

"No one in the PR business other than Howard Bragman could have written this book. He makes things happen and tells you how." —LARRY KING

WHERE'S MY FIFTEEN MINUTES?

Get Your Company, Your Cause, or
Yourself the Recognition You Deserve



HOWARD BRAGMAN
WITH MICHAEL LEVIN



CHAPTER 1

WHERE'S MY FIFTEEN MINUTES?

Andy Warhol saw it coming. More than forty years ago the iconic artist and philosopher predicted a world in which “everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.” Guess what? That future is now.

Never before have reputations been created and lost so quickly. Never before has an “average Joe” had such a chance to reach the heights and depths in so record a time, and on such a public stage.

We’re attracted to attention like moths to a flame. We see how it can boost careers, make people millions of dollars, and seemingly make dreams come true. But, like the moth, the closer we get to the flame, the greater the chance that we may get burned.

Publicity, fame, attention, recognition—these are powerful tools. In my thirty-plus years of working in the public relations and communications worlds, I have seen the good it can do. I have helped people get their messages out. Some have made amazing career advances; many have built smart, profitable businesses; others have changed the world by calling attention

to wrongs, curing diseases, or teaching the world to be more accepting of our differences.

But I have seen the other side too. I have helped people burdened with unspeakable woes. Some have been tarnished by scandals of worldwide proportions; others have been victims of crimes and heinous acts; still others have uttered a wrong word in a heated moment and become poster children for bad behavior. Some have made mistakes and been caught; for others, accusations, true or otherwise, have put them through unbelievable pain and sorrow.

The circumstances were different in every situation. Yet, in virtually every case, the right communications made the situation better; if not perfect. For those trying to better themselves, PR was able to facilitate their ascension. It got their messages out cheaper, better, faster, more efficiently, and, hopefully, without backlash. And for those in pain, I tried to lessen their public humiliation, control the damage, and get them back on their feet more quickly so they could continue on with their lives and careers.

Some have compared the effects of PR to lubrication in a machine. I can tell you that it's even more important than that. Life is not a machine; it's an organic, changing organism, and communications and messages are like lifeblood in the system. They nourish, transport, and even sustain health. Everyone won't be famous. But more people than ever before will become public figures. And I promise you, ordinary people do become famous as an ironic by-product of time and circumstance—even in cases in which they might not want it.

Further, everyone has a reputation, an image—people who look to them and judge them. That's just the nature of the world we live in. If you're reading this book, you probably instinctively understand that there is power and pull to life in the public eye: life at a higher level; the chance to influence and lead more people; and perhaps most important, the opportunity to make the world a better place and to make your own life better, happier, and more productive.

At the same time, there are dramatic changes taking place in the way the world communicates. Things like Web sites, YouTube.com, MySpace.com, Facebook.com, blogs, and iPhones weren't even in our orbit a decade ago and now, for many of us, they are our primary avenues for acquiring and disseminating information and entertainment. The speed, scope, and power of the "new media" are simply staggering. Even a seasoned communications professional like me has had to make dramatic and sometimes uncomfortable changes in my professional and personal life to accommodate them. It's no wonder that the inexperienced person can be so intimidated by the communications superhighway ahead. Should you? Would you? Could you begin to cultivate an image for yourself, your business, or your passion? This book will help you answer those questions.

I'm here to help. This book is not going to make you famous overnight or solve all your communications problems, should you have any. But it will offer insight into the way it works out there in the real world, in the trenches. I'll offer the good news and the bad. I'll be honest, share some of my experiences, try to make them relevant for you, and teach you how to think about communications and look at it in a new and different way. What I do is part art and part science. I have made mistakes, as I will point out in the chapters ahead. But I have certainly had a lot of clients and an amazing array of experiences over the years and far more successes than failures. If nothing else, I'm tough to impress and even tougher to frighten with most communications situations.

I truly believe in an informed, intelligent society. I believe it's time to open the curtain so others can begin to define themselves, change the world, or just simply communicate better and clearer in a crowded and noisy world. You can take what I say with a grain of salt—after all, I've got a point of view. It may not be the same as yours or even as others' in my profession. But I would be surprised if even the most experienced and cynical among you couldn't learn at least a few things from my decades of experience.

We all know that the media move very quickly. In my world, I try to slow things down at least a bit—to take a beat, a deep breath, and really focus on the big picture; to take the pulse and inject a little humanity and empathy into the situation. My belief is that it's not always how fast you do something, it's how well you do it. At the same time, I am not a reductionist. Every idea in the world cannot be turned into a sound bite. All sides of an argument are not morally equal. Sometimes people need the opportunity to express complicated ideas. I have made that happen.

I love to mentor. Whether it was the college students I have taught, my associates, clients, or the media—the chance to offer insight and guidance is a gift. There's far too little mentoring in this world. Let me mentor you.

Your responsibilities include being open to different points of view, to exploring compelling ideas on your own, and to accepting the truths that work for you and rejecting those that don't. If we do it that way, we're going to have a good time and learn something along the way. That will make me feel good and you even smarter. What more could we ask for?

Let me give you a little history lesson. In the past, if you had an important message to get out to consumers, voters, or the community at large, you advertised—either on TV or in newspapers or on the radio. There are two problems with that approach today. First, fewer and fewer people pay attention to traditional media. Everybody's on the Internet—watching videos on their mobile devices, instant messaging, or just hanging out. Young people in particular watch very little over-the-air TV, especially when compared with a generation ago. One major ad agency shared a statistic with me that says it all: in 1985, it took five television commercials to reach 85 percent penetration of the TV-viewing households; in 2008, it took 1,292 commercials to achieve the same penetration.

The other problem with relying on advertising is that it's hard to get people to pay attention to it—or to believe it. It's more difficult than ever to “cut through the clutter” of television, radio, newspapers, and even Internet advertising. People

just tune it out. And when they *are* paying attention, it's a challenge to get them to believe the message. Consumers are cynical, jaded, and bored with advertising—and rightly so. At the same time, we are gullible. Gullible and cynical is a very dangerous combination. Remember the story that ran rampant on the Internet about Paris Hilton helping drunken elephants? Even the Associated Press spread it, but no one checked with Ms. Hilton to see if it was true. And how about the time our own government, in the guise of FEMA, hosted a fake news conference—complete with fake journalists and fake questions? And, contrary to an Internet rumor that spread like wildfire, Will Smith does not respect Adolf Hitler and he won a lawsuit saying just that.

Proof that advertising is losing some of its power can be gleaned from the fact that the Super Bowl, the biggest TV event of the year, is watched by fewer than 100 million people. One hundred million sounds like a big number . . . until you consider the fact that more than 200 million Americans have figured out something else to do with their time than sit around and watch a game that, more often than not, lacks suspense. Yes, many people tune in just to see the ads, but those ads are more for shock value or winning awards than actually getting people to buy things. Super Bowl ads are also available online immediately, along with an instant analysis of them, numerous unused versions, and voting on which are the best. The Super Bowl has so many ads that it's just one more location for advertising clutter—and now most of the ads are used to draw people to the Internet. The ads that garner the most success are often the ones that have the best marketing campaigns behind them and that resonate with an existing image of the brand.

The Super Bowl happens only once a year. The rest of the time, a really successful TV show attracts a maximum audience of only 20 million or, in extremely rare cases, 30 million. Even 30 million is just 10 percent of the population. The venerable Academy Awards, the Super Bowl of fashion, attracts fewer viewers than *American Idol*. That means that the highest-rated programs are still leaving 90 percent of the American people with

no knowledge whatsoever of the products or services advertised therein.

Even so, advertising is by no means dead. It still consumes a great deal of money and attention, and far more journalists cover the advertising business than the public relations industry. In fact, most of the largest PR firms are owned by advertising agencies. However, it's crucial to know what each part of an overall marketing campaign can deliver. Advertising can deliver image, frequency, and a pinpointed message. Yet without the PR component, advertising alone lacks credibility, third-party endorsement, and the ability to generate that elusive "buzz" when one person tells another about something spontaneously.

PR is also consistently less expensive than advertising and, on a limited marketing budget, can often be the most cost-effective way to get a message out. You're going to find out how.

That leads us to the subject of public relations. It's not just what you have to offer that matters—it's how you get the word out about who you are, what you are, and what you or your product can do. It's great to be wonderful and to have a terrific product, but what good is it if nobody knows about what it is that you have to offer?

The word "spin" seems to have picked up a negative connotation in our society. People think that it makes us buy things we don't need, watch movies and television shows for the wrong reasons, and love or hate our political candidates. The truth is we all use spin. When we craft a resumé we write about our accomplishments—not our "off days," when we recount our families' weddings we forget the sloppy speech by the drunken best man and focus on the beautiful bride; and we all only want the best photos of us out there; that's spin. It's just another way of saying you're "putting your best foot forward." In fact, much of the image and message research done by companies and political candidates is simply to find out what people care about and what messages will resonate. This forces them to address issues of interest to us.

Spin/PR, or whatever you want to call it, is not just for na-

tional brands and national candidates. It's for just about anyone who wants to accomplish almost anything. It's as much a part of everyday life as combing your hair and brushing your teeth, and it's time to start thinking about it because it can change your life.

I don't want to give you the idea that public relations is something new in the world. Actually, the idea of having a "spokesperson" or a "media relations manager" goes at least as far back as the Bible. In the book of Exodus, God commands Moses to appear before the pharaoh and demand, "Let my people go." Moses sought to wriggle out of the assignment and told God that he wasn't particularly articulate. Today, God would have sent him to get some media training. Instead, God told him to bring in his brother Aaron. Essentially he said, "I'll tell you what to say, you tell him, and we'll all be fine." So a lot of us in public relations believe that Aaron is actually the first practitioner of our craft, thus making public relations the third oldest profession, slightly behind spycraft and prostitution. (And we get accused of both of those as well.)

PR always stood for public relations. I believe that in today's world, it actually stands for something different—Perception and Reality. It's the job of a public relations person to form a logical relationship between perception and reality—of an individual, of a product or service, of a geographical entity, of anything. When you think about it, there are really just three possibilities: the public's perception of you may be better than the reality, the reality of your situation may be better than the way the public perceives you, or, ideally, they are in balance. In most cases, for the vast majority of my clients and for most people, their reality is better than the public's perception of them. Perhaps that's because we live in an era where people don't trust anything—they don't trust the media, they don't trust politicians, they don't trust advertisers, and they don't trust a lot of what they read on the Internet. We live in cynical times.

If this is your situation—if you are a better person, or offering a better product, or doing a better job than your public

believes or understands about you—how do you create a shift in the public's perception of you so that they accept you and what you offer? How do you get perception and reality in sync? How do you reduce cognitive dissonance—that uncomfortable feeling of juggling two conflicting thoughts at the same time?

This may sound like an abstract concept until you think about how it plays out in the lives of real people. In the workplace, you know you're doing a great job but somebody else gets the promotion or the new job. In an election campaign, you know you've got more to offer than your opponent but he's able to paint you into a corner from which you can't escape—or worse, he defines you before you are able to define yourself. In the marketplace, your product is vastly better than that of your competitor but people are flocking to him. These are make-or-break issues that affect everything from your career to your livelihood to your reputation.

The purpose of this book is to share with you what I've learned working with America's top celebrities, companies, and events—from Frank Sinatra to Stevie Wonder, from Ford to Coca-Cola, to the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party—to show you how to change or create the way people in your world perceive you and what you offer. If you don't define yourself, somebody else is going to define you . . . and not necessarily in a way you like. There's nothing optional, therefore, about taking control of your own public image, and that's what this book is all about.

Another important thing that we will talk about is what to do if the public perception of you or what you offer is actually *better* than your reality. My term for that is “hype.” It sounds like a nice place to be, but if the perception of you is better than the reality, you may have further to fall once the reality gets out there. A good PR person monitors the relationship between perception and reality and keeps things in check. In many ways, the term “spin doctor,” which is often applied pejoratively to publicists, is quite accurate. The same way a doctor takes the pulse, monitors the heart, the lungs, the blood pressure, and the temperature of a patient, a good PR person takes the pulse of the

company or the celebrity status of his or her client to find a baseline: What's their ranking on fan sites? How many Google.com hits do they have? Who likes us and who doesn't? He'll do additional research to find out what the reality is, what the perception is, and what the perception needs to be. We're also in the business of making sure that negative information about our clients doesn't find its way into the media, or if it does, that it is mitigated promptly and powerfully.

Does public relations work every time? Unfortunately, no. Some people have a public perception that cannot be changed, or at least cannot be changed quickly. Take tennis powerhouse John McEnroe. Years ago, when he was still playing professionally, my client Anheuser-Busch was sponsoring tennis exhibitions across the country featuring McEnroe and another player to promote its Michelob Light brand. I traveled with him to a variety of cities to promote the tour. This was at the height of McEnroe's bad-boy era. The exhibitions were more about theater than the actual tennis—the players would emerge onto the court through dry ice smoke with the then-cutting edge song "Boy from New York City" blasting on the sound system.

We held a press conference in each city the day before the event to promote it, and the one in Minneapolis took place in the conference room of a sponsor's department store. The next day, the two local papers—the *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*—gave us write-ups I'll never forget. One paper said, and I rephrase here, that John McEnroe, "accompanied by a group of slick-looking yes-men, arrived in town yesterday." The other paper described McEnroe's entourage with something like these words: "Better-looking crews have come off fishing trawlers after hurricanes." Let's see—were we slick, or were we just weather-beaten? It didn't matter, because they didn't like John, so they didn't like the people with him; one event was not going to reshape their perception of him.

Sometimes you have no control at all over your image. Two individuals for whom this is true are former vice president Dick Cheney and columnist and conservative gadfly Ann Coulter. In

Cheney's case, he doesn't seem all that perturbed by the fact that people's perception of him is so negative. Or at least if it does bother him, he's not letting on. And who would know anyway, since he spent so much of his vice presidency hidden in a cave. In Ann Coulter's case, she is able to transform every blunder or misstep into an opportunity to raise her public profile. Cheney has transcended caring, while Coulter is intentionally provocative. Coulter believes the bromide that it doesn't matter what they say about you in the newspaper as long as your name is spelled right. Cheney assumes he's above public opinion.

If you're reading this book, it's because you want more than your name spelled right in the paper. It's because you want to either create a perception about you from whole cloth or alter the one that already exists. This is really the difference between revolution (creating a brand new perception) and evolution (changing a perception that's already been out there for some time). Either case takes serious work.

I have learned over the years that there is an inversely proportional relationship between image and risk—that is, the more established the positive image, the less willingness there is to take a risk. Those established companies that do take smart, calculated risks may do okay—except if they fail. Then they're called stupid.

One of the greatest challenges—perhaps the greatest challenge—that a public relations person faces is that he doesn't get to present the client's message directly to the public. Instead, the media serves as a filter, lifting up or burying those whom it favors or dislikes. The media simply doesn't play fair, and objectivity, alas, is a myth. So you can't count on the media to be your friend, to protect you, or to do your bidding, no matter how powerful you may be in your marketplace. Think back to Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis riding in the tank. It's not the photo that cost him the 1988 presidential election. It was the media's incessant playing of the image of Dukakis in the tank that destroyed his presidential ambitions. Granted, he didn't run the most stirring of campaigns, but the

media certainly did him no favors by constantly reminding us how silly he looked at the very moment that he was trying to project strength. In politics, this is known as the “macho cred” moment. Why did George W. Bush’s flight suit work (at least until the war became unglued) and Michael Dukakis’s tank ride fail? It goes back to authenticity: Bush was a pilot, whereas Dukakis rode the subway.

Most people think that, in the 2004 presidential election, Howard Dean imploded and destroyed his own candidacy when he let out that infamous whoop or scream or however you want to categorize it at a campaign rally. The truth is very different. When Dean screamed, he was in a room full of other people who were also whooping and hollering. It wasn’t as though he was a perfectly normal guy who had suddenly revealed just how bizarre he was, which is exactly how the media portrayed it. In reality, there were cameras and microphones all over that room, and if you had seen the video from any other angle and listened to the audio as captured by *all* of the mics in the room—not just the one isolated on Dean—you would have heard clearly that *everybody* was screaming. In fact it would be hard to hear Dean at all. By pulling out just the video and audio of Dean screaming into an isolated mic, and neglecting to accurately depict what was really going on, the media created an indelible image of a man far too manic to be trusted with the presidency. Love Dean or hate him, the media’s trashing of him in this manner was actually as fraudulent as altering a photo. Through this abusive use of journalistic power, the perception of an unstable Howard Dean instantly became reality. Ironically, he is one of the most stable human beings I’ve ever met.

Mention Bill Buckner to a sports fan, especially a Boston Red Sox fan, and you’ll get anything from rolling eyes to outright contempt. Bill Buckner had enjoyed an outstanding career as a stellar infielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers, but he had never won a World Series ring. In 1986, he found himself at the end of his career playing for the Boston Red Sox, which was making its first real run at a World Series title in more than half

a century. With Boston in the lead in the sixth game of the series, Red Sox manager John McNamara elected to leave Buckner at first base in the last innings so that Buckner would have the joy of being on the field as his team won the Series. Unfortunately, the New York Mets' Mookie Wilson hit a ground ball to Buckner, whose knees were in such poor shape that he was unable to bend down and pick up the ball. The ball scooted through his legs and into right field; Wilson was safe on Buckner's error, and the Red Sox promptly lost game six . . . and then the final game seven to the swaggering Mets.

I mention this because very few fans remember Bill Buckner for his outstanding infield play throughout his career. Instead, public perception of Buckner was forever tarnished by that one infield error. Things got so bad for Buckner that he couldn't even remain in Boston, and he ended up moving to the Pacific Northwest, where he now lives. They may treat him right in Idaho, but back in Boston, Bill Buckner's name still lives in infamy. And there's no spin doctor on earth who could revive his image in that city.

But make no mistake—PR works. Especially in the Internet era, when we've gone from a twenty-four-hour news cycle to a twenty-four-second news cycle, you can become famous in a heartbeat. Take Kristine Lefebvre, an attorney in Los Angeles who was a contestant on Donald Trump's television show, *The Apprentice*. Part of Lefebvre's legal work involved negotiating deals with *Playboy* magazine for various celebrities. At one point, she was discussing a particular deal with her counterpart at *Playboy* and the *Playboy* person said, "You're a beautiful woman. You should do *Playboy* yourself." Kristine was married to a European guy, so she received no objection from her husband; a deal was struck, she shed her clothes, and the photo shoot went forward. The shoot turned out so well that *Playboy* even put her on the cover.

Kristine's deal with the magazine was that she would be paid per issue over a certain volume of sales, so she wanted to do some advance PR. On the Friday before the last episode of *The Apprentice*, we leaked to TMZ.com the story of Kristine's upcom-

ing appearance in *Playboy*. As a result, ratings for *The Apprentice* went through the roof, far higher than at any time during the series. If you hadn't been watching all along, there was now only one reason that you were tuning in: because you wanted to see Kristine Lefebvre, the woman who was going to appear on the cover—and inside—*Playboy* magazine. By the following Monday, Kristine Lefebvre was the number one search on AOL. The story also got picked up by the Associated Press, one of the most powerful news organizations in the world, and by practically everyone else in the news media. They all went ballistic . . . viral . . . and gave Kristine every chance for success.

You may not be posing for *Playboy*, but your life is far more likely to be exposed, often in ways you might not like, than ever before. There used to be a wall of privacy both for public figures and for individuals. Not anymore. That wall has come tumbling down with the advent of camera phones, the speed of the Internet, and the ability of people to suss out all sorts of information about practically anyone. The market for celebrity information, scandal, photographs, and video clips has gone through the roof. Everyone from parking valets to lab assistants at hospitals is lured by the temptation to turn information into cold, hard cash.

Television host Kathie Lee Gifford explained it this way: "Privacy is like your health. It's one of those things in life you take completely for granted until it's gone, then you realize how precious it is."

Once Ed McMahon, famous for years as Johnny Carson's sidekick on *The Tonight Show*, had gone to a hospital in Los Angeles for medical tests. He saw the results in the tabloids before he got them from his own doctor.

You don't have to be an Ed McMahon—in the public eye—to be concerned about who's watching you. One of my former clients, Dr. Robert Rey, a plastic surgeon known as "Dr. 90210" on *E! Entertainment*, was criticized by a leading medical journal on the grounds that cameras in operating rooms and doctors' offices were a bad thing, potentially violating the privacy of the patient and posing a threat to the confidentiality of the

doctor-patient relationship. The publication was trying to put Dr. Rey on the defensive, so we wrote an op-ed for the journal as a response. I often do op-eds (bylined pieces that appear on the page opposite the editorial page of newspapers) in situations like this, combining my client's ideas and my take on the topic. My job is to write it in their voice, as best I can. This particular opinion piece said that if you're a physician, whether you're in your own office or the operating room, you ought to be acting at all times as if there were a camera over your shoulder. Why shouldn't people know what you are doing? It's actually the best thing for medicine, because it will cut down on malpractice. In the age of spin, like it or not, we all can be on *Candid Camera*.

Why am I writing this book? Because my career in many ways has paralleled the explosion of the field of public relations and I want to share what I've learned with the widest possible audience. I see a lack of basic communication skills. I see people wanting to be famous for just being famous. I see loyalty ebbing, being replaced by cynicism. Again and again, I see people going on TV just because they can, not because they should.

By the very nature of what we do, PR people are educators. We educate media about clients, and we educate our clients about the media. I educate and mentor my younger staff about how to do PR more successfully. I've had the honor of teaching PR at the University of Southern California and explaining it in terms that college students can understand. Now I want to share my thirty years' experience with you.

A while back I was doing PR for a Budweiser Parade of Stars Concert to benefit the United Negro College Fund. The day before the concert I placed a huge story on it in the local paper, the *Flint Journal*. My grandmother read the paper and called me.

"What a coincidence," she remarked. "You're here for a concert and there's a huge article on it in the paper."

"I did that," I replied.

"You did what?" she asked.

"I got that article in the paper."

“So,” she asked, confused, “where’s your name?”

So where’s *your* name? How are you perceived in your world? Do decision makers—consumers, voters, bosses, customers—understand who you are and what you offer? You can’t be hiding your light under a bushel basket in today’s world and hope to succeed. In Hollywood there is an axiom: Doing the work is half the job. The other half is making sure that your work is seen and promoted in this cluttered marketplace. What’s your reality and what do people think about you? Are they aligned? If the perception of you isn’t where you want it to be, what do you have to do to transform it so that you maximize your influence, sales, success, income, or any combination thereof?

Sometimes people ask me how I got into this field. In college, I worked for a small Ann Arbor ad agency. Once I graduated and began interviewing for advertising jobs in New York and Chicago, they kept asking me, “Are you a suit or are you a creative?”—meaning, do you intend to make your career in advertising on the business side, working with clients, or on the creative side, designing the ads?

I had been doing both at the small agency during my college years. I didn’t know I had to choose.

“I think I can do both,” I replied.

“No, you can’t,” they told me. “You’ve got to choose sides.”

“I like working with clients,” I said, “and I also think I’m creative. I think I can write ads pretty well.”

“Sorry,” they told me. “You’ve got to choose.”

So I chose to leave. I got a writing job at a small society magazine, *Chicago Elite*, put out by the owner of a successful gun dealer magazine because his wife wanted to go to a better class of parties. I submitted one story, and they didn’t change a word. I felt really smart. I submitted a second story, and they didn’t change a word on that one either. I felt even smarter. Then they didn’t change a word on the third story. And I thought to myself, “I’m not that smart.” If they weren’t interested in “growing” me as a writer, then maybe this wasn’t the right place for me. The magazine folded after a year and I got a job with a small PR

agency in Chicago. I thought to myself that it couldn't be that hard—it seemed that half of the people who had pitched me stories at the magazine hadn't even bothered to read the publication. In the public relations world, former journalists are welcome. They figure that we know how to pitch stories because we've been pitched to for so long.

The company soon won Anheuser-Busch as a client. I was twenty-four years old at the time, and suddenly I was traveling to ten different states on behalf of the biggest beer company in the world. Every weekend there was another event to support with publicity. Anheuser-Busch was a great client—they loved publicity, they understood how to maximize sponsorships, and they were willing to spend money. I learned a lot from them and I am very grateful to them for essentially giving me an MBA in PR. I then took a job at Burson-Marsteller, which was the largest PR firm in the world at the time, because I wanted to play in a bigger arena. I remained friends with the people there, who mentored me as I started my own company. I had truly found my home in public relations. I knew after my first week that I loved my profession.

Edward Bernays, often known as “the father of public relations,” said a PR person has three jobs: first, and most obvious, present the client to the public; second, interpret the public for the client (what's the landscape the client is entering); and finally, and perhaps most important, do good.

There are a lot of different names for what we do. You can call us publicists, flacks, media relations managers, image consultants, spin doctors, spokespeople, press secretaries, crisis managers, or some combination thereof. Whatever you want to call us, the techniques we use will work just as well in your world as they do in mine. There's no question about it—we live in the age of spin. So spin along with me; as you develop, change, or protect your own image, you'll be in for the ride of your life.



CHAPTER 2

GOING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Who needs PR?

Who needs to create or reshape a personal image or the image of his or her company or brand? In short, who's this book for?

In three decades of listening to clients tell me why they've come into my office, one phrase comes through again and again—*they want to go to the next level.*

What's the next level in *your* life? Higher income? More recognition? A promotion? Winning an election? Converting others to your way of thinking about politics, the environment, or some other idea or cause? However you define success in your sphere, if you're trying to reach that elusive next level, you must manage the perceptions others have of you, your product, or your service. Don't believe that stuff about the world beating a path to the door of the person with a better mousetrap. The world, in fact, will beat a path to the person who sets out enough cheese . . . for the media.

Who's reaching for the next level? A doctor specializing in a hot area of medicine. A lawyer who has won a big settlement and

wants to use that case as a stepping stone in his career. A business getting ready to expand. A celebrity about to appear in an attention-getting role in a new film. A community activist running for public office. An educator or PTA president who wants to start changing things on a macro, not micro, level. An environmentalist who wants to start a nonprofit and change the world.

One of the biggest problems facing businesses today is called “commoditization”—a phenomenon linked to the belief that “all companies are created equal” and “all products and services are created equal.” In a world where every product or service is viewed as a commodity, the only way companies can differentiate themselves is in terms of price. In other words, the world doesn’t care how good you, your service, or your product might be; it just cares how cheap it is. The only way to overcome commoditization is to find a way to stand out. PR helps you do just that.

It’s not just seemingly faceless businesses that fear being commoditized in the marketplace. Even celebrities fear it. I had a conversation recently with the beautiful host of a nightly entertainment show. She told me, “I think we’re all interchangeable blondes after a while, and I don’t want to be that anymore.” The last thing you want to be is interchangeable. PR illustrates the differences between you and those against whom you are competing.

People often come to me for the wrong reason—they want to be famous. I tell them fame is not the goal, recognition is. Fame will come as a by-product of recognition.

People come to me when they see articles or TV stories about their competitors. They tell me indignantly, “I do more business than they do.” Or, “I’m more articulate.” Or, “I’m more deserving.” All these questions boil down to two simple words—*where’s mine?* Public relations can be the golden key to getting what’s yours.

PR is also for those who have made a change in their life and need the world to know it. It might be an actor reinventing his image after a public failure by shaking up his team, hiring a new agent, manager, or publicist, and taking on a challenging role. In

the life of a private person, it might be a personal change—a breakup, a divorce, a new marriage or relationship. Or it might be about a business, individual, or brand coming back after a challenging period. It might be a company opening a new office in another city; landing a big account; or acquiring a competitor.

Another person whose image would need rehabilitation would be someone coming out of jail. Martha Stewart handled her comeback from insider-trading charges beautifully. Jail softened her image. But how did she end up in jail in the first place? Stewart built a billion-dollar brand, but she didn't build along with it a foundation of charity and caring, or if she did, she didn't promote it enough. When she got in trouble, who was there to stand up for her? Who was there to give her the benefit of the doubt? If you're going to be highly successful, and if your success is going to be in the public eye, you've got to create an image for yourself that says, "I care about people other than myself and I care about more than just simply being rich."

Compare Martha Stewart's legal troubles with those of Oprah Winfrey. When Oprah got in trouble with the beef producers, everybody rushed to her side. That's because she had already developed an image as a person who genuinely cared. By contrast, we never saw the "Martha Stewart House for Wayward Girls." Of course, all of a sudden, her house became the "Home for a Wayward Girl."

Martha Stewart's situation shows that you *can* go home again (the tenth of my Ten Commandments of PR which you will find at the end of the book). She knitted a poncho in jail. She humanized herself. She was humiliated, and we felt her pain, and we like her better now. The public consensus now on Martha Stewart is that she was a victim of the government—a notch on the belt of an overzealous prosecutor, not a true miscreant.

These are all situations in which a well-thought-out publicity campaign can make a difference. One of my basic premises about public relations, however, is that just because you *can* get press doesn't mean you *should* get press. Just about everybody

has the ability to get press in today's media-saturated culture. But a media campaign has to be part of a bigger picture.

Talk show host Rita Crosby came out with a book about Larry Birkhead, the father of the late Anna Nicole Smith's baby. As much as it hurts to have your reputation maligned in a book, Larry chose to go on a number of talk shows to defend himself and refute her charges. I think he would have been better served by judicious silence than fueling the controversy of the book and increasing attention and sales.

I was disappointed by Larry's judgment when he took his child for a walk down L.A.'s Robertson Boulevard, the street with the highest number of paparazzi, having dressed her in a T-shirt that read, "Who's your daddy?" His child had become a prop. And when he cut a deal with a magazine to sell pictures of the kid's birthday party, he was using his child as his ATM. It's just not right; children are not props or cash cows.

Larry focused a lot of energy on talking to the media. He liked the limelight and enjoyed having a relationship with journalists known to all of America by their first names. But ultimately, is that the best thing for him, his image, or his relationship with his daughter? I don't think so. Does a person want to be known as a tabloid husband, part of a circus act, or someone who is a good father with a good career?

If you are involved in a nationally newsworthy situation, don't be surprised when the "first-name journalists" come calling. But don't consider them your new "friends" in the media. "Friends" in the media are not your friends. Don't let your strategy be built around supposed "friendships" like these. These journalists and their staffs are not there ultimately to be your friend, even though they can be amazingly charming. They are people with a job to do, and they'll use you and then move on. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that now that you're "famous" you get to hobnob with the Geraldos of the world. That's not the way it works.

Another example of a person who did not benefit from publicity, even though her situation offered her plenty of opportuni-

ties for publicity, was the first runner-up in the 2007 Miss USA pageant. Pageant director Donald Trump, you may recall, went live on national television to announce, in dramatic terms, his forgiveness of the winner of the pageant, who had gotten into trouble in some New York clubs. Trump told a breathless television audience that Miss USA was ultimately a good girl who had made some mistakes. So now everyone wanted to know what the first runner-up had to say, since she would have taken the title had Trump bounced the winner of the competition.

Her best move would have been to not seek any media coverage and instead just put out a statement—something to the effect of, “I’m happy for her. Anyone would want a second chance.” And then she should let the whole thing go. Instead, the young lady went on numerous television shows and looked very self-serving and perhaps even bitter. I don’t think the appearances helped her, and she certainly has not parlayed her experiences into a significant television or movie career of any sort yet. She didn’t build anything. Again, just because you *can* get publicity doesn’t mean you *should*.

You might be saying, “Howard, I know I want publicity, and I know I need it. Tell me how to write a really killer press release already.”

I don’t mean to disappoint you, but this isn’t a book about how to write press releases. You can find plenty of those on the shelves already. Instead, this is a book to help you think about popular culture and your place in it, and to think about your community, whether it’s local, national, or international, and your place in it. The main questions I want you to think about for now are these:

Who do you want to be in the world?

How do you want people to think of you?

How do you want to be known?

If you could define your legacy—and you can—
what would your legacy be?

I grew up in Flint, Michigan, the town made famous by Michael Moore and his documentary *Roger and Me*, about General Motors. Most of the parents of the kids I knew when I was growing up worked in factories. These were good kids, but they were not especially aspirational. They expected to put the same kinds of bolts into Buicks on the assembly line as had their fathers and grandfathers before them. Back then, GM workers were well compensated, well taken care of, and enjoyed good benefits. But there were others in town who wanted more.

Somebody in Flint must have grown up wanting to be the president of General Motors. Or the union organizer. Or the author of a book. Perhaps you remember an excellent book called *Rivthead*, written by Ben Hamper, which told the story of what it was like to work on the line at GM. To me, this illustrates the fact that out of every hundred people, only a few have aspirations greater than those dictated for them by their surroundings. Are you one of those people?

Some people are addicted to seeing themselves in the media. Britney Spears might be one of those people. It's been said that the definition of an extrovert is someone for whom nothing happens until someone else knows about it. Some people, quite frankly, are a little too extroverted for their own good. If you're going to melt down, don't do it in front of the media. I go on CNN a lot, and for a while I was asked frequently about Britney Spears. "If you were Britney's PR guy," they would ask, "how would you fix her problems?"

"She doesn't have PR problems," I would respond. "She has life problems."

We have to understand the difference between PR and life: the truth seeks its own level. That's another of my Ten Commandments of PR. If your public image is out of order, we can fix it, but if you're out there doing terrible things, all the PR in the world isn't going to make a difference.

So let's say you've got a legitimate reason (or even an illegitimate reason; who am I to judge?) for creating a PR campaign. How do you know that you, or what you offer, will be a good

candidate for a publicity campaign? I'd like to offer four criteria. If you meet any of these, you're probably in.

1. Do you have enough money? If you have enough money, you can generate attention. It's that simple. The greater your aspirations—the broader the canvas on which you want to operate—the more it's going to cost. But if you want to pay the piper and spend your money wisely, the media will happily dance to your tune.

2. Does your offering make sense? Let's say you import a particular Italian beer. Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are the countries in Europe best known for beer, with Belgium and France not far behind them. (Okay, quite far behind them, but that's another discussion.) But Italy? How many Italian beers can you name? So you have a great idea to promote your Italian beer: you'll make bocci, the Italian bowling game, the next great American sport. Now, the market for beer is men, so you want to get in the sports pages. The only problem is that most American newspapers don't have a bocci reporter. The newspapers in Florence? They might. Here, not so much. Who on earth is going to write your bocci stories?

It's never gonna happen. Instead of bocci, pick an Italian soccer star as a spokesperson for your beer. Or better yet, since you are seeking to appeal to American men, pick a beautiful Italian actress. You've got a much better chance of someone writing about soccer or Italian actresses than about bocci. Of course, I've been wrong before and maybe you will turn bocci into an international phenomenon. But in the meantime, there's got to be a sensible connection between what you're offering and what the media can comfortably translate into a public image.

Keep in mind that media stories have to be "slotted"—they've got to fit into already established categories. A plane can't just take off from Detroit and land at LAX. It's got to have a slot at the airport—a time when it can land and find an open gate. Your story has to somehow "slot" or make sense to whatever media you are seeking to cover it.

3. *Are you passionate about what you're doing?* Is your issue or cause something to stir and inspire the world? Can it lift and motivate people? The more passionate you are about your offering, and the more passion you can inspire in others, the more likely you are to succeed. I recently saw a food called Plumpy'nut featured on *60 Minutes*. It's a combination of peanuts, milk, and vitamins, and it is literally ending malnutrition among children in impoverished regions of the world. Kids love the taste and the product is saving lives. Another innovation—the XO-1, an inexpensive laptop for children designed by the social welfare organization One Laptop Per Child (OLPC)—was developed to provide access to knowledge to kids in developing countries. Can you get passionate about products like these? I think you can. Is your product or idea powerful enough to inspire passion in the world you seek to influence? Environmental activists are doing it every day.

Passion must be a two-way street. It's not enough that what you offer excites you. It's got to excite *others* as well. Back when I was at Burson-Marsteller, we were having a brainstorming meeting to discuss the market introduction of Procter & Gamble's new product, Liquid Tide. For P&G, of course, Tide is a flagship brand, so when Tide goes liquid, it's a big deal—just like Coca-Cola creating Diet Coke. In that meeting I asked, "Does the client understand that while it's culture-changing in their world, it might not matter very much in the real world?" People stared at me for a while, because I was speaking heresy. But when you think about it, it makes sense: if it didn't matter to you, you wouldn't be thinking about publicizing it, but will it matter to anyone else?

4. *Finally, could this be a foot in the door to something greater?* Not every single project or activity represents your life's dreams and greatest ambitions. Sometimes we do things because we know—or at least we hope—that they will lead to greater things down the road. When we launched Fresca for Coca-Cola, that

wasn't a particularly big project. A lot of work, and not a lot of profit. But it was our chance to show the client what we could do. If the idea you want to publicize represents a stepping-stone toward greater things, then by all means go for it.

Who needs PR? Anyone who has a good reason for taking his or her image, career, product, or service to the next level. Who doesn't need PR? Anyone who could benefit more from judicious silence than media saturation. How can you tell if PR is right for you? If you've got the money, if you've got a sensible idea, if you're passionate, or if this project represents a step on the path to greater things, then go for it. It's time for your fifteen minutes.

There are three important things to learn about PR right off the bat. First, PR is a process, not a blueprint. Second, it's a marathon, not a sprint. And most important, everybody's DNA plays differently in the public arena. Why does Ann Coulter turn into a pariah when she calls John Edwards a "faggot" . . . but Jerry Lewis can drop the F-bomb on his telethon with nary a bleep?

Just remember that recognition is not an end point—it's currency that you can spend any way you see fit. Fame is what fame can do for you. George Clooney calls fame a credit card to change the world. For others, it can be a way to build respect, step up a career, make money, or get laid. Some use fame to further their activism. Others use it to stay in the public eye even when they shouldn't. Fame can also be a pain: when you're picking your nose while driving or if you're rude to a waiter, everyone on the planet is going to know about it. You'll be judged harshly—count on it. A famous woman stepping out of her home to jog wearing no makeup and dressed in sweatpants can open the tabloids a few days later and . . . hello. Is that really *me*?

Fame is a bitch goddess. It can help you or it can destroy you. But if you can approach it sensibly, it can open doors for you in unimaginable ways. So let's start opening some doors for you.