



Auditing Perception: Volvo Cars and the Automotive Journalist Community

Background

Volvo Cars has established the goal of being among the top three PR organizations in the automotive industry. To this end, Volvo has undertaken a variety of self-study initiatives over the past few years designed to help evaluate their practices and identify areas for improvement. One such program, a comprehensive, integrated benchmarking study, is described in a detailed case study elsewhere on this site ([LINK TO BENCHMARK ARTICLE](#)).

As another part of this ongoing quest for industry leadership, Volvo commissioned the Gronstedt Group in early 2002 to conduct a broad study of automotive reporters and editors. This research was intended to assess Volvo's performance, *vis-a-vis* its competition, along several key criteria, and also to gauge journalists' opinions of the state of automotive PR generally, with an eye toward establishing a definitive industry-wide annual benchmarking survey. According to Roger Ormisher, head of Volvo's North American PR efforts, "Our goals were two-fold. We wanted to assess the status of recent initiatives and changes, as well as establish solid, reliable benchmarks against which we could measure future progress. The Gronstedt Group knows our business and had produced high-quality work for us in the past, so they seemed like a natural for this project."

Challenges

Potentially the most daunting challenge was the survey design itself. For starters, it had to accomplish several different goals:

- benchmark Volvo's reputation;
- measure effectiveness at managing communication with automotive journalists;
- obtain qualitative feedback in the form of verbatim quotes from respondents;
- provide a snapshot of automotive PR in 2002, for purposes of baseline comparison and informing recommendations for future public relations development and research.

The study faced a number of hurdles. Perhaps the most significant hurdle was that the automotive press is vastly over-surveyed and, as a result, is generally hostile to surveys. This is especially true for North American journalists. One respondent told us that he receives multiple such surveys per week. As a result, at least three major publications now have policies against participation in this type of research. Creating co-sponsored, consolidated market research studies would go a long way toward addressing that challenge.

Additionally, most journalist surveys pose validity problems. Because the survey population tends to be drawn from a convenience sample featuring mostly (if not exclusively) journalists from the sponsor's contact lists, the results are routinely skewed toward the companies signing the check. This Volvo study, in an effort to estimate the magnitude of the "sponsor effect," informally examined other industry studies and noted two important tendencies:

- results consistently favored sponsoring companies, and,
- those results were not borne out by our own research.

We suspect that in every case the respondents to the survey were derived solely or primarily from the sponsoring agency's databases, and we therefore established methodological and sampling techniques to insure that we would not reproduce the same set of mistakes.

We label these factors "hurdles," and not "obstacles," because despite them the 2002 Volvo study of automotive journalists includes both big names from highly regarded international publications and lesser-known reporters who are working hard, but have yet to register on Volvo's radar screen. It represents the insights of freelancers, international business publications, national newspapers and local television affiliates. Young up-and-comers and seasoned old-timers are included here. The study features extensive quantitative ratings for simple comparison and benchmarking, as well as copious amounts of qualitative data for overarching analysis and contextualization, as well as specific feedback.

Solution

Throughout the summer of 2002, the Gronstedt Group's offices in Stockholm and Colorado conducted a survey of automotive journalists in Europe and North America. 68 journalists and editors in eight countries responded to the survey. Volvo provided the names and contact information for 38% of the respondents. The European sample was drawn from names provided by Volvo and various directories, including the *Motoring Press Guide 2002/2003* directory. The North American sample was drawn from names provided by Volvo's PR department, automotive press association membership lists and extensive searches of automotive publications.

It was important to solicit responses from a wide range of journalists, with some names provided by Volvo's PR department and others completely unknown to the organization. This was the best way for Volvo to get an accurate, industry-wide, unbiased look at their brand identity and relationships with automotive journalists in general, not just the editors and writers with whom they've cultivated relationships for years.

The survey questions were formulated collaboratively by the Gronstedt Group, Volvo Cars and Volvo Cars of North America. Each journalist was sent an e-mail introducing the survey and inviting participation via a simple link to an online survey. Follow-up telephone calls were made to non-respondents. Personal telephone and e-mail exchanges with journalists on both sides of the Atlantic yielded extremely valuable contextual and qualitative information, without which the quantitative ratings would be relatively unintelligible. The interviews provided an interpretive framework that allowed Gronstedt Group analysts to make sense of what would otherwise have been a confusing array of conflicting numbers.

Results

The qualitative component of the study proved critical. For the most part, surveys of this type, in this market, ask a relatively standard set of questions, such as:

- "Which manufacturers distribute the most useful press releases?"
- "Which companies host the most effective events and exhibitions?"
- "Which provide timely access and enough time with test vehicles?"
- "Which manufacturers have the most helpful online resources?"

The research varies in the degree of qualitative feedback provided to automotive PR units, but responses are most often reported as simple benchmarking studies, to be acted upon as desired.

The Gronstedt Group's Volvo study differed dramatically from this conventional approach. On both sides of the Atlantic, though the surveys were administered independently by separate teams, researchers' main conclusions used the benchmarking and qualitative feedback to uncover, for the first time, the *reasons* those scores and comments looked the way they did. Both teams gathered information with enough breadth and depth to explain why auto manufacturers received their particular ratings, and also to

illustrate the all-important context in which automotive PR occurs. The explanations for the patterns and trends documented were the same in Europe and North America.

In the end, it was this qualitative analysis that allowed the Gronstedt Group to make extremely specific recommendations for ways Volvo can improve its overall standing in the world of automotive journalism.

The final report's conclusions posed several central questions for Volvo to consider, including:

- How can we create a sense of intimacy despite distance?
- How can we leverage the things we already do well?
- What would it take to put Volvo on the tips of their tongues?
- Where are the areas that need immediate improvement?
- What tactics and strategies can help most effectively answer and address these questions?

The Gronstedt Group's recommendations included specific directives for bolstering and building personal relationships with automotive editors and journalists, including:

- offering specific and unorthodox approaches for meeting and cultivating relationships with editors and publishers of lifestyle publications;
- emphasizing the importance of the online press room, and offering strategies for utilizing and improving usage of Volvo's online media site (already a clear and defined strength of its North American organization)
- a shift to digital media press kits was recommended, especially where broadcast journalists were concerned.

The Gronstedt Group proved particularly well-suited to undertake this type of research because it teams analysts with diverse backgrounds and employs customized methodologies that draw from a host of business, communications and socio-cultural perspectives. Both Volvo and the Gronstedt Group believe that no other study of automotive journalists has presented benchmarking and comparative data in conjunction with the larger, "big picture" explanation for why the data looks the way it does and how the manufacturer can best position itself within that environment.

Said Ormisher:

As I told the research team the day they presented their findings, "This is better than I thought it would be." We intentionally didn't tell them exactly what organizational changes we were trying to measure, but we know their research is dead-on because it validated exactly what we know the reality of our business to be. Once the research "proved itself" on the measures where we know quite a lot, it lent tremendous credibility to a series of findings in areas we hadn't thought about as much.