Exploring the Comparative Communications Effectiveness of Advertising and Public Relations: A Replication and Extension of Prior Experiments

Don W. Stacks and David Michaelson

The comparative effectiveness of public relations compared to advertising has long been controversial. This study reviews a pilot and initial experimental study of the effect of public relations versus advertising and replicates and extends the research as the second part of a continuing body of research dedicated to comparing the communications effectiveness of these communications methods. The results once again failed to establish an advantage of advertising over public relations. Discussion focused on extending the research to different settings and message control.

BACKGROUND

What is the impact of public relations when compared to advertising? Is the impact greater? Is it the same? How do these forms of communication interact? Trying to answer these questions are more difficult than might be imagined. As Michaelson and Stacks (2007) point out, “It has long been held by public relations practitioners that public relations media placement have a relative value advantage over advertising when the messages employed by both are similar” (p. 3). The “claim” of relative value advantage of one form of communication over another is simple and ranges from self-reported public relations multipliers that range from 2.5 to 8.0 times that of equivalent advertising (Weiner & Bartholomew, 2006) as well as claims of the relative superiority of advertising.

These claims, however, have never been upheld under a rigorous experimental design that isolates the variables of interest in a programmatic and tightly-controlled study. In fact, the only truly experimental studies that address this question (Michaelson & Stacks, 2004, 2006), failed to find the existence of any multiplier effect to either public relations or advertising. While the results based on the rigorous design of the studies were not questioned, the authors have been criticized for a “lack of reality” in the experiments by communications professionals when presenting the results in professional settings (e.g., Michaelson & Stacks, 2004; Stacks, 2007). This concern with a “lack of reality” among communications professionals was based on the format used to expose respondents to test materials.

This study seeks to answer that criticism and further examine where, if at all, public relations or advertising multipliers ought to be found. We begin by quickly

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reviewing three issues with previous research: methodological, experimental, and theoretical.

ISSUES WITH PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In 2007, Michaelson and Stacks argued that a close examination of extant literature revealed three prevailing issues that impact on the reliability and validity of published “multiplier effect” studies. The most prominent of these issues is a widely held concern in the general body of public relations research -- the lack of truly experimental research designs. Pavlik (1985) and Stacks (2002) noted that the vast majority of public relations research has been limited to case study, content analysis, and survey methodology. The extant literature focusing on the multiplier effect has suffered from not only methodological issues and lack of experimental designs, but also from a lack of a theoretical perspective. Research needs to be based on a systematic program starting from a hypothetical-deductive theoretical approach which begins with defining the variables, moves to establishing their absence or presence and, if established, moves on to the specification of antecedent conditions and finally to variance accounted for (c.f., Dubin, 1974).

Methodological Issues

How a research study is conducted influences the type of results and how those results can be generalized. Most public relations research supporting the existence of a multiplier has been anecdotal (e.g., Ivison, 1995; Ruff, 1968). Research that has not been supportive of the multiplier effect has originated from more rigorous social science-type research (e.g., Cameron, 1994; Hallahan, 1999; Jo, 2004; Loda & Carrick, 2005; Schmidt & Hitchon, 1999; Shuumann, Hathcote & West, 1991; Straughan, Bleske & Zhao, 1996; van Reijmersdal, Neijens & Smit, 2005). This research, while more controlled, almost all employed student-based studies that projected use of advertisements or editorial commentary with little reporting of actual media use by respondents. Ivison and Ruff’s findings of a multiplier, although anecdotal in nature, at least focused on actual users – customers – of the public relations and advertising media examined.

Experimental Issues

Michaelson and Stacks (2007) point out three requirements for research to be “truly experimental” (c.f., Campbell & Stanley, 1955; Kerlinger & Lee, 2000).

- First, the study must be tightly controlled where extraneous effects (variables) can be ruled out.
- Second, study participants must be randomly assigned to all experimental treatment conditions.
Third, there must be control cell(s) where randomly assigned participants do not receive a particular treatment or no treatment at all.

They point out that most existing social scientific-oriented multiplier effect studies have met the first two requirements, but have been limited by the failure to include treatment control conditions. Further, much of the current body of research has not been part of a larger programmatic study that has systematically manipulated media and control over messages in attempting to find the elusive multiplier effect or predict its effect on truly behavioral outcomes as well as the attitudinal prerequisites that influence behavior.

Theoretical Issues

Finally, there has been little theoretical underpinning to the existence of a multiplier effect. Except for studies by Cameron (1994) and Hallahan (1999), there has been little theoretical research with the vast majority of research done in isolation from a larger theoretical position. The research that does take a theoretical approach comes from the integrated marketing communications (IMC) perspective, where the public relations publicity function of establishing how editorial coverage establishes an increase in source credibility over the paid and placed advertising function.

This “third-party endorsement” approach argues that the media who report on an event, product, or concept establish a degree of credibility above and beyond that possible when the backer of the story is known. Hence, it is argued that journalistic credibility is higher than paid advertisement because the journalist is an objective and trustworthy source of information, possibly providing a balanced coverage of the object’s strengths and weaknesses. Third-party endorsement reflects what contemporary public relations serves to do, although research to date has focused primarily on the professional rather than the interpersonal, focusing on targeting the media rather than as a persuasive strategy for influencing an intended consumer audience.

Stacks (2007), when presenting the International Public Relations Association’s “Inaugural Thought Leadership” lecture in Brussels, Belgium, introduced a number of factors that could influence the existence of a multiplier as a two-dimensional matrix (see Table 1). In this conceptualization multiplier effect ranged from low to high and was modified by factors such as situation (type of communications practiced), exposure (stand alone or cluttered), frequency (number of exposures), messaging (specific target audience [e.g., employees, NGOs] to general public), and control (whether the message is planned or unplanned – proactive or reactive).
Table 1. Assumptions Influencing a Communications Multiplier (Stacks, 2007)

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*Messaging associated with specifically targeted (employees, NGOs, reporters) audiences or general publics

Michaelson and Stacks (2007) note that contemporary media theory (23% of customers, 2007) suggests that effectiveness relies more on establishing a relationship between source (as an “outtake” variable, Stacks, 2006) and intended customer. This relationship takes the form of a mediated “word of mouth” marketing approach where the credibility of the source (the media in which the story occurs) establishes a bridgehead for the object being promoted. Michaelson and Stacks also go on to suggest that a second interpersonal variable, “homophily” (McCroskey, Richmond & Daley, 1975) has an impact on the intended consumer. They define homophily as perceived similarity between the media source and the intended consumer and further divide the variable into two classes – attitudinal homophily, how similar others’ thinking is to self, and behavioral homophily, or how similar others’ behaviors are similar to self.

INITIAL STUDIES

Michaelson and Stacks (2006) report the findings of a pilot and initial study of the multiplier effect. A quick review of the methodology and results help to better understand the current study, especially in regard to certain criticisms aimed at each.

Pilot Study

The pilot study tested the impact of publications as a multiplier compared to three different media: print advertisement, radio advertisement, and webpage advertisement. Four different products were employed in an attempt to answer how important was media type to decisions to purchase a product as a study in initial branding under the assumption that editorial copy would be more effective (have a multiplicative effect) than
the other media forms, which were clearly advertisements. In addition to the experimental conditions, a control group was added that received no exposure to any message, establishing a baseline against which not only differences between media could be explicated, but also to gauge the effectiveness of all media presentations against none.

A key part of the study was an effort to rule out the effects of known or existing brands on responses. To address this, three products were created including a “new” brand of bottled water that was used as the product of interest. The outcome variables of interest were those found in most branding studies: message recall, message credibility, product rating, and product interest. All were operationalized as single-item indicators on a scale ranging from 1 to 5.

Study participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at a large southeastern university and were randomly assigned one of five conditions – four experimental conditions reflecting the message’s media type and one control condition. The experimental materials were professionally written and designed with participants’ exposure in the experimental conditions counter-balanced to ensure that no experimental product was emphasized over the others. Students were provided printed packets for the print media including a webpage and listened to a radio advertisement. They were given as much time as needed to complete the measures, but were not allowed to go back and view or listen to the stimulus materials. Control participants received the measures without exposure to any media type. The results failed to differentiate any media type from the other. In other words, there was no “effect,” multiplicative or otherwise between experimental conditions or from the control group.

There are several possible explanations for the lack of results:

- First, sample size was small, but testing found that the condition sizes were large enough to detect a medium effect.
- Second, there could have been a problem with the outcome measures, but since they were single-item measures there was no way to establish measure reliability and validity.
- Third, no indices of theoretical interest were included in the study – it falls into that class of research that was interested in the moment and not programmatic.
- Fourth, the test materials may not been adequate to distinguish between the advertising and editorial presentations.

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1 This pilot study was conducted prior to the negative stories surrounding the environmental impact of bottled water.
2 The study’s pre-established a priori level of significance was set at 95% or the probability of error in the results could be no more than 5%.
Finally, it was overly complex. A good experiment is simple and one experiment in the program builds on the next.

All these “mistakes” were discussed when the pilot was presented at the 2004 Measurement Summit held at the University of New Hampshire and became the foundation against which the first truly experimental study was conducted.

**Study One**

Responding to criticism of the pilot study, a second study was conducted (Michaelson & Stacks, 2006). This study sought to establish a theoretical program of research that was theoretically and methodologically appropriate for the study’s objectives and tested at least one end of Stacks’ (2007) matrix (see Table 1). To conduct the study within theoretical parameters, a simple, stand alone exposure to either a print public relations editorial stimulus or a print advertisement was deemed most appropriate (see Figure 1).

Control of media type, as well as exposure is a trade-off with “real world” exposure and provides an uncontaminated source of exposure. There was concern that an existing brand or product preferences might add error to the study through preconceived perceptions of the product. A new “product” was created in a brand stream that had enough new products to be seriously introduced and yet which potential participants would be product familiar. The product created was “Zip Chips”. “Zip Chips” was positioned as a snack chip with no calories and no sodium that was promoted along with the tagline “Nothing But Taste”. This eliminated bias based on brand, product, dietary preferences or packaging. Two test stimuli were created and vetted by professionals as something that might appear in the *New York Times*, a newspaper chosen for both its credibility and national brand. These stimuli included editorial content that was maximized in its ability to persuade, and an advertisement that was created by an award-winning creative consultant.
Study One Stimulus Materials

![Image of Zip chips bag](image)

Nothing But Taste

All Zip Chips were zipped all the calories, salt and fat out of our chips...
The method employed a true experimental design. Participants were recruited to participate in the study in a monadic sampling design. The sample consisted of 351 adults who read a newspaper at least weekly from in a field interview process at five malls located across the continental United States (Baltimore MD; Duluth GA; West Dundee IL (Chicago); Fort Worth TX and Santa Ana CA) by a professional interviewing firm. Three hundred participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions (PR editorial/print Ad) and 51 were assigned to a “no stimulus” control group. The study, therefore, met at least two of the authors’ concerns regarding method and participants. The control group provided the study an ability to compare the effectiveness of both stimuli and, at the same time provide indices of experimental validity.
Because the authors were concerned about the reliability and validity of the dependent measures employed, several outcome variables were created. First, because the study involved a new and unique branding situation, the first set of variables focused on the ethos or believability or trust in the product, along with authoritativeness (respect, intelligence, information) and character (honesty, reputation, pleasantness or goodness) dimensions (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). The second measure focused on perceived homophily, which measured the similarity between a source and an individual as a second measure of third-party endorsement and was developed along two dimensions suggested by organizational literature (McCroskey, Richmond & Daley, 1974). As discussed earlier, the study employed measures of attitudinal homophily and behavioral homophily along a 5-point Likert-like measure on a strongly agree to strongly disagree continuum. Both sets of dependent measures were submitted to factor analysis, resulting in two two-factor variables that reflected the intended study outcomes. When submitted to Cronbach’s alpha reliability analysis, all four measures yielded reliability coefficients of .90 or higher. Thus, the measures were deemed valid and reliable indices of participant evaluations of the stimuli materials. Additionally, two regularly employed marketing communication branding measures were employed – product awareness and purchase intent.

The data were submitted for analysis using the SPSS 14.0 statistical package. A priori significance was set at 95% (probability of error less than 5%).

The resultant tests established that participants in both experimental conditions were significantly different from control group participants on all analyses. In general, differences were obtained between advertising and public relations conditions, but those differences were not what were expected. Both public relations and advertising stimuli were equally effective in promoting Zip Chips, although brand recognition was significantly higher than competitive brands tested against (Ruffles, Lays, Sun Chips, Fritos, and Doritos). Although statistically significant differences were not obtained, an examination of the differences between advertising and public relations stimuli showed that in almost all analyses the exposure to public relations led to slightly higher scores on exposure, believability, awareness, brand preference or purchase interest. Those exposed to the public relations stimuli showed less variance in overall purchase interest than those exposed to the advertisement. One significant difference was obtained. Participants exposed to the public relations stimulus were more homophilous with the product than their advertising counterparts.

Consequently, we concluded that the “multiplier effect” could not be supported as a universal concept, at least in the case of an initial branding campaign. Presentation of the findings at several meetings produced a number of comments ranging from “these findings will kill public relations” to “the study really isn’t a real test of the power of public relations in the real world.” While we dismissed the first type objection, we freely admitted that the study was not meant to be “real world.” Instead, it was an attempt to isolate what should be a multiplier effect in a “best of all cases” situation – highly controlled message content and no competing messages in a “campaign” that was

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3 Copies of the dependent measures are available from the authors.
promoting a health-sensitive alternative product. Indeed, it was the first step of many that would need to be conducted to first find if the multiplier effect exists and then, if obtained, how it affected the promotional campaign. Branding, in the sense that it is either what Grunig and Hunt (1974) identify as either press agentry or public relations approaches to public relations, was the simplest test of effect and it was not obtained.

Answering the second objection is more difficult. Seldom does a print advertisement or a print public relations editorial endorsement occur in isolation, as dictated by the first testing step. It could very well be that when exposed to stimuli, there is an additive effect of similar concepts boosting the credibility and homophily of the promotional object (a product in our studies thus far). In addition, there is a possibility that both editorial content and advertisement could be observed in a single outlet – carefully paying for an advertisement when knowing that positive editorial endorsement will occur, although probably quite rare, might be indicative of a multiplicative or additive effect where multiple exposure through the advertisement leads to better retention of the information presented in the editorial, thus producing a concept-boost effect (e.g., Tannenbaum & Norris, 1965; Tannenbaum, 1966; Tannenbaum, Mccauley, & Norris, 1966).

Study Two

Thus, Study One was extended both conceptually and methodologically in a second, follow-up study employing the same stimuli and outcome variables in a field experiment.

Study Two's specifically addressed the following three research questions:

RQ₁: Does editorial coverage and advertising perform differently on key measures of:
   RQ₁a: Credibility of and homophily of message?
   RQ₁b: Brand knowledge?
   RQ₁c: Brand image and attributes?
   RQ₁d: Brand purchase intent or interest?

RQ₂: If differences do exist, do they support the concept that the performance of public relations efforts is greater than advertising or vice versa?

RQ₃: Does the presence of both the public relations editorial endorsement and the advertisement impact on perceptions of the product?
   RQ₃a: If so, is the effect additive or multiplicative?

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Study Two sought to replicate and extend Study One. Consequently, the stimuli and dependent measures did not change. What did change was that the study took into account media comparisons to better understand the relationship between media and outcome; more “real world” stimulus packages, complete with competing stories; the
potential for a combination of advertisement and editorial impact on participant evaluation and reaction to the stimuli. Hence, we created a more complex study, one that allowed for multiple comparisons while extending the findings of the first study.

The experimental stimuli were created as full page four-color spreads of pages two and three of the Wednesday “Dining Section” of the New York Times. As with the first study, the New York Times was chosen for its exposure and reputation. Three different stimulus packages were created with the help of a professional public relations agency:

- The first experimental condition exposed participants to the public relations editorial stimulus only (n = 150).
- The second experimental condition exposed participants to the advertisement stimulus only (n = 150). These two conditions replicated and extended Study One and were used to test the multiplicative effect.
- A third experimental condition (n = 150) exposed participants to both the editorial and advertisement in the same spread (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows the placement of both messages; in the editorial only condition the advertisement was replaced with an advertisement for drinking water and in the advertisement only condition, a different story replaced the Zip Chips story. This condition extended the study to answer the question of additive effects.

Two offset control groups were employed. Participants randomly assigned to the first control group received no exposure to any experimental stimuli, completed the dependent measures and served as a baseline against which to test for experimental manipulation (n = 151). The second control group simply completed questions regarding Zip Chip awareness.

Execution of the study was similar to Study One. The study employed monadic data collection from adult newspaper readers who self-reported reading a newspaper at least weekly. A professional interviewing company interviewed 651 participants at malls in five locations across the continental United States (Baltimore, MD; Duluth, GA; West Dundee, IL, in the Chicago area; Fort Worth, TX; and Santa Ana, CA, in the Los Angeles area). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, exposed or not exposed to the stimulus materials and then completed the dependent measures or awareness question.
RESULTS

As in the earlier studies (pilot and Study One), an initial test found the manipulations to be significantly different from the control group across all analyses. In general, we found, as in Study One, that there are differences between advertising and editorial commentary, but as in this earlier study, these differences are not the difference expected.

What we found was that both the editorial and the advertisement were equally effective in promoting the product, but no statistically significant differences existed between the editorial and the advertisement across measures of awareness, information, intent to purchase, and product credibility.

After exposure to the test advertisement and the test editorial in full editorial context, Zip Chips brand recognition was significantly higher (t-scores varied from 12.73 to 10.7, significant at the p < .05 level) than five competitors that were all major national brands.\(^4\) However, there was no statistically significant difference between the

\(^4\) Ruffles, Lays, Sun Chips, Fritos, Doritos
advertisement and the editorial for brand awareness (see Figure 3). There was significantly greater awareness than in the control group and in the group exposed to test materials where no product information appeared (t-scores ranged from 774 to 9.98, significant at p<.05), thereby confirming the experimental manipulation of the research design.

![Figure 3](image)

In addition to this lack of statistical difference on awareness, there was also no statistically significant difference between the group exposed only to the advertising, the group exposed only to the editorial and the group exposed to both the advertising and the editorial on the overall believability of the information (see Figure 4). In each instance where exposure to Zip Chips communications occurred, however, the level of believability was significantly higher than it was for the group that was not exposed to product messages (t-scores ranged from 2.66 to 3.70, all significant at p < .05).

![Figure 4](image)
We also found there was no statistically significant difference in purchase interest or between those exposed to the advertising, those exposed to the editorial or those exposed to the advertising and editorial (see Figure 5). However, those reading the editorial (with or without the presence of an advertisement) showed less variance in overall purchase interest.

![Figure 5: Zip Chip Purchase Intent](image)

While purchase intent did not vary, there was some variation in overall preference for the Zip Chips brand based on type of exposure. Those exposed to editorial content, with or without the presence of an advertisement had a directionally higher brand preference than those exposed only to advertising. Exposure to advertising only yielded a brand preference that was similar to those who were not exposed to any Zip Chips communication (see figure 6).

![Figure 6: Zip Chip Brand Preference](image)

We did find one other difference that is significant – those reading the editorial, with or without exposure to the advertising, saw the product more closely related to their
lifestyles than those reading the advertising and this appeared to be related to higher levels of overall knowledge about the product from exposure to the editorial (see Figure 7).

However, even with these differences (significant and directional), we still failed to find a “multiplier effect.” This occurred even though we had the perfect, positive editorial review of our product.

Based on these findings, we have addressed the research questions posed earlier this paper.

**RQ₁:** Does editorial coverage and advertising perform differently on key measures of:

**RQ₁a:** Credibility of and homophily of message?
Overall message credibility and believability is the same for advertising and for editorial (see figure 4. However homophily of message is consistently stronger for editorial content (see figure 7).

**RQ₁b:** Brand knowledge?
Overall brand knowledge is consistent when exposed to advertising or to editorial content (see figure 7).

**RQ₁c:** Brand image and attributes?
Brand image and attribute is consistent when exposed to advertising or to editorial content (see figure 6).

**RQ₁d:** Brand purchase intent or interest?
Brand purchase intent remains the same regardless of the type of exposure – advertising, editorial or advertising with editorial. However, overall brand preference appears directionally higher based on any form
of editorial exposure (see figure 5).

**RQ2:** If differences do exist, do they support the concept that the performance of public relations efforts is greater than advertising?

Even though differences exist between the overall effects of advertising and editorial exposure, the overall impact on consumer attitudes and behavior are similar and do not support a multiplier effect for an editorial format (see figures 3-6).

**RQ3:** Does the presence of both the public relations editorial endorsement and the advertisement impact on perceptions of the product?

The presence of both forms of communication, advertising and editorial, does not appear to have any impact above and beyond that of a single form of communication. However, there is evidence that suggests that exposure to editorial content can provide an increased propensity by the reader to relate positively to the product (homophily) and also have higher levels of product knowledge. This higher level of knowledge generated by editorial content is an essential element of effective marketing communications.

**RQ3a:** If so, is the effect additive or multiplicative?

The presence of both advertising and editorial does not appear additive or multiplicative when compared to either advertising or editorial on its own.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study reaffirm earlier findings that for an initial branding campaign, the relative value of public relations and advertising is similar. While some have decried this as a negative, we believe that it reflects the actual value that public relations can offer to an unknown product or client and clearly argues that public relations as part of the marketing mix should be considered equal to and not subservient to advertising. Public relations also offers some specific benefits that complement advertising and other forms of marketing communications.

While we found no major differences between public relations and advertising on overall communications impact, public relations proved to have a greater influence on purchasers concept of closeness of the brand to self and friends. Public relations also provided the additional knowledge needed to make purchase decisions, albeit not significantly different from advertising. The addition of an advertisement with editorial content did not provide additional impact beyond editorial content alone. At the same time, the presence of both forms of communication did not adversely effect consumer perceptions of the product nor did it significantly increase purchase intent.

**Theoretical Implications**

If we look at the theoretical range of effect pointed out earlier (see Table 1), this study focused on communication that based on five theoretical factors should produce the lowest multiplier. If that multiplier is 1:1, then public relations should be considered

...in the marketing mix as a strategic rather than tactical tool. As the editorial content changes from branding to messaging, a multiplier effect should be obtained; that is, as the situation allows for increased exposure within the media type with a planned increase in information provided to recipients in a controlled environment where the message and channel are manipulated then we should expect public relations value to increase. Further, in situations where conflict or crisis occurs, advertising should decrease its value as being seen as “advertising,” while public relations offers rational messaging over time (c.f., social judgment theory; Sherif, Sherif & Nebergal, 1965).

Clearly, the findings reaffirm that at the most basic level of a new product promotion, public relations does provide several advantages, although those advantages are not what might be expected. From a theoretical point of view, this study has advanced what we know of the relative value comparisons in a more “cluttered” and “real world” environment. Taking into account the criticisms of the pilot and Study One, we created an experimental manipulation that was equivalent to what might be found in any major daily newspaper. The impact of reading a spread with competing stories – noise if you are so inclined to see it – did have some impact. This should be expected as the program of research at the initial branding stage of an unknown and not particularly exciting product (“Zip Chips” versus some “hot” product – iPhone, for instance) still provided superior outcomes when compared against both control groups.

What is theoretically interesting is the lack of an additive function when combining an advertisement with editorial content. It does follow that multiple exposures to a new product should enhance product credibility and belief, brand awareness, and intent to purchase. Indeed, looking at Figure 7, it is clear that the addition of an advertisement to an editorial content does not create a feeling of “affinity” or “group awareness” that editorial content alone accomplishes. Further, the practice of having both an advertisement and editorial content on the same two page spread did not prove detrimental and may, given the right context and product actually provide an additive effect. Future research among other products that have more “pizzazz” or high level of consumer appeal might explore that potential.

Pragmatic Implications

What are the practical or pragmatic implications of this study and the program of research it is part? We believe that there at least three major implications. First, it is apparent that public relations practitioners – again with the caveat that this study focused initial branding in a marketing milieu – should avoid making value promises that what it can do will yield a multiple of X-times the value of advertising. In some ways, this claim is as fraudulent as claiming that advertising equivalency value reflects the true circulation or reach of a particular media. The key words today are transparency and honesty. In the past there was no extant research that clearly tested for a multiplier effect for either public relations or advertising, thus making such claims without caveats based on lack of data. Now that data that that has been carefully examined in the best possible context, it shows that while there are several advantages to editorial content over advertising, those differences are not what we would have expected. That expectation was a greater impact by editorial content, an expectation that was not
Second, the results of the pilot and first two studies show that advertising and public relations possess more or less equal value, hence public relations in the marketing mix needs to be reexamined for its strategic value. In other words, public relations can now be said to be equal to advertising in its overall marketing efficacy and should have an equal place at the table in both the marketing and corporate milieus. This clearly extends the work of Grunig et al., (c.f., Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Toth, 2007) from the corporate sector to the marketing-based sectors and may actually provide additional strategic value to what the corporate communications executive can offer his or her CEO.

Third, and perhaps more important than initially thought, the impact of having advertising and editorial copy in the same publication, indeed on the same spread, does not disadvantage the campaign. It does not particularly enhance it, but given the nature of the product employed here for experimental purposes there may be an advantage to having both on the same page – at least with potential consumers. It may be that journalists perceive such practice as buying coverage, but that potential reaction, too, has never actually been tested in a rigorous, controlled environment.

Thus, this study has advanced the body of knowledge in terms of strategic decision making in the initial branding context from single stand alone copy to more realistic cluttered exposure. It replicated earlier research and addressed a possible additive effect of combined advertising and public relations strategy. Suggestions for future research in this area should focus on the type of product being promoted and moving away from unknown to known products or brands.

Limitations

All research has limitations. This study was conceived as a field experiment with exacting controls placed on participants and stimuli employing real people who actually exposed themselves regularly to the channel employed (newspaper). All materials were vigorously reviewed and commented on by professionals who vetted the content – even objecting in several cases where source attributions and writing style of the test materials were unrealistic. The study also tested promotional messages on a product that clearly lacks high levels of consumer excitement and product interest. This was done purposefully and then inserted in a mock New York Times food section spread that reflected in layout and content the actual publication.

Even though editorial and advertisement placement was optimized, participants were not told to look for anything specific. They were instructed to just read the spread in as much time as needed. At the conclusion of their review, these respondents completed the self-administered test materials.

What was learned in these three research phases is that more research is needed. The research needs to focus not only in looking for that elusive multiplier, but also focusing on a possible additive effect of editorial content and advertising. Additional
research also needs to explore the ramifications of editorial content and advertising on the buying public and those who serve as “third party endorsers” endorsing the key messages provided by public relations practitioners. This research is particularly important in light of the measurable decrease in media credibility over the past decade (News Consumption and Believability Study, 2008, p. 59). Such research is currently in the planning stages.

Summary

The key lesson from this research is that higher levels of credibility assigned to editorial content “a priori” is no longer a universally valid concept. While this hypothesis may be valid in some yet to be tested instances, we now know that it is not a universal concept that is valid in every instance. Our finding of a lack of a “multiple” of credibility and persuasion for editorial content appears to be closely related to the steady decrease in overall credibility of print media among the general public over the past decade (c.f., News Consumption and Believability Study, 2008). However, the fact still remains that advertising and editorial content are at parity in many respects in their ability to affect consumer attitudes on new product introductions.

The challenge for public relations professionals is applying this perspective in developing communications programs. Public relations activities play a unique role in the communications process and it differs considerably from advertising. While both forms of communication serve a similar role in building awareness, public relations appears to have greater efficacy in two critical areas: building a relationship (homophily) with the consumer and providing knowledge about the product under consideration. The increased effectiveness in each of these areas is, at best, incremental. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that advertising and public relations are well matched in working with each other in the overall communications cycle of building awareness, conveying knowledge and developing relevance that eventually can lead to purchase interest or intent.
References


www.instituteforpr.org/ipr_info/dictionary_public_relations/.


