

# PR News

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 **Tip Sheet**

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## Lend Marketing a Hand, But Avoid the Kool-Aid

Recently I was accused by a marketing VP of "not being passionate enough" about his company's products or what they do as a business. This was in the context of our potentially working together. It got me thinking about just how a certain degree of enthusiasm works in PR, and how it also may not.

It's true that as a PR pro, you need to have a level of enthusiasm for your client's or employer's brand. The job is, after all, promoting awareness and use of some product, service or adoption of a point of view. So motivation, initiative and persistence, based in believing the cause is worthwhile, are essential to success.

Perhaps because long before I got into PR I worked as a newspaper reporter and had a grounding in journalism, I approach business communications with a fact-based perspective, not with excitement, arm waving and loud noises. The other thing preventing my swallowing a lot marketing info whole was advice a few years back from a former co-worker and PR colleague. He also was a former reporter, who pointed out how often the marketing function didn't have its story quite straight, or worse, had it completely wrong.

PR is very much about telling stories, but hopefully nonfiction. This colleague,

considerably senior to me at this not-to-be-named company, pointed out how often marketing team members thought they had something great and expected it to be promoted as described. However, after some investigation, it turned out to not be quite as originally claimed. This used to be referred to as "going off half-cocked," an old hunting analogy meaning you only think you're ready to shoot but aren't really.

### GUARDING BRAND CREDIBILITY

Since those days, I've worked both inside corporations and PR agencies with dozens of clients, and have encountered the full spectrum of marketing management talents. I've learned that asking questions and not accepting what marketing says at face value pays off. The obvious benefits are not embarrassing the company and maintaining the brand's credibility. Being curious also can help uncover story angles marketing never thought of.

PR pros have a responsibility to maintain a healthy dose of skepticism and ask hard questions. Very often, marketing, in its rush to create revenue and occasionally by being too inwardly focused, forgets some key parts of the story that will make or break the promotional effort. There is a reasonable comparison

here with journalism's goals of accuracy and fairness. Of course, you're on the company's payroll or charging the client for your services but, like the newspaper reporter, you still need to act as a BS filter. Your company's or client's brand or your professional credibility are on the line. Don't be afraid of sprinkling a few healthy grains of salt when first listening to marketing's pitch.

Positive brand reputation is a core goal of effective public relations. Without that as the basis, all kinds of negative things will occur. Good PR pros maintain an "outside-in" perspective, not the reverse. They're paying close attention to the market, the social network, trends, issues, competitors and what's next. They weigh what marketing desires with how it will fly in the external world. Sometimes it's as simple as shooting down a product manager's bad idea for a news release lacking newsworthiness.

### CLEARING THE AIR

So how can PR help temper marketing's desires and enthusiasm? Here's a few suggestions:

- **Clarify a product or brand's differentiation:** The basic question of why is this thing or service valuable to customers versus what else is available often hasn't been

answered. Getting that right makes a huge difference.

- **Crystallize the message:** Marketing may be so caught up in features and benefits, particularly in the tech sector, that crystallizing in clean simple language what's different hasn't been done. As marketing's voice, PR should add value by crafting distinctive ways of separating your brand from what's already out there.
- **Keep claims honest:** PR can help keep the brand from getting in trouble by ensuring that claims about a product are accurate. They must stand up to sharp scrutiny.

So I suggest reining in the hot passion for a brand that some marketers may believe is essential to playing on their team. Blind passion can get you and your company into trouble. While public relations is typically the brand's cheerleader, it is sometimes the first and often the only line of defense against corporate embarrassment or worse. Sip the marketing Kool-Aid at your own risk. *PRN*

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