

# Is PR Really Part of Branding?

By Kathy O'Brien

One day my CEO decided the receptionist was to report to me. In my capacity as Director of Branding, she reasoned, our 'first line of attack' in representing the company to visitors should be totally immersed in our brand culture. Could I possibly disagree?

My CEO was right. An organization that takes its brand seriously doesn't only care about branding as it applies to advertising, the CI manual and the odd sponsorship. The brand lives in the minds of those who consume it, from customers to alliance partners to suppliers to job applicants to employees. If they don't all have a consistent brand experience, don't expect them to all have the same impression of your brand.

Some friends were discussing airline quality standards. One guy complained the thing that irks him most is when an award-winning airline serves cheap orange juice in business class. He has seen the ads, paid the higher price, chosen to fly with 'the best', and yet gets served a drink that is completely inconsistent with his expectations. Why? Because the branding folks clearly aren't exerting any influence over the purchasing department.

## About IPRS

IPRS, established in 1970 as a non-profit organisation, aims to be the leading regional PR organisation and set industry standards to increase public awareness of the PR profession. IPRS organizes several courses where you can learn about the professional skills of PR.

The IPRS Professional Certificate in PR and Mass Communication provides an overview of PR while the Diploma in PR and Mass Communication provides in-depth PR knowledge. IPRS also runs a degree programme in BA (Communications) - Public Relations and Organisational Communication with Charles Sturt University (Australia) for those aspiring to do a specialised degree programme.

For more information on the IPRS courses and Accreditation Scheme, we invite you to visit the IPRS website at [www.iprs.org.sg](http://www.iprs.org.sg). Alternatively, you can send us an e-mail to [admin@iprs.org.sg](mailto:admin@iprs.org.sg) or give us a call at 6534 1841.



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Should they? Does branding have the right to tell other departments what to do?

You bet it does. If branding can't set standards for service delivery, then don't bother having branding at all. The richest advertising budget in the world won't deliver your customers if your hotline staff isn't helpful.

All sounds good, you might say, but it's different on the inside. People get territorial, and branding can't just butt its way into everything. This is a cop-out. It's something to iron out before you start the job. If the organization is serious about creating, sustaining and communicating a strong brand, then everything the branding team does should both reflect and influence the rest of the organization.

Don't let human resources order motivational t-shirts without your input. It's not just a matter of printing the logo correctly – anyone can follow your CI manual. It's about making sure the style and quality of the shirts reflect the brand. Are you a t-shirt company, or are you really the button-down oxford type? Which shirt will send the right message about your brand when your employees wear it on the weekend?

For a long time, we've had a separation between branding and PR. Whereas branding was considered part of marketing, PR saw itself as a corporate function that should report directly to the CEO. I daresay we PR folks were wrong. PR is a crucial function, and no doubt it deserves CEO attention. But it is an integral part of the brand expression. How you communicate with your publics speaks volumes about your brand. The language of a press release, the tone of a community notice: both should be notably different when coming from a bar versus a bank.

So should branding have a say in how the PR is done? You bet! If it's not all one team in your organization, at least talk constantly. The PR folks should be eating, drinking and sleeping the brand, and everything they do should reflect that.

Here's an example. A 'challenger' brand enters the market and wants to be seen as different. Should you hold the press conference in the same grey hotel banqueting suite the established players have been using for years? No, of course not. Do you want to be seen as the challenger, or don't you?

I've had this dilemma more than once with companies professing to be different; but when decision time came, the PR people reverted to their comfort zones and took the most standard hotel ballroom in town. Think of the journalist: if it's Wednesday and I'm at the same hotel as Monday and Tuesday, what stands out in my mind about this brand?

Why not meet in a cinema? At a trendy new restaurant? At East Coast Park? No, they won't be as familiar with your audio-visual requirements, and it might take a bit more effort to work out the seating... but anyway, isn't it time you got rid of that boring Powerpoint and did something more interactive? Can't you engage this group in what you're selling them, give them a chance to live the brand experience? What do you want them to remember?

If you are still in the mentality of thinking PR has nothing to do with branding, it's time you quit the habit. If you aren't already embracing the brand in every choice you make, you'd better start before some wise guy in branding takes my advice and starts trying to tell you what to do. If you're the branding guy, isn't it time you had lunch with your pal in PR? 