

Taking Tips from Zenith's Legendary Eugene McDonald, Jr.: Getting Public Relations and Advertising to Say "I Do."

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Although integrated marketing communication programs in academia have been around for several decades, it is not certain to what degree educators are integrating advertising with public relations training, and what influence this integration is having on programs of study, especially in the teaching of the public relations campaigns course. The argument of this paper is that public relations instruction is not complete until public relations and advertising fully say "I do." The author finds support for this marriage of sorts by going back to the days of Commander Eugene F. McDonald, Jr., Zenith radio's flashy and colorful promotions genius. McDonald's successful and profitable integration of public relations with advertising, without question, underscores the need for public relations educators to re-examine their approach to teaching public relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Commander Eugene F. McDonald, Jr., the powerful and flamboyant founder of Zenith Radio Corporation, had a profound influence on the fledging radio industry in the first half of the 20th Century. It was McDonald's "marriage" between public relations and advertising that distinguished his company's products from other manufacturers. Hence, Zenith's famous slogan: "The quality goes in before the name goes on."

Although integrated marketing communication programs in academia have been around since the early 90s, it is not certain to what degree educators are integrating advertising with public relations training, and what influence this integration is having on programs of study, especially in the teaching of the public relations campaigns course.

In the college campaigns course, students find the opportunity to research, analyze, plan and execute a campaign for an actual client. They also get a better understanding of the relevance of what they have learned in school and how it can be useful in the field. Nonetheless, today's public relations campaigns course and related curriculum may leave students with a less than desired understanding of how public relations can best partner with other tools in the communication mix, namely advertising.

To provide support for this argument, the author returns to the days of Commander Eugene F. McDonald, Jr., Zenith radio's flashy and colorful promotions genius, and founding president of the company. McDonald's life and the promotional contributions he made to the radio industry, without question, underscore the need for public relations educators to re-examine their approach to teaching public relations.

Zenith becomes an industry leader

Zenith's legendary Eugene McDonald, Jr., played a significant role in the adoption of the shortwave spectrum for long-distance communications, the formation of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and the creation of the Federal Communications Commission (Cones and Bryant, 2004). With McDonald at its helm, Zenith Radio was able to produce an amazing number of electronic innovations, including the first portable radios, the first AC-powered radios, the first automatic push-button radio tuners, the first wireless TV remote controls and the first subscription TV system (Cones, Bryant & Blankenship, 2003). Furthermore, McDonald's ability to promote these innovations, through the synergistic coupling of public relations and advertising, has become legend. To understand how McDonald was able to achieve such success, one must understand the man, himself.

McDonald was a tremendously charismatic leader who "moved the company forward primarily through the sheer force of his gigantic personality" (Collins & Porras, 2004). McDonald was often described as a "volatile and opinionated mastermind of Zenith" (Forbes 1961); one who led a "swashbuckling, lickety-split life that might have exhausted even such stalwarts as Humphrey Bogart and Douglas MacArthur" (Time, 1946). McDonald's flamboyant style provided the thrust behind his company's advertising and this flair, together with pioneering genius and his ability to sense changes in what the public wanted in a radio, meant that "McDonald was Zenith," (Corporate, 1988).

When the Great Depression began in the fall of 1929, the radio industry found itself in serious financial hardship. Price wars and declining sales caused many companies to go bankrupt, yet Zenith radio struggled and managed to emerge from the Depression as a major force in the consumer electronics industry (Sterling, 2004). Throughout the depression, McDonald's management approach, and imaginative use advertising and public relations, helped the company prosper.

McDonald knew, for the most part, that keeping his network of distributors and vendors happy and educated about the company's line of radios were critical to the success of Zenith (Cones, Bryant & Blankenship, 2003). For that reason, McDonald turned to the "special event" to capture the attention of his vendor and distributor network. The special event, a widely accepted convention in the practice of public relations today, was ahead of its time for the radio industry in the 1920s. McDonald used annual distributors' conventions in Chicago to introduce Zenith's new product lines. At these conventions one might find mock ups of radios built five to ten times life size and dramatically presented on stage. Almost always, radios were placed on pedestals and punctuated with remarkable and impressive stage lighting. Standing by to assist were legions of Zenith radio representatives, armed with sales brochures and other information.

Although a great idea, conventions by themselves were not enough to keep the company on solid ground. McDonald saw strategically placed advertising as another

tool crucial to Zenith's success. His lavish expenditures on national advertising campaigns were meant to enhance the company's image and create awareness of Zenith's product line. "The quality goes in before the name goes on" was the mainstay of most Zenith advertising in national magazines with general readership, and in niche magazines targeted for smaller magazine segments of the market, such as farmers and women. McDonald spared no expense in advertising the elegance and operational excellence of his radios. The 25-tube Zenith Stratosphere, one of the most sought after radios in the world because of its big black Zenith dial, was an advertising favorite of Zenith radio, as was the Trans-Oceanic and Royal series of shortwave portable radios (Bryant & Cones, 1995).

McDonald enhanced and enlarged his national advertising program by providing distributors and local dealers with camera-ready ads via co-operative advertising arrangements. With co-op advertising, Zenith reimbursed distributors and vendors a percentage of the costs of inserting the advertisements. McDonald also provided dealers with point-of-purchase displays, brochures, and other collateral materials containing the images and descriptions of various lines of Zenith radios (Cones, Bryant & Blankenship (2003).

Zenith and the Arctic Expedition

McDonald expanded his promotional focus by integrating advertising with other public relations-backed initiatives, such as publicity. McDonald used publicity to convince the military that shortwave equipment was far more superior to the distance-limiting long-wave equipment being used at the time.

In 1925, he promoted short-wave radio for long distance communications by furnishing the Donald B. MacMillan Arctic Expedition with transmitters and receivers in the first modern expedition to the Arctic. McDonald equipped the Peary, and an Arctic sloop, the Bowdoin, with specially built Zenith shortwave equipment. Three U.S. Navy Loening amphibian airplanes, also attached to the expedition, were equipped with Zenith shortwave equipment, as well (Bryant & Cones, 2000). Such an undertaking marked the first use of ship-to-ship shortwave communications, the first use of aircraft in major geographic exploration, and the first successful use of shortwave communications in Polar Regions. McDonald's demonstration of shortwave's superiority in the expedition prompted the Navy to follow suit and purchase shortwave equipment for its fleet of ships.

Zenith's advertising programs took advantage of MacMillan's public relations inventiveness during the Arctic expedition. The company's products, such as the Zenith Transoceanic series of receivers, were advertised as "the choice of Arctic explorers," featuring Admiral MacMillan, one of the explorers, well into the mid-1950s.

However, not all Zenith radios met such standards of quality. After the failure of a new Zenith portable shortwave radio model, McDonald opted to buy all the radios back and

burned them in a bonfire. Such a stunt generated immense front page publicity for McDonald and bolstered his pledge to quality.

In 1940, as a publicity stunt to show the ability of a Zenith portable radio model to operate in a variety of areas, McDonald shipped sample radios by Railway Express to each of his dealers in a number of cities. Before shipment, he switched on power to each radio and dialed each receiver to the frequency of a radio station in the city in which the set was to be sent. In *Zenith: The Glory Years*,” Cones, Bryant and Blankenship write:

“The result was that, while the shipment traveling to Minneapolis for installation emitted nothing but static en route, when it came within range of Minneapolis station WCCO, to which it had been tuned at Chicago, it began to play soothing melodies” (2003).

McDonald’s idea was to convince dealers and consumers that the new model would play anywhere in transit, in trains, buses and automobiles, and on Railway Express platforms. McDonald’s dealers and distributors were impressed by the publicity generated. Shipping and receiving platforms, needless to say, were not. Some panicked and called the “bomb squad” when they heard strange noises coming from boxes that concealed the radios.

McDonald’s most successful Zenith public relations campaign was the notorious placement of Zenith radios in many of the Hollywood films produced during the 1930s and 1940s. According to Cones, Bryant and Blankenship:

“Movie buffs have been heard to wonder if there were any other radios made during those years, since it seemed at times that only Zenith radios were used on Hollywood sets. The understanding was that one of the two radios sent to these studios would be used in the film; the other went to the director of property manager’s home. The value of this exposure during the Depression years cannot be overstated. Today manufacturers literally pay millions of dollars to have their product appear in a single film. McDonald was decades ahead of his time.”

Zenith’s Commander Eugene McDonald, Jr., without a doubt, mastered product differentiation through integrating public relations with advertising. He, more than anyone, knew the power of integration and used it to make Zenith the undisputed leader in the radio industry.

While McDonald’s technique for combining public relations with advertising was successful at creating awareness and enhancing the image of Zenith radio, the tactic today is not always applicable or workable for every communications opportunity. Even so, the more educators teach students the differences and similarities between advertising and publicity, the better they will be able to successfully combine the two when merging is appropriate or critical.

An integration primer

Aside from particular messages and media, advertising and public relations each use the same processes, making it commonsense and valuable to combine the two (Haynes, 1981). Each attempts to create awareness, change attitudes, and influence behavior (Harris, 1998). When combined, these activities give an integrated marketing force that actually is greater than the sum of its parts (Moriarty, 1994). This is clearly seen in many U.S. markets where public relations and advertising professionals are already doing work that often “obscures the lines between the two disciplines” (Rose & Miller, 1993). Ries & Ries (2004) contend that public relations has reached celebrity status at the expense of advertising, making public relations a discipline of equal importance. Just the same, both are seen as mechanisms of promotion in the marketing mix (Belch & Belch, 2004).

Public relations has an interesting effect on other marketing communication behavior. “If you advertise in a time when you’re getting bad public relations, it doesn’t work,” explained one executive in a study conducted by Smith (2008). “Conversely, if you advertise in a time of really good PR, there’s a leveraging effect---it actually has more impact than it would, all things being equal.”

As traditional advertising loses its effectiveness, marketers are turning to public relations to create excitement in the marketplace. Advertisers often attach great importance to how publicity about a product or a brand can supplement advertising campaign expenditures and potentially create credibility and greater awareness of the advertising (Harris, 1998), often leading to product purchase (Wang & Nelson, 2006). Apple's iPod, the Harry Potter books, the Toyota Prius, Sony's Play Station 2, the "Star Wars" films, Botox and Viagra---were all driven by public relations, and maintained by advertising (Edelman, 2006). The iPod alone changed the way people listened to music and built Apple into an entertainment giant.

Chief among public relations advantages is its use of a variety of media channel options, which can be costly if purchased singly and independently in any other medium. Through the use of public relations tools---article placements, websites, and collateral materials like brochures, newsletters and press conferences--- audiences can gain a greater understanding of a product, service or cause. As such, the tools of public relations, and the communication channels they utilize, allow for the delivery of messages of greater depth and across more of the marketing media.

Editorial content provided by public relation's publicity arm has been known to have greater usefulness than a display advertisement by itself. This can be seen in the spread of the “advertorial format” (Greer, Stout, & Wilcox, 1988). Advertorials are news or feature articles about a company's products, services or causes that are presented in an editorial text format. Although such inserts require payment, much like traditional display advertising, they can be an effective choice under certain situations.

A weakness of public relations, especially in its publicity role, may be its lack of a persuasive purpose (Hass & Grady, 1975). Such an issue is worthy of attention when choosing an advertising or public relations strategy. Perhaps a more threatening shortcoming is the discipline's inability to control a company's message---when, where, and how often the message is published or broadcast, or even used. A press release can be bumped from a newscast for a late-breaking news story, or eliminated due to a lack of air-time, or a lack of column space. Editors may hack what they perceived to be "promotional" language disguised as news. Such occurrences happen and are big fears for public relations professionals who are seeking validation via the third-party endorsement method (Cameron, 1994). Compounding matters are the negative perceptions some journalists still have of public relations practitioners as "hacks, flacks, and spin doctors" (Downes, 1998).

Because it is a paid device, advertising can wrestle back the control that eludes public relations. Since a company pays to have an advertisement placed in a newspaper, magazine, or on TV and radio, it can run the advertisement as frequently as it wants. Hence, an ad may have a greater impact over time than a press release that may run only once.

An advertisement may actually be received by consumers as more interesting and more informative than a communication presented in news format. As such, the message may be perceived as more persuasive (Salmon, & Reid, & Pokrywczynski & Willett, 1985).

Advertising can help a company or institution establish a foothold in an area where it is not by establishing relevance with customers in more narrowly segmented or defined markets (Lauer, 2007). The same advertising methods used to promote commercial goods and services can also be used to motivate, inform, and educate.

One distinct and major contribution that advertising brings to the table is the discipline's ability to employ various ranges of creativity. With public relations, creativity must be kept in check. Such restraint may make public relations less convincing and compelling. Advertising, on the other hand, can take a more direct and creative approach. In public relations, creative intent is shown in the way professionals package stories and make them relevant to media.

Public relations education

Commander Eugene F. McDonald, Jr., was hugely successful in integrating advertising with public relations, and, while many of today's advertising and public relations practitioners embrace a more integrated approach to communication, it is still not clear to what level educators are integrating advertising with public relations training, and what influence this integration is having on curriculum.

Education task forces have looked at the feasibility of integrating public relations and advertising education for the last twenty years. The 1993 AEJMC Task Force on

Integrated Communications called for a "more conceptually unified and integrated program of communication study" for advertising and public relations students. Such recommendations were opposed by the Educational Affairs Committee of the Public Relations Society of America, citing major philosophical differences in the goals, strategies, and tactics of advertising, marketing, and public relations (Duncan, Caywood, & Newsom, 1993). The Undergraduate Communication Integration Team at the National Communication Association's 1998 conference agreed that public relations practice was interdisciplinary (Miller, & Kernisky, D., 1999) as did the 1999 Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education. However, the 1999 Report did not explicitly advocate integrating public relations with advertising or marketing, declaring instead that "public relations education requires an interdisciplinary foundation that includes liberal arts, languages, social sciences and management" (Commission Report, 1999). Such a notion suggests that there are many ways of defining "integration."

Larsen and Len-Rios (2006) examined educators' attitudes toward integrating public relations and advertising. Their findings supported such integration, with respondents agreeing that an integrated curriculum provided students with a thorough education. Respondents, however, indicated a slow, guarded acceptance of a more integrated advertising and public relations program of study for the future.

The debate surrounding the integration of public relations and advertising is just one of a host of discussions involving public relations education, as a whole. According to DiStaso, Stacks and Botan (2009):

"The days of one-size-fits-all public relations education are numbered. A well-planned curriculum can go a long way toward meeting many of the academic needs but no one curriculum can reasonably be expected to cover all the highly rated areas in sufficient depth to be meaningful."

Support for public relations education is "woefully bad, at best.....many universities don't support public relations education in a manner similar to other popular majors" (Wright and Turk (2007). The field of public relations is often viewed as an applied technical area, whereby public relations faculty are merely screened for technical skills, and are often not expected to be researchers and theorists (Botan, C. & Taylor, M., 2004).

Wright and Turk (2007) point to three major "disconnects" between what is actually present in the university-based, degree program of study and what those who practice public relations believe ought to be taught:

- 1) Most academic public relations programs are sub-sets of larger academic disciplines such as journalism, mass communication, communication, speech-communication or business.

- 2) Meaningful dialogue between educators and practitioners on curriculum matters is rare.

3) If and when educators and practitioners discuss curriculum matters, it usually involves a very small number of practitioners – frequently the same people time and time again – who differ from most of their peers in that they are truly supportive of public relations education.

An effort to change the quality and content of public relations education and training has been the work of a number of committees over the years. One of the more recent efforts is the Commission on Public Relations Education 2006 report: *The Professional Bond, Public Relations Education for the 21st Century*. Among the commission's findings is that public relations educators and professionals are in agreement on what public relations undergraduate students should learn, and therefore be able to perform at the practitioner entry level. Todd's 2009 study argues otherwise, saying public relations practitioners are not convinced that educators are teaching students the skills they need to effectively work in today's industry; that professional advisors "value more than do faculty advisors a curriculum that emphasizes new media technologies, hands-on technician skills, and preparation for entry-level industry positions" (Todd, 2009). Results from Wright and Turk's study (2007) indicate that educators see more value than public relations practitioners in curriculum pertaining to the introduction to public relations, research, measurement and evaluation, public relations law, management, public relations campaigns, internships, relationships and a thesis or capstone project. Practitioners find more value than educators in courses teaching public relations ethics, case studies, creating magnet content, metrics, and social networking, according to the study.

Another concern of the field is that it is not at all unusual to find graduates of liberal arts, business, and other academic disciplines chosen for entry-level public relations positions over graduates of public relations degree programs. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006) report that roughly 40 percent of those now working in public relations studied journalism and outnumber public relations graduates two to one.

Perhaps the traditional model of public relations education is faulty and doesn't work anymore. According to Kalupa (2007), the model is focused too much on "an association with journalism education, which continues to treat public relations as a one-way communication function centered around publicity and media relations." Hornaman and Sriramesh (2003) Hornaman and Sriramesh, 2003 Hornaman, L., & Sriramesh, K. (2003). *Public relations: Professionalism and education*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association. contend that "students need education in public relations, rather than journalism or another field, in order to practice a more sophisticated model of public relations." These arguments are in sharp contrast to the Commission's recommendations that "students be completely conversant in principles and practices of business." Course areas recommended by the 2006 Report include marketing and finance, economics, organizational change, management concepts and theories, problem-solving and negotiation, strategic planning, and managing people, programs and resources.

IMC and public relations

Integrated Marketing Communications is thought of as a more “holistic, strategic and customer-focused way of planning and managing the marketing communication process” (Kerr, 2009). It is the “integration of specialized communication functions that previously have operated with various degrees of autonomy” (Duncan and Everett 1993). According to Griffin and Pasadeos (1998), IMC suggests that “advertising and public relations efforts achieve their greatest impact when coupled together and with other marketing elements such as direct marketing and sales promotion to communicate with consumers through multiple channels.”

Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism pioneered one of the first IMC graduate programs in 1991. Other programs would soon follow, including the University of Colorado's in 1996, and present day programs, such as those found at Northwestern, University of Texas, Michigan State University, University of Alabama, University of Illinois, and the University of Georgia.

When the IMC concept was first introduced (Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn, 1993), it became one of the most powerful marketing management approaches at the time. Both advertising and PR agencies acknowledge that a widespread “application of all communication is required for IMC success” (Kitchen, P., Kim, I, & Schultz, D., 2008). Yet, defining the concept of IMC among those who practice the approach continues to be a problem. According to Schultz & Pattie:

Many have argued that IMC lacks a theory base, but, until we can define what we mean by IMC, both academically and professionally, it is difficult to develop theory or even theoretical underpinnings (Schultz, D. & Patti, C. 2009).

IMC education presents a challenge to many advertising, public relations and IMC educators (Kerr, 2009), especially when one considers the many uphill battles associated with accepting and utilizing IMC in business. One significant hurdle is that most practitioners may not fully grasp the practice of IMC and its usefulness (Duncan, 2005). Notwithstanding, companies have developed IMC programs they believe are successful (Kitchen, Kim, & Schultz, 2008).

Marketing and communications programs are still not consistently integrated in institutions of higher education as shown by the 36 different titles given to the senior official responsible for marketing and communications at 42 responding institutions in a study conducted by Edmiston (2009). Kerr, Beede, and Proud (2007) researched what content of IMC education attracted advertising and public relations practitioners in Australia. The study found that strategic planning, communication planning, consumer behavior and creative strategy were placed highest by advertising practitioners, while strategic planning, crisis and issue management and agency management were considered most attractive on the list for public relations professionals.

CONCLUSION

For instructors, especially those with an extensive background in public relations, it can be hard to appreciate how challenging it is for students to break through the mental hurdle of seeing themselves operating within the ranks of professional public relations. As such, we must recognize that students may be entering the public relations industry missing some of the knowledge and ability that employers want. Any misalignment between education and professional expectations seems to leave room for educators to evaluate and address the problem now.

When all is said and done, students in the public relations campaigns course should be taught to use public relations and advertising together as well as separately, because the approach is not applicable to every communication task. Rather than choosing one or the other, students should be encouraged to do both in a way that is in harmony with the client's goals, objectives and budget.

This paper's contention that a greater marriage of sorts needs to occur between public relations and advertising in no way discounts the stand-alone supremacy of good public relations or advertising campaigns. Public relations is, and will continue to be, an extremely essential and integral marketing tool from start to finish, with or without the assistance of advertising. Because it uses different methods of communication and different channels to deliver key messages, public relations can create awareness and interest, where advertising may perhaps fail.

All the same, those students who practice within an integrated atmosphere of public relations and advertising are the ones most likely to endure the pressures of corporate communication. For that reason, we as educators must develop within our public relations campaigns class a greater understanding and appreciation for the contributions made by both advertising and public relations, and how each can be mutually reinforcing and synergistic when combined. A good "marriage" allows the individual to grow independently and brings about a positive career experience for our graduates. Zenith's Commander Eugene McDonald, Jr., no doubt mastered product differentiation through integrating public relations with advertising. He, more than anyone, knew the power of integration and used it to make Zenith the undisputed leader in the radio industry.

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