At first glance, APCO’s acquisition of StrawberryFrog appears an unlikely union. The Washington PR firm is best known for its sober corporate and public affairs work, its crisis comms skills and its roster of political PR talent. The New York ad shop has a rather more feisty persona, with a creative reputation that has been honed through trendsetting work for such brands as Heineken and Jim Beam.

Perhaps the differences between the two agencies, though, offer some insight into the new alliance. StrawberryFrog ECD Kevin McKeon believes that the firms’ contrasting skills make the match more logical, particularly as they both, he points out, share the same ethos.

“What I found fascinating about the APCO deal was that when I first met with those guys and they talked about what they do, and how they shaped opinion and worked with everything from countries to brands to solve perception problems, I thought that’s very much what we do,” says McKeon. “We do it on a consumer level.”

For APCO, it is the consumer element that is particularly intriguing. The firm’s consumer PR business is small, but it counts deep relationships with FMCG companies such as Procter & Gamble, SABMiller and Mars. “In their relationships with their clients, they can only go so far because they don’t have consumer-facing comms,” points out McKeon. “They said they had actually pitched brands where, if they had an organisation like ours, they would have won business.”

APCO EVP Evan Kraus is less willing to concede a paucity of consumer PR business at the firm, although he admits that “our forays into the consumer side are relatively young.” Kraus agrees, though, that the addition of StrawberryFrog will help APCO execute campaigns that they are already devising for their clients.

“We come up with creative ideas, and often-times our ideas then need to be executed across a whole spectrum of disciplines, including advertising,” he says. “It became a little bit clunky for a lot of our clients to then have us work with someone else.”

That kind of business development strategy echoes the PR industry’s moves to build stronger digital offerings and, indeed, ad agencies’ own acquisitions of PR firms and skills. For Kraus, the prospect of growing its client relationships meant that it had to choose its target carefully over a number years.

“That’s why we couldn’t just buy any ad agency,” he explains. “We needed somebody who believes philosophically in a stakeholder model. StrawberryFrog’s campaigns are based on movements, alignment with stakeholder interests and are organised in such a way that they are multidisciplinary.”

That mentality also helps explain why StrawberryFrog made the relatively unique decision to sell to a PR agency, rather than opting for the tried-and-tested holding group route. McKeon notes that his firm is more focused on the kind of participatory marketing that is ingrained in public relations. “We thought this could be the start of shaping a new model. I think we are both speaking from the same playbook.”

It is a playbook that is likely to be examined closely if the combination proves successful. Former advertising executive Marian Salzman, who now heads Euro RSCG North America, calls the move a “game-changer”, noting that the combination of senior focus and creative talent represents a “paradigm shift” that her own firm would do well to emulate.

Convergence is an overused word in the marketing arena, but corporate branding is undoubtedly becoming more consumer-oriented, as it attempts to take stock of a more diverse group of stakeholder interests. Brand marketers, meanwhile, are growing increasingly aware of a broader social responsibility beyond just selling products.

These are trends that, to some, signal a more important strategic role for the PR industry. Marketing specialist Jim Joseph, who worked at Saatchi & Saatchi and now heads Cohn & Wolfe, sees the StrawberryFrog deal as “an indication of how PR firms are starting to get at the seat of the table in terms of driving brand strategy and the creative expression of it in the marketplace.”

“Many of the activities of a traditional PR function are starting to be front and center to the overall brand experience, shaping perceptions and behaviors much like advertising does, and used to think it did exclusively,” adds Joseph.

On reflection, then, the acquisition is perhaps less surprising than it first appears. And Kraus is confident that there is enough “cultural synergy” to quieten the most ardent skeptics, internally and externally. “Because of our reputation, people look at this and say, does this make sense? If you understand our business today, this is clearly serving a need that exists.”