



GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

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Third-Party Credibility: *Ghost in the Machine?*

No question about it, digital media have radically changed how we practice marketing and public relations – multiplying opportunities and placing a premium on new skills. It's fascinating, and it's almost all good.

Increasingly, both our content and our metrics are driven by algorithms. We can research popular key words, then tactically dose our releases and Web pages with them to drive search rankings and click-throughs. And we can now measure the digital realm with tools that use formulas to calculate the broader impact of Web hits.

In the digital revolution, though, it's important that we not lose sight of an important ghost in this dazzling new machinery: credibility. The nagging question is whether, once our target audience's eyes land on our content, they will **believe** what we're saying.

(Third) Party On!

Will they stay or will they flit? With so much information out there – so many "shiny objects" of digital content to distract our speed-clicking target audiences – can we hold their attention for more than a second or two? Will they care enough to seek more information, remember it, and even act on it?

One key factor in this is good old-fashioned third-party credibility.

At its simplest, a credible third party in marketing and PR is a disinterested and presumably objective expert who backs up an organization's initiative, campaign or messages.

For example, in the 2008 presidential campaign, several Democratic candidates took the position of opposing torture, even for interrogations of captured terrorists. This could have made them look "soft on terrorism" – except that they had the backing of a group of 16 retired generals and admirals who'd gotten together and taken the same position. In fact, President Obama invited the group to the White House on his second day in office when he announced key policy changes on the issue.

Industry Standards

Voluntary standards are a way to address key industry issues. One example is the U.S. Green Building Council, which awards silver, gold or platinum LEED certification to buildings based on standards for energy savings, water efficiency, carbon emissions, indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources. As commercial builders, business tenants and employees have become more attuned to the business impacts and productivity benefits of a positive environmental profile, builders and building owners have flocked to LEED as a credible standard that attracts tenants and commands higher rents.

Another standard bearer is Underwriters Laboratories (UL), which was founded in 1894 to set guidelines for fire and electrical safety. UL gained credibility with strong programs for testing and inspecting products, and by allowing those that meet its standards to carry its mark. In many cases, UL standards not only preceded government standards (e.g. building codes) but are the basis for government standards. UL is now expanding into additional industries, setting standards for water quality, food safety and environmental sustainability.



The food industry has come under attack in recent years by critics who charge it with contributing to childhood obesity. A leading industry association, the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), is answering the charges by galvanizing its members to action and trying to preempt excessive government intervention.

Earlier this year, GMA hosted First Lady Michelle Obama at a science forum and announced its support for her goal of solving childhood obesity within a generation. GMA cites specific steps its members have taken to improve nutrition of their products and change advertising, marketing and labeling policies – for example, creating 100-calorie packs of popular snacks. This month, GMA announced that it supports a role for government in setting standards for foods to be sold in schools, but that it would voluntarily take the lead on improving products sold in supermarkets. Various GMA member companies have pledged to meet specific goals on reducing sodium, sugar and fats in their products.

One wonders if opponents of health care reform could have avoided the recently passed legislation through coordinated industry steps to proactively, voluntarily address what critics, including the President, routinely labeled, “the worst practices of the health insurance companies.”

Trust by Association

Companies are increasingly working with prominent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to bring credibility to their positions on key issues. In 2003, FedEx partnered with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) to announce a major initiative:

FedEx rolled out 20 hybrid-electric delivery trucks and said it planned to replace 30,000 trucks, the lion’s share of its fleet, with the cleaner, fuel-saving technology. A FedEx executive went so far as to say, “I can’t envision any reason why we wouldn’t roll this out over the whole fleet.”

Seven years later, FedEx is up to only a little over 300 trucks – one percent of its original target. The company cites higher capital costs, partly because of a lack of uptake from other transportation companies, as well as stiff regulatory requirements and inadequate tax incentives. Meanwhile it is introducing a handful of all-electric trucks on a trial basis. The EDF relationship, combined with FedEx’s continued efforts, appears to be enough to preempt possible greenwashing criticism and keep the company positioned as a leader in trying to address the fossil-fuel-intensive nature of its industry.


Digital Enhancement

As long as communicators remember the importance of third parties and do the work needed to align with them, digital media offer terrific ways to extend their credibility.

Interactivity is one. “Crowdsourcing” – e.g. book or music reviews posted by ordinary customers on e-commerce sites – is a form of third-party credibility. Studies show that in social media communication, responding quickly to comments or questions is a main driver of trust. Blog readers are more likely to stick around and pay attention if a blog has lots of reader comments.

And of course, we can cite third parties – expert or otherwise – online, but beyond that we can add

in-depth third-party content to our sites or link directly to any online content that supports our positions.

With public trust in business, government and other institutions at or near all-time lows, credibility has never been needed more. Digital media give us the tools to multiply it – or to neglect it at our peril. 

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