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P&G eyes the influencer

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Long the world's biggest advertiser, Procter & Gamble Co. demonstrated its burgeoning interest in PR techniques Nov. 11, convening an event called Buzzpoint, where a heavy-hitting lineup of inside and outside experts taught, preached to or warned its brand managers about seeding marketing messages via influential consumers.

As word of mouth spread inside the company about the word-of-mouth marketing discussion, P&G was forced to shift from a planned hour-long discussion into a day-long program and move to a bigger venue to accommodate hundreds of lower-ranking marketers and agency executives who wanted in.

Those final 600 attendees-four times the initial plan-were treated to a host of high-level speakers and a film takeoff on Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" called "Influencer Eye for the Brand Guy." In it, Chairman-CEO A.G. Lafley dispatches a Fab Five that includes Global Marketing Officer Jim Stengel, Global External Relations Manager Charlotte Otto and Manager-Global Media Bernhard Glock to make over the marketing plan of a brand manager who has unfashionably sunk 99% of his budget into TV.

But while P&G is abuzz with talk of influencer marketing, the bulk of P&G's media spending, 69.6% last year, was still on TV, a fact that Kevin Roberts, CEO of Publicis Groupe's Saatchi & Saatchi, maintained should not change significantly. "The two most powerful media in your lifetime are going to remain the television screen and the store. Television because everybody's got one and can use it. ... The theater of dreams [the store], because 80% of decisions are made there."

a different view

To which ad-bashing pundit Al Ries, co-author of "The Fall of Advertising and Rise of PR," countered, "If 80% of people are available to switch brands, you're not putting your brand in their minds."

"For our brands, influencer marketing is some of the most [effective] marketing," Mr. Stengel said. But in introducing Mr. Ries, he noted: "We invited Al not because we necessarily believe everything he has to say

but to stretch our thinking."

Mr. Ries drew laughs from P&Gers with his rhetorical question: "If advertising is so effective, why is it no agencies advertise?" He termed advertising the "afterburner" that keeps brands in orbit after PR gets them off the ground.

PR already in place

That's not to say P&G isn't already using PR. Ayman Ismail, global marketing director-Crest whitening products, said the brand signed 2002 Olympic figure skating gold medalists Jaime Sale and David Pelletier right after the controversy surrounding their medal-and required local TV stations who wanted interviews to talk about Crest Whitestrips, too. He likened advertising to approaching a girl in a bar and saying, "I'm a hot date," and PR to getting her friend to convey the message.

"Eventually," retorted Dan Wieden, co-founder of Wieden & Kennedy, "there comes a time when you have to speak for yourself." But he also recounted successful buzz-building efforts linked to his shop's Gold Lion-winning 2001 Nike "Freestyle" TV ad, such as media coverage of the national Nike Streetball tournament.

'next big thing'

Nike's recent eight-figure deal with Cleveland Cavaliers rookie LeBron James notwithstanding, Mr. Wiede said the insight driving Freestyle was that celebrity athletes' influence is waning, because fewer youths see themselves as or look up to jocks, particularly those in the NBA.

If there's a "next big thing" for P&G from the event, it may be the old, oft-repeated ideal of integrating many elements, including PR, into the mix, espoused for years if overshadowed more recently as restructuring savings and recession made TV more affordable.

An example is "Healthy Smiles 2010," a program that provides free dental care to inner-city kids but break the mold for most PR programs by using TV ads as part of the mix. The program is run by Bryan McClear chief organizer of Buzzpoint and Crest's associate director-external relations who just began a four-month assignment as a Crest brand manager.