

Marketing & Public Relations: Yes, there is a difference

By Danielle Walker

Recently, a colleague of mine told a story about how management at his organization had arbitrarily decided to change the title of his department from “Public Relations Department” to “Marketing Communications Department.” Surprised? You should be — but not just because they changed the department title on a whim.

What’s surprising here is that management failed to realize that marketing and public relations are really two very distinct management functions, each ultimately having a significant effect on the organization as a whole. It’s an all-too common mistake in today’s business environment, and an easy one to make. Both are very similar in structure — they work to identify audiences, segment those audiences and set objectives. The purpose of public relations is not, however, to promote goods or services to increase sales, as marketing does.

This isn’t to say that public relations and marketing don’t work together. In fact, to achieve organizational goals, organizations should make use of both functions. Each makes unique but complimentary contributions to building and maintaining the many relationships essential for organizational survival and growth, and to ignore one is to risk failure in the other*. Let’s take a look at the fundamental differences between marketing and public relations.

1 – The Differentiating Factor. Marketing always aims at an exchange, usually one that involves money. It is the management function that identifies needs and wants (consumer demand), offers products and services to satisfy those demands and causes some kind of transaction that delivers those products and services in exchange for something of value. It’s the exchange between two parties but that distinguishes this function from PR.

2 – Its All Relative. Of course, public relations may, and should, assist in this process, but does so in a different way. Effective public relations assists the overall marketing effort by maintaining relationships through gauging awareness, attitude, mitigating crises, controlling damage, enhancing opinions or through other specific objectives not directly linked to sales. Writing a press release to announce the launch of a new product isn’t PR — it’s really marketing.

3 – The Whole Picture. Organizationally, marketing is usually a line management function — the first level of management, with supervisory or team responsibility for individuals and tasks. Line management operates in real-time and works closely with the workforce to contribute to the goals of the organization. Public Relations, on the other hand, is a staff management function — one that provides counsel and other services to support line functions.

4 – Not All PR Practitioners Are Spin Doctors. I know that when I said “enhancing opinions” you thought “Ah-ha! They really are only letting us hear what they want us to hear.” That’s not always true. In fact, most public relations professionals subscribe to a code of ethics, one that truly values and promotes honesty.

What true PR professionals do is work at establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics — those audiences on which the success or failure of the organization depends.

In the end, it's easiest to say that while marketing focuses on exchange relationships with one public — customers — public relations covers a broad range of relationships and goals with numerous publics — such as employees, investors, governments and special interest groups. Now, I realize that most small businesses don't have the luxury of supporting two or more staff people to handle both of these roles. Just be clear about your expectations when hiring to fill a communications function designed to handle both functions.

The point is, whether you think you need some really good marketing or a great public relations campaign, you can't get away without using both.

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