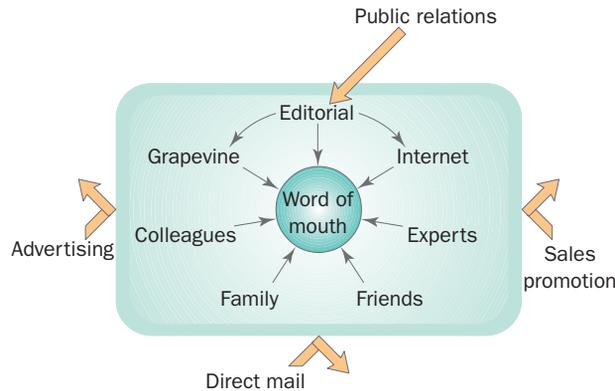


FIGURE 21.3 New challenges – the citadel of consumer culture

who have become disengaged from the marketing process. Figure 21.3 shows how public relations can give brands access to consumers who have switched off to mass message marketing through the use of third-party editorial endorsement and positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

Person to person

In *The Influentials*, Keller and Berry (2003: 5–6) illustrate how Americans are now twice as likely to cite word of mouth as a better source of ideas and information than advertising on a host of different issues:

- restaurants to try
- places to visit
- prescription drugs to use
- hotels to stay in
- retirement planning
- saving and investing money
- purchasing computer equipment
- best brands
- best buys.

Keller and Berry (2003: 5–6) go on to note: 'There are few areas in which advertising outperforms word of mouth . . . Moreover, the person-to-person channel of word of mouth, particularly among friends and family, has grown in importance in recent decades.'

In this environment, the media are still regarded as a useful source of information and advice. Mobile communication, personal computers and the internet

have broadened the process still further, allowing people readily to research their options, communicate quickly with companies and other consumers, as well as build relationships with people who have similar interests to their own. In this diverse communications environment, public relations' potential to harness third-party editorial endorsement – both on- and off-line – assumes an even greater importance than before, as does its ability to target and connect with individuals in a way that advertising cannot match.

The desire for word-of-mouth recommendation is nothing new and turning consumers into brand evangelists has long been held up as a key benefit of public relations. However, the need to focus strategically on generating positive word-of-mouth outcomes is more important than ever. Consumers are increasingly confident about what they hear from others and are increasingly ignoring the voice of vested interest that comes to them through direct and traditional media channels. The challenge for public relations practitioners and brand owners is to adjust to this evolving landscape.

Such a task requires fresh thinking and even greater powers of creativity. The people who hold the key to endorsement are a discerning audience who are known to be sceptical of hype and mass marketing techniques. The rise of the marketing refusenik will continue and public relations, having established itself as a viable partner in the marketing mix, should have an increasingly important role to play in shaping consumer attitudes and opinions.

Summary

This chapter has explored the terrain where public relations interfaces with the world of consumer marketing. A place where the ultimate objective for companies is to stimulate the sale of goods and services in the face of

relentless competition. Public relations campaigns are playing an increasingly active role in the marketing communications arena because of their potential either to harness third-party endorsement – through media relations

and sponsorship – or to allow brands to engage directly with their intended audience – through events and other activities. These tools can change attitudes, build relationships and positively influence behaviour.

The attributes public relations can bring to a campaign are growing in importance at a time when more established communication techniques are losing some of their effectiveness. However, it would be wrong to conclude that disciplines such as advertising are on the wane; in the complex communications environment of the twenty-first century, the very best campaigns tend to be integrated, multifaceted affairs, harnessing every tool at the marketer's disposal, including public relations.

In return, public relations not only has the ability to raise awareness of a product's benefits or key charac-

teristics but can also help to give life and substance to a brand. The communication strategy of successful brands is often their defining characteristic and helps to establish a valuable point of difference in the market. Public relations, which is more subtle in its message delivery than either advertising or direct mail, can help to create and sustain a brand's personality and values, in ways that appeal to consumers.

To further develop the discipline in a marketing environment, public relations practitioners must think creatively from both a strategic and tactical perspective. Grabbing the attention of consumers is increasingly difficult and public relations must evolve to ensure that it continues to enhance its reputation in a commercial context.

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