

Interaction

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Consider the case of a company that would soon release Gadget X into a competitive market. Gadget X has a 30 percent gain in efficiency and 10 percent lower cost than the leading brand. However, the manufacturer of the leading brand is developing a new model to be launched within a year that will meet or exceed Gadget X's features, functions and benefits. The company's challenge is to make a big enough splash and sell 500,000 units of Gadget X before the competitor can react.

The company knows it needs to convince influentials about the benefits of Gadget X, but it also needs to reach a large proportion of the technology-buying public quickly to drive sales. The company is banking on interacting with potential buyers in order to increase their awareness, interest and desire for Gadget X ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDA_\(marketing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDA_(marketing))). The company understands that nearly any medium can be used for interactive dialogue. Two-way communication is not restricted to social media. If you put an 800-number and/or QR code (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR_code) on a print advertisement, you have the potential of interaction with consumers whether the ad is in a magazine, on the side of a bus, in a newspaper or on a billboard four stories up on a building. Interaction might be with a person, a phone bank, another ad, a link to a web page, a discount coupon, a game, texting with a company source or something else. Any response by a communicator to a query from a message-receiver is interaction that might lead to a purchase.

Two factors constrain interaction – the organization sending the message and the individual receiving it. An organization needs the will and resources to interact with individuals. Individuals choose to respond to an organization's offer – or not. One may choose to delete an e-mail, or not to point a cell-phone toward a QR code, friend someone on Facebook, dial an 800-number or talk to a

salesperson. Since message senders and receivers both hold the power to interact, dialogue can be checkmated by either side at any time – a point negotiators know well. Because every individual and organization is unique and circumstances are ever-changing, interaction varies in depth, quality and effectiveness. No formulae allow one to calculate precisely how message-senders and receivers interact. This leaves room for creativity, experimentation and optimization. The company with 500,000 units of Gadget X to sell coordinates all elements of interaction closely to an objective and key message, but it cannot predict precisely how targeted individuals will respond. The company may use a matrix for a coordinated launch much like this (<http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/Interactive%20media%20planning%20guide.pdf>). This matrix has several assumptions:

- All media can be interactive. Newspapers, magazines, TV shows, product brochures, promotional giveaways, etc. can have an offer to communicate directly with the company through 800-numbers, URLs and QR codes or something else as much as a trade show where users and company personnel communicate with each other. It is up to message-senders to assess the time, effort and cost to dialogue with message-receivers and whether it is economically worthwhile.
- How one uses media determines whether it is interactive. Web pages that post material with no response mechanisms are one-way. Web pages with forums, telephone numbers, e-mail and comment boxes are two-way. A telephone, a natural relationship device, can become a one-way vehicle with robo-calling or automated phone trees that leave callers baffled. Twitter is primarily a one-way medium but one can conduct Tweet chats. A blog may have comments or not depending on the blogger. However, interaction might be more difficult to achieve with some media than others. For example, including a URL in a product placement might be difficult,

and getting a reporter to put a URL in a news story might require persuasion.

- Interaction is a holistic concept that coordinates individual media and their strengths and weaknesses. Without understanding of each medium, there is no chance of optimizing it for effective dialogue. The matrix (<http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/Interactive%20media%20planning%20guide.pdf>) is designed to get departments talking to one another. It focuses them on the sales goal and communications objectives against which tactics should be judged. The danger of media coordination is a tendency to stifle individual practitioners by managing them too closely. Marketing can make unreasonable demands that set a practitioner up for failure. Marketing's desire to control media can break down with interaction when responders act in unintended ways – e.g., a group of customers boycott the company over an issue that has nothing to do with a new product or service, such as software glitches in discontinued Product A that users want fixed.
- Interaction wastes time and resources if there is relationship building without a tie to the message the company wishes to send. However, the tie might not be direct in order for dialogue to be effective. For example, to communicate the benefits of Gadget X, one might develop a web page that highlights conveniences for those who use a similar gadget and inconveniences for those who don't. In other words, one elevates the need and desire for the gadget in general and for Gadget X in particular.
- Even though a message-receiver turns down an offer to interact, it does not mean the message-receiver has no interest. The message-receiver may have little or no desire to relate to a company. One could get few queries from potential customers but successful sales and tens of thousands of queries from potential customers but few sales.

- Because one cannot know precisely what sparks interaction, a message-sender can and should try a number of techniques. Of the 48 media on the matrix (<http://www.online-pr.com/Holding/Interactive%20media%20planning%20guide.pdf>), the company can only estimate which might spark the largest customer response either absolutely or proportionately. The company should prepare to handle interactions from wherever they come and to measure their effectiveness in leading to the ultimate action – purchase of Gadget X. This can lead to significant response costs and mechanisms to handle queries.
- Even though an individual has enough interest to respond to an offer for interaction, the sales process or funnel (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sales_process) still applies. Only a small percentage of those who interact will end by buying a product or service or adopting a new idea.
- Interactive media require significant planning, management and expenditure in response handling as well as fulfillment. All this needs to be measured to determine what works, what needs refinement and what should be eliminated.
- Audience segments are not exclusive. One may interact through a number of media before deciding to purchase – or not.

Ultimately, an organization needs a communications structure built around interaction. This structure recognizes that individuals drive conversation and not groups, even if people act in concert. Mass media thinking assumes that one message sent unidirectionally is effective with thousands, if not millions. Interaction recognizes that dialogue makes messages personal in a movement from awareness to action and ultimately, satisfaction. Interaction complements 1-to-1 salesmanship and sometimes substitutes for it.

PR and interaction

One definition of public relations is the following: “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.”

(<http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/>) If one accepts this definition, public relations has always had a dialogue function and is about interaction between organizations and publics. In the case of Gadget X, PR helps demonstrate that the product provides the features, functions and benefits claimed. PR through providing information about Gadget X, the company and aims bolsters the contention that the company is believable and thereby, helps manage reputation and credibility.

PR is involved in everything leading to a purchase decision – awareness, interest and desire. PR plans and manages events that allow for interaction of influencers and consumers – Product/service press launches, trade show interviews and user demos. PR information to heighten awareness and interest includes press kits, podcasts, videos, spokespersons, etc. PR serves as the principal data repository for a product or service through establishment and maintenance of online media centers.

PR interacts most frequently with proxies for purchasers and influencers – e.g., reporters, tech analysts, bloggers, Tweeters, Facebook posters, etc. One-to-one dialogue with these individuals serves to answer the questions of many. Getting these influentials to include a direct response vehicle in their reporting and opinions, such as the URL of the Gadget X web site, extends interaction to individual consumers.

For the company selling Gadget X, PR’s interaction with influencers is critical. A few bad reviews and Gadget X can become an also-ran, a near-miss technology pitched on a scrap-heap of other products and services that failed to sell. For this reason, it is important for PR to develop relationships with influencers in which one listens closely to their critiques, opinions and requests. PR is an ear to the world outside of the organization. It monitors what individuals say about a

company and its products and services and assesses their opinions. PR interacts as a quick-response function to issues that arise – e.g., bad-mouthing of a product in a blog -- and serves as a protector of reputation and sales.

To a PR practitioner, idea of interaction should be familiar. It is the plea that reporters and editors have given for decades. Namely, know my interests and send me only information that is pertinent to me. The concept of PR as “press mill” publicity is short-sighted and counter-productive, although prevalent. However, many practitioners still see their job as information dispersal and not interactive dialogue. They hold a mass-media assumption and not an idea of individual interaction. To the extent that one becomes a press release publisher and not an interactive communicator, one is engaged in unidirectional message-pushing. Measuring awareness in circulation totals and numbers of clips but not positive and negative opinions is an extension of mass-media thinking.

Particularly now when mainstream media are shrinking, reporters need PR practitioners to be honest, interactive brokers of information. The practitioner serves the needs of reporters, bloggers, Tweeters, posters and thereby, also supports the communications and sales objectives of the company. Practitioners know that twisting words and facts to “spin” an influencer is not dialogue. It is gamesmanship, and those who do it disrespect the other party in the conversation. They are propagandists who use media to promote a cause but not listen. A company seeking to sell 500,000 units of Gadget X might welcome propaganda until there is push-back, and the company is unprepared to handle it.

Interaction works at a discrete level. Although mass media is involved, the interactive communicator is looking for one-to-one dialogue in a measurable form. PR through its effort to “help an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” should be in the vanguard of the conversation.

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