

Not-so-splendid isolation

In the fast world of intersecting media, consumer-only PR campaigns are no longer viable

So I'm standing on the pitch of Turin's Stadio delle Alpi, home of the mighty Juventus. Goalkeeping legend Peter Schmeichel is to my left, the *News of the World's* chief football correspondent to my right and somewhere in the mid-distance is a man dressed as a furry orange monster.

It's 1997. My mission: to deliver an exclusive feature on the new Sugar Puffs advertisement: 'Honey Monster scores last-minute winner past hapless Schmeichel'. It's going well. The snapper has taken hundreds of shots. I'm getting on well with the journalist and it's looking good for a cracking exclusive the following Sunday.

A few days later, disaster strikes. The mobile rings. It's Mark Solomons from Specialist News Services, the press agency. What could I tell him about the new Sugar Puffs ad with Peter Schmeichel? Turns out some twerp at the ad agency sent an unauthorised press release to *Campaign*. The magazine ran the story, Mark spotted it and is now filing a piece for the nationals.

The result? A handful of nibs, a peeved *News of the World*, no exclusive and several thousand pounds of the client's money up in smoke. It's the kind of story all PROs have, but I tell it for a reason.

A long time ago it was possible to consign audiences to a series of airtight compartments. We could talk to the marketing press in the safe and certain knowledge that the resulting coverage would be for industry eyes only. Communications sent to staff could be relied upon to stay within the organisation. We tailored comms to City audiences without considering the prospect of an actual consumer catching wind of it.

Those days have long gone, yet PR consultancies have struggled to adapt. Most remain configured around sealed units defined by audiences.

The media world is so often described as a 'jungle', but a better analogy is the game of snakes and ladders. These days



a story intended for a business audience can easily land on a snake and become a major front-page blockbuster. Think back to Gerald Ratner's fall from grace.

Every day, dozens of stories that have been carefully crafted for the benefit of one audience end up in front of a different one. When M&S reports a poor set of results, every fashion editor in the land can be relied upon to file 800 words on this season's dowdy designs and why it is no wonder that profits are down.

The media sector is eating itself. Fewer specialist journalists, smaller editorial teams and an explosion in the number of news channels have combined to create a chaotic, constantly regurgitating editorial landscape. An eye-catching product launch in Saturday's *Grocer* can be splashed all over the nationals by Monday, perhaps weeks before the client is ready for consumer-facing coverage.

PR professionals can view this either as an occupational hazard or as a great opportunity. Many people raised an

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eyebrow when Citigate Dewe Rogerson launched a consumer offering four years ago, but more and more are starting to see the sense of it now.

It is impossible to have a consumer PR offering that exists in splendid isolation of the world of business, of politics, of investment. PROs have opportunities to use channels and platforms ostensibly destined for one audience to reach their true goal. And if they do it smartly, the results can be spectacular.

When Branston Baked Beans launched in October 2005, the brief was to draw consumer attention to the new Branston recipe. A conventional consumer launch with the usual parade of stunts and surveys would have delivered a few column inches. But by declaring war on Heinz and locating the story in the business world, Branston created a consumer launch platform of which most food brands only dream.

I sometimes tell clients there is no such thing as consumer PR – or for that matter, business-to-business PR, corporate PR, or any other 'type'. I am not being entirely disingenuous. While we must understand consumers' needs, our horizons must stretch further than this. If creative and strategic processes pay no heed to the wider world, the result will be an awful lot of snakes and not so many ladders.

Steve Marinker, head of consumer, Citigate Dewe Rogerson