HITTING THE MESSAGE HARD

The world over, big brand advertisers are panicking because their brands are losing out a major portion of the market shares to upstart companies. The only way to overcome this catastrophe is to combine advertising with good public relations techniques, says MUHAMED MUNEER C P.

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Big brand advertisers are scared. Their brands are losing marketshares to the new generation of private labels, the surge of supermarket chains acting as catalysts. They just cannot sit there and watch this erosion happening. They have to return the fire with increased and more powerful doses of advertising. Or so believes their ad agencies. See what is happening in the detergent market. Millions of dollars are spent by the international giants Unilever and Procter & Gamble, fighting each other and these private labels.

This phenomenon is not isolated to a particular country or region, it is spreading all

over. Sensing this, the American Association of Advertising Agencies recently announced plans globally, on behalf of big brand names, “to proclaim the value of advertising”. They spend millions on advertising this on TV and other media. A recent advertisement in most Middle East TV channels, proclaiming the value of advertising, confirmed their global plans on this issue.

Most of the advertisers have selected the right media, but are using only half the tools to arrest the decline in marketshares. This article suggests ways to deliver ad messages more effectively. In other words, this article claims that appropriate Public Relations (PR) techniques support most advertisers in getting better mileage out of their advertisements. Here are seven reasons why this is so:

1. Low credibility: By nature, brand advertising, is largely seen as self-serving because it is purchased time on air and purchased space in print, and it becomes even more suspect among consumers as name-brand marketshares erode further.

PR should be doing double-duty in the current crisis. Consider a full page ad on page 60 of *Explore Sri Lanka* for, say, a new perfumed and flavoured condom, coupled with an article anywhere in the first few pages of the magazine, that describes in detail, the latest advancement and innovation in condom technology, and explains why the perfumed and flavoured condoms are safer and much more fun. This should rightfully leap the same product ahead of the others in the pack because readers consider the article more credible. *It is indeed a powerful strategy Advertising drives the message home, PR makes it believable.*

2. The mounting crisis climate: Consumers are increasingly aware that big name brands are having their cigarettes smoked, their disposable diapers soiled and their detergent powders washed out, so to speak, by the private labels. Globally speaking, Marlboro, Pampers and Surf are some of the victims. After all, consumers must be surely asking, why the sudden sharp cuts in prices? Philip Morris and P&G recently slashed their prices considerably in the US to notch up marketshares. Consumers, beaming with that “at long last” glint, understand.

Consumers are ignoring costlier name brands in large numbers than ever before. In this environment, ad messages pronouncing the wonders of name brands will be seen for what they are-less effective than advertising in normal situations.

3. Little or no surprise: Regardless of its degree of quality, originality or frequency, advertising is never a surprise. Thus, it triggers this question by consumers: “Why don’t they quieten down a bit for a while?”. The predictability of a responsive ad campaign on the superiority of brand name products ensures that the campaign will lack a sharp edge. In such cases, a cost-effective PR exercise will reap a lot of benefit. Even paid (70:30) advertorials are effective for stretching your ad reach and impact.

4. Lack of news: After all, advertising is not news, and consumers today absolutely crave for news. Even the best of advertising. editorially, still has a “For Sale” sign about it.

Publicity, on the other hand, by its very definition is news. To re-capture the lost shares, big name brands require much more favourable news/editorial coverage. These products must be written about, illustrated, photographed, game-showed, surveyed, contested, and special-evented, to come across as newsmakers. Consumers must be seeing a lot of such reports these days.

5. Copycat: A typical consumer's perceived logic goes like this: "Private label brands do not advertise. Private label brands cost less than big name brands. Therefore, private label brands are my friends. By not advertising themselves to me, they lower their costs to me. Conversely, a name brand attempting to claw back at a private label brand by advertising the daylights out of itself is not my friend. It will, invariably, make its product more expensive for me."

But if the same typical consumer sees aspects of the big brand story illustrated as news on a network morning show or reads in the local newspapers about a product benefit as part of a major story, he/ she is persuaded, and do not ask "How much is this PR adding to the cost of the Product?"

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6. Low reach: The reach of advertising is unquestioned, but do the tips of both hands actually touch one another? In other words, the circulation and audience share may be certifiable, but is the page skipped, the commercial zapped? Big brand advertisers eager or even willing to cut their losses by playing only a pure advertising numbers game had better reconsider. Public relations' success may be less predictable but it is often won.

7. Money, money, money: "To proclaim the value of advertising" will have an interesting, perhaps even an epic, price tag. After all, this is war it is now or never! Advertise/spend, advertise/spend!

Is it not likely, then, that advertising costs will become a runaway horse while appropriate PR costs projected geometrically from normal levels for this special save-my- brand's-life assignment-will mount to a few pennies, vs the ad dollars to be imploded?

So, Mr and Ms Big Brand, advertise like demons against the upstarts if you are persuaded that you absolutely must. But in addition, take the time now and then to look through your communication tool kit to see if those PR. techniques remain unused. If so, intensify your degree of planning vis-a-vis PR, advertorials and the like. That should help you get the maximum out of your ad dollars.