

PR Pushed Harder To Demonstrate Bottom-Line Value

With budgets slashed to the bone in a tough economy, business clients, large and small, are pushing public relations experts harder and harder to demonstrate bottom-line value.

Can it be done?

A donation of \$20,000 in Christmas gifts for needy families spotlighted on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* produced \$13 million in holiday sales and a fivefold increase in perceptions that Sears, Roebuck and Co. was a neighborhood asset.

Says who and how did they prove it?

Delahaye Medialink, a professional measurement vendor, reported the findings, which included a 59% to 70% increase in expressed intent to shop at Sears and a 39% jump in estimated spending levels per shopper. Their proof was in the surveys, utilized to gauge public attitude before and after Oprah's show.

That was in December, 2000. Today's push to prove value is even greater.

In the past, three methods were judged valid when measuring the effectiveness of a PR media campaign - article counts, audience impressions and ad value equivalency.

Any one, or all three, can be deceptive without the benefit of analysis.

Last year, Habitat for Humanity, averaged 50,000 press clippings per month, as reported by *PR Intelligence Report*, August 2001. However, a careful scrutiny of the media coverage and public attitudes revealed a mis-focus, with an over-emphasis on volunteer opportunities, while poverty housing suffered with too scanty coverage.

Fortunately, all was not lost. The tracking led to a new strategy to spotlight

families in low-income housing, plus a 10% boost in the public relations budget to get the job done.

“Audience impressions” and “ad value equivalency” are two other methods of PR measurement. The first refers to the circulation and viewing-audience or listening-audience numbers. The second is the dollar value of a story equivalent to what the particular media would charge for an ad of the same size or column inches. In the case of radio and television, the dollar value of the story is equivalent to cost for air time.

Both tools prove that numbers out of context can be deceiving.

For example, neither measures whether the right eyeballs or targeted ears are being reached, nor do the ad rates necessarily reflect the size or reach of the audience.

In fact, the highest billing radio station in the country does not have the largest audience, according to Bruce Jeffries-Fox, a former chief executive vice president of communications for the research firm InsightFarm.

“Its ad rates are a result of the station’s image and the quality of the audience that it reaches,” he reported in *Media Relations Report*, October 2001.

For Norwalk area businesses, one question that arises could be which radio station represents the best target for me? WCBS News Radio 88 out of New York, with roughly two million listeners, of which over 60,000 are in Fairfield County or a popular regional radio station such as WEBE out of Bridgeport, with 40,000 listeners?

A final example illustrates the trap of measuring output without regard to any environmental factors. The sixth largest cable operation in the nation was recently headlined in *The New York Times*. On July 25, 2002, Adelphia Communications racked up a front page photo in color, plus another in the business section. Besides the front page

story, the corporation was spotlighted in a 30 column inch sidebar article in the business section and another in the sports section, for a total of 143.5 column inches in a single day.

Not only were the number of eyeballs in the millions but at the open rate for advertising, the printed version of the New York regional edition alone was worth over \$140,000 in ad equivalency value.

Taken literally, without regard for context or analysis, the head honchos at Adelpia should have been ecstatic. Unfortunately not.

The headlines “Founder of Adelpia and 2 Sons Arrested” hint at the \$1 billion alleged looting of their company and the context in which this coverage must be analyzed.

In summary, output, with analysis, is a necessity if PR measurement is to go beyond the counting of the numbers into determining impact on consumer attitudes and behavior, and subsequently demonstrate bottom-line value.

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