

Should you fire your ad agency and hire a pr firm instead?

I'm about halfway through Al and Laura Ries' newest book, "*The Fall of Advertising and The Rise of PR*".

In it, the father and daughter marketing gurus try to build an argument that advertising as a brand-building tool has outlived its effectiveness.

Their perspective is that clever ads -- and many of the ads done today are extremely clever -- are merely created as art for art's sake. That the ad agencies creating them have become blinded to the task of effectively promoting client's products and services, and have instead become consumed with impressing themselves and their peers with witty, award-winning creations. Also, that the more creative and startling the ads are, the less effective they become.

They indict the ad community for losing sight of its purpose and suggest that the billions of dollars marketers spend annually on paid media is no longer worth the investment.

Instead, Mr. and Ms. Ries try to make the case for good public relations, and that the "buzz" created by third-party endorsements is the primary tool we should be using to build today's winning brands.

Advertising vs. P.R. is the wrong argument.

I think there's a missing piece in their logic. The argument shouldn't be about which marketing tool to use (and that's what ads and p.r. campaigns are -- tools).

In reality, there are still plenty of effective ads done; and public relations is for certain an important and effective way to impress customers, too. Both are important to your marketing and each should be considered by how effective it will be at any given time.

But if you're a marketer truly concerned about the success of your product or service, deciding whether to fire your ad agency and hire a great p.r. practitioner instead is probably not your first -- or best -- solution.

What's of primary importance is to look internally first.

The real issue is whether or not your audience sparks to your product or service's value proposition.

At base, what makes an advertisement work (or not), or what makes a good p.r. campaign successful (or not) is whether (or not) the audience perceives genuine distinction and real value from your offering.

Both paid advertisements and free press coverage are great ways to tell your brand's story -- provided there's a good brand story to tell.

It's the brand story that's key to building loyalty, sales and success.

Earlier today, I passed a highway billboard with a chair hanging off its side.

The face of the board was painted to resemble an IKEA product hang tag showing a price of \$29.

To my mind, this is a great advertisement. If I saw a news story that said: "IKEA sells chairs for \$29", it probably wouldn't have stuck with me, made me smile, or compelled me to go to IKEA as effectively as the ad does. (So much for the Ries' theory).

But really, what makes this ad work so well, isn't so much its award-caliber creative. What makes this ad click is that it successfully tells a unique IKEA brand story that people can care about and can relate to.

On the other hand, Starbucks got a lot of p.r. "buzz" and was built into a mega-brand without the use of a giant ad budget. But not because its p.r. firm came up with a strategy that was particularly brilliant. It's because the Starbucks concept and follow-through is so wonderful. Its brand story is one that people can care about and can relate to.

At AGCD, we recently talked with a religious institution looking for help. After doing a little research, we came to the conclusion that what was at issue wasn't so much a marketing communications campaign, but that the brand itself has outlived its relevance.

We could create great and clever ads and milk the media for lots of press exposure, but since relevance is the issue, would either really fix the problem?

They need to find or create a new and fresh brand story that people will care about and can relate to.

Compelling ads and great press can create curiosity and get you a look, but if what your audience sees isn't appealing, neither your advertising nor your public relations efforts will work very well.

But, if your brand story is great -- one that people care about and can relate to -- won't it automatically get the "buzz", and won't your paid messages be so much more effective?

If the news isn't good, don't kill the messenger

The best marketing people -- advertising and p.r. professionals -- are great story tellers. When they create fiction from their heads -- as entertaining as it might be -- it's just an empty suit.

But when there's something substantial to say -- when there's true distinction and appeal - - both advertising and p.r. team up to become powerful allies in building your brand's success.

Before any marketing, you and your agency (or agencies) should work together to...

- Do some research to understand your audience(s) better. Find out what they need, how they perceive you vs. the ideal, and what you need to do to more closely resemble their ideal.

- Find ways to distinguish your brand better and deliver your promise in a unique, memorable and compelling fashion.

- Develop a distinct brand story that people will care about and can relate to.

- Help you and your entire organization take pride in knowing that your product or service is superior to every other alternative and develop new ways to more consistently deliver your brand's promises above and beyond just what's expected.

- Determine the right mix of marketing mediums that make the most sense for an effective return on your investment.

Remember that the tools you use to tell your story are effective only to the extent that you have an effective story to tell

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