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Strategy By Numbers: The Value of Upfront Research

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Everybody knows they should get their cars tuned up at 50,000 miles. But if money's tight, a motorist might make do with an oil change and put off the rest. Or, they might do it themselves if they have the right tools in the garage.

Market research is similar. PR people know to use it to fine-tune campaigns, but it's not always top priority.

"Clients have difficulty swallowing \$20,000 to \$50,000 on research when many external PR budgets are around \$100,000 per year," notes Paul Owen, president of Owen Media in Seattle. "But \$20k or \$50k is a drop in the bucket for a \$10 million ad campaign."

"It's on our wish list," says Al Maag, chief communications officer for Avnet, an electronics and computer components distributor in Phoenix. His company invested in a branding study and some IR research recently, but he hasn't focused the microscope on media relations efforts.

Controlling the costs

PR practitioners often jealously eye their advertising brethren's larger research budgets, but the pragmatic acknowledge vast differences in budgetary scale.

What's more, PR research can be more expensive because PR often targets more specific audiences than advertising, says Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief knowledge and research officer for Burson-Marsteller in New York.

In a perfect world, however, people wouldn't consider research an optional or extraneous expense that sucks resources from campaign execution, says Greg Gordon, VP of research and strategy at L.C. Williams & Associates in Chicago. "We would do well to stop thinking of research as something that takes away from the PR budget. Instead, it should be an important component in its own right," he says.

Many PR practitioners perceive research taking weeks or months, even though internet tools and omnibus studies can yield quick, relatively inexpensive results. In fact, PR agencies and corporate communications executives are more likely to directly commission research for image studies, corporate reputation management, or quick-turnaround crisis communications projects than for product launches, Sosin says.

Culture can be a roadblock to research. Advertising, for example, has a much longer heritage of using research than does PR. For better or worse, PR still struggles with

underdog syndrome where its more expensive cousin is concerned.
Breaking ad/PR boundaries

More often, PR and advertising functions remain somewhat siloed (especially when outside agencies are involved), and PR teams must build relationships with their marketing or advertising counterparts to gain access to data or influence up-front research studies. "Even if you're at an integrated firm, you have to stay involved," Owen says. "You have to push and insert yourself into the strategic process."

While using data gleaned from studies designed for other departments might not be ideal, it can be effective.

Ultimately, PR's rising status and demand for proof of ROI - the same factors pushing evaluation measurement to the forefront - may encourage more up-front research. And along with greater respect comes greater scrutiny, says Marianne Eisenmann, managing director of Echo Research.

Back-end evaluation can be done without front-end research, especially for media relations campaigns supported by clip packs and broadcast monitoring. Calls to action - such as directing consumers to websites or 800 numbers - also can be easily tracked. But many PR execs agree that measurement is much more meaningful when it can be compared against precampaign benchmarking.

"I think tying evaluation to a measured, upfront baseline will help force the issue," says Owen. "I see PR firms becoming more aware of the need for pre-campaign research, and I think we are beginning to prime the pump of expectations."

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