

It's about quality, not pennies

Price promotions may grab headlines, but brands built on quality are the winners in the long term

In 2005, long before the vultures started to circle the global economy, *The Daily Telegraph* reported on the trend of 'pay what you think it's worth' restaurants.

A north London bistro was asking customers to leave a 'fair or generous' amount for their meals. Other restaurants were reportedly following suit.

Then, in 2007, Radiohead allowed fans to download its new album and pay what they wanted. In so doing, the band cunningly catapulted awareness of its latest opus into the media mainstream, with the subsequent 'traditional' launch taking the album to number one. More recently M&S generated acres of coverage when it reintroduced the penny bazaar for its 125th anniversary, while Ryanair's £1 flights have captured the imagination of travellers and journalists alike.

So price can be a headline-grabber. In these cost-conscious times then, with consumers counting every penny, it's tempting to see PR as the ideal vehicle to deliver a great value proposition.

But there's a problem. What these price-led stories have in common is that they are barking mad. A handful of chichi restaurants might be able to get away with laissez faire pricing, but no branded chain could. Music fans won't pay for content offered for free, and M&S and Ryanair would soon be calling in the receivers if their offers amounted to anything more than an eye-catching promotion.

Price can command headlines, but only when it enters the realm of the fantastical. That's why I believe, in these cost-conscious times, clients and their PR consultants would be better advised to concentrate on quality.

Price can speak for itself, but quality needs an advocate. And creating advocates is what PR does best – and better than any other marketing discipline.

Brands and businesses that can convey the integrity of their offering,



PHIL ADAMS

investment in service and continued commitment to excellence will emerge stronger than those that pull off a series of – quite literally – cheap stunts.

But it all sounds a bit worthy, doesn't it? News of an enhanced quality control process, new call centre or improved product specification is scarcely likely to stir the blood. Well, that's the creative challenge. Brands must communicate the quality of their offer in ways that capture the imagination. That may mean devising strategies that imply quality; it may even mean developing eye-catching products and services designed to drive brand equity.

It's telling that when a brand that has already established a reputation for great quality launches an economy offering, the media respond positively. Witness the launch of the 'essential' Waitrose range, which was positioned as maintaining product quality while making price reductions through, for example, packaging savings. Waitrose was able to do this after years of building its relationship with consumers, who know what the brand stands for.

Business models based primarily on price are rarely defensible in the long term – they are relatively easy to imitate. However, what cannot be copied are brand values, attitude or ideology.

These are developed through consistent, long-term, strategic campaigns, rather than 'quick-win' tactical promotions. And while targeting belt-tightening consumers may seem to lead naturally to a focus on price messages, these are, ahem, ten a penny.

Creating long-lasting engagement should remain the focus for PR. Over any period, the economic climate will change and consumers will feel more or less affluent. But their underlying relationship with brands will be based on a long-term appreciation of quality, rather than the fact they saved a few quid in a promotion.

Brandon Stockwell is a director at Citigate Dewe Rogerson

Views in brief

Has your attitude to the use of celebrities in campaigns changed over the past year? The principles remain the same – ensuring there are matching values, carrying out due diligence, drafting tight contracts. The challenge is in creating a genuine link, rather than it appearing to be a case of creating a campaign and then asking: 'Who's available?' And then: 'No, we can't afford him/her; we'll go for that girl from *Big Brother* instead.'

Which brand has best caught the public mood over the past six months? Money Saving Expert. Whatever you think about Martin Lewis, he has transformed his brand into the de facto consumer voice of the downturn.