



EXECUTIVE FORUM

April-June 2007 • Volume 10, No. 2

FEATURE ARTICLE

THE CIRCUS COMES TO PR

By Peggy Frank

Yes, it is a PR circus world that drives media attention. You can be an observer and enjoy the show, or you can be in one of the three rings that dominate the circus tent, reaping all the attention. The choice is yours!

Publicist Lee Solters, who publicized Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was*, gives the best definition of publicity I have ever heard. "When the circus comes to town and you paint a sign about it, that's advertising," says Lee. "Put the sign on the back of the elephant and march through town, that's promotion. If the elephant walks through the mayor's flowerbed, that's publicity. And if you can get the mayor to comment about it, that's public relations!" Lee made that observation some years ago when he handled Ringling Bros. Circus.

Staying with the circus theme -- PT Barnum is considered by many to be the father of public relations. He is credited with developing the concept of the three-ring circus we know today. In order to get people to attend the circus, PT Barnum created bizarre, tantalizing, and sometimes death-defying sideshows to bring circus goers into the big tent. Without the sideshows, people were simply not sure if the circus was worth attending. PT Barnum's staged events like the bearded lady, the fire enhanced sword swallowed by a "freak," etc. was all done to draw attention for the circus to increase interest in attendance. No kidding! It was the birth of the "PR stunt."

Thus was born the idea of creating media interest by creating an event, or other newsworthy happening to invite and entice media coverage.

Many times you will notice that PR coverage is attracted through a "staged event," though naturally occurring events are more credible, timely, and more easily embraced by the public. So, when you sometimes think that the media coverage you are witnessing looks similar to a three-ring circus, like various criminal trials, e.g., the Anna Nicole coverage, you are right. The media "circus" you witnessed actually has its roots from the early days of the circus!

With this background in mind, what do you do if you are in the driver's seat in your organization and responsible for advertising, promotion, publicity, and public relations? Do you hire an in-house person, or a PR agency? What are the advantages of each type?

The US Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook puts it this way, "An organization's reputation, profitability, and even its continued existence can depend on the degree to which its targeted public support its goals and policies. Public relations is key to both the growing economy and to key institutions. The amount of resources dedicated to public relations should be aligned with this significant piece of information."

Whether you should hire an in-house public relations professional (I spent 23 years of my career in-house), or a PR agency, is strictly a business decision. Many start-up companies have
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FEATURE ARTICLE (CONT'D)**... the Public Relations Circus**

limited resources, and find it more economical to deal with a PR agency to manage their account. PR agencies are very attractive in that they work in the particular "space" or discipline of the client, and have the ability to leverage their media contacts with their various clients.

In-house PR counsel is strictly dedicated, devoted, to YOU, your company and its products. Hopefully they are part of your strategic executive management team, and participate regularly in all meetings involving strategy and tactics.

Sometimes, PR agency representatives are left out of this loop - which is really not affording the organization the full complement of skills that today's PR pro brings to the table.

Public relations is a strategic business tool, which should be respected by all members of the organization. When looking for a PR professional, in-house or agency, according to the Council of Public Relations Firms (www.prfirms.org), you should look for professionals who provide the following skills: problem solving, sociability, a sense of urgency, tenacity, persuasiveness, assertiveness, self-confidence, empathy, aggressiveness and stamina.

And finally, although I am not addressing the discipline of advertising here - what is the difference between advertising and public relations? Simply put: You pay for advertising versus "free" coverage from public relations. Public relations is considered earned media. With advertising, you create and place exactly what you want the public to see, where it appears, how often, the content, etc. With public relations, though you pay for the agency or in-house public relations professionals to develop press releases and collateral materials, you do not have control over when it appears, how much of it appears, or where it appears.

On the other hand, PR has an enhanced credibility over advertising material, and in fact, the next time you pick up your newspaper, read it very carefully. More than 90 percent of what you read has been generated by a press release! This is referred to as editorial content. Therefore, editorial content is more widely embraced as "news" written by a non-biased reporter versus advertising, which naturally is biased. Think about it - is editorial content really unbiased? Now let's go back to the circus and put all the elements together. How does a sound, strategic public relations campaign come into play with a strategic marketing action plan?

Let's have a little fun and use PT Barnum again. This is a visual response so get prepared. Picture the circus tent on the ground (the business plan), and picture the poles holding up the tent (the strategic marketing campaign to give rise to the plan). Now assign a name to each pole: marketing promotion, advertising (on and offline), and public relations - a sound strategic public relations campaign is part of the total marketing campaign. These poles are components keeping the tent up and ready for action.

Underneath the tent are all the organization's team players who are onboard with the strategic marketing campaign. Through all of their efforts, whether they are accountants, sales representatives, customer service, etc. - the best PR is that which is advanced by your own team of employees. A good strategic marketing plan, with the PR component, includes all employees. Be sure they know the direction of the organization so that they can serve as individual PR ambassadors.

Please do not leave out the strategic partners, alliance members, consortium partners, vendors, and others who are playing a vital role to advance your organization. They, too, are excellent PR ambassadors, not just of good will, but they can also spread substantive value-added information, which may help you retain current, and perhaps help you garner new clients/customers. Never underestimate the power of your employees. They have the ear of at least 10 people outside of your organization. They can be champions of your organization's mission. Work towards helping them deliver the best message possible. Communicate regularly, communicate effectively, and most importantly communicate respectfully.

Parting words: There will always be a circus ring filled with action and spectators eager to watch and know more. It is up to you and your organization to decide if you will stay a spectator or choose to be in the center ring of attention as the result of an inspired PR strategy and well executed tactics. ✨

Article taken from Frank Public Relations Worldwide's "Frankly Speaking" series of PR tips.

Frank Public Relations Worldwide is an innovative, results-oriented marketing communications company focused on the dynamic alignment of business development, strategic marketing and public and employee relations. Founded in 1999 by award winning public relations expert Peggy C. Frank, MBA, Frank Public Relations Worldwide is renowned for communication and engagement skills as well as a proven ability to train and mentor at all levels of an organization to both deliver consistent messaging and to enhance performance and profitability. Peggy Frank is a member of WHA.

Executive Forum is published four times a year by Women In Health Administration of Southern California. We welcome your comments, suggestions and article submissions. Please contact:

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