

Delve Into Media Psychology for Digital PR Tips You Can Use

By Dr. James N. Herndon

Great PR is at least as much art as science. An effective PR campaign requires a high level of creativity, a process that resists being quantified. Nonetheless, the world of scientific psychology can often help guide the PR professional through an increasingly complex thicket of marketing decisions.

The relatively new field of “media psychology” is quickly emerging as a valuable PR tool. I define media psychology as the use of research-based media to change behavior.

Psychology is the study of human behavior, and, on a practical level, the objective of all marketing is behavior change. We want the “consumers” of our marketing efforts to buy a product, to be better informed, to be entertained, to vote for a certain politician, to have positive feelings toward a celebrity, to regain confidence in a corporation, etc. This is behavior change at its most basic.

Therefore, we consider a marketing/PR campaign to be successful if we have been able to help “engineer” a desired change in the behavior of our target audience. The extent to which our PR processes are “research-based” (that is, “scientific”) has a strong association with positive PR results. This also means that “psychological” factors need to continually play a role in our design decisions.

It goes without saying that systematically testing the effectiveness of a PR campaign prior to roll-out is critical. Today’s competitive stakes are simply too high to do otherwise. This can involve everything from simple tryouts to complex scientific experiments. The objectives are two-fold:

- 1) To reduce the risk of failure; and
- 2) To optimize a chosen strategy.

Human psychology expresses itself both through universal tendencies, as well as through cultural/social trends. Awareness of these psychological factors is an added advantage in designing effective media. Over the years, I have been involved in a lot of media research. The results of this research have often played a key role in the success of a PR campaign.

The following are 10 research-derived tips that will be useful, especially in our increasingly digital PR environment. They are presented here, not as rules, but merely as potential guidelines for action.

1. Keep messages VERY simple.

“Nice” may be the new “mean,” but “simple” is rapidly becoming the new “sophisticated.” The digital age is one where information overload is already a reality. Messages that are not clear, striking, and, often, painfully simple, will have an increasingly tough time “connecting.”

Our research shows, for example, that less than 30% of national TV spots are genuinely memorable. That is, after having seen an average TV commercial for the first time, viewers are typically unable to recall the name of the product. This represents a squandering of advertising dollars, as well as a failure of research and design.

Fundamentally, messages must be “easy” enough to remember—or they are wasted. And, if something is not memorable the first time, repeated viewings will not necessarily make it so.

2. Don’t market to the world.

With the rarest of exceptions (for example, something that is breathtakingly newsworthy), the entire world is not interested in what we have to promote. Market and audience seg-

mentation is a reality. Design with targeted audiences in mind. Our research shows that nearly 70% of marketing efforts would have benefited from starting with a narrower audience base, then moving “wider.” Save money and start small.

3. Avoid the graphics trap.

Sophisticated graphics (especially 3D graphics) have become so pervasive that they are beginning to lose impact. Our research shows that today’s media professionals have an increasing tendency to overestimate the graphics “wow factor,” falling into “the-medium-is-the-message” graphics trap. The result? At least 50% of the money spent on sophisticated graphics is wasted. Sure, graphics can be very, very cool. But, do they play a primary role in selling the product? Or, are they simply an end in themselves? When research reveals that a graphic treatment is the most powerful aspect of the message, then it may be time to regroup and rethink.

4. Leave out the kitchen sink.

Remember the old saying about too many cooks? Don’t let pushy clients force you to include everything they can think of about themselves...or their product...in their promotional materials. Three to five key points is enough. Audiences for PR materials can only process and retain a very limited amount of core information. More is never better. And the kitchen sink is too much.

5. Keep the PR cycle refreshed.

Multiple researchers have demonstrated that the “shelf life” of PR campaigns is 60 to 90 days. After that, the “cycle” must begin again. Therefore, keep campaigns periodically “refreshed.” Often, only small changes are required. But, these can be enough to “renew” the interest of your target audience. (This advice particularly applies to celebrities.)

6. Ignore the competition.

It’s always risky to acknowledge one’s competition in a marketing campaign. You’re giving free advertising to an adversary, and you

risk confusing the target audience. Our research has shown that such risks, on average, noticeably outweigh the possible gains. Therefore, as a general principle, behave as if the competition does not exist. (This has profound implications for political campaigns.)

7. Always have an “angle.”

Editors for most online and print outlets roll their eyes at the vast majority of promotional materials that cross their desks. Simply, they see no “juice,” no “angle.” Look for, try out, and, if necessary, concoct (of course, within the bounds of ethics and propriety) attention-getting “angles” to PR stories. Or, don’t bother to write them. Who is going to read “Joe Smith Wins Another Sales Award”? If, instead, the headline says, “Top Salesman Paints the Town Red,” you’ve got a fighting chance. People respond to drama. The rest is often merely, “So what?”



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8. Free can be better.

If the Internet has proven anything, it’s that successful, viral PR can sometimes be generated—for *free*! Don’t wait for a client to ask, “Why have you made me pay \$10,000 for a print ad, when my competitor is getting more attention from Twitter?” Good question. In the future, more and more PR professionals will be earning bigger fees from their clients by designing campaigns for “free” digital media, which is a rapidly evolving marketplace. However, our own research forecasts the nearly complete merging of traditional TV and the Internet within the next three to five years. The psychological and marketing implications of this ongoing trend are enormous. However, much that is now free won’t remain so. Enjoy it while you can.

Why Is Media Psychology Important For PR Professionals?

- PR is fundamentally a process of “behavior change.”
- Most “buying” decisions are based on emotion...not logic or price.
- Media psychology is a good role-model for the positive benefits of systematic media research.
- Talking about “media psychology” with potential PR clients can dramatically raise your perceived value.
- The “new media” is principally a psychological phenomenon—use it as such.
- TV and the Internet will eventually merge; this will result in exploding PR opportunities based around “lifestyle” and “image.”
- As consumer choice increases, product “differentiation” through the use of advanced psychological principles will become more critical.
- Many PR practitioners will ultimately evolve into “media therapists.”
- The psychological aspects of “social media” (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are still in the early stages of their PR/marketing potential.
- More and more psychologists are becoming “communication” experts; it is therefore imperative for communication experts to become better psychologists.
- Media changes feelings, and feelings change behavior.

9. Never let the attackers control the PR agenda.

It is human nature to respond to provocations. This urge is nowhere more apparent than in the area of crisis management. When a company, or a person, is under attack, there is often the perceived need to attempt to deflect every bullet. Our research suggests, however, that it is typically far more effective to, instead, be “bullet-proof.” That is, *never* let attackers trap you into responding to an agenda set by them.

The public has an amazingly short memory. Therefore, it is prudent to ignore attacks unless they perfectly align with your own defensive strategy. Taking “the high road” when under attack (that is, being “above” it all) “plays” better with the public in almost every instance.

10. Rinse and repeat.

Repetition works. Pure and simple.

It’s easy to scoff at the crude high-pressure tactics of the typical infomercial. But they contain a powerful lesson: A few simple points repeated (seemingly) endlessly (but with subtle variation) is a highly effective tactic for persuasion and promotion.

This technique has a wide variety of unexplored possibilities (particularly in politics). Repetition is, in fact, a form of “training” that allows an audience member to “practice” a series of “concepts.” When we’ve learned our lessons well enough, more often than not, we take action. This is a PR practitioner’s dream come true.

So...keep it simple and keep it real. And look (do research) before you leap. **PRN**

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