

MARKETING MATTERS –

Deciphering the PR Riddle

I answered a call to assist with public relations tasks during the Dalai Llama's visit to the states a few years back. The appeal (and it *was* indeed a legitimate appeal) for volunteers was listed by a big-name agency in NYC on the front page of a major PR trade publication. After phoning the agency numerous times, I finally got through to the CEO who seemed remarkably surprised that I would be willing to fly all the way to New York from Macon to assist with this monumental Central Park event. "Why?" he asked incredulously. "Why would you want to do this?"

"Because I'm a PR practitioner and because, well, it's the Dalai Llama."

He went on to quiz me about how I envisioned my role as a volunteer. Am I just interested in getting close to Richard Gere, 'cause there's a good chance that won't happen? Do I expect to have my expenses paid?

"How do you guys do PR down in Georgia, anyway?" he wanted to know.

Good question. And one that is not often easy to answer, no matter where a PR practitioner lives and works, or how professional he/she is. In fact, in the last 1 1/2 years I've had at least a dozen people ask me to pinpoint exactly what PR is...and isn't -- a dozen people that include several marketing professionals, one of them whose company title has been for several years -- you guessed it -- "Director of PR."

The fact is, public relations is a multi-million dollar business making a profound impact on consumer spending, yet few business owners or even seasoned marketers can distinguish it from advertising, promotions or other marketing disciplines. Its watery reputation is well-earned, because the industry changes swiftly and often. PR practitioners whose tasks were once limited to press releases, press conferences, trade show activity, crisis management and lobbying tasks are now branching out to include the development of tangible products like print and broadcast advertising campaigns, human resource activities and branding strategies. What's more, waning advertising agencies are successfully adopting the sexier PR moniker without changing a thing they're currently doing.

So, what IS the difference? Distilled to one word with one adjective, PR is finely-tuned communication. In the purest sense of the word, before it became an innocuous ingredient in the marketing stew, PR is communication *with the media* -- communication that drives sales, builds relationships, educates the public, and promotes the organization's or individual's goals and objectives. (*when applied to the promotion of individuals, it's of course called "publicity."*) Examples of PR tasks might be staging a Kids Safety Day at a car dealership. Or aligning a corporation as a sponsor for a worthy

“rising star” charity (referred to as “cause-related marketing”). Or pitching a feature story in the form of a news release to the local newspaper, preferably one with great human interest. Having a human interest story about one of your employee’s picked up by the paper might (and this is a big ‘might’ as it is always at the discretion of the editors) indirectly draw attention to your company. The rule of propriety is this: if it’s genuinely interesting to you and doesn’t sound like self-promotion, it’s probably interesting to the general public.

Done correctly and with finesse, PR messages – both verbal, written and in video form-- are both credible and newsworthy. They are appreciated and respected by editors and news directors forever scanning the universe for a good story, especially one with a local angle. Good PR stands alone and is a discipline unto itself -- no glitter or add-ons required. Bad PR, on the other hand, is as eye-rolling as a tacky publicity stunt or as embarrassing as a needless press conference. The PR practitioner who doesn’t know the difference can sink his company -- not to mention his professional credibility -- in less than a day.

Regardless of the size of a business, the marketing ideal begins with a strategic plan that includes advertising strategies, sales & promotional tactics, and – the most cost-effective discipline of them all -- public relations efforts. PR is a powerful tool, and it’s here to stay, in one form or another.

Research released last year indicated that during economic downturns, marketing executives increased their business-to-business PR budgets despite overall budget cuts in advertising. Of the 300 businesses in the Edelman study, 63% decreased ad spending over a six-month period while less than 20% reported a decrease in PR spending – a testament to the rising influence and need for highly-creative PR programs.

I never set eyes on the Dalai Llama *or* Richard Gere that year in Central Park, except for the photo in a story I read in TIME magazine. It turns out the big-shot New York PR agency wanted volunteers to facilitate crowd control – yet another task slipped deftly under the diverse PR umbrella. The areas continue to blend, but the goal remains unchanged: tell the company’s, the organization’s or the individual’s story...and tell it in such a compelling way that it is irresistible.