



MARKETING STAR



Richard Laermer: Founder and CEO of RLM Public Relations, Author, and Revolutionary—Part One

[By Anique Gonzalez]

Did you know there is a revolution taking place? A revolution that, like it or not, you are a part of? Regardless of whether you are aware of the uprising, the revolution is affecting your interactions with brands, products, and organizations, as well as the way they interact with you. What is this revolution? It's known as punk marketing.

Richard Laermer, media and marketing trend analyst, co-host of the TLC show *Taking Care of Business*, and regular commentator on NPR's *Marketplace*, co-authored *Punk Marketing: Get Off Your Ass and Join the Revolution*. *Punk Marketing* is essentially a play-by-play book that not only notifies you about the revolution but also serves a guide to how you can "get on the right side of the barricade and become a part of it!"

So what is punk marketing? Essentially, punk marketing is based on the notion that "consumers are in control of the media, and marketing and corporations are no longer in control...consumers are no longer passive in any way. This whole generation of MySpace, YouTube people who spend all of their time online, they're not very interested in you [marketers and corporations]," Laermer explained. In response, marketers must now "use all forms of media in offbeat ways to knock consumers off balance, surprise them, and engage them."

And how has this shift in consumer consciousness impacted businesses?

"It means marketers are being trampled underfoot by powerful consumers for the first time. It's a real power shift. What consumers want to know is 'What exactly are you giving me?' You can't fabricate who you are anymore." Which means that for marketers to make an impact and accomplish their goal of stimulating action,

Q. What do you like to do in your free time?

A. I take airplanes to the west coast. I have a house outside of Palm Springs. We lived in L.A. for a couple of years when we had our office out there. So the remnants of that is this beautiful house that we bought in La Quinta. Whenever I have a free minute, I get on an airplane and go there. I also *love* old movies; they're the only reason I'm still sane. I have thousands of them.

Q. What DVD is in your DVD player right now?

A. The first season of *Emergency*, the TV series. And the movie *Little Children*, which I got bootleg from Hong Kong. It's a legal bootleg, though.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. Without a doubt, *The Simpsons*. I'm obsessed with *The Simpsons*. *The Simpsons* have never really waned for me in 19 years. June 26 or July 26, when the movie comes out, I'm going to be the first person in line. You know, as far as I'm concerned, that's a story that's supposed to be so controversial and a family of fights, but there's more heart in that show than any show I've ever seen on TV. Consistently, it's always been about heart, it's always been about love and about family, and I think that's pretty cool for a show that basically makes fun of everything in America.

Q. What was the last magazine you read?

A. *GOOD*, *The New Yorker*, and *Time Out New York*.

they "have to be more creative now than ever; they can't just sit on their laurels." Being creative and choosing to take the road less traveled is risky, but it is the most obvious path to enormous success.

"We always tell people to take risks, and inevitably somebody will say, 'Well, what's the calculation there?' And what I'm trying to say...is that if you think that way you're already lost. Risks are not supposed to be calculated; they're supposed to be risks. You have to try things. I mean, what's the worst that could happen? It doesn't work. No calculated risks? Again, don't participate; just facilitate."



After graduating from college with a degree in communications, Laermer began writing for local magazines—a profession he stayed in for nearly 10 years. At the time, he said, he was the "ultimate freelance writer."

"I wrote for every newspaper in New York and every magazine across the country. I worked, like, 24 hours per day, and I enjoyed it. But in the end...it didn't make me a lot of money," Laermer laughed.



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However, what he learned while he was working in the trenches was that oftentimes the publicists he encountered did not know how to or did not perform their jobs to the best of their capabilities. So after writing his first book, *Native's Guide to New York: Advice with Attitude for People Who Live Here—And Visitors We Like*, he decided to publicize and market it himself.

"I used the good techniques that the good PR people used with me [when I was a journalist]," he said. "I got to know the reporters around the country that needed to know about my book because it was part of their job."

He was so successful, in fact, that he took his knowledge of the PR industry and "wrangled" himself a public affairs director position at Columbia Business School.

"While I was there, we did a lot—probably more than anybody has ever done at a business school because I didn't realize I was supposed to be academic," Laermer joked. (Ironically, even if he was unaware of it at the time, he was utilizing a cornerstone of punk marketing: employing nontraditional methods to connect.) With a keen interest in and inherent knack for public relations, Laermer founded his own PR firm, RLM Public Relations, in 1991; he now currently serves as chief executive.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My dad. He's just a great guy; he's just a terrific guy, and he taught me the one thing that sticks with me every day, which is that time is irretrievable. He also said one other thing that I think about, even though I used to make fun of him every day while I was growing up. He said, "What you put into it is proportionate to what you get out of it." That's damn true. And my father is 78 years old, and he's the most childish person I know, and I think that's pretty cool.

Although the firm started out with only three people, it quickly grew. Between 1993 and 1996, Laermer said, "Every single web company that launched in America was either a client of ours or came to us for advice. In a couple of years, we launched everybody. Every year, we grew, like, another 50%. 1998 and 1999 were the biggest years of our company because they were the crux of the dot-com years, and we grew 100% each year."

However, as with most good things, there was soon trouble in paradise. When the dot-com bubble burst, much of RLM's client base dried up, and the company was forced to lay off employees, eventually cutting nearly 60% of its staff. Fortunately, though, RLM was able to diversify and weathered the dot-com storm. Although technology, which was the firm's original focus, still makes up a large

percentage of its business, it has branched out and now also represents clients in the publishing and healthcare industries.

"We're very nimble; we keep our feet to the ground...we don't do a lot of memos; we just get the work done," Laermer explained.

Evolving to incorporate new trends, discovering innovative ways to overcome obstacles, employing new ways to engage with society...what's more punk than that?

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