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Maybe it's the weight of being so earnestly vigilant for summer to actually arrive that started me thinking that the name of this newsletter should address "what is PR?" while posing the rhetorical question of whether you have it or not. The Arlo & Janis strip pictured was the clincher, especially with the thought of 100 degree temps.

I saw a great cartoon a while back with an older guy seated behind a desk with "Public Relations Department" lettered on his office door. His in-box/out-box was labeled "spin" and "spun." I couldn't find the cartoon to use here, but it strikes me as a pretty accurate portrayal of how the average person views the public relations function.

So I thought I'd defend myself...or should I say, clear up some misconceptions... about my profession. Is that PR speak? Well, yes and no. Is PR a black art? Is it sleight of hand? It actually is a very principled discipline with a strong code of ethics.

What is PR? I whack that piñata in this issue and will take more swings in the future. I'm combining July and August here, so you have a reprieve at least until September.

I call my business Bottom Line Communications because PR is intended to make a direct contribution to my clients' revenue and profits. The value of PR, advertising and other communications disciplines is not easy to measure, but I thought the example of KFC's Grilled Chicken launch sheds some light on the subject.

Anyway, let's hope for some major tan lines by September. Enjoy!

## What is 'PR'? That's a darn good question!

This cartoon reminded me of the various misunderstandings most people have of the term "public relations."

Definitions can range from the not so "public" at all nature of this cartoon to all manners of "word smithing" that are generally meant to put a "positive spin" on a less than positive situation.

This view holds that the purpose of public relations is to distort, misrepresent or otherwise evade revealing the facts of a given situation or position for the sole purpose of covering one's behind.

Another view, decidedly less cynical, is that PR is essentially having a nice way with people. That would suggest that being a Wal-Mart greeter is the pinnacle of the PR profession. Then there was the marketing VP of a Fortune 500 company I worked for who wanted to focus on PR so the company would have better sales meetings.



Definitions of "public relations" vary greatly in different contexts.

Now, I am fully aware that slang such as "spin doctor" and "flak" are commonly used to define public relations professionals.

In the early days of "publicity stunts," that characterization may have been accurate. Any way to get media coverage was fair game, and some PR practitioners took some zany, questionable routes to get there. More recently, however, a PR pro is soon out of work if that's the way he/she operates.

In my nearly 30 years of practicing public relations, I can recall only a handful of occasions where a client or employer actually needed some "evasive action" in dealing with the media and other stakeholders.

The vast majority of my work, and that of my many acquaintances in the PR profession, focuses on communicating the positive aspects of our messages — not doing damage control by finessing the truth.

(*"What is PR" cont.*)

## 'Going green' has never made more business sense

Prompted by high energy costs, damage to the environment, and concerns over global warming, it seems every day some company or organization is "going green."

For example, Hewlett Packard is partnering with green social network Greenwala to sponsor a contest "Choose to reuse" that will benefit ACTERRA, a nonprofit that brings people together to create local solutions for a healthy planet.

In another example of going green to do good, a new company named Dot Eco proposes to use that domain name to showcase green initiatives by companies or individuals.

The magazine *On Earth* reports that if the new domain gets approved by the Internet Corpora-

tion for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Dot eco will have the right to sell it, with the promise that half the profits will go to environmental causes.

It's tempting to second-guess the sincerity of pro-environment business initiatives because we're trained to assume that there's always a profit motive steering the ship. But there's simply no denying the evidence that organizations can "do well by doing good."

It's no coincidence that going green makes for a great PR campaign, and demonstrates corporate social responsibility (CSR). Research shows that consumers increasingly consider the CSR commitment of suppliers when making purchase decisions. Tree hugging is OK, really!

## KFC's grilled chicken launch shows PR's bottom line contribution

As reported in *Brandweek* in July, despite, or perhaps because of, a well-publicized stunt that involved promoting coupons for free chicken on Oprah for which it couldn't deliver, KFC's Kentucky Grilled Chicken launch has been a major success, judging by the company's financials.

Parent company Yum's second quarter earnings showed KFC sales went from a negative 7 percent in the first quarter to a positive 3 percent in the second

quarter. Yum CEO David Novak called the launch the most successful in KFC's history and added that the item now accounts for 40 percent of KFC's chicken-on-the-bone sales.

KFC introduced Kentucky Grilled Chicken with great fanfare in April. In addition to a large ad campaign, the brand also ran a promotion via The Oprah Winfrey Show that dangled a coupon for a free Kentucky Grilled Chicken meal. The chain faced some



**KFC's Kentucky Grilled Chicken launch has been a financial success despite some bad publicity early on.**

negative buzz, however, after many locations were unable to honor those coupons because of huge demand.

Darren Tristano, EVP of researcher Technomic, said the promo brought KFC priceless publicity. "It wasn't necessarily a misfire as demand exceeded expectations of the company," he said. "It created a demand, a buzz and a lot of free press. It gave a lot of people a reason to try it."

### What is PR? (cont.)

I think part of the cynicism surrounding the PR profession is the misuse of its best known device: the press release.

It's still common for business, marketing and sales execs to get their PR staff together to "fire off a press release" on some pet program or project that "must be important to the marketplace because we're the clear leader in our field." These read more like ad copy than serious journalism so they give PR a bad name.

Some people think that issuing press releases is pretty much the sum total of what a PR practitioner does. Kind of like a comedy writer searching for the next joke. If you're creative enough, you'll find some "news" sooner or later.

There are many companies that still think this way, and have a quota of sending out at least two releases every month.

You can run an ad campaign that way, but you don't measure quality by the ton when it comes to press releases. The media sees right away there's really nothing to many of these releases so they largely ignore them. As a result, when there is truly "big news" to announce, the media often overlooks those releases; wary of yet another case of the company crying wolf.

That's why I always use the phrase "news release" — never press release. It's not just a subtle change. It makes me think very carefully about "where's the news?" in what I'm trying to communicate for my clients. More importantly, that's exactly what a journalist, industry analyst or blogger will ask when they scan the release...

for all of five seconds if I'm lucky...so I better not waste their time.

Whether you prefer "news release" or "press release," the document itself is just the part of the PR process that people see. Long before a release is ever written, the organization issuing it needs to be crystal clear on who it's trying to reach — the precise audience in vivid detail — before deciding which media outlets to pitch and what it actually will say in the release.

This is a major area of discussion with my clients, particularly at the beginning of our engagement. It's natural for an organization to focus on what they do, how they do it, why it's important, etc. But they usually fail to see that no one really understands all of this, or even cares, *except them!* Guess what? You're not the intended audience for your news release.

In fact, you're always trying to reach people who barely know you or have a vague or even mistaken idea of what you're all about.

I ask my clients to make a mental picture of an ideal customer or prospect — by name, rank and serial number — who already or may personally their products or services. What pain points does the product/service address? What are the measurable benefits — not features — the product/service delivers? Once you know Frank or Sally, it's easier to find and sell to lots more people like them than to some faceless target audience.

So, what is PR? I'll write more on this topic in the next newsletter. But I've chosen to end on the point that PR is about "relating to the public" in all the varied and dynamic forms such interaction takes. There's never a dull moment, believe me!

### Everyone loves a parade!

Some of you know my wife, Faye, and I built our dream house a few years ago on Upper Saranac Lake in New York's Adirondacks region.

For now, we rent it by the week during the summer, but it was available over July 4th, so we spent the long holiday weekend in our "dreamland." It rained all but one day, but the weather cooperated for the annual Wooden Boat Parade, albeit postponed to a day to July 5 due to rain. Some 25 craft took part, and it was something to see... from our canoe!

**The volunteer fire boat led the parade of magnificent, classic wooden boats of yester year.**

