

Testing PR Messages

By

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Do you work with management to develop a set of messages and then develop various media campaigns to get that message out? Do you then follow up with media analysis to determine whether those messages appeared in the coverage you generated?

If so, good for you! You are doing a lot of things right.

But before you send these messages out, do you test them to determine whether your target audiences understand them? Do you find out if your target audiences find them persuasive?

I am astounded by how infrequently we in PR test our messages. Our colleagues in advertising have been doing this for years. They do research to understand what is likely to encourage a customer to use the product they represent, develop a set of messages and then test those messages to see which work best. Sometimes they do this in the context of an entire advertisement.

Why We Don't Test

The most frequent argument I get when I recommend testing messages is:

“We know what the message should be.”

However, I fear what these practitioners really know is what their internal or external clients want the message to be, or what they themselves think it should be. And unless the target audience is PR people working on this business, they almost certainly do not know what the message should be. They only think they know.

How to Test Messages

To find out whether you have the right message, you should consider the initial messages you develop as hypothetically being the most effective to encourage the target to act in a way that will help the organization achieve its goals.

Then you should test the message.

There are a number of ways to do this. In public relations, it frequently is useful to be able to modify messages as we test them. This enables us to build the strongest ones possible. I have done this in one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups. The one-on-one interviews are probably better, if the message is pretty far along. However, if your message is in an earlier stage of development, focus groups can be very useful for getting ideas and language out on the table.

Many practitioners object that their client doesn't have money for focus groups and interviews. Perhaps. But do they have money to throw away on a campaign that will not achieve any business goals because the message has no effect or even an undesirable effect on the target?

There are less expensive ways to at least get a reality check on a message. You might limit your interviews to about ten qualified prospects. If even that seems too much, you might approach ten customers and ask them what they think of the message. This second approach may not be the best, because customers already have an experience with the product and this might change how they perceive the message. Still, it is better than nothing.

How Not to Test Messages

What you should not do is talk to one or two potential or current customers. One of the challenges with most research is that we try to understand or predict the behavior of a population of people from the responses of a sample of that population. If these one or two people do not represent the entire population, you could get a misleading reading. If, on the other hand, you talk to ten people, and they tend to be saying the same thing, it is a reasonable indication that you are getting a reliable read. If all ten say something different, you need either to do more interviews until you start to get a consensus, or go back to the drawing board to develop another message.

Accountability

In our day to day work with our clients, whether we work in agencies or as consultants inside organizations, it is very easy to be driven by client requests to produce copy and materials. But as professionals, we owe it to our clients to make sure our efforts will help the organization achieve its business goals.

Testing messages is one way to ensure this is what we are doing.

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I work with organizations that are going through a change in strategic direction (merger, acquisition, building program, new product launch, change program) and that are concerned about what will happen with their relationships with key stakeholders (customers, employees, investors) if they send out the wrong, or

confusing, messages. After working with me they have a clear understanding of what their messages should be. I also provide them recommendations on other actions they can take to enhance their relationships with their stakeholders.

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