Integrated Communication:
Synergy of Persuasive Voices

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# 17 Product Publicity: An Orphan of Marketing Research

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Merims (1972) described product publicity as "marketing's stepchild." From a marketing theory and research perspective, this fourth element in the promotion mix might better be described as an orphan.

Despite the millions of dollars spent by marketers and publicists to gain exposure for products and services in the editorial (nonadvertising) portions of the mass media, little theoretical literature exists about product publicity or how it works together with other marketing elements. This gap exists at a time when marketing professionals are calling for integrated marketing programs that combine all of the promotion mix elements.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline a research agenda in this neglected area. It begins with an analysis of why product publicity has been so ignored by practitioners and academicians, reviews recent pertinent marketing literature, summarizes important characteristics of product publicity that impact its study, and then briefly suggests, in capsule form, avenues for original research in four broad areas.

## PRODUCT PUBLICITY AS A MARKETING TOOL

*Product publicity* is defined here as the dissemination of product news and information in the editorial (nonadvertising) portions of the mass media—

newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. This definition excludes hybrid messages (such as product placements in movies and books, advertorials, infomercials, and music videos) for which a fee is paid by the brand maker (Balasubramanian, 1991; Sandler & Secunda, 1993).

The major media are interested in covering product news because they have found that product information attracts audiences. This trend received a boost in the mid-1960s with recognition of consumerism, when media responded by adding consumer reports and features such as Action Lines. Today, consumer newspaper sections, magazines features, and even whole television shows are devoted to such diverse categories as food, fashion, entertainment and leisure, books, autos, real estate, home furnishings, and travel. Many business sections and publications are full of product-related information, whereas sports and entertainment sections in publications and comparable segments in the broadcast media are the ultimate examples of product publicity at work.

Media personnel actively seek out product information, and are dependent on marketing sources. More than one third of all material in the mass media is provided by public relations sources (Cutlip, 1962, 1989). For product publicity, this figure is probably higher. News from product publicists serves as an information subsidy that facilitates news gathering and reduces the costs of obtaining material (Gandy, 1982).

Marketers use product publicity to reach a variety of audiences. These include consumer-related audiences (purchasers, specifiers, approvers, end users), channels-related audiences (sales forces, distributors, retail managers and buyers, and retail sales staffs), and external audiences (suppliers, competitors, legislators and regulators, activist groups, and others).

Marketers use product publicity for various reasons: to build awareness, to enhance product knowledge, to demonstrate or dramatize how a product works or has been accepted, to take advantage of the inherent news value of a product, to identify the product or service with current or historic events, and to test market ideas. Strategically, marketers also can use publicity to "heavy up" communications directed to primary targets, to reach secondary or tertiary markets that cannot be reached with advertising due to budget limitations, to penetrate audiences that would otherwise avoid or react negatively to advertising, or to pinch hit when other marketing communications tools cannot be used (Rotman, 1973; Wilcox & Nolte, 1990).

Marketers and PR practitioners ascribe a variety of strengths to publicity (Cushman, 1988; Rotman, 1973; Softness, 1976). Kotler suggested that publicity is most notable for three distinct qualities vis-à-vis advertising: its high credibility, its ability to catch people off guard (i.e., they are not expecting a promotional message), and its ability to dramatize a product (Kotler, 1984, p. 605). Elsewhere he suggested the publicity is most useful



for products that have an interesting story, as a stimulus for the sales force, when credibility is needed, and in cases of a small budget (Kotler, 1984, pp. 670–671). Goodrich, Gildea, and Cavanaugh (1979) proffered a similar set of benefits. They stress that publicity is inexpensive, can cut through advertising noise, has more credibility, and may be the only way to get to some publics. They add that publicity can generate sales leads.

Marketers have acknowledged publicity since the initial conceptualization of the 4Ps of the marketing mix (McCarthy, 1960), and publicity has been preserved as a separate element of the communication mix in subsequent models (van Waterschoot & Van de Bulte, 1992). Most marketing textbooks include obligatory summaries about product publicity in sections dealing with promotional strategy. However, such discussions are often short and superficial.

## ROOTS OF PRODUCT PUBLICITY'S ABANDONMENT

The orphan status of product publicity as a marketing research concept results, in part, from the fact that publicity is often considered to be a function of public relations, not marketing or advertising. In fact, publicity is one of many tools used in public relations; product publicity is the application of the tool in a marketing context.

Public relations, as a management function, concerns itself with managing an organization's relationships with key stakeholders or constituencies (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1994) defined *public relations* more specifically as the "management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 1). The practice's roots are largely in journalism, due to its early emphasis on media relations and its ongoing involvement in communications (cf. Cutlip, 1994; Olasky, 1987; Raucher, 1968). Customers, dealers, distributors, and sales forces—the principal audiences for product publicity—are only some of the many publics of concern to public relations practitioners.

Despite attempts to differentiate marketing public relations from corporate public relations (T. Harris, 1991), and the recognition of the role of public relations in times of marketing crisis or vulnerability (Deighton, chapter 13, this volume; Goldman, 1984; Sherrell, Reidenbach, Moore, Wagle, & Spratlin, 1985), product publicity is frequently regarded as a rather prosaic component of the practice. PR practitioners often accord it a low priority compared to more pressing challenges posed by employees, investors, community groups, and governmental officials.

Three characteristics of product publicity programs further explain why marketing practitioners and academicians have paid so little attention. First, most marketers have little experience in product publicity. Their roots usually are in product management, advertising and promotion, sales, or market research. Product publicity production and evaluation is delegated to specialists. As Kotler (1984, p. 673) also noted, publicity is the least utilized of the major promotion tools.

Second, expenditures in other marketing areas, especially advertising, far outstrip product publicity. Marketers naturally tend to focus on those areas with big budgets and high levels of financial risk. In advertising, where expenditures commonly range from 10 to 30 times more than product publicity, an "effective" strategy is generally believed to involve a single, highly focused, albeit well-researched campaign that is funded at the highest available dollar level. Few product publicity campaigns concentrate their effort in a similar way, although it could be argued that the potential risk to a company's reputation or a brand's equity is just as high.

Third, the evaluation of product publicity is difficult, especially when programs are undertaken as part of an integrated program that combines other promotional tools. Because product publicity represents the least costly—and most ephemeral—element of the promotion mix, measuring its impact relative to other elements is nearly impossible with any level of confidence. The relative cost of evaluative research is also high compared to the low cost, which dissuades many firms from believing they can get an sufficient return from research related to publicity.

Measurement of product publicity's effectiveness is confounded by the comparatively low level of control that marketers (or their publicists) have over whether items actually are run, and over the final content and context of stories. Publicity items that are rewritten or even run verbatim are subject to factual errors and omissions, misinterpretations, and deliberate or inadvertent "slanting" by media personnel. Thus, a story might appear in a hundred different newspapers, but with different headlines, leads, localizations, and page positions, which makes the field measurement of cumulative effects difficult. Advertising, by comparison, involves guaranteed insertions on predetermined dates, pretested and tamper-resistant creative, and negotiated positions. Measuring publicity impact is also made difficult by the fact that most product news stories only run once in a publication, whereas advertisers depend on frequency of insertions.

Marketers often cope with the difficulties of measuring product publicity by ignoring evaluation altogether, relying on anecdotal reports (particulary whether management or the client liked the effort), not efforts to quantify either the output or impact (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994; Hendrix, 1992).



## SCANT CONSIDERATION BY MARKETING RESEARCHERS

With the comparatively low level of practitioner involvement, and the measurement problems specified earlier, it is not surprising that marketing academicians have ignored the topic.

A review of scholarly journals covering a 15-year period, from 1976 to 1991, revealed no empirical studies focusing on product publicity per se.[1] Moran (1990) summed up the situation well by noting that marketers traditionally have equated publicity effects with brand presence. Publicity effects generally have been considered "declasse among earnest minded researchers, not intellectually elegant enough to be treated seriously." He added (1990):

> Advertising we were told, is a more sophisticated communication technique, principally concerned with what is stated or deliberately implied about the brand with words, music, pictures, casting, etc. Publicity, by contrast, was characterized by the old-fashioned publicity agent's credo: "I don't care what you say about me as long you mention me by name." (p. 10)

Kotler has recognized the value of public relations and publicity as marketing tools more than any other marketing scholar, in part due to his interest in social marketing and marketing for not-for-profit organizations—two areas in which public relations traditionally has played a greater role than either advertising or sales promotion (Broom & Tucker, 1992; Kotler & Andreasen, 1991; Kotler & Levy, 1969).

Kotler and Mindak (1978) addressed marketing's relationship to public relations in the only major marketing journal article dealing with public relations during this period. They noted marketing people were increasingly interested in incorporating publicity as a tool within the marketing mix and described marketing and public relations as the two major external functions of the firm. However, their primary focus was on the relationship between the two functions, not product publicity per se. (For an update and discussion of organizational relationship issues, see Hallahan, 1992; Holmes, 1991; Public Relations Review, 1991.)

When marketing and consumer researchers have addressed product news, they have done so only incidentally. In a majority of these studies, particularly in the information search literature, media habits are used as

[1]Among journals surveyed were: *Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, and *Psychology & Marketing*. The topic also is absent from the two principal public relations journals, the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review*.

scale items to operationalize broader theoretical constructs. Descriptive data are rarely reported.

Notable research that touches on the use of media containing product news content are studies dealing with the role of public relations within consumer goods companies in Britain (Kitchen & Procter, 1991), the relationship between news coverage and sales of caffeine-free colas (Fan & Shaffer, 1990), and simulated searches for new car information from various sources, including news articles (Hauser, Urban, & Weinberg, 1993). Other research includes the impact of information sources on industrial buying (Moriarty & Spekman, 1984), information seeking and the reduction of consumer purchasing anxiety (Locander & Hermann, 1979), purchase information sources of the elderly (Lumpkin & Festevald, 1988), media understanding and learning deficiencies among the elderly (Cole & Houston, 1987), preannouncing activity prior to the introduction of new products (Eliashberg & Robertson, 1988), diffusion of product information among individuals identified as "market mavens" (Feick & Price, 1987), and the impact of the publication of quality ratings on advertising practices and product pricing (Archibald, Haulman, & Moody, 1983).

## TOWARD A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Marketing researchers and practitioners need to better understand product publicity. As a foundation, it is useful to summarize some key characteristics of product publicity.

*Publicity Involves Intermediaries.* Product publicity is a form of public communication that always involves three parties: marketers, who must understand and gain access to the media; media employees, who judge, process and often present the information; and target audiences, who are the ultimate receivers.The intermediary role of media personnel is probably the most distinguishing difference between publicity and advertising. It explains the lack-of-control problem, but also provides an important set of variables for examination: the beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices of media personnel. Product publicity thus bridges traditional marketing/advertising research and mass communication research.

*Product Publicity, Like Advertising, Generally is Intended to Persuade but Is Not Necessarily Persuasive.* The intention of most marketers and publicists is to encourage buyer behavior, that is, consideration, inquiry, store visits, or purchase.

Because product publicity is largely controlled by media personnel, the tone and approach of product publicity generally must be more subtle and



less commercial than the approach taken in advertising. This fact does not negate the influence of publicity vis-à-vis advertising, but suggests that the techniques are different and that researchers face a particular problem in measuring its power. Similar to the function of the advertiser, the role of the publicist is to enhance the motivation, ability, and opportunity of the audience to process product news and information (Batra & Ray, 1986a; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991).

*Product Publicity is Disseminated and Consumed in a Highly Competitive Environment.* Marketers compete against marketers, but media also compete against media, using their editorial content (not their advertising) to attract an audience. Competition also characterizes product publicity messages: Stories must contend against all other product publicity stories seeking coverage in the media due to the limited channel capacity.

As a result, perceived news value is an essential ingredient in determining story use. A major strategy of marketers is to increase the likelihood that a story will be appealing. This often involves tailoring a story to be more newsworthy, in a way that is consistent with a product's core positioning (Geltzer & Ries, 1975). A key to success is balancing desired positioning for a product with the realities of news operations, to create messages that speak in the brand's single voice, and to understand the conventions and routines for successful publicity (cf. Daubert, 1973; Elsberry, 1988; Hart, 1974; E. C. Williams, 1988; J. Williams, 1983).

*The Source is a Critical Element in Product Publicity.* Product publicity, like advertising, always involves a source. This might be the marketer or another provider of information about the marketer's product, or the person who actually delivers the message as a spokesperson. However, the source often can be perceived by the audience as being the channel of communication itself. Characteristics of the source, and which of these is perceived to be the source, thus play a central role in product publicity research. (For an early discussion of source credibility in marketing communications, see Levitt, 1967.)

*Product Publicity Generally is Proactive and Most Often Involves Positive News Generated by the Brand Maker—but not Always.* Whereas the brand maker is almost always the only source of advertising for a product, and usually presents product information in an accurate and consistently positive light, such is not the case with product publicity.

Brand makers are not the only source of news about their products. Sometimes positive news can be generated by an unsolicited outside source, such as when a product receives a positive product rating, or when a

reporter has a positive experience with a product, or when readers or listeners share experiences with the media.

However, product publicity can also involve negative news generated by the marketer (such as an announcement of a voluntary recall, warning, or price increase) or by external sources (such as competitors, government, or activist groups, who typically make claims about issues such as safety, pollution, or labor practices). In the case of negative news, the intention of the message might be to exhort the audience to exercise caution, avoid purchase, or return the item (such as in the case of a recall), whereas the response of the brand maker might be to mitigate the impact of such claims by others. This potential for negative valence is a distinguishing characteristic, although the majority of product information in the media is unabashedly positive.

## PRODUCT PUBLICITY RESEARCH AGENDA

The dearth of research on how product publicity works suggests the opportunity for a programmatic study of an otherwise unresearched facet of marketing. I have identified two dozen questions worthy of examination. These are drawn from existing theories, models, and metaphors found in the marketing, mass media, and public relations literature. These can be grouped into four broad areas discussed next.

### Product Publicity in Marketing Strategy

One fundamental area for study is to better understand how marketers evaluate product publicity as tool and, more specifically, their success in using product publicity vis-à-vis other tools in the promotion mix. These questions principally deal with managerial issues.

*Product Publicity as an Alternative to Advertising.* Hastings (1990) argued that the assumption advertising is the *sine qua non* of promotion is being challenged, and suggests that new product introductions can be promotion-, distribution-, or PR-driven. Such an assumption is consistent with practitioners' calls for greater use of integrated marketing, as well as Kotler's observation that publicity can be especially effective for clients with small budgets.

Among key questions meriting study are whether marketers actually consider publicity a viable alternative marketing tool. Separate from the perceptions of marketers, which influence their decision making, how can researchers develop empirical evidence of the superiority (or inferiority) of publicity vis-à-vis advertising to encourage inquiries or trial use of a



product? Anecdotal evidence suggests that certain product categories lend themselves to receiving considerable publicity treatment, whereas others do not. The likelihood of success is mediated by circumstances that have yet to enumerated in any theoretical scheme.

*Cost Trade-Offs.* A specific approach for considering publicity vis-à-vis advertising is to develop a model comparing returns on investment of the two techniques. Some marketers attempt to assess placements by calculating the value if the same amount of space had been purchased as advertising (Bolland, 1990). Many PR practitioners vehemently object to this approach, arguing that a 6-inch story in the *New York Times* is not comparable to a similar story in another daily newspaper, either in terms of circulation or prestige. However, other approaches might be possible, such as analyses of aggregate spending and results (such as inquiries obtained). Such a model would be useful in better understanding the claim made by many PR professionals that publicity both costs less and is more efficient (Rubinstein, 1992).

*Market Signaling.* Some work in marketing channels arena has drawn on economic game theory to examine the way that formal and informal announcements by companies are intended to influence the behavior of others, whether competitors or distributors (Burke, Cho, DeSarbo, & Mahajian, 1990; Eliashberg & Robertson, 1988). Product publicity can be conceptualized as one of many signaling devices used by marketers to alert or condition the marketplace, frequently prior to more extensive promotional activities, such as advertising. A worthy extension of this research would be to examine strategies used by marketers in making press announcements about forthcoming products and how they view publicity vis-à-vis other potential communications forms.

*Pioneering.* It is generally accepted that the first entrants in a product category enjoy larger market share and greater profitability over time (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989; Robinson & Fornell, 1985). Several researchers have extended the implications of pioneering, using schema research, to suggest that pioneers set up consumer expectations for a particular product category (Ratnewshwar & Shocker, 1988; Sujan & Bettman, 1989). Because publicity is frequently the first communications element deployed in the rollout of a new product, product publicity can be used by pioneers to capture substantial press visibility, opinion leader support, and favorable word of mouth. Specifically, it would be beneficial to understand the advantages enjoyed by pioneers in the publicity process and how successful pioneers employ product publicity as part of a first-in-the-category strategy.

## Accessing Media

A second area deals with analyzing how marketers (and their publicists) access both consumer and trade media, and how media personnel process product information. Topics in this area revolve primarily around institutional characteristics of mass media work.

*Functions of Media in a Marketing Context.* Lasswell (1948) suggested that media perform three functions in at the macrosociological level: surveillance, correlation, and transmission of culture. Within a marketing context, it would be potentially useful to analyze more fully how these functions are perceived by marketers, the media, and consumers. Beyond the general press, two specialty categories of media merit special exploration: consumerist publications and the trade press.

Consumer publications and certain broadcast shows position themselves as friends and protectors of the consumer. *Consumer Reports*, the best-known example, has been the focus of several studies (Anderson, Engledow, & Becker, 1978; Beales, Mazis, & Staelin, 1981; Thorelli & Engledow, 1980), but virtually no research has been done to relate their content to consumer confidence or to examine whether consumerist media are any more influential than general media.

The trade press is probably the single largest outlet for the dissemination of product news, justifying special attention in understanding how mediated communications work in tandem with interpersonal communications within a marketing channel. Hallahan (forthcoming) suggests that the trade press perform three distinct roles: as an external source of information, as a contributor to channel climate, and as a conduit of influence. However, as Webster (1968) noted, little is known about how noncommercial sources of information are used.

*Conflicting Perceptions of News; Commercialism.* Marketers and news media often have divergent opinions about the newsworthiness of publicity materials. Some research has been done in public relations to develop predictors of success in placing press releases and matching the news values of publicists and editors (Aronoff, 1976; D. Harris, 1961; Knodell, 1976; Martin & Singletary, 1981; Morton & Warren, 1992). Much more needs to be done in terms of understanding the interactions between media and commercial news sources.

A central question in this area deals with the acceptable level of commercialism or brand identification in product materials. Marketers seek maximum brand name identification, whereas many media personnel are wary of excessive "product plugs" (Karp, 1971; Knopf, 1977; Sesser, 1970; Surface, 1972; Williams, 1976; Zinman, 1970). Many marketers with large market shares can afford to forego brand identification if generic publicity exposure will lead to greater demand for the category as a whole. For example, Eastman Kodak, with a lion's share of the consumer photo market, stands to gain simply by promoting consumer interest in photography. However, for most marketers, obtaining brand mention is an imperative.



Commercial names appear regularly in media of all types. Of special interest is determining the decision-making process and news values of media personnel who permit and often condone blatant product promotion in certain instances, but not others. This would include how media personnel's own brand loyalty or personal product experiences affect news judgments.

*Influence of Advertising on Publicity Coverage.* Although major media claim to differentiate the two functions, various media researchers have noted the influence that advertisers have on the editorial content of the press (Bagdikian, 1983; Gans, 1979). The 1991-93 recession sparked examples of outright interventions (Agins, 1992; Helliker, 1992; Hwang, 1992; Rykker, 1992), which prompted the American Society of Newspaper Editors to sponsor a study (Zachary, 1992).

Soley and Craig (1992) provided a useful summary of empirical research, as well as findings from the ASNE survey of daily newspapers, which showed that just under 90% of editors have experienced attempts to influence content. Marketers and media researchers alike would benefit from a better understanding of these cross-currents, particularly as to how they affect story selection and treatment. Beyond overt efforts by advertisers to shape content, past research on social influences in news operations, dating back to Breed (1955), suggests that such influence is often indirect and unconscious on the part of news personnel.

*Product Portrayals and Framing.* Stories carried by the news media invariably carry a point of view. The "spin" given a particular story often follows journalistic conventions and cliches and might not necessarily be liked by the marketer, nor be consistent with the positioning developed for the product. Framing theory (Gamson, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Ryan, 1991) suggests the media portray stories in persistent, routine patterns that affect the selection, emphasis, and exclusion of news.

Frame labels that might be applied to products or services include "revolutionary" or "money-saver," and "unsafe" or "environmental threat." Useful research would involve identifying common product "frames" and segregating factors (including the routines of news work) that lead to this media "typing" of product publicity stories.

*Product Agenda Setting.* Similarly, it is useful to study the product publicity process in terms of how the media focus attention on specific issues in the public discourse. As popularized by McCombs and Shaw (1972; see also McCombs, 1973; Rogers & Dearing, 1986; Shaw and McCombs, 1977), the agenda-setting metaphor says that the media perform an important function by telling people what to think about, not what to think. Advertising researchers have acknowledged the relevance of the concept to promotion (Fan & Shaffer, 1990; Ghorpade, 1986; Sutherland & Galloway, 1981). Product publicists are integrally involved in agenda setting by focusing the attention of media personnel on particular product categories and brands. Conversely, a strategy of publicists is to tap existing media interest, when particular product categories are in the news, in order to obtain access. Agenda-setting research provides a technique for comparing media content to audience awareness levels, as well as for publicists to evaluate the newsworthiness of their client's product.

*Sampling and Media Ethics.* Sampling is a standard technique used by marketers to promote trial of a new product. The distribution of product samples to media is used by product publicists to encourage coverage, but has been the criticized sharply. Many organizations prohibit "freebies" (Long, 1973) and junkets (Wylie, 1975), believing that the receipt of products or services of value jeopardize the journalistic integrity of reporters. An interesting ancillary question is to examine the effectiveness of this type of operant conditioning (Nord & Peter, 1980) in media relations and whether receipt of samples actually results in more favorable stories.

## Uses of Product Publicity

A third area involves the dissemination and use of product publicity material by the end user or audience. This area represents largely a social-psychological approach.

*Information Search.* A basic assumption in much product publicity is that people actively seek out information to help them make buying decisions. Although marketing researchers have a substantial body of knowledge on information seeking, few studies have distinguished between how individuals use the editorial versus advertising portions of the press. (e.g., Cole & Houston, 1987; Locander & Hermann, 1979). Most studies omit making the distinction because their primary focus involves measuring the influence of personal versus nonpersonal sources (e.g., Armstrong & Feldman, 1976; Dash, Schiffman, & Berenson, 1976; Kiel & Layton, 1981).

A specific application of search deals with the use of marketing information by industrial buyers. Robinson and Stidsen (1967, cited in Kotler, 1984) suggested that the importance of product publicity is relatively small, although consistent across the continuum of industrial and consumer goods (with personal selling dominant in industrial goods and advertising the prevalent tool used in promoting consumer goods). However, Moriarty and Spekman (1984) analyzed 14 sources of information among industrial buyers and found that news in trade publications was a significant source of information, outranking both trade shows and trade publication advertising as sources of information.



*Product News Diffusion.* Opinion leadership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and diffusion theories (Rogers, 1962) have been studied exhaustively by marketers (Mahajan, Muller, & Bass, 1990; see also Armstrong & Feldman, 1976; Feick & Price, 1987; Richins, 1983). Despite the extensive examination, virtually no studies have focused on diffusion of product publicity messages.

Beyond the general issue of how publicity combines with word of mouth and interpersonal communication is the special case of fads—products that achieve high attention and sales during a short lifespan. Faber and O'Guinn (1988) pointed out that trends and fads are accelerated by the mass media. An interesting study of product publicity deals with the life cycle of fads and how media coverage contributes to a fad's promotion and mystique, particularly if the use of other promotional tools is limited or absent, as was the case with Cabbage Patch Kids dolls in the mid-1980s (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

Another useful context in which to study the dissemination of product publicity is to analyze how one company's publicity is used by competitors. Organizations routinely scan media as one method of environmental monitoring. Although many firms hear about competitors' products beforehand, media reports emanating from publicity sources can provide confirmation and details not previously obtainable. Such research might analyze the reconnaissance process and apply the emerging literature and methodology on marketing networks (Reingen & Kernan, 1986).

*Secondary Uses of Publicity.* News coverage confers status on a product, which might be interpreted as a reason either for attention, or greater credibility, or both. References to products in the news are widely used by marketers. Reprints of favorable articles are often distributed (Maher, 1991), banners referencing publicity exposure appear on point-of-sale displays, and sales forces frequently reference favorable mentions in the press in presentations and negotiations.

*Consumer Gratifications.* Finally, product publicity can be studied in he context of how consumers use information separate from the intended

purpose of influencing behavior. McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) suggested that media provide gratifications to individuals in at least four categories: diversion (escape), personal relationships (social utility of information), personal identity (value reinforcement), and surveillance. The value of this "uses and gratifications" approach has been acknowledged by marketers (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hornick & Schlinger, 1981). Many product publicity genres—food recipes, travel features, sports stories, book reviews, self-help segments, and personality features on celebrities in upcoming entertainment productions—can be seen as providing lifestyle gratifications only tangentially related to intent of the marketer. The principal question here is not what product publicity does to people, but to understand what people do with product publicity. The answer might provide insights as to why consumers are willing to expose themselves to marketers' publicity messages at all.

## Product Publicity and Message Processing

The final arena for examination—and the one potentially of most interest to consumer researchers and practitioners concerned with integrated communications—deals with how individuals process product publicity. The level of analysis here is the individual; the paradigm is principally psychological.

*Differentiation Between Advertising and Publicity.* The ability of individuals to discern between (paid) advertising and (nonpaid) publicity is generally accepted, despite the lack of any extensive empirical research. Indeed, the question has been addressed only in the limited policy context of the potentially adverse effects of advertising on children (Faber, Brown, & McLeod, 1979; Ward 1974; Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977).

Conventional wisdom suggests that people tend to avoid, resist or discount advertising because they believe the sponsor is trying to sell them something—phenomena that have been explained in terms of dissonance, reactance, and attribution theories. Publicity, on the other hand, is less obvious and provides less forewarning. As Lesly (1959) noted, public relations techniques are "especially selected and used to impact ideas so that the recipient comes to feel they are his own" (p 5).

Researchers have found that individuals respond differently to advertising and publicity messages, but the results are fragmentary at best. Salmon, Reid, Pokrywcznski, and Willet (1985) and Schwarz, Kumpf, and Bussman (1986) provided partial evidence for the belief that publicity is more credible, but found contradictory results in terms of purchase intent. Cameron (1994) found publicity to be more memorable than advertising. McLeod, Pan, and Rucinski (1988) suggested that message processing



patterns might be different between advertising and news, but admitted that their research was inconclusive and limited in scope.

Hallahan (1995) suggested that individuals engage in a process of content class categorization, that is, audiences identify messages as either news or advertising and apply alternative rules and strategies depending on content class heuristics. Work needs to be pursued to understand if and precisely how consumers differentiate between news and advertising. In a similar way, more needs to be known about how consumers and others respond to the kind of hybrid messages that have become commonplace (Balasubramian, 1991; Sandler & Secunda, 1993) and how they respond to messages found in nontraditional media, such as interactive computerized bulletin boards, which are being used for both informational and promotional purposes.

*Product Publicity, Purchase Decision Models, and Involvement.* Early marketing theorists believed that publicity's primary benefit was creating awareness (Cash & Crissy, 1965; Kotler, 1984). This assumed that consumers were logical and objective processors of product information.

Early hierarchy of effects models suggested that purchase decisions involve a series of cognitive—affective—conative steps (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Strong, 1925). Ray et al. (1973) described this approach as a learning hierarchy, in which the role of publicity can be seen essentially as educational. However, at least two other alternate approaches can be seen operating. Under Ray et al.'s low-involvement hierarchy, which is rooted in Herbert Krugman's work on television's ability to generate learning without involvement, extensive education is not necessary. Instead, product publicity can be seen as performing primarily a reminder function. Under the alternative dissonance-attribution hierarchy, based on the separate work of psychologists Elliot Aronson, Daryl Bem, and Harold Kelley, there are situations in which behaviors occur first, then attitude change, and finally learning: a conative—affective—cognitive relationship. In this situation, product publicity can be viewed as primarily a reinforcement vehicle.

These alternative functions—education, reminding, and reinforcement—represent potentially different objectives and time-order relationships with other integrated marketing communications components. Publicity can either precede or follow other campaign elements, and can be examined from either a pretransaction or posttransaction perspective. In the pretransaction situation, useful research would more thoroughly examine how consumers use publicity to reduce risk or uncertainty. Posttransaction research could also shed light on why consumers attend so much to media stories on products already purchased (presumably to validate previous consumer decisions).

These alternative approaches underscore the potential role of involvement as a variable for researchers in product publicity (see Salmon 1986 for a valuable review of the role of involvement). Presumably, individuals for which a publicity message is highly relevant are willing to effortfully or systematically attend to publicity messages (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). On the other hand, individuals with low involvement in a topic might be willing to use a variety of peripheral cues (including but not limited to the source, prominence in the media, the number of mentions, etc.) as heuristics or peripheral cues to make a summary judgment about product news.

*Cognitive Processing of Marketing Messages.* Perhaps the most critical question for marketers concerned with integrated communications is how publicity might facilitate the processing of subsequent campaign elements. Marketing communications generally suffers from the failure of researchers to address communications from an integrative perspective, for example, to conduct studies that test theories in more than one medium or that involve more than one communications technique. This failure is due to higher costs, control problems, and the lack of researcher interest discussed previously.

Major work awaits to be undertaken about how publicity operates from a cognitive point of view. The most prevalent scenario in integrated communications campaigns is to maximize product publicity in the kickoff of a new product introduction, after which intensive advertising begins. Under this regimen, publicity can be conceptualized as facilitating the processing of communications that follow. However, researchers have not yet begun to understand how this integregation works. At least five explanations are possible:

- Repetition effects: Publicity can be viewed merely as another exposure opportunity for the basic message in integrated campaign message, and might facilitate the "wearin" of advertising (Pechmann & Stewart, 1988).
- Retrieval cue effects: Publicity could be considered as a generator of memory traces that are stimulated through association in subsequent advertising, point-of-purchase messages, and other cues (Edell & Keller, 1989; Keller, 1987, 1991a, 1991b).
- Multiple sources effects: Hearing about a subject from two or more independent sources, or hearing slightly inconsistent messages, has been demonstrated to result in greater cognitive effort, resulting in more elaboration and learning (Harkin & Petty, 1987; Moore, Reardon, & Mowen, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1989).
- Schema effects: Publicity, like all other sources of information, can be seen as a contributor to the creation of cognitive structures—categories, prototypes, or scripts—under which product information is organized (see especially Alba, 1983; Cohen & Basu, 1987; Sujan, & Bettmann, 1989; Sujan & Deklava, 1987).
- Priming effects: Finally, publicity can be seen as a priming mechanism (i.e., it highlights particular attributes of products), thus increasing the likelihood that the audience subsequently will inspect product information or broaden their memory traces in terms of these attributes. Priming can also be examined in contextual terms, underscoring the potential role of publicity in creating a "favorable editorial environment" for advertising (Chook, 1985; Gardner, 1983; Soldow & Principe, 1981; Wilder & Buell, 1923; Yi, 1990).



*Affective Processing of Publicity.* Separate from cognitive processing, researchers have devoted increased attention to the role of affect in marketing communications. The trend began with Zajonc's (1980) work showing that repeated mere exposure can lead to greater liking of a message (Zajonc & Markus, 1982). Since then, various content and context elements of advertising have been examined (see especially Batra & Ray, 1986b; Stayman & Batra, 1991).

Affect has been operationalized various ways. Among these, researchers have demonstrated that a consumer's attitude toward the ad (Aad), which combines cognition with affect, can mediate the processing of the message (see especially Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989; Mackenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Hallahan (1995) suggested that a more general construct, attitude toward the message (Amessage), would permit the same approach to be applied to publicity research. In keeping with Moran (1990), it could be argued that many content and contextual affective factors can be seen at work in publicity as in advertising—with a notable difference being that publicists have less control over them.

*Impact of Negative Publicity.* A question of special interest in today's era of heightened reporting of product news is understanding of the impact of negative news on consumer knowledge, attitudes, and purchase intent. Stated more generally, negative publicity involves information that is incongruent with a consumer's expectations or experience.

Various psychological studies have shown that individuals assign relatively more value, importance, and weight to events that have negative versus positive implications (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Pratto & John, 1991).

The effects of negative news reports have been documented in terms of their effects on financial markets (Klein & Prestbo, 1974), and various examples can be cited as to how negative news reports have adversely

impacted products (Tanouye, 1992). Sherrell, Reidenbach, Moore, Wagle, and Spratlin (1985) provided a cogent review of recent research. Also of special note are Weinberger & Dillon's (1981) work on the effects of unfavorable product rating information, Mowen's (1980) study on consumer perceptions of product recalls, Iyer and Debevec's (1991) empirical research on product rumors, and Deighton's study (chapter 13, this volume) of responses to a product tampering.

Much more needs to be known as to why and how consumers respond to negative product information in media. Mizerski (1982) suggested attribution theory as an explanation of the disproportionate influence of unfavorable information. Alternatively, involvement and the nature of the elaborative processing engaged in might provide insight (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). Negative news reports, despite their pervasiveness, are often discounted or criticized by high-involvement audiences. On the other hand, individuals with low levels of involvement can be oblivious to negative news that is of of no concern to them, whereas many others with relatively little stake in the issue can be keenly aware of the problem. Marketers and publicists alike would benefit from understanding the differential impact of negative news in both pretransaction and posttransaction contexts.

*Media Credibility.* Probably the single most important issue to be examined in product publicity research centers around the higher credibility generally attributed to news (Levitt, 1969; McGuire, 1973; Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims, 1982). Many publicists ascribe the superiority of publicity over advertising to a third-party endorsement effect. Rotman (1973, p. 13) explained that publicity in the media carries "an implied endorsement by the editor, who [the reader or viewer feels] sure would not allow anything unverified or incomplete to occupy editorial space or time in the media." However, Detwiler (1974) noted such a concept is largely an article of faith.

Although researchers have addressed aspects of the issue (Cameron, 1994; Hallahan, 1995; Salmon et al., 1985; Schwarz et al., 1986) no comprehensive work has been completed within the general population on implied product endorsement, or the idea that news is any more credible than advertising. Similarly, although self-proclaimed consumerist publications strive toward high levels of credence, media credibility has been shown to be highly dependent on the specific medium (Appel, 1987).

The assumption that news is necessarily more credible than advertising runs counter to popular complaints about media bias. Many argue that there is a media credibility gap (Gannett Center for Media Studies, 1985), whereas critics have charged that public relations' undue influence has created cynicism (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). These are charges not unlike those lodged against advertising. Recent studies have demonstrated that claims about media bias are related to characteristics of the audience



involved, not the medium (Gunther, 1992; Robinson & Kohut, 1988; Roper Organization, 1991; Whitney, 1985). If news is more credible than advertising, the evidence is yet to be substantiated.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined research areas that seem particularly interesting and worthwhile to pursue in the area of product publicity, in light of today's emphasis on integrated communications. It has attempted to weave together conventional wisdom about product publicity with research drawn from the marketing, public relations, and mass communications literature.

Each of these areas merit further elaboration and examination. The implication is inescapable: There is no reason that product publicity should be neglected as a research interest by marketers. Not only has the subject been overlooked, but many of these questions represent thought-provoking issues with broad implications that go far beyond the product publicity practice.

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# VII Theoretical Summary, A Research Agenda, and Conclusions