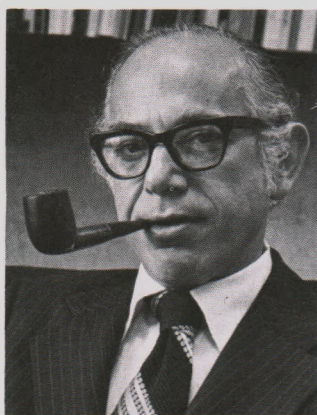


Advertising as a Public Relations Tool; A Distinction Without a Difference?

Elias Buchwald



Mr. Buchwald is president of Burson-Marsteller, the second largest public relations firm in the world. A graduate chemical engineer, Mr. Buchwald has 27 years of experience in technical, trade, financial and corporate public relations counseling. He is a frequent speaker and lecturer here and abroad on various public relations topics before educational groups, trade organizations and professional societies. He is a lecturer at the American Management Association, the New School, New York University and has spoken frequently before NBP and ABP magazine editor groups. He is a member of the Public Relations Society of America, the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and the Chemists' Club. He is a director of Marsteller Inc. and the Marsteller Foundation.

JOURNAL OF ADVERTISING, 1975, 4(1), 11-14

Advertising is a superb marketing tool. Almost every sound marketing communication plan is built around a solid advertising program. Sales promotion and public relations (especially publicity) programs are adjuncts of proven effectiveness. They supplement and complement the advertising and round out the communication package.

When you begin to develop a communication plan for a public relations problem rather than a marketing problem, however, the field is reversed. Communication techniques more commonly associated with public relations are usually employed and advertising is a supplementary, supportive function, if it is used at all.

None of us have looked hard enough at the questions implicit in the latter situation: Is there a role for advertising in public relations programs? What, precisely, is it?

I am more firmly convinced than ever that these questions are worth asking and worth the trouble of answering. Public relations may be one of today's great potential growth areas for advertising. Some headway has been made. But we have only scratched the surface. To reach the full potential we may have to develop a different kind of advertising, using different approaches and different applications of advertising skills. And it will require different sensitivities in both advertising and public relations.

First, I think, we must look at the difference between an advertising problem and a public relations problem. The key difference, to my mind, is the prevailing attitude of the audience.

If the assignment is to sell a product where no attitude has been formed — as with a new product or service — or where attitudes are not negative, it is basically an advertising problem. Advertising provides the means for telling potential buyers exactly what they should know about the product or service to influence them to buy it.

Public relations can help by working to develop a favorable attitude about the product and/or company. When the selling message comes through advertising

into an atmosphere of positive attitudes it is even more effective.

On the other hand, if the assignment is primarily to deal with attitudes, either because negative ones have already been formed or because there's a danger they will be, then it is basically a public relations problem.

Here's an example of what I mean. During the Vietnam War, Dow Chemical Company was widely criticized by anti-war factions for manufacturing napalm. Negative attitudes about the company were formed. These attitudes persisted even after Dow lost the government contract and stopped making napalm.

This is a public relations problem and a public relations program was developed to deal with it. The strategy was simple. Reverse the negative attitude by getting broad recognition for the contributions the company's policies and products are making to a better life. Communication activities included major articles in business and consumer print media, interviews on radio and television talk shows and public service films.

The program also included an ad campaign. Six full page spreads were developed, each discussing a human need, the solution, and in a very low key way, Dow's contribution. The ads were run in regional editions of major news magazines covering Dow's headquarters area around Midland, Michigan where Dow was getting most of its public pressure. This concentrated the effort very precisely on key target audiences.

The ads totally avoided brag and boast. Among the subjects: methods for controlling water pollution, preventing tuberculosis and measles, guarding against tree insects, recycling waste, purifying blood when a person's kidney fails.

The ads were reprinted in a booklet and mailed to thought leaders throughout the country — federal government officials, educators, prominent local officials, environmentalists, and so on. Response was strongly positive, giving Dow credit for its discussion of these critical subjects and its contributions to solving the problems.

That's one instance of dealing with a negative attitude. But, as I said, a public relations problem also exists where there is a danger of negative attitudes being formed. And advertising has a role here, too. We recently experienced shortages of many critical materials. Advertisers sensitive to the public relations aspects of the situation, did not stop advertising simply because they had no more product to sell. They tried to help their customers deal with the problems caused by the shortages.

Babcock and Wilcox was faced with another shortage situation — severe supply deficiencies in tubular steel products used in power generation, oil drilling, refining and chemical processing. Customers had generally negative attitudes. They had little understanding of what was causing the shortages, what was being done to reduce them and what they could do to get by in the meantime.

The company committed itself to a \$63 million expansion but these new facilities would not begin to come on stream until late 1974. As many companies have done under such conditions, Babcock and Wilcox might have taken a low-profile approach with its customers. However, the company's management decided this approach would make unhappy customers even more unhappy and hurt the company's long-term position as a major supplier. So they launched a consistent, candid information program.

It began with a letter from company management providing details on the supply situation and the company's program to expand its production capacity. This initial communication was followed every other month with a newsletter from B&W, reporting on progress in their expansion program, giving perspectives on the steel industry's main economic issues and factual tips and guidelines for interim measures which would enable their customers to continue their operations until the supply situation eased.

This same material, particularly the guidelines and tips, became the basis for a publicity and advertising campaign in publications serving B&W's customers and distributors. The ads were two-page spreads highlighting what B&W was doing to ease the shortage.

One of the basic strengths of advertising — total control of the content and placement of the message — gave this information program power and reach it could never achieve with publicity and newsletters alone.

Reaction of B&W's customers to this information program has been excellent. They are still hot happy about not getting the products they need, but at least they understand why the problem exists and what one of their major suppliers is doing to help alleviate it.

The gasoline shortage brought similar kinds of messages from oil companies and higher electricity costs are bringing these kinds of messages from utilities.

These are efforts to adapt the techniques and capabilities of advertising to public relations problems. They are examples that begin to point the way to the role of advertising in public relations.

The greatest untapped potential for advertising probably lies in the area of public relations which we call public affairs. We define public affairs as the area where that negative attitude is so strong it is leading to restrictive and unnecessary legislation or regulation.

These negative attitudes don't just happen if you have a sound, legitimate product or service. They result from the advocacy of an opposing point of view which is positioned "in the public interest." Right off the bat, you're on the other side of the fence — against the public interest, despite the merits of the product or service.

I don't think anyone in the communication business has been more successful than politicians in dealing with situations like this, where you have adversaries fanning negative attitudes. (If you don't

agree that politicians are in the communication business, I'll discuss that with you separately.)

The communication objective of a political candidate is a simple one — to win election. Politicians have been using (and perhaps invented) many public relations techniques long before the term public relations was coined — speeches, events, broadsides, editorial support. They have also used every advertising technique that became available to them and proved effective: direct mail, newspapers, billboards, radio and television.

Generally they are not hung up on the distinctions of communication technique. If they have a hang-up, it is usually money. But where the money has been available, advertising has proven it can help.

The important point here is that advertising moves from a function of stimulating a buyer to make a purchase to a function of developing an attitude in a voter which will move him or her to cast a favorable vote. Advertising has proven its techniques can be adapted to this purpose and make a significant contribution.

(There are worthwhile questions regarding real and imagined abuses of using advertising techniques to "package and sell" political candidates, but that seems more a question of funding and related ethics than a question of techniques and related ethics.)

In many ways public affairs problems are like political campaigns. They are concerned with an *attitude*. They are concerned with confronting an opposing and sometimes highly organized point of view, winning support for their position and in some cases even eliciting an action.

These areas more and more are the areas of public relations involvement. And this is the area where advertising has yet to find its role, alongside other communication techniques. It is not that advertising people haven't tried. There are many instances of using advertising programs to try to "sell" an idea. But there are few if any success stories. The reason, in my opinion, is a failure to account for the adversary. The result is a backlash which sharpens and reinforces negative attitudes.

The current controversy over the use of smoke-stack scrubbers by electric utilities is a good example of what happens, and what can happen, when two points of view collide on a public issue. The American Electric Power System is running a heavy schedule of advertisements telling the public of a report by the hearing examiners of the Environmental Protection Agency of Ohio which found, according to one ad, "stack gas scrubbers unreliable for major electric utility use." The ads go on to make a strong demand that the Federal EPA rescind regulations which make it necessary to install scrubbers.

On October 24, a full page ad in this series ran in The New York Times. In the same issue, an editorial by the Times decried the ad campaign, characterized it as "hysterical" and upheld the Federal EPA's point of view.

What is the potential for advertising in the public affairs area? Let's pose a not-so-hypothetical problem. A \$120 million market for an established product is being threatened by an erroneous belief that the product is a pollutant. Three states have already passed legislation banning the product. Eight others are considering it.

The bans are generally supported by the population — even though they impose personal hardships and inconveniences — because the people believe the bans will make a contribution to improving the environment. Investigations show that the scientific basis for this assumption is unsound. The ban will not improve the environment as it is intended.

The public relations assignment is to prevent passage of pending bans and to win repeal of the bans which have passed.

The key is the public attitude. How can the public be convinced of the facts to prevent further legislation. In addition, where legislation has already passed, how can public dissatisfaction with substitute products be leveraged into active opposition to the ban to win repeal?

That would be a simple problem to solve with advertising if you didn't also have these other considerations: The proponents of the ban are well organized and charged with the zeal of crusaders. The leadership of the proponents have placed their personal stature on the line. Legislators have aligned themselves by sponsoring and supporting the ban. A reversal could seriously affect their political reputations and aspirations. People tend to believe what public interest advocates tell them more readily than they believe what industry tells them.

It is possible to say that this is the same as a selling situation, where the competition is fighting just as hard as your client for share of market. But that would be a superficial analogy. I have never seen housewives picketing in the store in favor of one brand of soap over another.

Advertising recognizes and has learned to deal with emotional involvement in selling situations. But there is a whole different level of emotional involvement here. Changing or influencing public attitudes in such a situation is difficult and sensitive work. People who support the ban and fail to be dissuaded by reading a message against it can (and have been) stimulated to do just the opposite what you're trying to achieve. They can become active, which you wanted, but fight against you and your high powered campaign, which you don't want.

Some progress has been made in melding the capabilities and insights of the two disciplines, public relations and advertising to tackle problems such as the one I have posed. Attitudinal research techniques adapted and perfected by advertising people are extremely valuable in such a situation. It's the only way to tell what people's attitudes really are and why they hold them. So is pre-testing messages. Does it have the desired effect, or are there dangerous side

effects, downside risks, backlash?

Little work has been done in testing message delivery. We know there is a great deal of difference in the way a person receives a message as part of a newscast or newspaper story and how he receives it in a commercial announcement or print ad. But we don't know much about the nature of the difference. A much better understanding of that difference is essential to the development of the use of traditional forms of advertising in situations such as the one I have described.

One form of advertising has proven effective and has been used with a great deal of success, particularly in conjunction with the attitudinal research mentioned earlier. That is direct mail. Here the downside risks can be minimized by selectivity. You mail only to the kind of people who are likely to support your position. You don't activate latent opposition by sending messages to people who are likely to oppose you. But direct mail is expensive and it takes time.

In the closing days of a political campaign there is a crescendo of activity. Speeches and interviews by the candidate and his supporters, hand bills passed out on the corners, telephone calls to voters in their homes, radio, television and newspaper advertising.

Today, when a vote on an important public issue is coming to the floor of a state legislature, we can use speeches, interviews and telephone calls to mobilize an outpouring of public support for a position in the voting, but it is too late for direct mail and we have not yet learned how to use radio, television and newspaper advertising effectively.

Having been involved in a number of such situations, I have become convinced that the reason so many ill-advised pieces of legislation are enacted is rather simple: well-meaning proponents have learned how to organize and advocate effectively. They win some vocal public support and carry the day on political expediency. The legislators never hear from the great silent majority. There is no mechanism through which they can voice opposition, if they are aware of the issue at all.

Creating that awareness and providing the mechanism through which these people can be heard is one of the great challenges of public relations today. And in these programs there is a very definite need for the speed, reach and impact of the communication techniques we call advertising. All we need do first is find the answers to a few questions.