



COUNCIL *of* PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRMS

# Creating Value: Public Relations and the New Brand Strategy

*A White Paper from the Council of Public Relations Firms*

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# Creating Value: Public Relations and the New Brand Strategy

**A**lmost a decade after Al and Laura Ries boldly proclaimed the “fall of advertising,” it’s become painfully apparent that traditional advertising no longer works quite so well as it used to.<sup>1</sup> In fact, with social media and peer-to-peer influence starting to affect the fortunes of companies in obvious ways, commentators are now wondering whether marketing itself is obsolete, even whether “customer service” or “listening” is the “new marketing.”<sup>2</sup> This isn’t merely idle talk; marketers are increasingly shifting their dollars away from TV and other traditional mass media and toward options like online. They are also dabbling with increasing sophistication in social media vehicles like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

The rise of social media has gone hand in hand with a broader shift toward increased self-empowerment and self-assertion on the part of consumers. What some observers miss, though, is the extent to which such a shift calls into question the basic parameters of the company-customer transaction. Consumers don’t merely want to be listened to for their own sake; they air their views—and expect businesses to listen—so that companies can then provide them with better value for their dollar. Value thinking is everywhere, and not merely because of the recession. As one recent study found, 83% of Gen-Xers and 91% of Boomers reported that a brand’s ability to provide more value was an important factor in their decision to switch brands, and large majorities also cited other value-oriented reasons like the new brand being “better than the one they had been using” and “lower priced.”<sup>3</sup> In another study, almost 60% reported that a brand’s ability to provide “better value for the money” was “extremely important when considering purchase” of a new food, beverage, or personal/household care product.<sup>4</sup>

A new model of marketing is emerging. No longer is marketing just a ‘communications discipline’ or even a ‘dialogue discipline’ that explains brand benefits to consumers.

**We at the Council of Public Relations Firms believe that marketing activities themselves must deliver enhanced value – tangibly contributing to the consumer’s positive brand experience.** Today the marketplace is rejecting conventional mass-media advertising because consumers don’t feel it adds value. To the contrary, many believe its constant, repetitive presence actually corrupts the brand experience and erodes value.

Winning companies are increasingly eschewing advertising and instead deploying social and conventional media in ways designed to enhance the perceived value they deliver to customers. In recognition of consumers’ newfound power, enhancing value now involves embarking on a *shared* project of creating goods and services that better serve consumers’ needs at an equal or lower price. This white paper explores seven areas in which companies have begun to squeeze out more value for consumers through marketing. In each of these areas, the public relations industry and dedicated PR agencies in particular are proving themselves uniquely equipped to spearhead corporate value-enhancing efforts. Experts in the latest social media, public relations agencies help companies add considerable amounts of value for consumers in disciplines as diverse as customer service, business ethics, promotions, and many others. And public relations agencies do it more efficiently than traditional ad agencies, providing extraordinary bang for your marketing buck.

Public relations has a rich, proven history of enhancing a brand’s experiential and social value. As consumers transform today’s marketing environment – seeking greater value for their hard-earned dollars – public relations is emerging as the marketing discipline that’s right for the times.

# 1. Public Services

One creative way companies are providing perceived added value is by offering a useful product or service above and beyond what consumers feel they are paying for. Businesses have long devoted marketing dollars to sponsoring art exhibits, sporting events, and non-profit organizations. During the recession, however, some companies have sought to enhance value by going further and directly providing public services free of charge.

KFC, for instance, recently paid for 350 potholes to be repaired in Louisville, KY, for a total cost of \$3000. Each pothole carried a sprayed-on message: "Refreshed by KFC."<sup>5</sup> Charmin bathroom tissue offered some love of its own by creating SitOrSquat, a free service that provides consumers with advice on bathroom conditions via their mobile phones. Starbucks has given free coffee to consumers who themselves perform public service.<sup>6</sup> With consumer interest in public service rising since the 2008 presidential elections, the opportunity seems right for other brands to raise their profile by offering public services themselves. What if Clorox launched a campaign to clean-up graffiti in inner-city areas? What if Exxon offered to pay for heating inner city schools? What if Nike paid for athletic programs in the schools?

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KFC recently paid for 350 potholes to be repaired in Louisville, KY

*Photograph courtesy of KFC*

Rather than jam ads in consumers' faces, companies can enhance brand awareness and create favorable brand associations by giving something back to the public at large, trusting that appreciative citizens will in turn reward the brand with loyalty and positive buzz. How do businesses craft brand-supporting public service promotions? Public relations firms are well positioned to offer a number of helpful services, including strategic counsel, assistance with media placements, and publicity via social media websites such as Facebook or MySpace. Internal public relations departments are also capable of contributing, as was the case in Walmart's recent promotion of its \$4 generic prescription drug initiative, which was publicized via direct pitches to the news media and without any paid advertising.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Brand Experience

Another way companies are enhancing value through marketing is by making the brand experience more memorable and fun. Public relations firms have long helped clients create attention-getting guerilla and stunt campaigns that enable consumers to enjoy the brand more. Often these campaigns have proven critical to the success of new products, as with the launch of the iPhone and Nintendo's Wii. With the rise of experiential, guerilla, and viral marketing as disciplines, the traditional "publicity stunt" has morphed into a multi-platform brand experience that uses the latest technologies to intensify brand meaning and bring it full-throttle into consumers' lives. A pioneer in such a brand experience has been the television show *American Idol*, which has incorporated texting, concert tours, CDs, and its website into an experience that goes way beyond the high-rated television program itself.



Guerilla campaigns in particular have been described as a convergence of advertising, marketing, and public relations.<sup>8</sup> Yet in an effort to create campaigns that deliver fun experiences for consumers, many companies are relying especially heavily on the public relations discipline, most notably in the area of social media. Some noteworthy examples include the following:

- In 2008, IKEA worked with a public relations firm on a well-received campaign that saw the comedian Mark Malkoff living in a store in Paramus, NJ and posting webisodes about it. The campaign's website, [MarkLivesinIKEA.com](http://MarkLivesinIKEA.com), generated 15 million hits, while blog coverage increased over 350% in the course of a year. Sales in the Paramus store rose 5.5% year over year, and traffic to IKEA's web site also rose. Ikea's North

American sales rose<sup>9</sup> from \$2.9 billion in 2007 to \$3.16 billion in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

- Papa John's pizza partnered with a public relations firm to create an award-winning campaign in which the world's fastest talker and the world's fastest texter competed to order a pizza in the least amount of time. The campaign generated over 600 media placements, resulting in a whopping 53 million impressions and 75,000 views of a YouTube video.<sup>11</sup> Papa John's revenues rose 6.4% from \$1.06 billion in 2007 to \$1.13 billion in 2008.<sup>12</sup>
- Six Flags amusement parks are reported to be looking to hire a full-time social networker with media relations skills, having already launched an innovative alternative reality game that included creation of a fake newspaper, blogs, a game website, and Twitter pages.<sup>13</sup> Although the company operated at a loss in 2008, revenues rose by 5%, while attendance rose to 25.3 million people, up from 24.9 million in 2007.<sup>14</sup>



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## 3. Brand Relationships

With the rise of new expectations about value, it would seem that brand relationships don't matter as much as they used to. A decline in brand loyalty has become apparent during the current recession, with the rise of private label brands and the decline of juggernaut brands like Starbucks and Whole Foods. Yet rest assured, brand relationships *do* still matter — in some ways, more than ever. Trusted brands like Cheerios, J. Crew, Apple, and Kodak continue to serve as sources of comfort and stability in consumers' lives during times of crisis. Meanwhile, large percentages of consumers report remaining loyal to grocery store brands. One recent poll found that over 40% of consumers agreed wholly or partially with the statement "I consider myself to be loyal to brand name products."<sup>15</sup>

With trust in brands declining across categories,<sup>16</sup> it may be that consumers cherish even more the relationships they do have with a few special brands. Thus a meaningful brand relationship may still comprise an important part of the enhanced value that firms can deliver to consumers. Here social media plays a huge role. Using tools like Twitter, blogs, and Facebook, companies can forge increasingly intimate bonds between the brand, key executives associated with the brand, and consumers.

In launching its redesigned Hybrid car, for instance, Honda intensified the brand relationship by launching a blog that handled consumer feedback. Including interviews with Honda executives as well as video and consumer comments, the blog built buzz online while allowing the firm to counter impressions that the new model was too similar to its competitor, Toyota's Prius. As one expert noted, the blog "makes the consumer feel like they have genuine information they can use to make decisions. It's building a relationship with the brand and with the product."<sup>17</sup>

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How should businesses go about incorporating social media into relationship-building efforts? Public relations firms can provide vital assistance. As one commentator has observed, companies dabbling in social media often err by adopting a hard-sell approach which consumers don't find credible. "On your Facebook profile, if you and I 'friend' and then within a day of befriending you, I start sending you invites to my stupid conference and my stupid downloadable document you should read, and this thing and that thing, you're going to unfriend me fairly quickly."<sup>18</sup> Companies also start marketing too quickly without understanding their audience or asking for permission to market. Even worse, they respond too slowly to relationship-busting crises when they happen online. When two Domino's Pizza employees posted a YouTube video showing them putting nasal mucus on sandwiches, management didn't respond immediately, hoping the whole thing would blow over. A full-blown public relations crisis ensued, and although the long-term implications aren't yet clear, there is some evidence that consumers' short-term brand perceptions were hit hard.<sup>19</sup>

Expert in rapidly evolving technologies, public relations firms can help businesses avoid costly mistakes. A recent social marketing industry report found that most marketers using social media have been in it for a few months or less.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, public relations agencies

### 3. Brand Relationships (continued)

have had their own dedicated professionals in the digital trenches for years now, day in and day out; as a result, agencies understand the intricacies of online communities and the special idioms used there. Also, as experienced crisis managers, public relations firms are able to respond quickly and more effectively to events that threaten the brand's image and consumer relationships. Crises may be inevitable, both on and offline, but in the hands of a public relations agency they can often be turned to a firm's advantage, tightening the brand-consumer relationship over the long-term, and enhancing the value delivered to consumers.



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## 4. Community

In addition to a meaningful brand relationship, companies are enhancing value for consumers—and seeing financial results themselves—by serving as conduits for the formation of peer-to-peer communities.



Brand communities are nothing new, yet with the assistance of public relations agencies companies are using social media to intensify peer-to-peer bonds of all sorts among consumers. In support of its Tampax tampons and Always pads and pantliners, Procter and Gamble created an online community called beinggirl.com, aimed at exploring issues encountered by girls entering puberty. The community, which includes advice from a woman's health care expert on questions like communicating with a parent and handling physical problems, receives 3 million

active visitors a month from 49 countries. It's not only the girls who are receiving an added benefit: Costing \$3 million annually, the community provides an ROI of three times that of conventional media spending.<sup>21</sup>

More and more companies are experimenting with online communities as a way to add more value for consumers while also helping the firm reach its own marketing goals. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty has incorporated many community tools, including a blog open to the public and sites where consumers can share their own campaign-related stories.<sup>22</sup> WalMart has partnered with female bloggers to create elevenmom.com, a site about saving money that now includes a YouTube channel and radio network.<sup>23</sup> And the mobile Korean BBQ restaurant Kogi (<http://kogibbq.com/>) creates both online and offline community with its innovative community model built around its blog and Twitter feed.

## 5. Knowledge

One benefit traditional advertising has always offered to consumers is the ability to provide them with information they need to make better choices. With advertising increasingly losing credibility, however, client firms are adding more value than ever by providing useful, credible information via public relations. A clear example of this is POM Wonderful, which has been credited with single-handedly creating the US market for pomegranate juice. Between 2002 and 2006, the brand pursued a public relations strategy that included spending \$10 million on scientific research into the heart benefits of pomegranate juice, spending \$5 million on continuing research on cardiovascular and cancer studies, and hiring a mixologist to promote pomegranate juice usage in bars. The brand got the word out about pomegranate juice in a big way, receiving numerous placements in publications from *The New York Times* to *WebMD* to *O Magazine* to *Men's Health*. The results: Consumers learned a thing or two about the preventative anti-oxidant power of pomegranates, while POM saw sales skyrocket from \$500,000 in 2002 to \$80 million in 2006.

It's abundantly clear that consumers *want* companies to provide information about subjects important to them, so long as it's reasonably objective and credible. As one study has shown, over half of consumers who sign up to get email from pharmaceutical companies do so to learn about new products, while slightly less than half do so to learn about existing products.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, about half of baby boomers list pharmaceutical company websites as a media source they trust to learn about health issues.<sup>25</sup>

Health is hardly the only area in which consumers have received useful information from companies and organizations. Benefitting from the media expertise of public relations agencies, Haagen-Daz has added value by

### The Power of Knowledge

51

Percentage of US Internet users who are very/somewhat likely to read and take action after viewing an online article with brand information.

47

Percentage very/somewhat likely after viewing an email offering.

25

Percentage very/somewhat likely after seeing a banner ad.

13

Percentage very/somewhat likely after seeing a pop-up.

66

Minimum percentage of respondents 18-34 who, as one expert put it, "said they conduct Internet searches for products or services they read about in online articles either very frequently or somewhat frequently."

Source: "Brand Mentions Preferred over Ads," *emarketer.com*, April 20, 2009

raising awareness about the disappearance of Honeybees, while Honeywell sponsored a program that brought Nobel Laureates in science to lecture on the campuses of partner colleges. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported, the Safeway supermarket chain offers consumers an online program that keeps tabs on their food purchases and evaluates their diets.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Raytheon recently created a well-received PR campaign around the film *Iron Man*, starring Robert Downey, Jr., in an effort to increase its pool of potential recruits and improve its image. Entitled "The Raytheon You Don't Know," the campaign created publicity around the firm's high-tech exoskeleton robotic suit and its development team. The effort yielded 20 million impressions and an increase in the number of possible recruits. Consumers benefitted both by learning about the suit and also by discovering potential job opportunities at a company they otherwise might not have considered.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

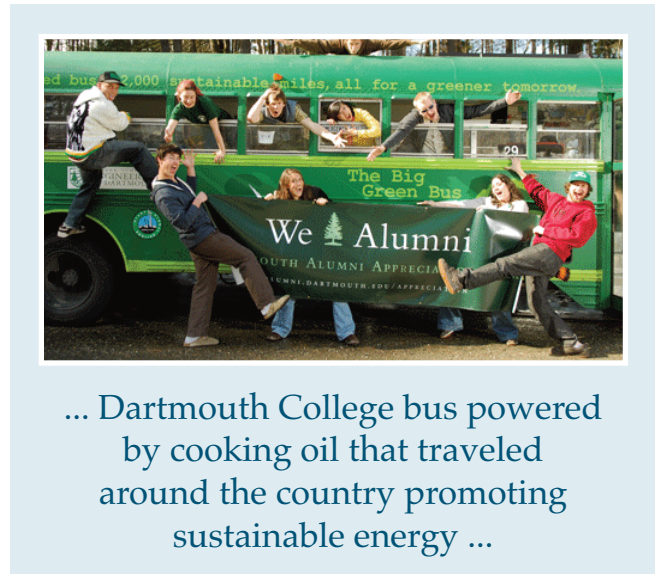
Many consumers today don't merely want to buy a useful product or service when they engage with a brand; they want to feel like they are doing something positive for themselves, their communities, and their planet. As companies are discovering, offering a strong ethical message can provide a new dimension of added value for consumers while also enhancing the brand's image. This isn't merely true in America: One recent study found that strong majorities in countries like India, China, and Japan would "buy products provided by socially responsible businesses with 'good purposes,' or products devoted to safety, the environment, social causes and communities."<sup>28</sup>

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Many companies are pursuing social corporate responsibility (CSR) programs or charitable works of various sorts, but what some miss is the strong strategic guidance that public relations agencies can provide. Working with a company's chief ethics officer, public relations agencies help companies enhance value for consumers by crafting a company's mission statement and other messages around corporate behavior as well as by orchestrating CSR campaigns and employee-focused events. Working alongside a company's legal staff, agencies can also serve as ethical counselors, helping businesses stay true to their values. Public relations agencies themselves take ethics very seriously, and the Council of Public Relations Firms maintains its own code of ethics for member firms to follow, with special emphasis on honesty and transparency in communications.



... Dartmouth College bus powered  
by cooking oil that traveled  
around the country promoting  
sustainable energy ...

Timberland's Earthkeepers campaign offers an exciting example of how companies can put CSR to work to build consumer value while also benefitting the brand. To promote Timberland's image as an environmental leader and to create buzz among youth audiences, the company created an online network focused on encouraging positive action toward safeguarding the environment. Establishing a presence on media like YouTube, Facebook, and changents.com, Earthkeepers championed several high-profile Heroes, including a Dartmouth College bus powered by cooking oil that traveled around the country promoting sustainable energy, and a group called Reverb that connects with fans at major rock concerts around the subject of sustainability. Overall, Earthkeepers created value for consumers by offering both fun experiences and the satisfaction of engaging with an important social issue. Since the June 2008 launch, almost 160,000 people have registered as Earthkeepers, over 400,000 virtual trees have been planted on Facebook, and the campaign has generated almost 100,000,000 total impressions.

## 7. Better Products and Services

A final way businesses are enhancing value is by making their core products and services better. Here public relations agencies can play a surprisingly powerful role by helping companies understand consumer needs better and then delivering on them.

One of social media's great potentials that still frequently goes untapped is the chance it offers to learn of consumers' true feelings about a company's offerings and how they can be improved. Fully immersed in social media platforms like Twitter, public relations agencies help firms stay on top of consumer sentiment — not merely so that they can respond to bad publicity, but so that firms can have the benefit of consumers' R&D ideas.<sup>29</sup> Agencies can also help companies actively solicit customers' participation, something that Campbell's Soup recently did online when it offered consumers up to \$5,000 for their innovative ideas.<sup>30</sup>

Although it might not seem so at first glance, customer service is another area in which public relations agencies can contribute. Many public relations firms today maintain research departments skilled at understanding how consumers tick and what improvements in service they desire. As part of developing good public relations,



agencies often look to customer service as a differentiating feature of a brand, studying how it is performed, writing about it, celebrating it, encouraging brands to excel in it, and even using customer service representatives as part of campaigns. In this way, agencies help galvanize entire organizations around delivering superior service. If anything, public relations and customer service should be far more integrated than is currently the case. Such integration represents an easy opportunity for improving customer satisfaction and loyalty through the delivery of enhanced value.

## Public Relations: A Vital Tool

“For business,” *The Economist* has observed, “public relations is an increasingly vital marketing tool — especially as traditional forms of advertising struggle to catch consumers’ attention.”<sup>31</sup> This white paper has sought to show exactly how and why public relations has become so vital in an age of consumer empowerment and social media.

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As we’ve seen, it’s incorrect to proclaim that “customer service is the new marketing”; rather, providing value is, across all its many dimensions. Great customer service will create powerful peer-to-peer endorsements in our brave new world of social media, but so, too, will a combination of more entertaining brand experiences, richer information offerings, products and services better tailored to customers’ needs, more opportunities for

ethical participation, more extensive brand communities, better brand-consumer relationships, and even the provision of public services. All of these dimensions are extensions or improvements on the core product or service offering, and all enhance the overall value consumers get for the dollar. In each of these areas, public relations agencies possess tremendous assets that companies can mobilize to win share-of-wallet far more cheaply and efficiently than traditional mass media advertising can.

Change is scary, but a bright spot in current marketplace trends are the new possibilities opening for firm-consumer partnership. The old marketing was win-lose; companies won, but only at the expense of the consumer, who was pummeled into submission by advertising. With the rise of a new, value-centric mentality, marketing has the potential to be a win-win exchange: More value for consumers, but also more loyalty, profit, and revenues for brands. As Sir Martin Sorrell has remarked, “it falls to public relations professionals to lead companies into this conversation between consumers, mainstream media, employees, analysts, investors, bloggers, and competitors around brands.”<sup>32</sup>

## About the Council of Public Relations Firms

Founded in 1998, the Council of Public Relations Firms represents America's premier global, mid-size, regional and specialty public relations agencies across every discipline and practice area, accounting for an estimated 12,000 employees in the U.S. The Council's mission is to advance the business of public relations firms by building the market and firms' value as strategic business partners. For more information about the Council, visit [www.prfirms.org](http://www.prfirms.org).

The Council also publishes *The Firm Voice*, a bi-weekly online publication that covers trends, insights and analysis for public relations firms. In spring 2009, the Council will publish "Firm Voice: Best Practices for Public Relations Firms: The 2009 compendium of Insight and Intelligence from Members of the Council of Public Relations Firms." Check out [www.prfirms.org](http://www.prfirms.org) for more details.

<sup>1</sup> Al Ries and Laura Ries, *The Fall of Advertising & the Rise of PR*, (Harper Business, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> "Your Call Is (Not That) Important to US," discussion of book by the same name on NPR's Talk of the Nation, March 31, 2009; "Customer Service Is the New Marketing," panel at Web2.0 Expo, New York, September 17, 2008, discussed in blog posting on [www.mequoda.com](http://www.mequoda.com); Paul Chaney, "Social Media: Listening Is the New Marketing," posted February 18, 2009 on [www.practicalecommerce.com](http://www.practicalecommerce.com).

<sup>3</sup> "Baby Boomers Are Less Brand Loyal Than Gen Yers and Xers," *Research Alert* 26 (15), August 1, 2008. Data originally appeared in a study by TV Land ([tvland.com](http://tvland.com)) called "Generation Buy: A Close Look at the Boomer Consumer."

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dolliver, "Priorities at the Store," *Brandweek* 50(6), February 9, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Alli McConnon, "A Chicken in Every Pot(hole)," *BusinessWeek*, April 20, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Pierret, "The Hot New Trend in Marketing: Public Service?" posted March 26, 2009 on [blog.tmcnet.com](http://blog.tmcnet.com).

<sup>7</sup> Bob Niedt, "WalMart Wakes Up to PR; Company Had No Public Relations Presence Until Recently," *The Post Standard* (Syracuse, NY), November 19, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Joy McNaughton, "Guerrilla Communication, Visual Consumption, and Consumer Public Relations," *Public Relations Review*, vol. 34, issue 3, September 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Ketchum and IKEA: Man Lives in IKEA: Citizen Marketer Becomes IKEA Brand Evangelist," *PR Week*, March 9, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Thomas, "Ikea set to open 36th U.S. store in Charlotte, N.C.," *Furniture Today*, February 13, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "Fleishman-Hillard and Papa John's Intl.: Papa, What's Next? Text!" in *PR Week*, March 9, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Pizza Chain Papa John's Reports Fourth Quarter and Full-Year 2008 Earnings," *Chain Leader*, 2/25/2009.

<sup>13</sup> Shannon Curley, "Hurry, Hurry, Tweet Right Up; Six Flags Coasters Take A Ride on the Viral Market," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 26, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> "Six Flags' revenue, losses up in 2008," *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, March 11, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Dolliver, "Priorities at the Store," op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Tracy Turner, "Our trust is eroding, consumer poll shows," *Columbus Dispatch*, September 5, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Alysha Webb, "Honda Uses Insight Blog to Build Buzz, Shape Message," *Automotive News*, March 16, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Brogan, President of New Marketing Labs, quoted in "Twittering Businesses Warned Against Being Too Hard Sell," *Independent Financial Review*, April 16, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Stephanie Clifford, "Video Prank at Domino's Taints Brand," *New York Times*, April 16, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> "Local Business on Social Media Marketing Bandwagon," *Business Press* (Riverside, CA), April 13, 2009. Data cited is from Michael Stelzner, "Social Media Marketing Industry Report," sponsored by Social Media Success Summit 2009.

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<sup>27</sup> "Raytheon Company: The Raytheon You Don't Know: Channeling 'Iron Man,'" *PRWeek*, March 9, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Liu Jie, "Consumers Are for Companies That Care," *China Daily*, November 26, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> For an article on corporate attempts to use Twitter as a tool for consumer feedback, see Claire Cain Miller, "Putting Twitter's World to Use," *New York Times*, April 14, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.campbellsoupcompany.com/ideas/submitidea.aspx>.

<sup>31</sup> "The PR industry," *The Economist*, January 19, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Sir Martin Sorrell, "Public Relations: The Story Behind a Remarkable Renaissance," speech delivered at the IPR dinner, November, 2008.