



# Sizing Up the Best Marketing Strategy

By Willy Gissen

**T**he nexus among public relations, advertising and the Internet presents a conundrum to most business owners. They must make critical strategic decisions about the best way to promote their firm and are bombarded by conflicting advice from marketing consultants, industry colleagues and vendors.

Business owners and CEOs from almost any field ask the same questions: Is public relations more effective than advertising? How does the Internet compare to other media such as newspapers, industry trade publications and radio or TV? Is it possible to accurately measure the impact of my promotional efforts?

All these questions may be condensed in one overall concern. What is the most efficient and economical way to promote my organization?

## Public Relations vs. Advertising

It is surprising how many new and even veteran business people are unaware of the parameters of the debate. Public relations, broadly defined, refers to unpaid publicity. It consists of news stories and articles evaluated and selected by editors for publication in newspapers, magazines, and on TV or radio. Publicity is generated through press releases, interviews and pitching reporters.

The competing method of promotion, advertising, allows the business owner to tailor the message, but publication costs may be prohibitive, especially in media with larger circulations.

PR is cited by some practitioners as up to 10 times more valuable than advertising because it is evaluated by a "neutral gatekeeper," the editor or reporter, who determines whether the item is newsworthy. Thus, readers know there is some sort of quality control before an article is published. Advertisements, on the other hand, tend to generate more skepticism among the public at large.

This viewpoint makes sense. Ask yourself what you pay more attention to: a display ad worth several thousands dollars or a small

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interesting news story on the same page, costing nothing?

One component of the debate about public relations vs. advertising concerns promotional strategy for the Internet. How effective are e-zines and blogs, for example, compared to print publications? What about Internet advertising such as banner ads? While the Internet is getting a lot of buzz, most owners are unsure about the general consensus regarding this medium.

My firm, Cut-It-Out Editing Inc., recently attempted to answer some of the above questions by conducting a survey about the value of public relations, different media formats, Internet publicity and advertising. It also included an open-ended item about measuring the impact of PR, a crucial issue for business owners. The survey generated some interesting results.

On one hand, it found the basic message about the effectiveness of PR is getting through to the business community at large. Only six percent of the respondents felt advertising was more important than public relations.

However, 47 percent felt the main value of public relations was visibility compared to only 41 percent who cited sales generation. In addition, key goals cited by public-relations specialists -- strategic planning and crisis management -- came in a distant third and fourth.

One particularly interesting finding concerned the value of the Internet. Despite the growth of this medium, a solid majority, 59 percent, felt Internet publications, such as e-zines and blogs, were either less valuable than print publications or not valuable at all.

One reason for this response may lie in a

current fault line in our society. Commentators today generally refer to the difference between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants."

Digital natives grew up with computers and the Internet already in existence and are comfortable with multi-purpose cell phones, text messaging and regularly visit websites such as MySpace and YouTube. Digital immigrants remember society without computers and are constantly trying to catch up. Most business owners today are immigrants, not natives.

Another major area addressed by the survey involved measuring the value of public relations. PR practitioners are constantly urging patience, because they know public relations works through a stream of publicity over time, and it is typically several months before the results of a PR program may be accurately measured. However, respondents to the survey cited more immediate feedback through sales leads, event attendance, follow-up contacts, sponsorships and donations.

## Conclusion

It seems the interrelationship between public relations, advertising and the Internet is still evolving in the business world. As more and more digital natives become business owners, the field of public relations may undergo a significant sea change. It would behoove business owners and PR practitioners alike to prepare for this occurrence.

*Willy Gissen is president of Cut-It-Out Editing, Inc., a public relations agency in Hartsdale. Reach him at [wgissen@cioediting.com](mailto:wgissen@cioediting.com). Complete poll results are available on the company website at [www.cioediting.com](http://www.cioediting.com).*

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