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# Marketing public relations (MPR): a critical perspective of current literature

*ABSTRACT*

This article addresses the Marketing Public Relations (MPR) concept, whose emergence can partly be ascribed to the continuous debate regarding the respective boundaries of both the fields of public relations and marketing. The article first explains the nature of the debate and then explores the emergence and some theory of MPR. It also argues the position of MPR in the organisation and finally contemplates its future.

This article in particular debates the current apprehension that MPR is merely product publicity or mostly adds credibility to an organisation's product advertising efforts. It argues that MPR can achieve much more in the organisation than scholars and theorists currently address, especially with regard to the establishment of long-term customer relationships and trust.

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## 1.    INTRODUCTION

Earlier literature argues in favour of the concept of integrated communication or a closer cooperation between and coordination of disciplines within organisations (cf Stanton, Etzel, Walker, Abratt, Pitt & Staude, G E, 1992). Current literature acknowledges the integration of communication to the benefit of the organisation (cf Ferguson, 1999), or critically refers to this concept as "uncritical acceptance of integration as a panacea for communication management in the twenty-first century" (cf Cornelissen & Lock, 2001). The value of integrated communication is also acknowledged in terms of better consumer satisfaction (cf Tourish & Irving, 1995).

Cornelissen and Lock (2001) state that integration has been endorsed by so many academics as well as marketing and communication executives that it has become a permanent organisational practice. The concept of integration has led to different theoretical positions and different concepts such as integrated marketing communications (IMC), integrated marketing (IM) and integrated communications (IC).

Gayeski and Woodward (1996) refer to Grates (1995) who argues that in this new era "lines between communication disciplines as well as those between communication and other related types of consulting are blurring". Consequently separate "islands of communication" have become more unacceptable due to fragmentation, loss of credibility and information overload (Gayeski, 1993b in Gayeski & Woodward, 1996). Belch and Belch (1998) explain  that there are various reasons why marketers today adopt an IMC approach. In addition to delivering a consistent and central marketing message, organisations also benefit from cost savings by eliminating duplication and coordinating human resource requirements with improved long-term results for the organisation.

Irrespective of opposing views, the marketing and public relations disciples have already started to integrate some functions. Goodman (2001) explains that communication today has become more strategic while better relationships with the community have also become a priority to many organisations. Dolphin and Fan (2000a) reiterate, based on findings of their study empirical study in 20 UK organisations regarding the role and tasks of corporate communication executives, that corporate communication has become recognised as one of the most valued strategic planning tools in the organisation.

The perception of integration was also very prominent in the early and late nineties. Stanton et al (1992:46), for instance, argues that public relations experts regard themselves as part of a team that includes other promotional mix elements, a perspective

which are also promulgated by Miller and Rose (1994) as well as Erdogan and Kitchen (1998). An interesting perspective is that of Schultz (1996), who argues that "the consumer integrates the marketer's and advertiser's communication whether the marketing or advertising organisation does or not".

Responses to the concept of integration in literature are critically analysed by Cornelissen and Lock (2001), who argue that this concept has been "polarised" amongst academics. One the one hand academics embrace this concept as resulting in communication effectiveness (referred to as pragmatists, eg Schultz, 1996 & Kitchen & Schultz, 1999). "Purists" on the other hand regard this concept as unworthy of serious examination because it is regarded as academically unrespectable. Purists therefore support the traditional distinction between marketing and public relations within the study of communication management (cf 2 & Ehling, White and Grunig, 1992).

## 2. THE DEBATE REGARDING THE INTEGRATION OF THE MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS DISCIPLINES

The current debate about the integration of public relations (PR) with marketing and advertising functions is still unresolved. Especially over the past 10 to 15 years a significant disagreement has developed with regard to the respective boundaries of both the fields of public relations and marketing. While advertising educators are in favour of the integration of public relations, marketing and advertising functions regarding it as the best of both worlds, public relations educators still tend to oppose this emerging trend (Miller & Rose, 1994).

However, studies in this regard indicate that this debate is merely academic, that practitioners need a multi-disciplinary and more cost-effective approach to communication and that the integration of public relations and marketing functions have already been practised for years (eg Brody, 1994; Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997 & Miller & Rose, 1994). Miller and Rose (1994) refer to a national study in the United States of America (USA) which resulted in a preliminary Task Force Report suggesting circular integration of public relations with advertising and/or marketing which elicited much deliberation. The study reveals that while practitioners support integration, educators are fiercely opposed to the merger but that the private practice appeals to a more interdisciplinary and cost-effective approach to communication.

Based on the above findings, Miller and Rose (1994) argue that the time has perhaps come for both academia and the industry to cooperate in supplying this demand for a multi-disciplinary approach, one that allows the advertising, marketing and public relations fields to grow together, while learning from each other.

Various theorists and scholars still conclude that marketing and public relations are two separate disciplines and use different arguments to substantiate their different perspectives. Kotler and Mindak (1978) point out that marketing people tended to view public relations people as "press agents, flacks, and sponsors of pseudo-events". Public relations people on the other hand viewed marketers as "hucksters, number-crunchers and deodorant salesmen", both viewing the other's function in its narrowest perspective.

There are those scholars who argue that the two functions of marketing and public relations are frequently confused and that public relations is often "subsumed by the larger, more powerful marketing function" (Lubbe in Lubbe & Puth 1994:10), while others underscore this argument by pointing out that public relations and marketing are both essential factors for a modern organisation, but that when an organisation makes public relations a marketing function, practitioners are reduced to the "technician role", which results in the "organisation losing a valuable mechanism for managing its interdependence with its strategic publics" (Ehling et al in Grunig 1992:357). This perspective is much criticised by Harris (1993:13) to which he refers as "hysteria expressed in some PR circles". He in particular opposes Grunig's statement that "a marketing oriented company ignores the nature of a volatile and hostile environment in which organizations, especially business enterprises, must function", arguing that marketing oriented organisations are extremely concerned with the changing environment. Cornelissen and Lock (2001) refer to Grunig as a "purist" who regards the concept of integration as unworthy of any further examination. Brody (1994:20) regards the debate regarding this changing role of marketing and public relations and other elements of the promotional mix as "disservice to all these disciplines" and emphasises that "one-on-one media" are growing in efficiency and effectiveness", a factor which, according to him,   necessitates these changes. He criticises this resistance to integration as a perception that interests "will be better served by capturing larger shares of a shrinking market than by expanding the boundaries of their disciplines".

The confusion is also increased because marketing people are increasingly interested in incorporating publicity as a tool within the marketing mix (a function which has been controlled by public relations practitioners), while public relations practitioners have become concerned about their organisation's marketing practices in that they question whether they adhere to the organisation's social responsibility (Kotler & Mindak 1978). Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000:6)  contend that there should be no confusion between the two disciplines which also often even occur in the practice of public relations. They argue that marketing and public relations are two different disciplines and that  the transaction (exchange for something of value) distinguishes the marketing function from that of public relations.

Various authors (eg Boone & Kurtz, 1999; Erdogan & Kitchen; 1998; Kitchen, 1996 & 1999; Koekemoer; 1998 & Wells, Burnett & Moriarty, 2000), however realise the value of public relations for marketing purposes. They accept that public relations is part of marketing, in particular assists marketing efforts with customer relations and that public relations not only complements but also benefits the marketing approach.

According to Kitchen and Papasolomou (1997), there still exists some confusion with regard to the distinction between marketing and public relations in literature. However, an increasing number of articles (eg by Erdogan & Kitchen, 1998; Kitchen, 1996 & Schultz, 1996), recognise public relations and marketing communications practices as "increasingly integrated and converging concepts". A significant contribution to the debate is that these articles reflect a growing tendency for the public relations and marketing disciplines to be regarded as converging disciplines in both professional and academic worlds.

An interesting perspective is that by Wells et al (2000:434), who argue that public relations can add credibility to an organisation's marketing messages and must work hand in hand with advertising as part of the organisation's marketing plan. They also argue that integration supports marketing's product and sales focus by increasing the brand and the organisation's credibility with customers.

This debate and the respective boundaries of both marketing and public relations are perhaps best summarised in a paper that was delivered in 1989 in San Diego by the internationally renowned marketer Philip Kotler entitled *Public Relations and Marketing: Dividing the Conceptual Domain and Operational Turf*. In his paper Kotler contemplates final decisions as to which tools, techniques, principles and procedures belong to the public relations and which to the marketing discipline (Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997).

Kotler argues that the two disciplines of marketing and public relations are mistakenly regarded as "adversarial". He suggests that these disciplines are better viewed as "corporate allies" rather than as adversaries, a view that is also supported by other theorists (cf Kitchen, 1999 & Shimp, 1993).

An interesting qualitative study on the debate was conducted in 1997 of which the results indicate that this dispute has been merely academic. In the academic literature reference has been made to the debate between marketing and public relations academics over "respective positions and spheres of influence of the two disciplines". However, results from the field research indicate that such a debate does not exist in reality. The research rather identifies an inclination among marketing and public relations practitioners to compete over power, territory, and in essence, budget control. Practitioners suggest that the debate between the two disciplines is a question of

definition or, in other words, merely academic and in other words, "a war of words". Some participants even state that the debate between marketing and public relations practitioners is actually about ownership of MPR in relation to the two disciplines and that these two disciplines are already integrated (Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997).

Despite all the arguments in favour of the integration of marketing and public relations, there is still resistance by especially public relations academics that marketing plays a significant role in public relations. There is especially resistance among these academics to the recent move towards the news concept of marketing public relations (MPR), which has been induced by the traditional marketing view of what public relations is or should be. However, studies indicate that the MPR concept is not only already accepted but also integrated in practice (Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997).

## 3.    THE MPR CONCEPT

### 3.1    Defining MPR

The expanded view of public relations (cf 2) has over the years led to the MPR concept, a new name for a cross-disciplinary approach which holds various underestimated benefits for the organisation (cf 3.2). Owing to the fact that MPR is a relatively unexplored area, there has not been any empirical research carried out by theorists and scholars that have written and published articles and books about this concept, while various perspectives and views of what MPR is and should still exist (cf Harris, 1991 & 1993; Kitchen, 1996 & 1999; Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997; Koekemoer, 1998;  Marken, 1995; Shimp,1993; Strenski, 1991 & Wells et al, 2000).

Definitions and interpretations of MPR vary widely, also partly due to the continuous debate with regard to the integration of marketing and public  relations functions. Public relations experts in particular cannot come to an agreement about what MPR entails, but agree that MPR "is not free advertising". Because MPR includes thinking from traditional public relations,  marketing, advertising and research, defining MPR has also been complicated by the various definitions of these disciplines.  However, definitions of MPR are different from, for instance, general public relations definitions due to their consumer and sales focus.

On a basic level, MPR can be described in the words of Harris as a " new promotional discipline which comprises specialised application techniques to support marketing activities and which is referred to by some theorists and authors as product publicity" (Harris, 1991).

Shimp, 1993 in (Kitchen 1999:352) defines MPR as:

"the more narrow aspect of PR which involves an organisation's interactions with consumers or with other publics (such as governments) regarding marketing matters (like safety). In short it is the marketing-oriented aspect of PR".

Kotler, 1991a (in Kitchen 1999:352) defines MPR as:

"a healthy offspring of two parents: marketing and public relations. MPR represents an opportunity for companies to regain a share of voice in a message-satiated society. MPR not only delivers a strong share of voice to win share of mind and heart; it also delivers a better, more effective voice in many cases".

Perhaps the foremost existing definition of MPR in available literature is that of Harris (1991:12):

"MPR is the process of planning, executing and evaluating programmes that encourage purchase and consumer satisfaction through credible communication of information and impressions that identify companies and their products with the needs, wants, concerns, and interests of consumers".

This definition includes the most frequently used definitions of public relations and marketing as well as Harris' own personal experience. But while this definition links both public relations and marketing functions in a way that contribute to and complement each other to attain the organisation's marketing objectives, it still lacks a description of which benefits it holds for the organisation. The following definition of MPR is therefore proposed by the author (cf 3.2):

"MPR constitutes an integrated way of planning, executing and evaluating MPR programmes to establish long-term and trusting relationships with the organisation's publics/customers and to generate an abiding interest in buying the organisation's product or to make use of its service".

## 3.2 MPR benefits for the organisation

MPR, which emerged in the 1980s because of the need to distinguish between the specialised application of public relations techniques that support marketing and the general practice of public relations, has grown rapidly and "pragmatically" to meet the opportunities of a changing marketplace and has in the process adopted and incorporated thinking from traditional public relations, marketing, advertising, and research (Harris 1991:13). Because MPR includes such theoretical thinking, it is argued that MPR does not merit to be a distinctive concept. As a result this concept is

promulgated in some literature to be essentially about product publicity (cf Harris, 1991 & 1993; Kitchen 1996 & 1999 & Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997) .

According to theorists and scholars who conducted qualitative research in this regard, MPR cannot "legitimately" at this time be termed a new discipline, and suggest that MPR may be simply a "new label" for well-established utilisation, traditions and procedures to support marketing communications (cf  Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997). However, to date no empirical research has been conducted to support these research findings.

From existing literature and research it is clear that MPR is not a new concept, but a new name for a cross-disciplinary approach which has been practiced for many years. Edward L Bernays, who is regarded as the founding father of modern public relations, for instance, was responsible for various MPR programmes in the early years of public relations (Harris 1991:13). This cross-disciplinary approach, however,  holds various underestimated benefits for the organisation such as better customer service, long-term relationships with customers and more trust.

Various theorists and scholars not only have identified uses and applications of MPR in practice over the years, but also tactics in terms of product publicity. This constricted focus has gradually been changing as this concept gains more and more appreciation in terms of benefits other than mere product publicity (cf Guth & Marsh, 2000;  Harris, 1991; Kitchen, 1999;  Marken, 1995; Strenski, 1991 & Wells et al, 2000).

Already MPR is gaining more recognition as something with more benefits other than product publicity. MPR is now also referred to by public relations theorists as that part of public relations that fits into marketing and IMC and on building relationships with customers in order to persuade them to buy a product or make use of a service. This expanded perspective is a valuable contribution to existing literature, as building long-term relationships with an organisation's various publics  (cf Guth & Marsh 2000; Harris, 1991 & 1993; Koekemoer, 1998; Marken 1995 & Strydom, 1998), is the most underestimated benefit of the MPR concept. According to Nakra (1991:43) public relations can especially play a valuable role in customer service in terms of "an apology tool" through strategic planning.

However, various scholars and theorists still tend to treat this concept to mainly assist in positioning a new product, repositioning existing products, complementing the advertising campaign message and adding to marketing tasks. Fewer theorists and scholars also emphasise the value and role of MPR in establishing closer and long-term relationships with customers and clients, an increasingly important approach in contemporary marketing to gain a competitive advantage (cf Guth &  Marsh 2000;

Harris, 1991 & 1993 & Marken 1995).

Building better customer relationships and trust through credible communication by adopting a cross-disciplinary approach can be regarded as the main benefit of MPR. Marketing literature reflects an ongoing interest in the central role that trust plays in building customer relationships which is underscored by the relationship paradigm in marketing (cf Cant, Strydom & Jooste, 1999) and to which public relations can make a considerable contribution (cf Cowles, 1997 & Miller & Rose, 1994). Kitchen (1996:10) underscores this argument by stating that "as marketing has evolved through various orientations as a result of environmental change so public relations has also evolved towards the concept of the public-oriented company". He argues that the integration of marketing and public relations can especially be promulgated "under the societal orientation banner". Brody (1994:20) refers to public relations practitioners "who seek to enhance relationships with stakeholders, employees and in many cases with customers".

Because MPR includes thinking of both the marketing and public relations disciplines, better relations with customers could be established in that a more holistic approach would be adopted by the organisation. MPR techniques may also involve the organisation more with the customer, generate credible communication and feedback and in this way build more trust and support. Applying a cross-disciplinary approach may engage the organisation with publics/customers in ways previously unknown.

On the surface MPR seems to be product publicity, but it certainly distinguishes itself from traditional marketing and public relations in that it focuses more on the publics/ customers in an integrated and engaging manner, provides more opportunities for feedback and in the words of Guth and Marsh "can win an independent, third-party endorsement for a product or service" through the approval of the media (Guth & Marsh 2000:423).

Academic and empirical evidence indicate that there is a bright future for MPR and that it might evolve into a separate management discipline comprising of elements with a wider scope from both the marketing and public relations disciplines. The wider scope includes managing and controlling marketing and public relations activities to achieve marketing communication objectives. It is also widely appreciated that MPR can enhance the credibility of an organisation's product advertising efforts (cf Harris, 1991 & 1993; Kitchen, 1996 & 1999 & Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997).

A gradual shift in perspective with regard to the benefits of MPR confirms that it will in future gain more recognition among theorists and scholars for the valuable role that it can play in building better and long-term relationships with an organisation's publics/

customers and in building more trust. Customers' demand for better product value and service will no doubt also contribute to the significance of the role of MPR in the organisation.

### 3.3    The role of MPR in the organisation

From existing literature it is evident that the relevance of MPR to marketing communications has already been established (Kitchen, 1996 & 1999). The academic debate with regard to the integration of marketing and public relations  has, however, also become relevant to MPR. Some  marketing academics suggest that MPR should be incorporated into the marketing discipline whereas the majority of public relations academics argue that  MPR represents a further attempt by marketers to "hijack" public relations by incorporating it into the promotional mix. Some academics  claim that MPR may evolve into a  new marketing or public relations discipline separate from that of corporate public relations (cf Harris, 1991).

Harris (1991:34), who believes MPR to support marketing objectives through product publicity,  argues that MPR and corporate public relations should be recognised as "separate and self-sufficient" disciplines. He believes that this division will enable public relations practitioners to focus more on the marketing function "unencumbered by other corporate public relations responsibilities" (Harris 1993:14). This view is opposed by Kitchen & Papasolomou, (1997), who believe that a division of responsibilities would seem to create potential for confusion and  possible conflict between the messages which are communicated to.an organisation's various target audiences without necessarily bringing any recognisable communications benefits. Kitchen and Proctor (1991:361) regard corporate public relations and MPR " as not being mutually exclusive, but rather as mutually interactive", a perspective which they believe is not reflected in literature. They argue that public relations cannot be an area "preserved for corporate communications".

Various theorists recognise MPR to be a valuable addition to the marketing mix, while others believe this concept to play an important role with other promotional tools such as advertising, sales promotion and personal selling (cf  Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997 & Nakra, 1991). Empirical research by Kitchen  & Proctor (1991) in the United Kingdom with public relations agencies dealing with the fast-moving consumer goods ( FMCG) sector indicates "greater synergy in the promotional mix" and a shift away from traditional forms of marketing communications towards MPR.

Other qualitative research indicates that in most cases MPR is launched in conjunction with an advertising and marketing campaign, that it complements other marketing efforts, but serves  a distinct and unique purpose, by providing more credibility,

media exposure and newsworthiness to a product, service or marketer. In some MPR efforts, for instance, one objective may be to enhance product credibility and also position the organisation favourably through social responsibility programmes or societal marketing. Most theorists on MPR believe it should be used with other promotional tools as part of an integrated communications programme in order "to increase the effectiveness of the overall promotional effort targeted at a particular objective" (cf Harris, 1991 & Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1997).

Numerous case studies (cf Marken, 1995 & Strenski, 1991) indicate that MPR works well in practice and has benefitted organisations tremendously. These case studies illustrate how MPR can position a new product or service through various public relations techniques.

Harris (1991:63 - 73) made a considerable contribution to existing literature on MPR by formulating an MPR plan which includes the four classic steps of public relations campaigns and programmes as advocated by Cutlip et al (2000). Harris (1991:105) is also one of the few theorists who embraces MPR's role in the organisation to build better customer relationships. He points out that public relations is an important management function to build consumer trust which can only be accomplished over a period of time. MPR will therefore through various MPR tactics, ensure direct involvement with customers and proactive participation in programmes that will be beneficial to the community.

Due to this gradual shift in perspective, MPR as part of an organisation's promotional or marketing communication mix, will increasingly play a key part to gain a competitive advantage in terms of credible communication, better customer service, long-term relationships with customers and trust.

## 4.    CONCLUSION

It is evident from current literature that MPR is not only about product publicity but also exists when credible communication between the organisation's publics/customers generates better customer service, long-term customer relationships and trust, which is still underemphasised or simply overlooked by many theorists and scholars.

Kitchen (1996) best summarises the importance of the integration of marketing and public relations functions in the organisation: *"That does not necessarily mean that marketing and public relations are the same function; rather it means that the strengths of both can be accessed to create effective communications with a diversity of audiences/ publics previously beyond the domain of either function".*

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