

Does Media Coverage Matter? Perspectives of Public Relations Practitioners and Business Professionals on the Value of News Coverage

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the value of news media coverage as part of a strategic communication plan from the perspectives of public relations practitioners and business people, often PR clients and target audiences. Findings from in-depth interviews with 20 public relations and business professionals reflect continued belief in the conventional wisdom that media coverage is more credible than advertising. Interestingly, however, the revealing comments of both PR and business professionals reflect a growing skepticism of the media, which may help explain the results of experimental studies and provide context for the growing use of paid and owned content and native advertising.

The research entailed in-depth interviews with 10 practitioners reflecting varied levels of experience in corporate, agency and nonprofit settings and 10 business professionals representing diverse industries, company size and geographic scope. Nearly all those interviewed said they consider independent media as more credible than advertising or other controlled media. They are less confident that the general public perceives media coverage to be more credible than advertising. Practitioners said that clients continue to see value in media coverage as a way to broaden the reach of their messages to target audiences. However, despite their overall belief in media credibility, both groups expressed rising doubts about the believability of media, citing recent cases of plagiarism, breaches of journalistic ethics, and the public's growing cynicism toward news media as a factor in declining media credibility

INTRODUCTION

Disseminating business news and information through the media is a long-standing strategy of public relations professionals. The perceived benefits of using independent media is multifaceted, ranging from building awareness and targeting messages to specific audiences to benefitting from an implied third-party endorsement effect. Assessing the value of media coverage, however, is an ongoing challenge. Additionally, the media landscape has radically changed to include various forms of

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online and social media, coupled with the growing presence of paid and owned content and native advertising.

Additionally, as the media landscape has radically changed, the role of “press coverage” in a communications strategy is being reconsidered. Beyond statistical tabulations, a potentially more powerful – yet more difficult to quantify – value of media coverage is the assumed enhanced credibility of a message delivered through independent news media compared with organization-sponsored controlled communications, such as paid advertising (Harris, 1998).

Experimental studies generally have not supported the presence of a positive third-party endorsement effect of media (Cameron, 1994; Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Stacks & Michaelson, 2009; Howes & Sallot, 2013). Nevertheless, the practice continues because many communication and business professionals continue to believe the conventional wisdom that information is more credible when conveyed in an editorial context than in an advertisement. Consequently, if the implied endorsement effect of independent media exists in the “eye of the beholder” – public relations professionals and their business clients – its impact must be a consideration when developing overall communication strategy.

While a number of studies have used experimental and survey methodologies to test for the endorsement effect, often using student-subject pools, no studies to date are believed to have used qualitative methods to gauge perceptions of public relations or business professionals, as this study does. This research contributes a personal and experiential dimension to the dialogue about the role and value of media coverage among public relations practitioners and scholars.

Discussion of the value and role of media coverage is increasingly relevant as technology continues to drive changes in how information is disseminated and consumed by audiences. Delving into practitioner and client viewpoints on media credibility and the value of media coverage brings a real-world perspective when considering implications for public relations practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Belief in this implied third-party endorsement effect of news media coverage has its roots in early theoretical studies that examined the impact and role of media on society (Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b). The perceived power of news media to set agendas and influence opinion led to comparisons of credibility between news content and advertising, although later studies based on limited-effects theories have raised doubts about the influential impact of the media on the actions of individuals (Baran & Davis, 2006).

Michaelson and Stacks (2007) contended “it has long been held by public relations practitioners that public relations media placements have a relative value advantage over advertising when the message is employed by both or similar” (p. 3) in a multiplier effect. This multiplier or implied third-party endorsement effect is considered

advantageous because information conveyed through the media filter is thought to be perceived by consumers as more fact-based and credible and less-biased than information provided in a paid advertisement or other information that is prepared, funded and distributed by a self-interested party (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Guth & Marsh, 2007; Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b; Harris, 1998; Smith, 2009.)

Value enhancements also are often attributed to an audience's perceptions of greater credibility because gatekeeper (reporter or editor) of the information provider (the news media) is not directly beholden to the originating source. In contrast, the originating source of information in paid advertising or other "controlled" media (such as newsletters produced by organizations) is seen to have a vested interest in the effects on an audience; the information is thought to reflect bias and carry diminished credibility (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Guth & Marsh, 2007; Hallahan, 1999b).

The implied third-party endorsement effect of published or broadcast information has been studied from multiple perspectives, often focusing on comparing perceptions of credibility and impact of information conveyed through mock "published" editorial news stories versus mock paid advertisements (Cameron, 1994; Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b; Jo, 2004; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Stacks & Michaelson, 2009). These studies' results provide little-to-no support for the conventional wisdom among public relations professionals that media coverage has enhanced value to organizations (Cameron, 1994; Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b). Hallahan (1999b) even titled one article, "No Virginia, It's Not True What They Say About Publicity's 'Implied Third-Party Endorsement' Effect," a review and analysis of 11 studies comparing the effects of news and advertising which yielded only mild overall support for the concept of third-party added value for news articles.

Typically these studies have used between-subjects or within subjects experimental or survey methodology; limitations have often included small sample sizes and reliance on college-student participants, absence of reliability and validity measurements, lack of theoretical grounding and insufficient differentiation among the various test materials (Stacks & Michaelson, 2009).

Evaluating measurement of public relations is an ongoing dialogue among practitioners and academicians. The Barcelona Principles, a set of guidelines endorsed by leading international professional PR organizations, emphasized the importance of measuring the impact of public relations activities. The principles declared that long-used measures, such as Advertising Value Equivalents (AVEs) and multipliers, did not reflect the true value of public relations (AMEC, 2010). Watson and Likely (2013) examined financial-based measures, such as Return on Investment (ROI), as a business-based approach to evaluating PR effectiveness.

Additionally, surveys showing declining trust and confidence in the news media by the public (Geary, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2014), further call into question implied third-party endorsement effects.

Yet anecdotal evidence suggests the widely held belief persists in PR practice that information published or broadcast in news media takes on added value because it has been approved by an independent third-party gatekeeper and conveyed by an independent, supposedly unbiased news medium.

Up to now, no qualitative studies are believed to have probed and compared perceptions and attitudes of editorial endorsement values held by PR practitioners and business people; this study was conducted to address this gap in the literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although much of the existing research questions the third-party endorsement effect, anecdotal evidence suggests the widely held belief persists in practice that information published or broadcast in news media takes on added value. In public relations work, communicators may utilize the third-party endorsement effect of media coverage as justification for various media relations activities, from issuing news releases to conducting executive interviews. Business people who see value in media coverage may base that belief, in part, on the assumption of the third-party endorsement effect enhancing the impact of their message. They may see other values to media coverage, as well. The level of perceived value will likely influence a business person's attitudes and expectations of media coverage. Additionally, both public relations and business professionals must factor in the public's perceptions of credibility of editorial coverage and paid advertising when evaluating role of media coverage in a public relations plan.

Based on the literature and the apparent divergence between experimental findings and prevailing conventional thought, this study seeks public relations and business professionals' perspectives on the credibility of independent media and controlled media and how they believe others view the endorsement effect and value of media coverage. The following research questions were used to explore beliefs about the presence and impact of third-party endorsement and the value of media coverage:

RQ1: Do public relations and business professionals perceive media coverage as more credible than advertising?

RQ2: Do public relations and business professionals believe that members of the general public perceive media coverage as more credible than advertising?

RQ3: What value, if any, do public relations practitioners believe that their clients place on media coverage?

METHOD

Interviews consisting of guided, open-ended questions were conducted with 10 public relations professionals and 10 business people. The in-depth interviews followed a

designed and tested questionnaire. A purposive selection process was used to secure input representative of a variety of types of public relations practices, organization sizes, and industries. Fourteen public relations practitioners and 15 business people were invited, with 10 of each group agreeing to participate. Seventeen interviews were conducted by telephone and three in person. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participant identities were confidential and pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals quoted in the study. Though representing a small sample, comments were reflective of a cross-section of professionals and organizations.

The analysis entailed listening to the audio recordings and reading transcriptions and notes from all interviews a minimum of two times and crosschecked for accuracy. Following qualitative data analysis protocol suggested by Bogdan and Biklin (1998), transcripts were organized by specific question responses grouped by the two respondent groups. In initial coding, responses were categorized and labeled line-by-line. Focused coding then eliminated, combined or further refined categories to identify repeating concepts and broader themes. Guidelines detailed by Berkowitz (1997) identified common themes, presence or absence of patterns and repetition in the answers, any deviations from identified patterns and possible explanatory factors, considered the influence of participants' background and experience on their responses, sought illuminating stories and examples to add depth and understanding, and compared responses to expectations based on other studies.

Participants – public relations professionals

Of the 10 public relations professionals, four worked for corporations, three for public relations agencies of varied size and client base, two worked for nonprofit organizations, and one was a sole practitioner. Organization size varied from fewer than 50 employees to more than 20,000 employees. Experience ranged from less than a year to more than 16 years; five were male and five were female; seven held bachelor's degrees and three received master's degrees in communication-related studies.

Participants – business people

The 10 business people interviewed represented manufacturing, entertainment, consumer services, business consulting, utilities, consumer products, construction engineering, and advertising. Eight of the companies were public and two were privately held; they ranged from fewer than 500 employees to more than 20,000 employees. Participants were mid-level to senior management. Five participants were male and five were female; five had bachelor's degrees, two had MBA degrees, one had a master's degree in human resources; two had J.D. degrees.

FINDINGS

Public relations and business professionals' views on credibility of media coverage

Research Question 1 asked public relations and business professionals if they

perceive the presence of an implied third-party endorsement effect of independent media, such as newspapers, versus controlled media, such as advertisements. Both groups showed overall support for the existence of implied third-party endorsement effects of independent media stemming from greater perceived credibility of independent media compared to controlled media.

Nine of the 10 public relations professionals said they perceive independent media to be more credible than controlled media, and one person found independent media somewhat more credible than controlled media. Eight of the 10 business people interviewed said they perceived independent media as more credible than controlled media, while two found independent media somewhat more credible than controlled media.

Interestingly, some PR professionals perceived greater credibility of independent sources because they recognized the advocacy role they play in their own work. Independent PR practitioner Barbara said, "Part of my job is to put people in the best possible light. Not being dishonest, but just playing up their strengths. Ideally, a good newspaper or radio, television and other media outlets are digging to get at the actual facts of the situation. So that gives more credibility."

An assumption that editors and reporters are unbiased whereas companies are biased was another explanation for perceiving higher credibility of media. Marketing communication professional Jill observed that reporters are considered to have no bias, while a company that puts out an advertisement obviously has a self-interested perspective it wishes to advance. Because the controlled message is "scripted and approved," it lacks the credibility conveyed by a message communicated through an independent third-party channel, said strategic communication consultant Greg.

A number of public relations professionals noted a cynicism toward and resistance to messages designed to "sell" or "persuade." Wayne, a corporate communication executive, observed, "It makes sense that when people see advertising over the course of their lives, they become more cynical about it..., and they think about the fact that they are being sold to." He added that people consume news media and advertising differently and are less cynical about accepting information they receive through the news media. "They have a fundamental belief that the news media is more objective, generally, and certainly more objective than advertising."

Several public relations practitioners, while acknowledging the greater perceived credibility of the news media, still expressed some skepticism. A PR professional with extensive corporate and nonprofit experience, Ellen, said that coverage by independent media has greater credibility because "there is the possibility that it has been vetted and screened, and the fact that it is not paid for allows for some balance and for other voices in the story." Nevertheless, she said she had worked with reporters who "never let the facts get in the way of the story," selectively including or excluding information or failing to check facts.

While agreeing that independent sources, such as the news media, are more credible than controlled sources, such as advertising, public relations professional Tim emphasized that independent sources did not guarantee credibility. Information that is conveyed through independent sources is not inherently credible, he said, but it is perceived as more credible than information coming from a controlled source, giving an example: "If company X puts out a press release, I am going to be more skeptical about that release versus a story about company X that was published in the *New York Times*." Despite this view, Tim raised a concern shared by several practitioners about the declining credibility of the news media. "These days I'm going to be much more suspicious about that newspaper article in the *Times* than I might have been 10 or 20 years ago," he said.

High-profile situations that call into question the veracity of certain mainstream media also have influenced practitioners' perceptions of credibility, such as circumstances of plagiarism and inaccurate reporting, and retractions from lack of fact checking, have diminished the perceived believability of media in general, observed agency practitioner Tim. "That said, I still think people will say, if you read it in the newspaper, there is some degree of credibility to it versus the company or the organization saying it," he added.

Business people interviewed agreed with public relations professionals that independent news sources are viewed as more credible and accurate than controlled sources, such as paid advertisements. For many of the business people, advertisements or controlled sources represent a selling tactic designed to influence individuals to purchase something or think a certain way. In contrast, an independent source has no vested interest in influencing people one-way or the other, they commented. Rather, its intent is simply to report or record news and information from an unbiased perspective.

"If it is a paid advertisement, you generally think that advertisers are slanting or interpreting the facts to suit their desires to show their product or services in a more favorable light," said Karen, an attorney experienced in working with consumer products companies.

Advertising executive Rick also acknowledged the perceived bias. "In an advertisement, obviously, the message is slanted – not so much slanted, but the message is more controlled as opposed to something that comes from new source that is from an independent thinker, or somebody who offers an opinion," he said. "So I think that a newspaper article, even though it usually comes from only one person, has less bias."

The perception of third-party objectivity of independent media was cited by several of the business people interviewed. "At least in theory you think the third-party media is trying to be objective and is not trying to position a product or situation or spin it in a certain way," human resource manager Kelly explained. "If I read about a product in a newspaper article, I would think it would be more objective (than advertising). I would hope the media would be concerned about other things such as objectivity versus the sole focus being on the product."

Public relations and business professionals' views on public's perception of credibility of media coverage

Research question 2 asked how public relations and business professionals assess the public's perceptions of the credibility of media coverage and advertising. The public relations practitioners and business professionals showed some differences in opinions on the general public's view on the credibility of independent media versus paid (controlled) media. Four public relations practitioners and seven business professionals said the public views independent media as more credible; four public relations practitioners and three business professionals said the public considers independent media somewhat more credible; and two public relations practitioners and three business people said that the public sees no difference in the credibility of independent media coverage and advertising.

The general public is likely to be less critical and more accepting of news media content than advertising, the public relations practitioners said. Corporate public relations practitioner, Kirk, represented the views of most interviewed: "I think that John Q. Public is still very trusting of media and editorial content and much more cynical about advertising. Which is not to say that advertising does not work; it just means that advertising has to overcome a higher hurdle to resonate with consumers than news editorial messages. I just think that, intuitively, if it looks, smells, or in any way resembles advertising, John Q. Public is going to be more cynical than if it looks and smells and appears to be editorial content."

The matter of media literacy and the education level of the audience influence the perceived level of media credibility, according to several public relations practitioners. As Greg, a strategic communication consultant, said, "It would probably depend on the educational strata that you are talking about in terms of the general public. So, I would say the higher educated would be leaning more towards seeing the same credibility for third-party versus the other and (among) the lower educated strata would there would not be such delineation."

People "read the headlines and the first three paragraphs, and basically, given human nature, believe what was said," said PR agency practitioner Tim. "In a lot of cases, perceptions of credibility probably depend on the media that is delivering the news."

Despite greater believability of news coverage over advertising, some PR practitioners noted a general rising distrust of institutions, including the media, business, and nonprofit organizations. As public relations practitioner Ellen, noted, "The public has cynicism about anything they read anymore. I think people know when they are being sold something when they hear it in a paid or controlled context. People have been sold such a bill of goods over the past 20 years. There has been a big shift in the level of trust that is placed in pronouncements by commercial or nonprofit voices, whether it is the Red Cross or Enron."

The declining credibility of the news media among the general public is a growing factor,

noted Perry, a banking industry public relations manager. "I would think the majority of people probably take what they read in an unpaid news source as more credible, yet the journalism profession may not be held in the same esteem that it was a number of years ago," he said. At the same time, he added, some segment of the public "doesn't really think either way. They probably accept whatever they see in advertising. I would say it is a much greyer area in advertorial kinds of outreach because sometimes it can masquerade very well as unpaid media and yet it is obviously paid for."

Business people believed that the general public considers independent media more credible than advertising, but several doubted that the average person was consciously aware of whether information was being presented by an independent source or a controlled source.

Business manager Charles said that he believes people perceive information conveyed in a newspaper article, as more believable than information that comes from a controlled source, such as a paid advertisement. The public generally considers that the objective behind a newspaper article is to inform while an advertisement is designed to persuade. "The newspaper does not have the same incentive to sell while a marketer placing an advertisement is governed by an incentive to sell," he said.

Familiarity with a media source may also influence the public's perceptions of credibility, with better-known media being perceived as more believable, said Tom, a business manager.

Some business people expressed a mixed view on public perceptions of the credibility of media vs. advertising. "I think there are people who are very gullible and want to read things and believe it. Maybe they just don't have the experience to realize, or the objectivity to say, 'Hey, you know what, this is a paid advertisement, and it is not necessarily true'," said Christa, a corporate communication professional. Other people are more skeptical and evaluate advertising with a more critical eye, she added. These individuals take the view if an advertisement sounds too good to be true, then the validity of the claim may be suspect.

How public relations practitioners' clients perceive the value of media coverage

Research question 3 probed public relations practitioners' thoughts about how their clients view the value of independent media coverage. All of the practitioners said that their clients believe the value of PR-driven media coverage exceeds the value of paid placements, such as advertisements. The perception of media credibility was a key factor in that value assessment. "I think there is the perception that media coverage is just more credible. You know, clients feel 'they have made the news,'" said public relations agency executive Tim. He also finds that using information attributable to independent media sources strengthens the impact of client strategy sessions.

A direct credibility benefit was noted by Ellen, a practitioner for a nonprofit organization, when discussing the impact of newspaper articles on business people who serve on her

organization's board of directors. "We have put out messages that are paid versus editorial. When some of the business-focused members of our board see a story, editorially, in the newspaper or hear something on NPR about us or on CNN, it completely boosts the credibility of what they think about us versus what we tell them about us."

While clients see value in independent media coverage, how they view a particular media outlet affects the degree of value they see in coverage, said corporate public relations professional Kirk. "Even more valuable in their minds is a third-party media outlet that they personally respect," he said. For example, widespread third-party publicity in small-town newspapers around America that speak daily to consumers may be viewed as good, but even better may be a single story on slate.com.

The lower cost of public relations compared to advertising also was mentioned as a reason for clients seeing value in independent media coverage. "It's cheaper for them to pay a PR person, not just because that it's cheap, but because the costs of advertising are very high," said sole practitioner Barbara. She recalled a sleep-disorder doctor who sought public awareness of his work but had a very limited budget. "We got him some TV coverage and he was pleased with that," she said.

DISCUSSION

When directly asked, public relations practitioners and their frequent clients as well as audiences, business people, said they generally perceived information conveyed through independent media coverage as more credible than advertising. The majority of both groups also believed that the general public sees greater credibility in media coverage than advertising. While these acknowledgements endorse conventional wisdom and common rationale used by public relations practitioners to justify media relations activities, they are contrary to the findings of experimental studies that, thus far, have failed to show solid evidence of an implied third-party endorsement effect of media. This apparent contradiction raises questions about the role media relations and media coverage should play in communications strategies and plans. Are public relations practitioners placing too much value on gaining media coverage for a client just because of a perception? Or does the perception of credibility expressed by business people reflect a reality that must be taken seriously on its own merit? In other words, is the perception of credibility of media coverage the reality, at least to some degree?

A notable observation by public relations and business professionals was the impact of declining credibility of media among the public. Individuals in both groups said that trends indicating a loss of media credibility in recent years may be tempering the strength of the third-party endorsement effect.

Overall, public relations practitioners interviewed said they believed their clients generally saw value in media coverage in independent media channels. They perceived information conveyed by the news media as more credible – therefore more valuable –

than paid advertising. Their clients, consistent with the business people interviewed for this study, also saw more value in editorial content than advertisements, public practitioners said.

Despite some doubt about media accuracy and balance, the essence of belief in the enhanced credibility of independent media coverage over advertising seems to prevail among those in public relations. For many practitioners, the reality of their jobs remains all about getting their stories placed in the independent news media. As one practitioner said, "I think that you can consider any good hit a victory."

Limitations and future research

The relatively small number of public relations and business professionals interviewed for this study (10 of each) presents a limitation common to qualitative research of this type. The generalizability of these findings must be viewed in that context. However, the diverse backgrounds of the public relations practitioners and the industries represented by the business people, coupled with the consistency of viewpoint, lend support for consideration of this study as part of a broader assessment of the changing role of media in society and media relations in the public relations profession.

The results of this research point to a divergence between the results of experimental studies and real-world perceptions of public relations and business professionals. Consequently, further research building on this qualitative study could involve a survey of a larger number of public relations practitioners and business people on their perceptions of media credibility to see if the views presented by those in this study are more widespread. The difference between experimental findings and this research may also suggest exploration of different experimental methods to gain a better understanding of issues around perceived credibility of media.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

So, *does* media coverage matter? Based on the respondents in this study, the answer appears to be "yes, but." Communicating messages via independent news media that go through an editorial process of review and selection of content continues to be viewed to some degree as a valuable public relations practice by practitioners and business people because of perceived enhanced credibility. However, both groups voice increasing doubts about news media credibility. They express both personal skepticism as well as a growing cynicism among the general public, a trend supported by recent surveys. The revealing comments of both PR and business professionals may help explain the results of experimental studies and serve as a harbinger of changing beliefs.

Importantly, public relations practitioners said their clients perceived unique and incremental value from media coverage over advertisements. This indicates that communicators and their organizations seeking to reach and influence a business audience will benefit from utilizing media coverage as one dimension of their overall

strategy.

Despite the results of academic experiments, the continued perceptions of enhanced credibility among PR professionals and business people, who are often clients and a target audience, supports the role of media coverage as part of a communication plan. Perhaps the definition of “media” needs to be reconsidered beyond “news media” when analyzing endorsement effects. In today’s communication landscape, more media formats and forums exist – many of them online – and many may offer an implied endorsement effect to different audiences. Influential effects may actually come from multiple media types, not just the news media. Consequently, a multifaceted approach to communication will continue to produce the most successful and effective results for public relations professionals and their clients. Rather than limiting or diminishing the role and value of public relations, this expanded idea of third-party endorsement may require practitioners to develop new, more sophisticated communication strategies using a variety of media channels.

The long-time role of public relations to pitch and secure story placements in media such as newspapers, magazines, and trade journals is likely to continue, but it is changing. As perceptions of media credibility change, public relations practitioners will need to adapt their methods to maximize impact. With the ongoing evolution of media channels to include various social and other online forums that may blur the line between independent and controlled media, the subject of source credibility will only grow in importance for the public relations profession.

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