

Positive Power!

No, this is not a post about the power of positive thinking. It's about the power of positive reviews.

How many times have you bought a book, gone to a movie, hired a contractor, eaten at a restaurant because you read/heard a positive review? I would bet that the answer is many times.

Case in point. The Washington Post raved about Helen Simonson's book, Major Pettigrew's Last Stand. In fact, many other reviewers also raved. So I went out to buy it. And guess what, I am not liking it quite that much. But the sale has been made.

Getting a third-party positive review is definitely worth its weight in gold. This is why public relations is so valuable, even in the age of social media. You get one great review, and you will get lots of interest (and possibly lots of sales). The sticking point lies in whether the product/service/movie/restaurant delivers the goods. You may get an initial sale but no follow up sales if the product does not live up to its review.

As companies look to save money, many are doing away with PR help. This is not good business. Good PR can lead to good reviews, which in turn, may lead to increased sales.

When has a review turned your opinion? Please share any stories.

What was he thinking?

You've probably heard about the flap involving Bob McDonnell, Virginia's new Republican governor. McDonnell issued a proclamation calling April Confederate History Month in his state. But he had omitted a key belief of the Confederacy—its support of slavery. Naturally, there was outrage from civil rights leaders, African-Americans and the media. And guess what, McDonnell had to amend his statement to include language about slavery.

Now, I think McDonnell was speaking his mind the first time. I also think Virginia has a large racist population who would be happy to be Confederate once again. And clearly, I think the whole Confederate declaration is a ridiculous, shameful attempt to pander to the more right-wing, racist elements in Virginia. But, from a public relations perspective, I want to know what was McDonnell thinking? Indeed, was he thinking?

McDonnell either is unaware that large segments of the population consider slavery an outrage or he has really bad advisors or simply is ignorant of how the media works. Anybody could have told him that many people would be offended by this offensive proclamation. And furthermore, that the media would pick it up and tear it apart. Sure, he reacted within a day and issued a

"fix" and an apology, but why on earth was the governor not aware of the furor his decision would cause?

On the one hand, I think that McDonnell probably does not realize that being associated with confederacy equals racism because he does not see that as racist. He buys the whole Confederate argument that the Civil War was a fight about states' rights. On the other hand, I also think McDonnell does not understand public perception or perhaps he lacks in the public relations advice department.

Whether on purpose, or unwittingly, McDonnell has contributed further to the perception that he is a good ol' boy, happy to maintain Virginia's commitment to Confederate ideals where African-Americans are second class citizens, if citizens at all. McDonnell did not even consider that African-Americans live in his state and that they may not share his rosy view of the importance of celebrating Confederate history.

So, what was he thinking? He was not thinking nor was he receiving any type of credible public relations advice when he issued the proclamation. Obviously, once the criticism started, his PR folks woke up or showed up to the office.

The moral of this story is that perception matters, and that if you do or say something offensive, and you are in public office, you will have to face the music.

UPDATE: Washington Post columnist Robert McCartney makes very good points in his column today.

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Qualities of a PR Pro

PLEASE READ UPDATES AT THE END OF POST

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across a few blogs where the authors are complaining about inappropriate public relations overtures or of getting mass and untargeted pitches. I have come across a great deal of grammatically incorrect, spelling challenged and generally poorly written PR material.

I also have met several PR people who don't really follow the

news or ever read a newspaper (including online). A few months ago I witnessed a gathering of PR professionals who expressed fear of social media, and resistance to change.

Today I came across this excellent and cautionary article, *Almost Everyone Gets PR Wrong* by Nick Morgan in Forbes, about public relations and public perception, and how PR folk just don't seem to know how to shape the narrative. Morgan writes the following:

Executives everywhere take note: Beware the power of the narrative. Stop keeping score, and instead look at your organization from the outside. What is your basic job, as far as the world is concerned? And what is the story that has developed over the years? That's where your PR efforts should be focused. That narrative has to be simple, consistent and all about your functional role in the world. You've only got one story. Make it a good one.

All this made me think about what makes a good public relations person (no matter if he/she specializes in media relations, crisis communications or strategic communication). Following a list of qualities a PR pro should have, in my opinion:

- Ability to use the language correctly (grammar, spelling, word usage), both written and spoken
- Common sense: being able to see what is important and what won't make a difference
- Interest in the news and the news business
- People skills and emotional intelligence (e.g. being able to pick up cues)
- Understanding what public relations attempts to accomplish (getting the big picture)
- Ability to network (meeting people and being able to connect with them is a learned and important skill)
- Eager to learn new skills and communication trends

- Seeing the possibilities and being creative (“thinking outside the box”)

UPDATE: As per the two comments below:

- **Listening skills (not as easy as it sounds!)**

In short, a PR pro should be a great communicator and should be able to understand how communications works to shape perception.

UPDATE: Just read this great post about the 14 attributes for new PR practitioners. Matches up quite nicely.

What makes a PR pro in your opinion?



Social media has changed PR

This is not or should not be a newsflash, but social media has changed public relations. Yet many people are resisting.

Yesterday, I was fortunate to have attended a presentation on social media strategy given by Sally Falkow, and hosted by the PRSA-NCC, here in Washington DC. Ms. Falkow presented a case for social media (newspapers in decline, people looking for new sources of information) and gave some advice on how to use social media to achieve public relations/marketing goals. You can access this valuable presentation here:

[slideshare id=2655269&doc=prsadcsocialmedia-091205063755-phpapp02]

Although her presentation gave me lots of new perspectives and ideas, what fascinated me the most was the audience reaction.

Specifically three or four people, who are decidedly old school, immediately started questioning Ms. Falkow. One person in particular, who claimed she had been a White House reporter, was quite acid about new media, saying “no one has time to watch video news releases” and “blogs are not credible.” Obviously, this woman is not keen on social media, and thinks it just is not up to snuff, certainly not comparable to old media.

These questioners actually were quite disruptive, but mostly, they were a sad reminder that some people will fight change. This is why so many organizations are having a difficult time communicating these days. Sure, I know that getting a clip in a major newspaper or coverage from a major broadcaster felt good and was the result of good media relations. But that is not where the majority of the audience is these days. Newspapers are dying, major news broadcasts are losing ground, and more importantly, legions of people have embraced social media. Although you could ignore this situation, you would be doing it at your own peril.

If you practice PR, or advertising, or marketing, you **MUST** consider social media. It is not optional any more. It is not just a way to get young people or techies. It is where a large majority of people are getting their news and information. Railing against it, questioning its legitimacy and refusing to change your ways will only result in your public relations efforts going to waste. You will be left out in the cold.

Propaganda

Last night, I was fortunate to visit a magnificent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, entitled State

of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda.

As the curator explained, propaganda is inherently linked with advertising and public relations. In the beginning of modern advertising and PR, propaganda people were running the show. Edward Bernays, the “father of modern PR” was a propagandist. But propaganda is not inherently negative. Propaganda is simply the propagation of an idea, using various means.

Unfortunately, as with Hitler and the Nazis, propaganda has been used to propagate evil and incite violence and murder. It is a testament to the power of propaganda that the Holocaust was as widespread and supported as it was.

The Nazis understood the power of mass media, and they understood the power of symbolism and word choice. They understood that you had to dehumanize your enemy. They used words that had emotional appeal to the Germans of the day, like “freedom.”

The Nazis made radios cheaper and widely available, and then proceeded to use radio as a way to send out their propaganda within music shows. It became illegal in Nazi Germany to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, punishable by long imprisonment. So the way propaganda worked within Nazi Germany was to use all media possible and by the suppression of all opposing viewpoints.

In any case, the lesson to learn is that words are powerful. We that work in the promotion business, be it advertising, PR or marketing have the power to persuade and that is not something to be taken lightly.

Who is helping you to help others?

Organizations that deal with the public typically have one or more frontline people. These people deal directly with the public, perhaps by giving directions, meeting and greeting or assisting in some way. Many times, these frontline people are also some of the least well compensated in the organization. But they are crucial in shaping how the public perceives the organization.

Have you ever walked into an office where the receptionist didn't even bother to greet you? Have you stood waiting for help at a "customer service" booth? Then you know that your interaction with people that are supposed to assist you can color how you perceive the organization that they represent. However, many organizations don't seem to grasp this simple concept and continue to deploy people in "helping" positions that are unwilling or unable to help, therefore damaging the credibility and perception of the organization.

Here's a tip: if you are hiring someone to help you to deal with the public make sure that persons LIKES helping people.

On my last trip, I had trouble checking in on the kiosk. So, a very unhelpful, surly guy came over, growled at me and told me to go wait in line. He was absolutely rude and unpleasant. Do you think that makes me feel positive toward the airline in question?

Yesterday, I was in downtown DC to meet with a client. She had her laptop with her and we needed to go somewhere with WiFi. I couldn't think where the nearest Cosi was, but DC has deployed Downtown DC people in the Gallery Place area. I went up a woman with the Downtown DC jacket and asked her if she knew where the nearest Cosi was. She did. She gave us specific,

perfect directions. She was helpful (and right). Contrast that with an exchange I had witnessed earlier inside a Metro station. A gentleman had approached the booth to ask a question, and the lady in the booth was BERATING him for tapping on her window. Does that make Metro look helpful? (BTW, I have had similar experiences with people in the booths...they just don't want to be bothered to do their jobs, that is, assisting people.)

As a marketing consultant, I can advise you to take a good look at who is dealing with public in your organization. These people are crucial because they create the first (and maybe the only) impression the public will have of your organization.

You only have one chance to make a first impression

Yesterday, I attended a networking/information lunch put on by a group to which I had never been before. The topic was business strategies. This was the fall kick-off event and I thought it was a good time to think about strategy as I move forward with my business and so forth. Well, the speaker was more interested in telling us about how he doesn't take clients under \$20,000. He made the point that we should think about doing strategy and not tactics. No word about how to develop strategies for your business. He also took a bunch of self-centered questions from the audience. In a word, the event was disappointing. Not to mention expensive and not very satisfying.

The group put out a survey and I gladly responded that the

event did not meet my expectations and why. The organizer wrote me and said that “he had no control over the speaker” even though he agreed with me about content. He asked me to give the group another chance.

Here are my thoughts.

1) Organizers do have some control over the speaker. It is not total of course, but the organizer could have reminded the speaker of the topic, and OUTLINED EXPECTATIONS FROM THE SPEECH, QUESTIONS AND TOPIC TO BE COVERED.

2) It is not enough to ask me to try again. It was money out of my pocket, and perhaps he could have offered a discount for next time or something such.

3) The organizer needs to be aware that you only get one chance to make a first impression. If you don't make a good first impression, YOU MUST make a better second impression or else all is lost. My second impression is that the organizer doesn't get it. He did not take full responsibility. Etc.

Oh, and when I arrived at the event, there was no name tag for me, even though I pre-registered. Nothing irritates me more at these types of events than having a handwritten Hello, I am... tag. Awful. My handwriting is not that clear and I think it looks unprofessional.

Ironically, this group is a public relations related group. What is the saying about doctors healing themselves?

JetBlue sells out ... in a good

way

Did you hear about JetBlue's unlimited pass? For \$599 you can go anywhere during a month. You probably already heard about it, but now you can no longer get the pass because it is sold out. That's right, in just about a week, JetBlue was able to create so much demand that it was able to sell out. To me, that is the definition of a great marketing campaign.

Why is this such a great marketing campaign? For many reasons:

- First and foremost it **sold product**, in this case, seats on planes.
- It was **creative** and different from most airline promotions. It caused JetBlue to stand apart.
- Its creativity created buzz, and loads of **publicity**. Google is telling me that there were at least 226 articles about the promotion, and 50 articles about the selling out.

JetBlue has tapped into something customers want: lower cost air travel. But its not all about being cheap—Spirit Airlines is also cheap, but it does not offer the same experience. JetBlue is comfortable, offers snacks, TV in each seat, and it's generally a good experience. But it also distinguishes itself for being cutting edge. JetBlue has embraced Twitter by offering their "cheeps" (travel promotions). And its tries hard to provide good customer service.

It is a really good day in marketing when a promotion reaches its target while generating front page news, all for a comparatively low marketing dollar investment.

Being upfront is good policy

As you have no doubt read somewhere else, the governor of North Carolina, Mark Sanford, had disappeared for a few days and no one seemed to know where he was. His staff first said they didn't know, and then they said he was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Well, it turns out the good governor was a lot farther away...he was in Argentina. And when he arrived back in the United States he expressed surprise about the amount of coverage.

First, let's start with the public relations aspect of this. Sanford screwed up, and not by going out of town, but by being secretive about it. He could have easily said he was taking a few vacation days and that would have been the end of the story. Instead, he chose secrecy and his staff chose disinformation or misinformation. These decisions reflect poorly on the governor's and his staff's judgements. Clearly, these poor folks don't understand how the media works. News is instantaneous and has a wide net. Everyone reported his "disappearance" and they also reported the explanation and now they are reporting (and commenting) on what really happened. Not being able to understand the consequences of your actions is the definition of lack of judgement.

When you are in a political position you are also in a public position. It is probably hard to adjust to losing your privacy but that is the what happens when you get elected to office. President Obama has made comments to this effect, about how he is living in a bubble and so forth. Nonetheless, it is best to acknowledge and deal with the situation. Not understanding that the public is now invested in an elected official's moves is not understanding how politics works.

In any case, this case shows that a being upfront is good policy and good politics. Not talking or being secretive always carries a negative connotation. People imagine the

worse and in today's hyperfast communications environment, negative comments can transverse the globe in seconds.

You can read great insight on this situation in Politico.com and on The Fix blog in the Washington Post.

On doing things piecemeal

Are you a small business with a tight marketing budget?

If you are, you probably have fallen prey to the idea that you should do (marketing) things as you can afford them. You know, an ad here, a brochure there. Budget-wise, this may make sense. After all, you can't afford a large campaign, or an ad agency. Branding-wise, not so much. It's tough to build up an image on unconnected pieces of the puzzle. The missing link is the connection, or the reason, behind each piece.

Think strategically

In business, there is strategy and there are tactics. Often companies fall into tactics without thinking about the strategy. Many people can't tell the difference. Here's a quick example: sending a press release is a tactic, achieving positive publicity is a strategy. Ideally, tactics should follow your strategy.

You must know what you want to accomplish so that you can figure the steps to make it happen.

Often, small business owners are overwhelmed with trying to do everything: managing staff, invoicing, doing the books, buying inventory, negotiating. Marketing may be a distant thought, something to do when there is down time. This is unfortunate because marketing will bring business in. Neglecting your

marketing will result in a business downturn, for sure.

Develop a basic marketing plan

The easiest thing to do is to devote some time to thinking about what you want to accomplish. Perhaps you want more female customers, or larger organizations. Write these goals down. Figure out who your current customers are. Figure out how much budget you can afford to devote to marketing. See what you already have and what you need.

Here are some elements of a marketing plan:

- Current situation/Situation analysis
- Goals
- Target audience
- Budget
- Tactics for reaching target audience (and this is where your ads, brochures, press releases fit in)

Remember, doing marketing piecemeal will only result in getting small chunks of your target audience.

