



Comparing advertising and editorials: An experimental study in TV and print

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ABSTRACT

Publicity represents one of the most visible elements of public relations and as such draws a lot of attention from both within and outside the profession. Public relations practitioners seem to rely on the concept that news in the media has a superior value to advertising, if both messages are similar in content. This study aimed to establish the relationship between advertising and news editorials in terms of communication effects. Since public relations specialists claim that editorials are more credible and have greater impact than advertising it is clear how the results of this study could have potentially important implications for both advertising and public relations professionals.

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1. Introduction

Publicity and media relations are so important for public relations that even many educated observers equate them (e.g. van Riel, 1992). US textbooks (e.g. Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2004; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) describe the public relations profession as having evolved out of publicity work at the beginning of the previous century, and a recent bestselling book declared that public relations rose to prominence at the expense of advertising (Ries & Ries, 2004) thus putting the two on equal conceptual footing. Comparisons of publicity (often simply referred to as 'public relations') to advertising as a substitute public communication technique (Weiner, 2006) are rooted in marketing, where both advertising and public relations are seen as components of 'promotion' in the marketing mix (Belch & Belch, 2004).

Public relations practitioners seem to rely on the concept that news in the media has a superior value to advertising, if both messages are similar in content (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Hallahan, 1999). These claims however do not have sufficient empirical support. Hunt and Grunig (in Hallahan, 1999: 332) state that: 'We know of little research evidence that people actually believe journalists have endorsed a product when they run a news story or that editorial copy has greater credibility than advertising copy'. An examination of the relevant literature points towards certain methodological, experimental and theoretical issues (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007: 1–3), which include the fact that this kind of research was mostly conducted on college students, using a quasi-experimental design and without a firm theoretical rationale supporting the research. This study aimed to establish the relationship between advertising and news editorials in terms of communication effects, while trying to avoid some of the most common mistakes mentioned above. Since some public relations specialists claim

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that editorials are more credible and have greater impact than advertising (Jo, 2004: 504) it is clear how the results of this study could have potentially important implications for both advertising and public relations professionals.

2. Literature review and critique

In their classic marketing communications textbook Belch and Belch (2004: 580) state: 'Because public relations communications are not perceived in the same light as advertising – the public does not realize the organization either directly or indirectly paid for them – they tend to have more credibility'. Some public relations authors agree (Seitel, 1999: 214): 'Publicity is regarded as more credible than advertising'. The same author continues: 'Publicity which appears in news rather than in advertising columns, carries the implicit third party endorsement of the news source that reports it. In other words, publicity is perceived not as the sponsoring organization's self-serving view but as the view of the objective, neutral, impartial news source. So when publicity is reported by such a source it becomes more credible, believable, and, therefore, valuable 'news'. That, in essence is the true benefit of publicity over advertising'.

It seems that Hallahan's conclusion regarding the superiority of news over advertising, popular for more than 60 years, is often supported by both advertisers and public relations specialists. The recognition of this concept has been so widespread that it lead to the idea of a 'multiplier' of perceived impact (Michaelson & Stacks, 2007: 2), that has even been quantified reportedly from 2.5 to 8.0 times the equivalent advertisement (Weiner & Bartholomew, 2006: 2). However, this brave claim lacks empirical support.

3. Publicity vs. advertising

Publicity represents one of the most visible elements of public relations and as such draws a lot of attention from both within and outside the profession. As the quote from Belch and Belch implies, professionals and academics in the field of marketing communication frequently equate public relations with publicity. Public relations academics disagree and are often dissatisfied with public relations practice, which allows and sometimes even underscores such evaluations. Ehling (1992: 461) states: 'The overwhelming number of practitioners who claim the title of public relations professional fall into the category of publicists—people who confine their activities to message production in the hope of getting these messages used by the mass media; and much of this kind of activity is further restricted to product publicity, making public relations subservient to marketing and supplementary to product advertising'.

Public relations experts attribute the value of editorials to the intrinsic credibility of the source, which implies that receivers tend to believe in news more than they believe in advertising. When a mass medium endorses a product, person or a cause, the subject of endorsement receives public support. This serves as a rationale for numerous public relations professionals in valuing news editorials in terms of advertising expenditures (Jo, 2004: 504).

Even though source credibility and its consequences are unquestionably important, the amount of research conducted in this area has been very limited. It seems that most public professionals and a surprising number of academics consider news editorials superior in their ability to persuade. The few empirical studies that have attempted to further explore the impact of publicity in comparison to advertising have added only weak support to the thesis that editorials are more credible and thus superior in their influence.

4. Theoretical analysis

In exploring the comparative influence of advertising vs. news editorials there seem to be two main questions—the question of credibility itself, followed by the question of the various potential implications credibility might have on attitudes and behavior. Before investigating what the implications of higher credibility are, it is necessary to explore whether or not news editorials are actually perceived as more credible than advertising material. As previously established, in public relations higher perceived credibility of editorial content is mainly explained through the third party endorsement effect.

Cameron (1994: 186–188) reports on a number of studies that support the idea that news copy has greater credibility than advertising. Based on the aforementioned studies Cameron proposes three aspects of source credibility (vested interest in the message, explicit intent to persuade, and bias) that distinguish commercial messages from editorial ones. The results of his information processing experiment indicated that there is some basis for the notion that third party endorsement adds credibility. However, the author concluded (1994: 203): 'the effect is not profound and is restricted to the more discerning reader'.

Hallahan (1999) also studied the third party endorsement effect. He questioned (1999: 331): '... the traditional explanation that publicity's superiority can be attributed to an implied recommendation found in media content'. After conducting an experimental study to analyze the differences between advertising and publicity he found no substantial difference among the two, even though editorial content proved to be more believable.

The popular assumption that news editorials are perceived as more credible is based on the US's understanding that a free and unbiased press is essential to the survival of a democracy. It is postulated that the general public needs to believe that the media 'objectively' report events as they happen. Trust in journalists, editors and the media industry in general is carefully monitored and studied as an essential element of the generalized trust in democratic institutions (Fukuyama, 1996). Advertising messages (as well as any messages created by corporate sources) are, on the other hand, perceived as

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