

Why PR practitioners may have more power than ad agencies (Part II)

By Peter Mann

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Even though ad agency bosses and media owners sit on a veritable pile of money, they live in the land of declining returns - where you have to run harder just to stay in the same place.

In the [first part of this series](#) I noted that the MediaShop measured total adspend for 2011 at more than R32bn - and adspend for 2012 is predicted to grow to R33.8billion. In 2011 that money bought 3 909 221 ads.

The table below (which I stole from somewhere without attribution and which I apologise for in advance) even shows you where they appeared - and remember that this excludes self promotion - where media owners advertise themselves; and trust me this adds a whack more ads as anyone who spends more than a nanosecond watching DSTV will attest to.

Excluding Self Promotion	2011		2010		% increase/ decrease	2011 No of Ads
	R	Expenditure	R	Expenditure		
Cinema	R	597 183 095	R	351 257 554	70.00%	802
Direct Mail	R	70 018 131	R	141 206 625	-50.00%	952
Internet	R	752 514 852	R	578 937 786	29.98%	217,148
Out of Home	R	1 368 834 990	R	1 231 110 990	11.19%	28,109
Print	R	10 034 481 467	R	9 428 290 200	6.43%	811,506
Radio	R	4 503 952 295	R	3 684 455 581	22.24%	1,614,615
Television	R	14 683 459 773	R	13 438 643 406	9.26%	1,236,089
Grand Total	R	32 010 444 603	R	28 853 902 142	11.00%	3,909,221

How many commercial messages a day?

So here is an empirical answer to an oft-debated question - how many commercial messages are we exposed to every day?

I know it's simplistic: but if you divide the 3.9 million paid-for ads flighted in a year by 365 days; every South African is (potentially) exposed to 10 710 advertising messages a day!

Again, that is a total figure and our individual choices of the media we consume will dramatically alter this figure, but even if we see only 10% of them, that's still a hell of a lot of advertising. You're not even safe at the urinal in the movies or a mall.

No wonder more and more of us are turning away from this incessant stream of commercialisation - using PVR decoders to fast-forward through the ads, or channel surfing, or going to the loo (our own, without advertising) rather than watch yet another commercial.

And no wonder advertisers are getting more and more desperate and extreme to get their advertising content noticed. The industry itself is predicting the end of "interruption" advertising, with global luminaries like IBM's Global Business Services publishing reports entitled "The end of Advertising as we know it".

One of advertising's great folklore stories is attributed to John Wanamaker (1838 - 1922) the owner of a department store in Philadelphia. Wanamaker was a prodigious advertiser. Someone asked him how he knew whether it worked. His answer: "Half of my advertising works and half of it doesn't. If I only knew which half."

A challenging game

When we media train clients at Meropa we play a game which I challenge you to do. We give participants a copy of one of the major daily newspapers and ask them to read the whole of the front-page, and to be prepared to answer questions about it.

After a couple of minutes of studying, we ask a range of questions: what was the front-page lead; what was the source of the story - was it journalistic enterprise or was it an announcement? Most people easily process this information and get the correct answers.

Then we ask: how many ads are on the front-page and who they are for?

Almost nobody gets this answer. In fact most of the many, many people we have asked, have not even noticed the ads. They simply tune them out. Watch how you consume media yourself, you will see how you skip the ads.

To break through this massive clutter, ad agencies simply counsel clients to do more advertising. You have to buy so many ARs to get noticed. It's like saying, "I stuck my hand in the fire and it really burned - so I'd better do it again and again until I get it right".

Recession = budget cuts

At the height of the recession, I even heard a well-known advertising guru on radio telling companies in the motor industry that they should be advertising more, to gain market share! The theory goes like this: In a recession, advertising budgets are cut. This offers the second/third in market an opportunity to gain market share by maintaining or increasing their budgets (rather than cutting) to take first position. Provided of course that you have the money in a recession.

It's a great big vested-interest machine. There's so much advertising it is overwhelming us.

Desperation rules: Let's ambush everything we can. We might get into trouble -- but we will have generated something that will get us noticed through the clutter.

I don't know why marketers love advertising so much. Al Ries, in his controversial, but seminal book, *The Fall of Advertising & the Rise of PR*, perhaps overstated when he likened advertising to art - beautiful to look at, but completely bloody useless.

I think marketers are just not taught any different. They follow a formulaic approach. The five P's rule. This is the law of ad agency... 50% of it works so spend, spend and spend some more...

A part of me does know why advertising is so popular. It gives you such a buzz - you turn on the TV and there's your ad, it cost millions to make, let alone how much it is costing to flight; then there are all those wacky, tattooed, coked-up creatives, the funky girls, and the suits who "fat-face" you.

The most exclusive club in town

It's like being admitted to the most exclusive club in town - albeit a slightly edgy one, where you never quite belong - you are only good as long as your money lasts. It's a bit like going to one of those clubs where the girls gather as you buy that bottle of watered-down champagne only to disappear along with the last, hasty gulp.

Even if you are one of the biggest advertisers in the country and Tony Koenderman's Ad Review provides a useful table - say a Unilever (top of the table and which spent a whopping R1,29bn on advertising), what do you get?

Your share of voice, against all of those competing ads, is 4% - not such good odds. You are going to have to spend, and spend some more, to get noticed less and less as you drive the hungry machine. And you are getting less and less for your money.

Consider so-called adflation - the increases charged by the media owners for their advertising space. 2011 figures show 6.43% growth in print advertising while it is well known because it is tracked by the Advertising Bureau of Circulations that most print titles are showing seriously declining circulations. That's just one indication of how you are paying less for more; and most media owners have been brutal in the way they have hiked their prices over the years.

It's the ad agency bosses, not us, who act in this slew of declining returns and ever-increasing costs.

A better way

Of course there is a better way. It's called PR. And, it's really time that marketers give it a go. After more than 20 years in PR, I can count on the fingers of one hand the clients who have really, really used PR to best advantage - putting it at the centre of their strategy and funding it properly. (It's largely our own fault as an industry, as we are really bad at what we do - but again that's another topic.)

So why does PR offer an alternative? Consider media relations alone - and it is just one part of what PR should do.

Media relations produce credible *news* stories that are published by the media. It is vastly different from advertising, which is legally recognised as hyperbole - witness the buyer-beware principle - and which, incidentally, is why we PR people keep on trying to take the marketing/advertising hype out of our media releases. Editorial has vastly more credibility than advertising.

That's a simple fact -- although trying to quantify it depends obviously on the credibility of the title publishing it and the context in which it is published.

You cannot buy the front-page lead in *Business Day*, the *Financial Times*, the *New York Times* or any other title - and to get your company profiled by any of them is either a hell of a good thing, or an appalling thing, depending on the context.

Editorial publicity is cheaper

We consume media because it not only informs us about our world, but it tells us what to think and how to interpret our world.

Editorial publicity is also considerably cheaper than advertising. Because it is news it is flighted free. It's more difficult to get, but more credible when you get it.

Ad agencies are fond of dismissing PR. They argue along the lines of, "sure it can help, but it can't be used to launch or sustain a brand, because too much is left to chance. You can't control the messages and you can't build reach and frequency with PR".

Bollocks - properly done media relations can bring you reach and frequency at costs per thousand that ad agencies can only dream of. Because we are not paying for flighting, we can effectively "buy" the entire media schedule - getting you

into every relevant media title with information that is newsworthy and credible, effectively with third-party endorsement to boot. What could be better than that?

We routinely check messaging in media coverage gained, course correcting as we go. PR also allows you to provide a wider range of more-complex messaging than advertising.

Recent studies, Australia being just one example, show that PR people provide up to 55% of the editorial content of major media outlets. We are mostly a hidden industry wielding large impact, which is why Meropa is a determinedly low-profile company. For example we don't enter or seek awards for our work.

At its best we are in advance journalism - getting to the news stories before the media. At worst we are accused of manipulation of the news and spin doctoring.

Some legitimate concerns

There are some legitimate concerns in the media industry about our dominance of news, but it does prove that we are relevant.

We should be more important than the ad agency bosses - although I don't have any desire to be. Much more important is this: next time you consider launching a new product or service, challenge yourself to do something radical.

Don't call your ad agency - call a reputable PR consultancy. Put them at the centre of your strategy and let them drive the process. Let them suggest when you should advertise (after you have gained all the newsworthy advantage you can) and let them drive for once.

We can pretty much guarantee you will be more effective, and you'll save a shedload of cash!

For more:

- [Do PR practitioners have more power than ad agencies? \(Part I\)](#)

ABOUT PETER MANN

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