

Advertising & PR: What's the Difference?

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Two of the most commonly misunderstood terms in advertising and PR are, well...advertising and PR. I can't tell you how many times I've heard these terms used almost interchangeably by CEOs, company presidents, even vice presidents of sales and marketing. The fact of the matter is they are distinctly separate disciplines, each with its own inherent advantages and disadvantages for disseminating messages to a target audience.

Advertising is the use of paid announcements conveyed by any number of media, including print (newspapers, magazines, sales literature), broadcast (over-the-air TV, CATV, radio), and, now, the Internet (company web sites, e-zines, portals, marketplaces, email). The advantages offered by advertising are many – you control the who, what, where, when, and how of your message. You can employ the power of a carefully crafted message, strategically placed at a particular time of your choosing in one or more carefully selected media to maximize the impact of what you have to say. The downside to advertising is the audience's potential for mistrust of anything that smacks of "advertising". For many, "advertising" can be synonymous with "misleading".

But because you control the message, you can also control the level of audience acceptance. How? By ratcheting down the hyperbole and avoiding such hackneyed and bankrupt phrases as "industry leader", "revolutionary", and "cutting edge" to name just a few. Stick to the truth and you will usually be rewarded.

PR is, by and large, the calculated attempt to favorably manipulate the impressions and attitudes of a target audience primarily by inducing editors into publishing information about your company or product. While that might sound almost underhanded, it isn't. Effective PR never feels like manipulation or

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coercion because if you've done it correctly, you have presented a compelling story of legitimate interest to a medium's audience and editors will naturally gravitate toward that. After all, they need content for their publication or program and if something of value and interest to their audience is presented to them on a timely basis they're often grateful to receive the outside help. The advantage of PR is the perceived objectiveness of your message – if it's published it must be A) true, and B) important. It has the perceived third-party endorsement of the medium it in which it has appeared. A published article in a trusted publication is one of the strongest impressions your company can make. The downside to PR is the fundamental lack of control you have over your message, its timing, and appearance. You are at the mercy of editors and publishers, who, after all, control the content of their publication or program. If you have a highly technical or complicated message, you run the substantial risk of having it misunderstood or misconveyed.

How do you minimize your risk and maximize your exposure? By having knowledgeable people who can answer the tough questions representing your product or service. Then do your homework. Research the media you want to use to reach your target. Confirm their appropriateness and focus your message to maximize its appeal to each medium's audience. Find out the right editors to approach and the method in which they prefer to receive their information. Its remarkable how often companies don't qualify the media they're approaching and end up wasting time and money talking about the wrong topic to the wrong people.

So which is the most appropriate tool to use to reach your target audience, advertising or PR? The truth is, both. By combining their strengths, you minimize their weaknesses. Don't make the mistake of trying to get one to do the work of the other.

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