

Marketers v. Counselors: Never-ending Misunderstanding

James L. Horton

Differences between marketers and PR practitioners seem small but aren't.

This article examines why marketers and PR practitioners are often at odds and why each has a chasm to cross to work with the other. This is not a diatribe against marketers. My masters in business was in marketing from The Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. Marketers and PR practitioners come from different environments and assumptions.

This article also is a caution to PR practitioners not to get too bound to marketing language and principles. Every communications discipline is different and effective. Integrated communications should respect media differences and the economic value of each rather than force-fitting one into another. Unfortunately, force-fitting is easier when marketers and practitioners fail to understand subtleties of each other's craft.

The key to misunderstanding is an unexamined assumption. It is a difference in belief about media control. Both marketers and PR practitioners believe in controlling communications, but practitioners accept a point in media distribution where control ceases and ambiguity takes over. Marketers maintain control until a message reaches an audience.

Marketers come from controlled media creation and distribution – advertising, promotion and events. One can develop a message and its distribution precisely. Even if the event is a NASCAR race where the outcome of the contest is in doubt, a marketer controls the painting of the car, the uniform of the driver and pit crew, signage around the garage, giveaways and many other elements that racing promotion uses. Even if the car fails to finish the race, a marketer has communicated the company's logo and brand image to a calculated number of eyes during the time the car was on the track.

PR practitioners from an environment of uncontrolled media and distribution act differently. They persuade reporters to write a story: They attempt to create story ideas that incorporate an organization's message. Their success rate is uneven. Using the NASCAR example, a PR practitioner works to get media interviews for owners, mechanics and drivers before a race because the practitioner knows there is less chance afterward. (The winner and perhaps the runner-up will get interviews, but the driver in the 10th-ranked car may not get even a brief squib on air or in print.) Moreover, should interviews appear, there is no guarantee a

sponsor will be mentioned or seen in imagery. (Neither the reporter nor driver might name the sponsor, and the news cameraman might frame the subject in such a way as to cut out the sponsor's logo.) Thus, what is a display ad for the marketer as cars race around the track is a less certain publicity opportunity for PR practitioners. PR practitioners can exercise control to avoid such oversights, such as having the driver wear a cap with the sponsor's logo, or having the logo stitched to the collar of the driver's fire-retardant suit where it can't be missed even in a close-up, and so on. However, if the interview is strictly text, none of these tactics work.

The small difference in assumption about control leads to a number of attitude differences in communications:

- **Message integrity.** A marketer assumes a message will be exactly as the marketer has stated it. A PR counselor accepts that a message may be distorted in its passage through uncontrolled media and one must keep working to get the right message out. Both the marketer and PR counselor accept that message integrity may be lost at the point of audience reception.
- **Message clarity.** A marketer assumes a message will be as clear as the marketer and testing can make it. A PR practitioner assumes message clarity ultimately lies with the uncontrolled transmitter of the message – reporters and journalists. A practitioner will simplify a message, create slogans, suggest stories and headlines and brief reporters, but a reporter may or may not use or understand these prompts. The reporter is free as well to point out disagreements with the message from opposition sources. Practitioners will attempt to bypass journalists, as Washington spinmeisters often do, with background visuals and staged events, but there is no certitude that bypassing works. Reporters, for example, might point out that events are staged.
- **Transmission frequency.** A marketer assumes a media schedule for advertising, promotions and events. A counselor cannot assume transmission frequency. If news media determine a story is not newsworthy, they won't report it.
- **Communications effectiveness.** A marketer assumes that if the right audience segments are targeted, the message will drive appropriate action. A PR practitioner assumes communications can be effective, but effectiveness might not be readily apparent. It may come over time as target audiences make up their minds through multiple inputs. A practitioner further assumes the medium's reputation makes a difference. A story in *The Wall Street Journal* has more communications effectiveness than a story in *Lower Podunk Business Journal*, even though there might be wasted circulation in *The Wall Street Journal*. The counselor relies on a medium's reputation for editorial integrity and fact checking built over

decades of reporting. Readers rely on this reputation of integrity as a way of shortening their search for factual information.

- **Measurement:** The marketer assumes one can measure the effectiveness of a message based on the size and type of audience exposed to it and some correlation to sales. (This is not true when dealing with the internet where one can measure audience actions and click patterns, i.e. audience engagement.) This assumption is clearly erroneous for those familiar with the vagaries of TV ratings in an era of TIVO, of falsified audit circulation figures among newspapers, of click-fraud online and of areas of controlled media where measurement is judgmental at best. But, a perception of accurate measurement rules in marketing, and decisions are made on the basis of data, whether or not data is “squishy.” PR practitioners have been confounded for decades by measurement: Confusion is likely to continue. PR’s economic value should be measured in terms of credibility and reputation. It should not be measured in the same way as advertising or marketing exposure to target audiences. Scoring credibility requires human judgment. One person’s high score is another’s middling or even low score. Breaking down scoring to finite elements of positive versus negative words and/or images doesn’t help. An article, TV, radio or internet segment can have a great deal of negative material and still be positive –and vice versa. Scoring the “tone” of the content is ephemeral. Scoring attitudes of those exposed to content is a step removed and hard to connect directly to content. That said, there are measurement experts in PR and systems for scoring its value. The good systems are unlike typical advertising metrics.
- **Risk and certainty:** A marketer believes in low risk and high certainty in message creation and distribution. The PR practitioner accepts risk and uncertainty as a condition of persuasive and uncontrolled communications but with positive and negative benefits. If a reporter independently reports a positive story the reporter has verified through the reporter’s own diligence and resources and the news medium’s editorial process, news consumers can take comfort that what a company claims is more likely to be true than not.

Audiences and the control assumption

Audiences understand controlled and uncontrolled media and value them differently. Information consumers have always found uncontrolled media more credible. When an independent observer publishes the result of investigation in independent media over which advertisers have no control, news consumers take comfort that they have not been manipulated (or have been less manipulated.) Marketers understand this. They try to borrow reputation with statements like “See our ad in *The Wall Street Journal*.” But a purchased message is not the same as an impartially reported story with editorial fact checking. Both PR practitioners and marketers understand the difference and its

value. They both merchandise newsclips to validate claims. They both cite favorable independent analyses. Where they differ is in the process of getting the newsclip.

Marketers and PR practitioners, fearful of independent editorial outcomes, have subverted impartiality since the beginning and looked for opportunities to keep an appearance of impartiality while maintaining control over message and message distribution. Thus, for example, the earliest publicity agencies in the 20th Century paid editors to write positive stories about clients. This was done on behalf of the wonderful new technology called the telephone.

There is another well-known issue that threatens impartiality – the contention that no individual, journalist or not, can be objective. Hence, any reporting is inherently biased. If it is inherently biased, then one should do whatever is necessary to bias reporting in one's favor. The counter is that journalists should strive for objectivity with an understanding they cannot achieve it entirely. The function of the editorial process is to correct errors before they reach news consumers and to balance views to give information searchers as complete a picture as possible of an issue, individual or event. This is classic “he-said-she-said” journalism. News editors rely on distillation of fact as a sufficient step to inform news consumers. They know facts can be manipulated by selection and order. They also know that in striving to balance a story, they can blunder into error, such as quoting deniers of the Holocaust or evolution long after these events and ideas have been proven. Editors understand that what is reported today is insufficient to tell an entire story because much is unknown. Hence, the old cliché that reporting is a first draft of history.

Arguments about impartiality and objectivity are based on fundamental notions of human perception, the nature of fact and of a human's ability to arrive at truth. These are difficult issues, especially as we know more about the limitations of human perception and distortions affecting human psychology. They are beyond the limits of this essay, but they are factors in the control assumption. However, that doesn't change an information searcher's desire to find factual data and truthful opinion that can help the individual make accurate decisions and navigate daily life.

Publisher's choice

Argument over impartiality and objectivity has bent in many directions to a point where some news publishers want reporters to express opinions while others continue to pursue relation of fact without the reporter's voice. To some degree, expression of personal opinion is back to the future. Early journalism was subjective. It moved to an idea of objective reporting rather late. Today, the two views co-exist, and news publishers clarify policies on objectivity in news and

opinion daily. Some trumpet opinion: Others espouse objectivity. And, of course, most do both with news columns and opinion pages.

There is a gray area, however, where objectivity and subjectivity collide and news publishers have not clarified either the reporter's role or the editorial process. This is a desire to maintain an appearance of impartiality while relaying controlled messaging. The result of this lack of transparency confuses news consumers, journalists, PR practitioners and marketers. Confusion also gives comfort to a marketer's assumption of control. Two recent sources of such confusion have been spotlighted recently in the media -- Video news releases and paid "experts."

Both techniques rely on insufficient editorial processes in which news media pick up and transmit controlled messages without crosschecking or transparency. Both techniques have been used in PR for decades: They are mainstays of marketing PR. Paid experts largely started on non-news programs where self-interest was expected. Video news releases were targeted to TV news sources from the beginning. Under the First Amendment, both techniques are valid and worthy of exploitation. The question is how editorial gatekeepers consider them and by extension, news consumers.

The issue is whether paid experts or video news releases have as much credibility as unpaid experts or independently reported stories. For the most part, they don't. And if they don't, then what is the obligation, if any, for news publishers to tell news consumers that the publishers are using VNRs and "paid experts." Ultimately, news publishers decide how transparent to be and whether to let news consumers know. Some will be more rigorous than others. Some will not see it as an issue. The government will dictate some actions as well, as the Federal Communications Commission has done.

Where gray remains, there is ample opportunity for PR to be controlled communications – i.e., an arm of marketing. The fact is that most PR practitioners are marketers who use controlled editorial techniques, events or promotions to generate awareness. And, marketing-oriented PR practitioners fit into marketing metrics easily. Where gray is disallowed or made transparent, PR practitioners may be forced to use more traditional techniques of persuasion. And, metrics become more difficult.

Purveyors of controlled communication should be wary when they send controlled communications under the guise of impartiality. Their cover can be blown and the reputation of the message-sender damaged. Purveyors of controlled-but-transparent communication should be as factual as possible and act like independent journalists. This provides an illusion of impartiality and comfort to news consumers. A great many news releases are written as straight news stories. Think, for example, of earnings releases. Such releases transmit facts as efficiently as possible.

On the other hand, most PR is meant to sell something. In the service of selling, PR techniques often morph to marketing's controlled messages and distribution. As a result, PR practitioners who are persuaders but not marketers are a minority. It appears that the large PR agencies discovered this long ago. In following the money, they have become marketing-oriented and in some cases, have moved deliberately away from the concept of persuading impartial reporters and editors. Most have stopped using the term "public relations" because it no longer describes the bulk of what they do. And, it is easier for marketers and advertisers to accept PR under a marketing guise than under the assumption of an uncertain business relying on impartiality of reporters and editors.

There are instances, however, in which controlled and uncontrolled communications should not cross each other's line. Wherever a company is under public scrutiny, attempting to manipulate media under the guise of impartiality could be foolhardy, especially if someone finds out. An organization can wreck its reputation and that of its leaders quickly. Transparency is best.

On the opposite side of the coin, where there is no controversy and the marketer needs to coordinate messaging for maximum audience impact, controlled messages and distribution are best. PR practitioners should avail themselves of tools and techniques that allow for the maximum amount of message and distribution control. Ultimately, both marketers and PR practitioners should be able to move freely between controlled and uncontrolled communication, but in reality, it is not so easy. One becomes more skilled in some techniques than in others.

Summary

Whether marketer or PR practitioner, each should understand the advantages of controlled and uncontrolled messages and message distribution. It is understandable that marketers trained in control prefer controlled media. But even the most controlling of marketers admits that message control inhibits message credibility.

Information consumers simply don't trust or like self-serving messages delivered in a controlled manner through advertising. That is part of the reason why the broadcasting industry is fighting against consumers' growing tendency to zap TV ads when using Digital Video Recorders, or zip by them at high speed to get to the rest of a program. That is also why many online ads are ineffective and getting people to click on ad banners is so difficult. Consumers have their own clear idea of the information they need and of its validity, and they express it in how they deal with media.

Even though PR counselors claim higher ground by relying on persuasion in uncontrolled media, the fact is controlled media dominate and will continue to

rule. Controlled messages and controlled distribution are amenable to planning, coordination and measurement. With new emphasis on Return on Investment for media expenditures, marketers demand measurement that links stories to results like increased awareness and higher brand reputation. PR counselors who work in uncontrolled messaging and media are outnumbered and outgunned. That said, there still is work in the uncontrolled segments of PR work, and some prefer it. For those who do, it remains an interesting field that depends on finding real differentiation and building solid cases for ideas, products, services, organizations and individuals.

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James L. Horton, the founder of online-pr.com, has been in PR for more than 25 years.