

PR POINTERS



Here's a Brainstorm: PR Needs Creative People

[By Steve Caulk, President of ProConnect Public Relations]

Somewhere back in time, public relations professionals agreed that our departments should operate on the most microscopic budgets, relying upon others to process our work at no cost to our clients.

Newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio all happily carried our messages and provided exposure for our clients, as long as we could inspire that distribution by contributing a little bit of creativity to the mix.

"Could you please mention our \$28,000 four-wheel-drive vehicle on tonight's news, and, oh, by the way, here is a video of someone driving it up the side of a skyscraper."

"Please encourage people to come to our baseball game, where they can watch us demolish hundreds of disco records."

"We advise the media to write extensive stories about the death of our superhero, as chronicled in our hot-selling comic book, before we miraculously revive him in a subsequent edition."

Creators of those campaigns forgot to invite me to the meetings that spawned them; but I daresay some serious brainstorming went into the process. In the PR craft, there is no tool more valuable than the brainstorm. It puts creativity on steroids. Sadly, many PR people are too busy to use the brainstorm regularly or don't know enough about the technique to get the most out of it.

And make no mistake, there is a technique.

The Fundamental Elements of a Brainstorm

Let's make one thing immediately clear. When your boss announces, prior to secluding himself in his office behind a closed door, that he needs time to

brainstorm the solution to an urgent problem, he is not brainstorming. Maybe he is thinking. Maybe. But one person cannot brainstorm. It takes at least two. Three or four is better. Five or six is okay. Any more than that can begin to create problems and actually hinder the process. A crowd inhibits contributions. No matter how skilled the facilitator, he or she will not be able to track the rapid-fire responses of a typical brainstorm, provide some direction, and still properly emphasize the most important function of the facilitator, which is to draw contributions from everyone.

The facilitator (usually a manager most on the hook for results) who organizes a brainstorm should seek diversity of personalities. And in PR, an ideal session would probably include someone well-versed in media behavior, someone familiar with today's basic PR tools, someone with a marketing background, and perhaps someone with a background in crisis communications.

The ground rules for brainstorming are pretty universal:

- No interruptions.
- No naysayers; no judgments.
- Work fast and charge ahead. Don't stop at the first "good" idea.
- Limited timeframe. It can be 20 minutes, it can be four hours (with breaks), but people will have a better attitude throughout if they know there is a specific end.

- Build on each other's ideas.
- Write it down.

A Brainstorm That Worked

In my capacity as Director of Media Relations at DISH Network, we needed a PR campaign to supplement a new branding campaign. We had kicked around some ideas for weeks-but only informally and always with the attitude of "we'll come up with something eventually."

As we got closer to our deadline, I dragged my communications manager, Mark Cicero, into my office, closed the door, and told him we were going to spend the next two hours in there until we came up with something we liked, something that would make a big impact. I told him I wanted him to spit out ideas, and I didn't care how outrageous they were; and I would do the same.

Mark was already pretty frustrated by the slow pace of the previous informal idea sessions that had occurred in drive-by meetings or in less-interactive meetings where we were supposed to "report our plans." In this case, his frustration nearly bubbled into anger, resulting in a brainstorming godsend.

"Why don't we just give DISH Network service to everybody for free!" he said, raising his voice and clearly growing impatient. "That will get us publicity."

Rather than shooting it down, I suggested we explore it. I asked how we could do it without ruining the company.

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"Just one city," he said, still clearly frustrated. "Chicago!"

"Okay," I said, "but what do we get in exchange?"

The result was the DISH City Makeover, in which we distributed a press release offering all the residents of any city free DISH Network TV service, provided they would change the city's name to DISH. We ended up with more than 3,500 media hits, including outlets in South Africa, Israel, and London. After a small town in Texas changed its name to DISH, more hits rolled in. We had hit the brainstorming mother lode.

Why Brainstorming Works

Brainstorming harnesses the thoughts of multiple PR professionals; it's like daisy-chaining a string of computers. Some members of the brainstorm session will have ideas they thought were simply obvious to everyone else but weren't. A combination of all those "obvious" but separate thoughts mixed with an attitude of tolerance and optimism about a productive outcome often results in greatness-or at least a chance to survive another day within that microscopic budget.

About the Author:

Steve Caulk is the president of ProConnect Public Relations in Denver. He spent 20 years as a reporter at the *Rocky Mountain News*, covering such diverse topics as cable TV, telecommunications, airlines, casinos, breweries, and the Denver Broncos. He has an MBA from University of Colorado-Denver and a Bachelor of Science in Journalism from Northwestern University. He is married with five children.