

A little old-fashioned PR (for the airlines)

Yesterday was a good news day for the airlines, specifically for US Airways and United Airlines. Why? Because both apparently have engaged in some good, old-fashioned PR. Both companies released good stories about themselves, that then translated into major and positive coverage. Just like it is supposed to be.

USAir posted a story about how it is going to bring back free soft drinks to its economy cabins as of March 1. The news was reported across the board, from wire services to the evening news. And, USAir released this out as a news item before it sent out a notification to its frequent fliers. The company was seeking to get as much good mileage as it could out of this trite bit of news. USAir "admitted" that it miscalculated the negative impact of charging for beverages and that this negative coverage undermined its gains in on-time performance and baggage handling. I am sure it is also undermined employee morale as people silently shook their heads when asked to pay \$1 for a cup of lukewarm, ill-tasting coffee on board.

United did USAir one better. NBC Nightly News ran a piece about how United is now really cleaning airplanes between flights, something that had gone by the wayside. The piece talked about a guy dubbed "Mr.Clean" who has a title something like Director of Cabin Appearance. The point was to show that United is taking steps to improve customer experience onboard its aircraft. Again, this is classic PR. I am sure the airline pitched the angle that most airlines are filthy (they are) because in these economic times, airlines are cutting corners on cleaning crews or the amount of times a plane gets fully cleaned. United is bucking the trend because United wants to enhance its passengers's experiences. Here's a link

to NBC's Daily Nightly' blog discussing the story.

Bottom line: A bit of positive news can go a long way. Proof positive that PR works!

[poll daddy poll=1398136]



Frames of reference

Sometimes, when you are writing or speaking to a group you try to frame things by using examples or metaphors. Nothing wrong with that. Except when your audience doesn't get it. The other day I was listening to a professor speak and he referred to the Iran-Contra affair. Nothing wrong with the example but it did not work as a frame of reference for the students, many of them born well after the time. Or perhaps you use cliched expressions like "you sound like a broken record." Guess what—kids probably have never ever seen a record. In fact, I am starting to think they will rarely see a CD. Lots of our jokes and references are generational—and we need to consider this as we try to communicate with the younger set.

Do you have good examples of generational frames of reference? Please post in the comments.

In print or online

A couple of weeks ago, The Washington Post decided to merge its online personality (washingtonpost.com) with its print personality by using the print Washington Post brand online. The company had decided a while back to separate its online content from the print content although it was mostly the same. Now, it is definitely trying to make it all one.

I think that in the next few months we are going to see changes in print and online newspapers as subscriptions go down and costs go up, as advertisers continue to dial down their presences. Eventually, newspapers will have to deal with the fact that they are giving away all of their content for free online. It begs the question of why someone should subscribe to the print edition. Of course, some people do not have online access or simply prefer to read printed matter. But those people are probably a distinct minority. Overall, most people that follow news are online and comfortable reading news online. The other question for newspapers is how can they make money from their online ventures? There is online advertising, but what kind of metrics are they giving their advertisers? With print, you have geographic based demographic information. But online, anyone can read the content on a site. What will this do to local advertisers?

[poll daddy poll=1395553]

Information dispatch

In case you haven't heard by now, Facebook had silently changed their terms of service a few days ago and then, when caught by a media observer and reported all over the news, was

forced to backtrack because of public outrage over the ownership of information. What is interesting about this is that yet again, Facebook shows a complete lack of awareness about public opinion, and more importantly, how to handle such public opinion. It may have something to do with the very young, and obviously not media savvy, CEO Matt Zuckerberg. Facebook is a new concept and a new company, and as such, does not have methods in place to disseminate information effectively to both its members and the public at large. It does not seem to understand that there is always someone watching and that you must have a plan to deal with issues as they arise.

Unfortunately, this is the second time that Facebook is being reactionary because of public outrage. The first was last year when it announced a rather invasive advertising plan based on various items on people's profiles, and then selling things to their friends based on those profiles. There was outrage over privacy. In fact, privacy seems to be Facebook's Achilles' heel. The company cannot seem to find the right balance between protecting its users' privacy and the needs to grow revenue and membership.

It hurts any company's credibility to have the media inform its customers of a change in terms of service. It hurts Facebook to have to retract and retrace steps. Many people are now confused about what is private or not private on their profiles. It will cause some people to get off Facebook and others to change the way they use Facebook. In short, a failure to communicate clearly and directly has created a load a negative publicity for Facebook, and has alienated its core customer base.

I hope that this time Facebook reconsiders its public relations program, if indeed it has any. I would advise Facebook to hire PR counsel and to focus on how to best communicate with its public.

Energy (ad) wars

UPDATED INFORMATION

Ever since the steep rise in gasoline costs last summer, we've seen a steep rise in image/issue advertising from energy providers. What is interesting is that it continues, even months later. The big ones here are traditional oil companies like Chevron and Exxon/Mobil, the coal and natural gas industries and nuclear energy. Steadily, these three are competing for attention, one has to wonder from whom and to what end. And of course, before I forget, there is T.Boone Pickens, the millionaire, who is self-paying for ads pushing wind and natural gas energy as a way to "stop our dependence on foreign oil." Pickens is part of Clean Energy, an outfit promoting natural gas.

Chevron is running a campaign that is centered around the tag line "human energy." It is designed to make gasoline look environmentally friendly (in fact, that is exactly what all three types of energy want you to think—that they are the most eco-friendly). There are two types of commercial—one saying Chevron is a company concerned about the human race, and the future and another about conserving energy—for instance unplugging more. I am not certain who the target audience is for the campaign, nor am I certain the campaign works.

Meanwhile, the Nuclear Energy Institute (I think) is running a commercial with the tagline "nuclear-clean air energy." In searching for info about the ad, I came across AREVA (a nuclear company) that was running an ad campaign with the tagline "pure energy." You see the theme here?

And finally, there is the omnipresent commercial ~~for the clean~~

coal oil and natural gas industry. You've seen it—a woman in a black pant suit is walking around talking about how we can tap our own—(clean)—energy resources at home. This commercial has been running fairly steadily since before the election last year, and still, I can't find a link to it. (If you can, will you send it to me or post in the comments?). Of course, clean coal has come under fire, because apparently, there is no such thing. I saw the commercial again last night and saw that it is for the Oil and Natural Gas Industry. The concept really is not about eco-friendliness but rather using American resources (you know, drilling more at home). It is quite anachronistic in a way because it has no mention or acknowledgment of the impact of the energy industry on the environment.

In the end, all some of these energy sources are trying to prove to us that they are the most ecological/green alternative. The gas/oil industry is the one running the most scared. After the rise in fuel prices last summer, people made changes in their energy usage, and are now demanding fuel alternatives. So, gas has to position itself as somehow clean and friendly.

Do you find any of these commercials compelling or convincing?

How to not attract attention

If you are active in marketing communications, you most certainly do want to attract attention for your organization or your clients, right? Well, here is how NOT to do it:

- 1) Have a lousy website: The uglier the better, extra points if it looks like it was self-designed, designed in 1995, or has a distinctly 80s look and it is 2009.

2) Never put out news about your organization. And make sure any news you do have on your website or other place is from two-three years ago.

3) Ignore social media, after all, it's something the kids are doing, nobody serious. Who needs Twitter, LinkedIn, and all that stuff. Hard to keep up with all that stuff.

4) Never network. On the rare occasion that you do wander out, be sure to forget your business cards and dress sloppily.

5) Don't sweat the small stuff. Sure, it's a great name for a book, it should be a great thing to do. Don't spell check, or keep your phone numbers updated on your website, or let your memberships lapse, don't pay bills...

5) Be rude. After all, if someone contacts you, they shouldn't expect a response, right?

How many marketers do you know that are dead-set on not getting any attention?

Those changes in print-UPDATED

Fitness Magazine's latest issue contains an insert...of coupons, just like you would find in newspapers. *Newsweek* is revamping its content/look and will try to up its price to subscribers (story from the *New York Times*). Last week, I looked up *Pink* magazine in the store, and found a thin magazine that resembled a supermarket tabloid or newsmagazine instead of a more solid (thick) magazine a la *Real Simple*. Why? Very little advertising. I can predict now that *Pink* will be folding

within a year or going to a completely online iteration. The changes in the print world continue as magazines and newspapers try to grapple with a new economic panorama. Basically, magazines are looking for any source of additional revenue or cutting back to save costs.

The reality is advertisers are cutting back, but why? Why are advertisers circumventing print advertising? Print used to be attractive because it was targeted and print media have two things going for them: shelf life (especially for special editions) and something called readership, which is the total amount of readers per issue (not to be confused with circulation, which is the number of issues that are distributed). Has print advertising become too expensive? We know for certain magazine subscriptions were unchanged, so it is not the drop in circulation.

And in a related change, there is a new company in Germany producing a light plastic reader that can serve as a place to read newspapers or magazines electronically. The company is claiming that this way fewer trees will suffer the fate of the paper pulp machines. That might be the end of print altogether...

UPDATE: Reuters is reporting here that magazine sales in supermarkets and at newsstands fell 11% during the last quarter of 2008. Apparently consumers are saving money and not buying magazines. This is truly bad news for the print industry. This does impact circulation AND readership numbers and makes it even a harder sell to advertisers. Brace for more closings...

Vatican is a bit late in the PR game

By various reports over the past week or so, it was clear that Pope Benedict does not understand PR. Why? Well, the Vatican recently revoked the excommunications of four priests, one of whom has publicly denied the Holocaust ever happened, going so far as to claim that Jews were never gassed and that at most 300,000 Jewish people lost their lives not the 6 million. Now, Holocaust denial is outlawed in certain countries, most notably Germany and Austria. Holocaust deniers in other countries such as England, have been taken to court. Jewish groups were outraged and Angela Merkel, Germany's premier, spoke out against the Pope. Finally, today, the Vatican called for the priest to recant and retract his statements about the Holocaust. (Here's the NYT Times article)

In my opinion, the damage is done, and in more ways than one. First, it makes the Vatican appear callous in the face of an outraged public. And second, it makes the Vatican seem to finally buckle, but only under pressure. Either way, it is not good public relations practice. Public relations is concerned with how your publi

To extract for more real world/corporate settings, here are a few thoughts:

- Vet your candidates properly (this goes for President Obama too)
- If there is a problem with someone you are publicly supporting, immediately look into the matter. Do not pretend everything is A-OK.
- Do not let others dictate your response—then you have lost credibility
- Deal with problems as they arise, especially with sensitive matters

Personal marketing and communications

Although we think of marketing communications as mostly printed and electronic promotional pieces, there is one part of the communication process that is completely personal—you. Most of us represent our companies or even ourselves, if we are looking for a job or a project. We may have nice business cards but what else are we doing to market ourselves? Yesterday, I attended a networking/educational event where I saw Kate Perrin, a fabulous networker and business person. We discussed (among other things like the Daschle debacle) how people present themselves. This area, which I consider personal marketing, is rarely addressed but it is crucial nonetheless.

Why is your personal presentation a part of marketing? Simply, because *all marketing is about perception*, and how we look (how we are dressed, our body language, our demeanor in general) determines the perception others have of us. If I show up to an interview in sloppy clothes, doesn't it seem that I didn't put any effort in and that I really don't care what people think? Similarly, if I go to a business event where everyone is wearing "business attire" and I am wearing flip-flops and shorts, don't I look out of place? Creative people generally dress creatively and corporate people also tend to dress in corporate attire. There is a reason for this—they are branding themselves. This extends to business cards as well. A lawyer probably will hand you a linen embossed card and a designer might give you a colorful one.

A few months ago, I attended a networking event. The woman in charge was a business owner, and had a direct marketing firm.

She talked about email campaigns and such. However, I was distracted from her message because she was dressed in a suit circa 1985, and had unstyled long hair. She was clearly stuck in an earlier era, so my impression of her was that in no way could she conduct a 21st Century direct marketing campaign.

Of course not everyone should be cookie-cutter, dressed in navy blue suit and showing no hint of personal style. But there are some generalities about personal marketing:

- Clothing style reflects your brand—what do you want your brand to be?
- Sloppiness never looks professional
- Business cards are part of your personal marketing package
- Your handshake speaks volumes about you
- A smile goes a long way

Not so super if you ask me

Last night, I suffered through a football game in which the team I was rooting for lost. I was in it for the ads in any case, and that also was a bit underwhelming. As I had predicted, there were lots of ads for movies (about 10 by my count), some of them not opening until late summer. The beer ads were as always for Budweiser, Bud Light, and Bud Lime, plus one for Heineken (again, that I saw). There were ads from CareerBuilder.com and Monster.com and Avon touting the time to change your career. Other advertisers included:

In the automotive category: Hyundai, Toyota, Audi, cars.com, carmax.com, Bridgestone tires, Castrol Oil

Beverages (non-alcoholic) : Pepsi, Coke , SoBe Lifewater,

Super G (I think this was Gatorade)

Food: Taco Bell, McDonalds, Cheetos, Doritos

Products and Services: Etrade, GoDaddy.com, H&R Block, Teleflora, GE, Cash4Gold.com, Overstock.com, Kelloggs Frosted Flakes, Pedigree adopt-a-dog campaign.

Overall, some of the best (and more memorable) ads came from the usual suspects, Pepsi and Coke. Pepsi seemed to have taken over the Obama logo and used Bob Dylan and Will.I.Am. Coke went the animation route (this is after all the company that brought us cola drinking polar bears). Budweiser had two memorable commercials-one in which business people are having a budget meeting while drinking Bud Light (what?) and one of the recommends, albeit jokingly that they cut out the Bud to save money and gets booted out the window. The other featured the Clydesdale horses recounting their epic immigration to the United States. Bridgestone used Mr. Potato Head. SoBe used ballet-dancing football players.

My least favorite ads by far were for GoDaddy.com. Not only were they juvenile but they were also sexist. I am not sure what their target audience is for their services, but unless they are only trying to appeal to teenage boys and immature men, they missed the mark. I also did not like the CareerBuilder.com commercial. There was something so patronizing about it. Just like last year, I didn't get the Doritos ads. And Cheetos ads were funny, but disturbing: women who eat snack foods can tap in to their inner witch.

I think when the tallies come out, this year was not the year for Super Bowl ad spending. Many of the ads (and some of the funniest, actually) were for NBC and their shows. I especially liked the one dealing with the LMAO. That was funny.

If you missed the game, but want to see the ads, you can go to Hulu.com.