

## Market Research and Effective Public Relations

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Visit the web site of almost any global public relations firm, and you'll find a commitment to market research. There's a reason. Good market research is critical to building and measuring effective public relations campaigns.

Most people know, of course, that opinion polls can be good ways of generating visibility. They provide news and interesting facts that can help draw media attention and get a brand or a message into the news.

But market research plays a much bigger role. It can be invaluable in uncovering the insights and understanding needed to come up with that big idea on which to rest a program. It can be used to develop and test messages, to make sure that they're as relevant and compelling as possible. It can be used to develop and test materials—that is, the speeches, brochures, Web copy, toolkits, advertisements, and the other collateral that can bring a campaign to life. And, of critical importance, it can be used to measure effectiveness.

**Finding the Big Idea.** The first place to use market research is to help generate ideas. The better we understand our audiences—who they are, what interests them, what motivates them—the more likely we are to come up with messages and programs that are both attention-getting and relevant.

Secondary research is usually the first step here—that is, compiling and distilling all the information already available. Frequently, our client's own market research departments can provide a great deal of this. Primary research can also be valuable, including focus groups and other sorts of interviews that give us a chance to truly listen to our audiences, as well as surveys to help us measure and compare.

For example, in developing programs to interest more young people in mathematics, a survey provided the central insight that the biggest barrier to greater interest in math was not that math was uninteresting or "uncool," but that math was not connected to something exciting that young people might want to do in the future. It was seen as interesting and necessary, but it was not connected to dreams and aspirations. We are now developing a program to leverage that insight. Similarly, in developing programs to increase consumers' willingness to seek and stick with treatments for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, research told us that one of the biggest barriers is the feeling of *failure* that often accompanies these treatments. Consumer are told again and

again to control blood pressure and cholesterol through exercise and diet, and being prescribed a medicine makes them feel they have failed. This, too, provided a central nugget that could lead to effective programs.

**Getting the Messages Right.** One of the first rules of communications is that you cannot say everything to everybody. You have to choose, and effective communications are often about repetition—repeating one key idea in as many places as possible.

Identifying that one key idea can be the difference between success and failure, and research can help identify it. Surveys can be used to identify the attributes of a product or program that are most appealing or interesting, or the arguments that are most persuasive. Focus groups can be used in a similar way, and they can also help us understand why people respond more positively to some messages than others.

In addition, even when our clients know already what messages they want emphasized, research can help us emphasize them in the right way. We had one client, for example, who told us they wanted a campaign to deliver a message that their products are healthy. When we conducted research to explore how to communicate this to their customers, however, we learned that “healthy” had a different meaning for their customers than it did for the client. Our client had assumed that “healthy” meant nutritious. For their customers, however, “healthy” had more to do with “freshness” than nutrition. At the end, the message was indeed that the products were healthy, but the way we illustrated this message changed entirely.

**Getting the Materials Right.** A brochure or poster or Web site can look great at the office, but consumers do not always react to things the way we hope or intend. Particularly when the client’s investment in materials is substantial, research is a good way to make sure materials draw attention, communicate clearly, and deliver the right messages.

In addition, new on-line technologies make using research to test materials faster and less expensive than ever, and in more and more places around the world. Particularly in B2B campaigns, where our target audiences often have high-speed Internet access at work, taking the time to have a small sample look at materials and react to them—do they like them? would they read them? what is their main point? are they believable? what needs to be improved or changed?—can make an enormous difference, not only in the effectiveness of the materials, but in building our clients’ confidence that they get the job done right.

**Getting Attention.** Of course, the most common way market research is used in public relations is to draw attention. A timely and topical survey can be news that drives media coverage, getting our client’s name or brand or issues more visibility.

The best surveys of this kind are short, easy to understand, and easy to explain, and are most likely to be created when the research firm and PR professionals work together to define the desired outcome (visibility for the brand? the category? the client?), then to develop a survey concept likely to drive the headlines we want, where we want them.

Here are some examples of some survey concepts that have successfully driven media coverage for our clients:

- A survey of international business travelers on their pet peeves (our goal was mention of the brand name);
- A survey of consumers on heart-healthy knowledge and behaviors (our goal was coverage of the importance of breakfast);
- A survey of marketing managers on the importance of quality data (our goal was mention in technology media of our client's name and software products);
- A survey of physicians on why their patients preferred a certain treatment (our goal was highlighting the benefits of that treatment in medical publications);
- A survey of CFOs on the burdens of Sarbanes-Oxley (our goal was positioning our client as an expert on this issue);
- A survey of migraine sufferers and their families on the impact of migraines on their lives (our goal was to generate media that drew attention to migraines and mentioned the brand in that context);
- A survey of young urban consumers on how they lived their live today (our goal was to give a well-known contact lens maker a platform for discussing their new lens);
- A survey of drivers on their behaviors behind the wheel (our goal was to help a major tire manufacturer get their product in the mainstream consumer press rather than the trade press).

**Measuring Success.** Finally, when a PR campaign is intended to create awareness or influence perceptions, research is a critical piece of the ROI puzzle. By designing carefully targeted research programs at the very beginning of a campaign, research can provide real data to measure whether awareness in fact increases, or perceptions in fact change.

Of course, as most public relations professionals know, market research can be costly. What they don't always know is how scalable it can be. It may not make sense to invest in large-scale quantitative surveys, but creative research agencies, experienced in public relations and communications research, can generally find ways to provide insights, testing, and measurement that fit within a campaign's budget.

Good ideas, effective implementation, and measurement. These are pillars of good public relations, and research enhances them all.