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OP-ED

Back to the future: The link between psychology and PR

Jason Winocour, Hunter Public Relations April 13, 2012

As many PR folks know, Edward Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud and spent many summers at his famous uncle's side. Bernays was heavily influenced by Freud and generously tapped Freudian theory to develop some of the most groundbreaking and successful PR campaigns of the 20th century.

As a Freudian thinker, Bernays sought to change habits by appealing not so much to rational thought, but rather to more primal human needs and desires. So when the Beech-Nut Packing Company approached Bernays in the 1920s to help stimulate sales of bacon, he donned his Freudian cap and developed a campaign that linked eating a hearty breakfast, such as bacon and eggs, to enhanced physical security and well being. Within a matter of years, Bernays transformed bacon and eggs into America's breakfast of choice and shifted the dietary habits of millions.

I hadn't thought much about the relationship between psychology and public relations in recent years until I read Charles Duhigg's recent article in the Sunday *New York Times*, "How companies learn your secrets." I was fascinated by the piece, which is an excerpt from Duhigg's new book, *The Power of Habit*, and was further intrigued after hearing Duhigg speak about the book at South by Southwest Interactive last month. As I was reading it, I kept thinking about the ethical implications for PR and marketing pros.

Case in point: Duhigg reveals Target's practice of assigning each shopper a "pregnancy prediction score" based on the purchase of 25 products that, when analyzed together, enable the company to predict if a woman is pregnant with astonishing accuracy. So accurate in fact, that Target angered the father of a teenage girl who demanded to know why the company was sending his young daughter coupons for baby clothes and cribs. Turns out that Target "discovered" the girl was pregnant before her own father did! Although some may find this to be a bit creepy and overly intrusive, presumably there's no real harm in tapping into the shopping habits of pregnant women to entice them to buy their zinc and magnesium supplements, hand sanitizer, cocoa-butter lotion, and cotton balls at Target, rather than somewhere else.

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But as Duhigg outlines in a subsequent chapter, it's deeply troubling when the casino gambling industry uses neuropsychology studies to make slot machines more habit forming, or dare I say, addictive. In that scenario, there are some pretty hefty business and ethical considerations for PR practitioners to grapple with. Is it the role and responsibility of PR pros who work in the gambling industry to develop marketing programs that align with a habit-formation approach — an approach that will likely enhance the bottom line? Or conversely, does the PR pro urge discretion and self-regulation to avoid the potential avalanche of bad press and long-term damage to a company's reputation and bottom line if such marketing tactics became public? And how far should marketers of other consumer-facing products and services push the neuropsychology envelope in an attempt to increase sales and maximize profits? Thorny questions, to say the least.

Duhigg is optimistic that the latest science and insights on habit formation can be used to benefit individuals and societies at large. That's certainly true, but let's hope the PR and marketing folks at Gamblers Anonymous read Duhigg's book and embrace its findings with as much gusto as their counterparts in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Macau.

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