

# PR News

Building the bridge between PR and the bottom line.

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Contents

## PRN Special Report

# Funny Ha-Ha or Funny Uh-Oh? Does Comedy Belong in PR?

In 1997, John Stewart Socha was president of **Audio Computer Information**, a company that produced tutorial tapes for newcomers to the high-tech world. At that time,

### (( PR PULSE ))

#### Barbara Bush Gift Stirs PR Backlash



It is not uncommon for proud parents to call attention to their children's endeavors, but few parents would wish to endure the PR brouhaha recently stirred

up by Barbara Bush. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the former First Lady gave a donation to a Hurricane Katrina relief fund with a very specific condition: That her money be used solely to purchase educational software for Houston-area public schools with a high percentage of Gulf Coast evacuees. But there was another catch: The software had to come from the Austin, TX-based **Ignite Learning**, which is owned by her son Neil Bush. Although this requirement is perfectly legal, the PR implications were perfectly rotten. Bush was named "Worst Person in the World" by Keith Olbermann on his **MSNBC** show "Countdown" while Andrew Sullivan dubbed the story "Marie Antoinette Watch" on his blog. As for Ignite Learning, it mentioned the donation but not Barbara Bush's stipulation in its online newsroom – which has not been updated since February (a PR boo-boo unto itself!).

Socha decided to branch out his business focus into a very different direction. He hit on the idea to create a gag gift product that could be used as a PR fundraising tool by animal rights and rescue organizations involving in spaying pets: Kitty Kondoms. Scissoring the fingers from latex gloves, Socha created the packaging that suggested tiny prophylactics for felines.

The good news, from a PR standpoint, was that Kitty Kondoms created quite a stir in the media – Socha was bombarded with requests for interviews. The problem, however, was that many of the requests were from feral radio shock jocks who wanted to have obvious fun with the concept of (according to Socha's press release) "putting the boot on puss." And at least one media outlet, a European trade journal covering the industrial rubber industry, missed the joke completely and inexplicably gave Kitty Kondoms serious new product coverage.

And what happened to the animal groups Socha hoped to sign up as customers for his fundraising gag gift? Despite coverage in the **ASPCA's** magazine, the target audience shied away from the item.

"It was definitely over the top for its time," he recalls. "Perhaps it was a bit too edgy for the average nonprofit's board of directors. We had some faithful individual buyers, but the organizations never did catch on."

Humor is clearly a subjective notion, but in PR the use of humor can sometimes create more concern than laughs. In Socha's case, the wrong people took the joke in the wrong direction while the target audience either didn't get the humor or didn't want it.

Whether the laughter is carefully conceived in advance with the hopes of a big boffo payoff, or whether the comedy is an impromptu reaction, the ability to incorporate levity into a PR campaign is a serious concern. Specifically, how can a PR professional lighten up the communications message while achieving a measurable return?

For starters, it helps if the PR professional is comfortable in creating and presenting funny campaigns. Scott Cohn, creative director with the New York-based **Night Agency**, encourages humorous approaches from his team – even to the point of dissecting creative ideas to determine their laugh quotient.

"By and large we find ourselves hilarious, and our own opinion holds the most weight with ourselves," says Cohn. "We usually pass an idea around the office and see if we get some laughs. If we bomb with our own staff, then we change gears and try something else. Then

we have a bunch of friends who we send stuff out to for them to review. They'll in turn supply us with feedback, which we'll ignore, and the campaign will go



Actor Frank Ferrante's letter-perfect imitation of Groucho Marx was a PR bonanza for the Maccabee Group's comic campaign on behalf of Malt-O-Meal cereal.

out to the masses for excoriation by wise-ass bloggers."

All flippancy aside, there are three key elements needed for a comic communications campaign to work: An original idea, the ability not to overplay your hand, and the talent to shape your efforts to meet the specific personality of your target audience.

### SAY THE SECRET WORD

For Paul Maccabee, the notion of lacing laughs into PR is the ultimate in subversion. "Everything in PR is obsessed with credibility, accountability and ROI, and humor seems to fly in the face with all of that," says Maccabee, president of **The Maccabee Group** in Minneapolis.

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**Tip Sheet**

## Lies, Smears & Dirty Tricks: An Ugly (But True) PR Story

By now, everyone is aware of lobbyist Jack Abramoff and public relations man Michael Scanlon, who have pleaded guilty to various illegal deeds involving their nefarious representation of American Indian tribes. Here is the bottom line to the saga: They were aided and abetted by politicians, and the media gave them all a free ride.

I write this having, for the past 40 months, handled pro bono media relations for a state-recognized Indian tribe in Connecticut, the **Golden Hill Paugussetts**. While it may be common wisdom that the U.S. press is liberal, you would not think so when it comes to Indian affairs—a complicated nexus of history and law that is ripe for manipulation by the financially and politically powerful.

Among other revelations, what has emerged from the Abramoff/Scanlon affair is that the duo was able to accomplish their various goals by funneling money to, and hiding behind, seemingly innocuous local “anti-gambling” groups. Some of these groups were actually pro-gambling entities protecting their turf. But until this tactic came to light (via the **Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**), the press in places like Alabama, California, Michigan and Texas never bothered to investigate the people behind these front groups or their ties to local and national politicians.

**THE TRUTH ABOUT ANTI-INDIAN CASINO PR**

Long before Abramoff and Scanlon made the headlines, there was a secretive “anti-casino” group in Connecticut fighting the efforts of the Paugussetts and other state-recognized tribes to gain federal recognition and its attendant benefits (which include the right to operate gaming operations on

tribal lands). While the press is always quick to publicly lambast the tribes’ financial backers, the “anti-casino” group has kept the identities of its contributors a secret, and the press has perpetuated this double standard.

Before he stepped down, the leader of the Connecticut anti-casino group routinely toured the state and declared that it was wrong for anyone to hire lobbyists to influence the federal recognition process at the **Bureau of Indian Affairs**. In the midst of his campaign, he quietly registered as a lobbyist in Washington to do exactly what

**“Become immersed in the subject, stick to the facts and grind it out, month after month, year after year.”**

he said no one should do. When informed of his lobbyist status, do you suppose the Connecticut press corps wrote about this double standard? They did not.

It gets worse. Connecticut’s Attorney General, Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat, continues to make much political hay from singling out a minority group—state-recognized Indians—while allying himself with the “anti-casino” group and working together to deprive Indians of their right to due process. Meanwhile, we have a Republican Congresswoman, Nancy Johnson, who, during the height of debate over another state-recognized tribe in Connecticut, publicly labeled that tribe a “rag-tag group.” No public criticism ensued. If she or any politician called a group of Italians, Mormons, Poles,

Muslims or Jehovah’s Witnesses a “rag-tag group,” how do you suppose the press would react?

**HOW TO REACT?**

What are the lessons for PR professionals who decide to represent legitimate but very controversial clients? Here are a few quick tips:

- ▶ Become immersed in the subject.
- ▶ Stick to the facts and grind it out, month after month, year after year.
- ▶ Find and cultivate the journalists who are capable of independent thinking and not afraid to go against the established political order.
- ▶ Most important, be sure to run a squeaky-clean operation, because you will be up against powerful opponents, public and private, with the resources and inclination to undertake any and all manner of behavior. There are literally billions of dollars at stake.

Opposition research, dirty tricks, surveillance, criminal and financial background checks—be prepared to be on the receiving end of nasty tactics from the opposition or don’t get involved. If this sounds like hyperbole, spend an hour or two on **Google** searching some of the words in the previous sentence, along with the words “Indian casino,” and decide for yourself. **PRIN**

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## Crisis Communications, Government Agency-Style

*Question: Many government agencies have a reputation (whether deserved or not) of facing crisis communications with stonewalling or deliberate misinformation. What advice can you give to information officers in public agencies in regard to handling crisis communications?*

**ANSWER:** With the same advice given to their counterparts in the corporate world: Be honest, be transparent and be in front of the story. According to Brandi North-Williams, public information officer for the **City of Charlotte (NC) Solid Waste Services**, there are four key elements to consider.

First, remember who you are ultimately reporting to. “As a government agency this is extremely important because these agencies are public servants,” says North-Williams. “And the public expects, and has a right, to know what has hap-

pened.”

Second, make sure all of the facts in the matter are gathered with speed and efficiency. North-Williams notes that public agency information officers “need to be diligent in getting explanations for everything and completely understanding the cause and cure for the problem.”

Third, she points out the importance of stressing that the issue is an aberration and not business-as-usual. “While it is important to develop a plan for communicating, I am specifically talking about a plan of action for making sure that the problem, if possible, does not occur again,” she explains. “This step must also include taking the appropri-

ate actions to ensure it doesn’t happen, such as policy changes.”

Fourth, North-Williams stresses that it is important to communicate internally as well as externally. “Your employees can be your advocates in situations like this, and that is what you want,” she says. From her own perspective, North-Williams incorporated this four-step plan following an accident at her agency’s property.

“Several years ago, we had our fleet of garbage trucks vandalized,” she recalls. “A group of rowdy kids got in the trucks and drove them around like bumper cars, causing thousands of dollars in damages. When asked how this happened, we were completely honest: We left the keys in

the trucks. This is a practice that is standard in many organizations where they have truck/bus fleets. The rationale is that if one caught on fire, we had to save the rest of the fleet. So, we left the keys in the trucks so that they could be moved quickly. Well, in this case it allowed the vandals to get in. After this happened, we increased security and developed a new plan of action for safeguarding trucks against fire damage and vandalism. That plan was shared with the public. We took the steps mentioned above and things went smoothly.” **PRN**

*(Editor’s note: Please join us for our next webinar on crisis management on April 26. Details can be found at [prnewsonline.com](http://prnewsonline.com))*

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Brandi North-Williams

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## ► PR Spotlight

### A PR Matter of Life and Death: Raising Awareness of the Darfur Genocide

Promoting the introduction of a new product or service is a challenge for any PR professional. But how does one go about promoting awareness of an ongoing genocide in a distant country? For the **Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)**, a key mission of its inter-congregational communications has been raising awareness about the ongoing crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan, where an estimated 400,000 black Africans have been killed and approximately two million have been driven from the homes during the past three years by Arab Janjaweed militias, acting at the behalf of the Sudanese government.

According to Janet Hayes,

UUA information officer, the decision to focus on Darfur came from the top. “This is a personal commitment from Rev. William G. Sinkford, the UUA president,” says Hayes. “He is an African-American leading a historically white congregation. He made racial justice a priority.”

The first part of the UUA’s PR campaign was digital: Darfur-related stories were prominently featured on the UUA Web site and communications was distributed to electronic listserv channels targeting Unitarian-Universalist ministers and social activists. “We were reaching out to the activists in the individual congregations – most congrega-

tions have a social activist committee,” says Hayes.

Rev. Sinkford made numerous personal appeals, visiting several Unitarian-Universalist congregations each month. His primary message was to alert parishioners to the “Million Voices for Darfur” campaign, which is coordinated by the nonprofit **Save Darfur Coalition** with the goal of gathering one million postcards to be delivered to the Congress at a Washington rally on April 30.

Hayes reports the reaction among the congregations has been “overwhelming” and she notes many parishioners were



Rev. William G. Sinkford of the Unitarian Universalist Association meets with displaced Sudanese at a refugee camp in Chad.

getting their first true understanding of the Darfur genocide via the UUA’s efforts. **PRN**

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# A Do-It-Yourself Global High-Tech Trade Conference

**Company:** Globalpress Connection  
**Timeframe:** Sept. 2005 to March 2006

Starting a new trade conference is never a simple proposition, especially in the high-tech world. Between long-established trade shows and vendor-sponsored gatherings, it would appear this area has a surplus of competition.

But don't tell this to high-tech PR veteran Irmgard Lafrentz. Founder and president of **Globalpress Connection** in San Jose, CA, Lafrentz recently completed the fourth annual edition of her **Globalpress Summit**, which brought 47 companies and 57 technology journalists from around the globe. While those numbers may lack the scope and magnitude of conferences such as **Comdex**, it nonetheless offers an intimate way for vendors to connect directly to the international technology media.

Lafrentz came up with the idea for these conferences follow-

ing her agency's success with what she dubbed "reverse press tours."

Initially Lafrentz organized road show presentations for her high-tech clients, but over time these became increasingly expensive (especially when the road show went overseas), and following 9/11 the enthusiasm for corporate travel dropped dramatically.

Instead of sending her clients out into the world, Lafrentz turned the process around and coordinated junkets with tech media from across the globe coming to Silicon Valley, where they could meet her clients in their corporate settings.

"The cost is shared by the companies," she says, noting the media delegation consists of 10 people. "We take the visiting media to their headquarters, where their PR people can focus on content. In one week, they visit 10 or 11 companies. The companies love it because it is totally cost-effective; the CEO can give the media a half-hour

of his time, and there's no longer any need for the CEO to go to Europe to meet these editors."

The success of the reverse press tours encouraged Lafrentz to take her skills to a higher level and start her own high-tech conference. "In 2003, we began with 25 companies and 30 editors," she recalls. "We have panels focused on a particular topic and a special day for start-up companies, where we train them and make sure they are doing a great job so they come back again and again."

## A WORK IN PROGRESS

Planning the Globalpress Summit requires adequate time to ensure all of the pieces are in place. The work begins six months prior to the opening day.

Lafrentz spends two to three months planning the agenda for each conference. This involves coming up with topics for panel discussions, securing speakers for the conference sessions, and exploring sponsorships with the industry's top companies.

"Through research and ongoing dialogue with leading U.S. and international editors and analysts, we develop ideas for a theme," she says. "Then we test-market the theme with a focused group of stakeholders. The best suggestion nets a reward and acknowledgement at the Summit opening gala dinner. Our first four Summit themes were the direct result of creative brainstorming and collaboration with participating editors, who guide our development of panel topics."

After the agenda is set and



The high-tech press corps at this year's Globalpress Summit readies their cameras at a new product demonstration.

moderators and speakers are secured, the next step is the marketing phase. This covers five months and begins with blast e-mail campaigns to the media and sponsors (both returning and potential). Telephone follow-ups ensue, and Lafrentz employs two full-time sales people to handle this function. "We achieve a 10% average response for returning sponsors, which is a very nice ROI for this type of campaign," she says.

## PEOPLE POWER

One consistent factor has been the location: the California resort of Monterey, which Lafrentz points out as being accessible to Silicon Valley and more than entertaining for out-of-town visitors. Oddly, some California journalists have raised objections to Monterey. "We had a guy from San Jose who told us: 'Oh, it's too far!'" says Lafrentz.

For this year's Summit, Lafrentz pre-arranged 149 one-to-one interviews between her clients and the visiting media. "We take all of the guesswork and legwork out of planning press events and tours and connecting their spokespeople with key international editors," she says. "The clients can focus on the core tasks of their PR programs like message develop-

## LESSONS LEARNED: WORKING THE PRESS CORRECTLY

If you handling the PR for a trade conference and you are planning to incorporate the media into the mix of attendees, here are quick tips to consider:

- **Maintain an on-site pressroom.** This enables the journalists to have access to press announcements from the conference organizers and press kits for new product announcements (which, obviously, need to be gathered in advance). The pressroom should also be promoted as a quiet setting for press conferences and interviews.
- **Don't treat the media like second-class citizens.** Allow journalists full access to all trade conference events and social gatherings. If you are arranging assigned seating for banquets, don't segregate the media to a single table (especially not one in the far corner of the room).
- **Maintain an online pressroom.** To accommodate the media at the conference, and to secure coverage in media outlets that did not send journalists, keep an up-to-the-minute online pressroom complete with high-resolution photographs of the guest speakers and podcast-ready recordings of their speeches. **PRN**

ment and product launches.”  
Lafrentz also keeps track of media coverage (there were 470 articles generated around the world from this year’s Summit). But even as the final Summit-

related articles appear in print and online, Lafrentz herself has to hit the road — to check out other tech conferences in search of potential speakers and ideas to bring to next year’s Summit.

“The main focus of any conference must be on content,” she advises. “No one comes on a junket just to travel. People need to come with the idea of returning home

with result they can use.” PRN

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## ► Corporate Reputation Gauge

# Management Strength: Another One Bites the Dust

A corporation, like a chain, is only as strong as its weakest link – or its weakest executive, as the case may be. That notion is maintained in this week’s corporate reputation gauge, provided with data from **Delahaye**, focusing on management strength.

Week after week, **Microsoft** proves itself to be the corporation to beat, and this category is no exception. It held court with two other technology companies – **IBM** and **Intel** – in the highly coveted high visibility/high favorability quadrant. All three corporations enjoyed positive news coverage in large part due to the public personas of their CEOs and top executives. The leaders of each company are often quoted in leading news sources on the state of the economy, emerging technologies, etc, thus increasing their public presence.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, three companies floundered in the media due

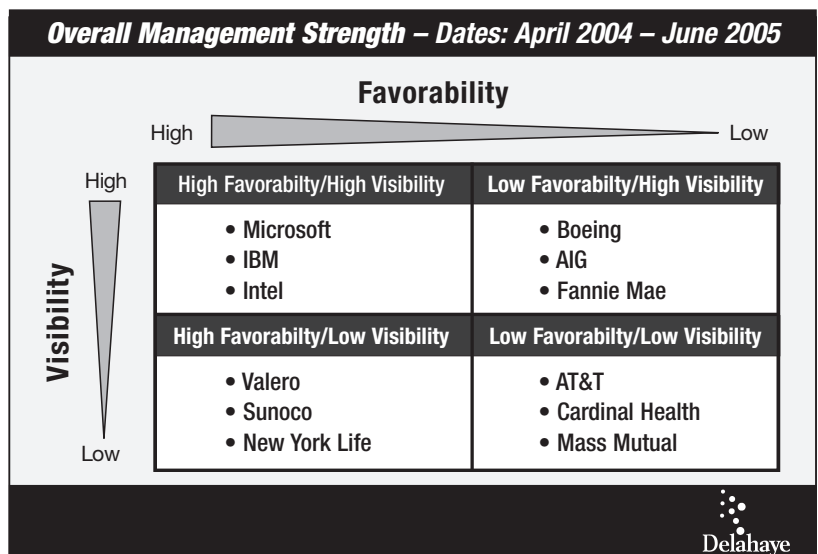
to scandals that desecrated their executives’ reputations. **Boeing’s** then-CEO and other top executives were forced to resign after the air-refueling tanker scandal that dominated news coverage; then, in the same timeframe (April 2004 – June 2005), the successor CEO resigned after a sex scandal made the news. In a similarly negative vein, **AIG’s** then-CEO stepped down after a widely reported regulation inquiry, and **Fannie Mae** lost its CEO to an accounting scandal.

In the low visibility/low favorability quadrant, **Cardinal Health** struggled to get back on its feet after an accounting scandal prompted firings of many top executives. **Mass**

**Mutual** was relatively fortunate to maintain a low profile after its CEO was caught in a sex and money laundering scandal; if such a situation arises, the low visibility sector is the place to be until things cool off.

Overall, this week’s corporate reputation gauge only underscores the importance of

the managerial hierarchy and reputation. When scandal strikes, crisis management and succession planning must be at the forefront of PR executives’ minds. Without that, the company will be coated with lingering residue of news stories concerning executives biting the dust. PRN



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# Comedy in PR

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Yet Maccabee has happily subverted the system whenever possible. Perhaps his most extraordinary PR campaign invoked the spirit of the ultimate warrior against a too-serious society: Groucho Marx.

“We had a program for Malt-O-Meal cereal,” recalls Maccabee. “This was product that was usually found at the bottom of the cereal shelf in the supermarket. So we figured: What famous celebrity would walk close to the ground and be at the same level as the Malt-O-Meal boxes?”

After clearing intellectual property licensing rights to use the Groucho Marx image, Maccabee hired actor Frank Ferrante, who played the zany comic legend in Off-Broadway and West End stage productions. For supermarket promotions and food bank donations, Ferrante appeared as Groucho and either duplicated the classic routines from the Marx Brothers movies or bent them to fit his food trade environment.

“We’d do a satire of Groucho’s speech to the hotel employees in ‘The Cocoanuts,’ poking fun at Malt-O-Meal along the way,” says Maccabee, adding that sometimes Ferrante’s audience would get into the act. “At one food bank, the employees put on Groucho glasses and noses – so we had a whole room full of Grouchos.”

The idea of having a Groucho clone running amok in the supermarket aisles (often with delighted kids following him in Pied Piper-style) clearly stood out from the run-of-the-mill food trade promotions. “We got saturation TV coverage,” says Maccabee. “If there were four TV stations in a market, we’d get three or four of them. We even brought our Groucho to a Christian radio station, and they went nuts for him. They’d do a live interview for 15 minutes, pause to take a prayer break, then

go back to the interview.”

However, Maccabee notes none of this could have been achieved had the Malt-O-Meal brand not been willing to allow a faux-Groucho to clown around at its expense. “Not many companies would themselves to be taken as anything less than seriously,” he says.

## THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT?

Indeed, wacky PR campaigns can rarely be found in companies or organizations that attempt to maintain a business-like demeanor. Trying to sell humor (even a bit of light mirth) often requires the a shift in the mindframe for thinking outside of the proverbial box.

“Humor doesn’t necessarily lend itself to ROI,” acknowledges Maccabee. “It’s an intangible. It enhances the personality of a brand.”

However, not everyone is ready to think outside of that box. Eric Robichaud learned this a few years ago when he was hired to create promotional screensavers for the **U.S. Mint** as part of their PR campaign to encourage numismatics. Robichaud, who now directs the technology marketing as CTO for **ETR Consulting** in Woonsocket, RI, presented a series of proposed screensavers with lightly humorous themes wrapped around a monetary tie-in, including tap-dancing coins hoofing their way through Busby Berkeley-style formations. However, even something benign as dancing pennies was too extreme for the U.S. Mint.

“The marketing lady there made it clear to me that she was the first ‘marketing’ person at the U.S. Mint,” recalls Robichaud. “For hundreds of years it’s been a government institution – it’s a monopoly – and they were just starting to go through a transformation to market themselves. But the

marketing lady continued to remind me of the keyword: Start. They had decades of old-school thought, and it was like bailing the ocean with a teacup to try to change the place. But it was a start.”

The eventual result was a pleasant (if not particularly amusing) screensaver based on the theme of a treasure hunt along a tropical beach. Robichaud acknowledges disappointment that his comic suggestions were nixed, but he recognizes the agency was not ready for dancing coins.

“We had all sorts of funny ideas for the screensaver, but it was still an old, stodgy, government bureaucracy and they were only willing to go just so far,” he says. “It’s run by committee and being a face of the government, they have to make sure not to alienate any constituents, yada yada. They wanted safe, vanilla... yet cute. The goal was cute more than humor.”

## THE PETA TOUCH

One organization that has personality to spare is the **People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals** (PETA), the animal rights group with a fondness of out-of-the-ordinary PR campaigns. While PETA has a reputation in many circles for over-the-top stunts (such as throwing flour bombs at Paris Hilton during a recent London fashion show for a fur-favoring designer), the organization insists that its antics are often the only way to call attention to its mission.

“The issues are so serious that it is often times difficult to get an entrée with anyone if you approach them with gravity that may be appropriate,” explains Bruce Friedrich, director of vegan promotions at PETA. “But we’d rather go too far than not far enough. Sometimes there is a fine line between what makes the point and what is



Playboy Playmate Lauren Anderson (Miss July 2002) was one of the “Chicks for Chicks,” a comic PR campaign created by PETA to call attention to allegations of animal cruelty at Kentucky Fried Chicken.

over-the-line, which is no longer funny. We try to stay on the correct side of that line.”

The flour-soaked Paris Hilton notwithstanding, PETA’s humor tries to aim for the ironic. One of Friedrich’s most recent PR volleys was a public letter to South Dakota Governor Mike Rounds following his signing of an anti-abortion law for the state. Friedrich challenged the governor to extend his pro-life politics to all living things, asking him to “consider adopting and advocating a pro-life (i.e. vegetarian) diet.” He added an invitation to cater food for Gov. Rounds and his family for a two-week trial period. (Gov. Rounds has yet to respond.)

If that’s a bit too dry in the humor department, PETA can also pull out a PR tool from its Benny Hill gag bag. One of the more eye-catching endeavors targeted **Kentucky Fried Chicken** with allegations of inhumane treatment of batter-bound poultry. Dubbed “Chicks for Chicks,” a squad of pretty PETA supporters carrying placards (including *Playboy* Playmate Lauren Anderson, a.k.a. Miss July 2002) turned up at highly-trafficked intersections in bright yellow bikinis.

“Of course, not every situation lends itself to humor;”

acknowledges Friedrich. "The last thing we want is for people to feel assaulted or defensive, since that will make it harder for them to hear us. If we can pique their curiosity or tickle their funny bone, they're going to want to hear what we have to say."

### TAKE MY PRESS RELEASE, PLEASE!

Of course, it helps if the PR professional has a buoyant and organic sense of fun. Melissa Prusher, an independent PR rep based in Manalapan, NJ, enjoyed stints in stand-up comedy during the 1990s and has occasionally used her sense of fun into delightfully off-kilter campaigns.

"Marrying my two passions, comedy and PR, I once persuaded a client to coordinate a comedic portion of a product launch," she says. "We spoofed the 'Mr. Jaws' novelty song – back in the 1970s that song had a radio announcer pretending to interview the shark, but instead of answering the questions the 'shark' responded with bits of lyrics from songs. It made for a fun presentation, got a lot

of laughs and, considering much of our target audience was way younger than I, came across as a novel approach."

For Alan Weinkrantz, there is no shame in being the butt of the joke. The president of **Alan Weinkrantz & Co.** in San Antonio, TX, he recently used his birthday as a joyfully shameless way to drive traffic to his PR blog in order to boost his **Technorati** standing.

"Tomorrow is tech PR blogger Alan Weinkrantz's 53rd birthday," he announced in a press release. "He doesn't need a shirt. He doesn't need socks. He rarely wears a tie. He's already got a digital camera, cool headphones, tons of music, an **Apple** PowerBook and other assorted electronic toys." The press release then details in depth how to reach his blog, then how to reach Technorati to vote for the blog: "This will not only make Weinkrantz's birthday a special one, but it will help his Technorati ranking, which is currently 72,000 or so out of 31,000,000 in the blogosphere. Even if you don't

know Weinkrantz, he's a good guy and pays his taxes."

Weinkrantz notes his blog traffic increased about 50% in one day as a result of the "birthday" announcement. Still, not every PR professional feels comfortable in reeling off the jokes in their press releases. But that's not to say a little whimsy cannot be incorporated into person-to-person aspect of the work.

"We don't necessarily interject a lot of humor into our campaigns," says Jody Winters, president of **Jody Winters Public Relations** in Santa Fe, NM. "But I do work in a very human way. In my correspondence and conversations, I try not to stick to a firm, canned way of communicating with my clients. I think there's a place for humor – it brings fun to the day and the job – and we need levity in this day and age."

Indeed, even the **Arthur W. Page Society** recognizes the importance of a light spirit. "One of the Page Principles is to remain calm, patient and good-humored," observes Karen

Arnold, communications director for the Page Society.

Although not a Page Society member, John Stewart Socha was able to remain calm, patient and good-humored when his comic Kitty Kondoms bombed. Socha never pursued the fundraising market again. But where are the packages of Kitty Kondoms he created nine years ago?

"I have a limited number left," he says, adding with a hearty laugh: "Perhaps I will offer them on **eBay**." **PRN**

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## SERIOUSLY, FOLKS: IT'S MIKE STRECKER, THE PR COMIC!

Many PR professionals are naturally funny, but few would dare to channel their sense of comedy into a performing venue. And fewer would dare to journey where Mike Strecker has traveled: The stand-up comedy circuit.

Strecker, who is director of public relations at Tulane University in New Orleans, began doing stand-up in 1995 after taking a six-week non-credit course taught by comic Mike Parnon at the University of New Orleans. The final exam was a live performance. "I had a great experience my first time on stage, mainly because the audience was packed full of my classmates' and my own family and friends," says Strecker. "Anyway, I guess I got bit by the bug and have been at it since."

Strecker bills his act as "Think Jerry Seinfeld...with less money and more problems." To date, he's appeared at major clubs including The Improv in Los Angeles and the HA! Comedy Club in New York. Most recently, he opened for Brett Butler as part of her national comedy tour.

"I perform mostly at night and on weekends so the shows don't interfere with my work," he explains. "Actually, I find performing is a great way to relieve stress after a long day at work."

The Tulane administration has been a big fan of their in-house funnyman. "The university is very supportive of my comedy work," continues Strecker. "I even had

the pleasure of performing for our top administrators and donors at the kickoff of our capital campaign in March 2005. I often try

to use a pun in the headline of press releases or start off with a light lead if it is appropriate. For example, one time we had a professor who devised a new method of recording owl calls.

So my headline

was: 'Professor's Work May Land Him in the Who's Who of Researchers.' So far, no one's complained to the Labor Board!"

Of course, recent events in New Orleans have left laughter in short supply. Strecker and his fellow Big Easy comics have carefully worked to bring back

smiles.

"Oh yeah. I don't see how you could be a comedian in New Orleans and not mention Katrina and its aftermath," he says. "There's nothing funny about people dying, of course, and nobody I know would dare joke about that. But Katrina is a common experience that all of us in this area have gone through and are still going through. You need humor to get through. It's not a choice. Here is an example of my Katrina-related material: I was watching a relief concert for hurricane victims. I was so moved I wrote myself a check for \$100. I hope it's tax-deductible." **PRN**

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Mike Strecker

## Learning a Harsh PR Lesson From the Chair Throwing School

(This week, PR News editors Phil Hall and Courtney Barnes question whether the message, the messenger or even the audience is to blame for unsuccessful PR campaigns.)

**PHIL:** Back when I was in seventh grade, my friend Mark once came running into homeroom to announce that a fellow classmate (a tall girl with a rather pronounced resemblance to Olive Oyl) was hit in the head with a flying chair during a melee in the school auditorium. The entire class absorbed Mark's news and burst into laughter. This very inappropriate response clearly surprised Mark, who looked upon his nasty classmates (yours truly included) with utter shock – how could everyone be so cruel? Now let's take this "Lord of the Flies"-worthy

anecdote and plug that into PR. Specifically: How should a PR professional react when delivering a communications message and receiving a reaction which is completely opposite of what was anticipated? Do you blame the message, the messenger or the audience?

**COURTNEY:** Of course, the saying "don't shoot the messenger" usually determines the person who often receives blame. PR professionals are in effect the ultimate messengers; they control the delivery and, often times, the message itself. The point is, how often does a PR exec think he or she has anticipated each and every possible outcome and then BAM - all hell breaks loose once the message reaches public hands? The answer, unfortunately, is more often than anyone would

like to think. The communications professional needs to prepare for something utterly unexpected.

**PHIL:** How about test marketing? And not within the confines of the office or agency, where iconoclastic opinions are often stamped out in favor of a conformist culture. If time and budget allows, having focus groups weigh in on a possible campaign can work – provided that the PR professional doesn't try to skewer the results to justify their planning (and, yes, that occurs).

**COURTNEY:** That is an effective way of testing possible outcomes, but bigger questions must be asked as well. For instance, PR executives must be sure they are reaching out to the right market in the first



place; otherwise, they might get a baffling response solely because they were off target. Audiences that aren't familiar with a brand or a company's reputation are more likely to react with confusion, no?

**PHIL:** It goes back to research, which often seems like a lost art. PR professionals who fail to properly research every aspect of their campaigns (and I do mean *every*) before they launch should not be surprised if their message is ignored or even reviled once it is out in the world. That was one painful lesson I learned in the midst of the chair throwing at my old school: if you don't do your homework, you fail. **PRN**

## ► PR Personality Profile

### From Vancouver With Gusto

When Marshall McLuhan spoke about a "global village," he probably wasn't thinking about PR agencies that operated across borders. Nonetheless, the Canadian scholar inspired a fellow Canuck to seek success in the North American PR market. Enter Colleen Coplick, CEO of Vancouver-based **Type A Public Relations**.

"I took McLuhan's global village to heart and started looking at the broader concept," says Coplick, who founded her agency in 2002. Not limiting herself to a Canadian client base, she successfully reached out across the United States and landed clients as far away as New York, Kansas City and

Los Angeles.

"When I am seeking new business, I am sometimes asked: So how are you going to handle what I need from where you are?" she says.

Coplick answers those inquiries with references from current clients and makes the effort to hold in-person meetings with the seemingly far-away clients.

Coplick's go-getter attitude has been the driving force of her PR career. She came to the industry after being bored to death working for a CFO in a corporate setting. "I did not enjoy number crunching and balancing

budgets," she recalls, adding liberation came through a chance encounter. "I met a woman who did PR and I thought: Wow, no one told me about this! This is so cool!"

After taking a college course in PR and working at an agency, Coplick found a talent for snagging free-lance projects. After setting up her own agency, she made her mark promoting lifestyle consumer products and services.

Coplick has secured quality placement on both sides of the border, and even placed a Vancouver client's product into an Academy Awards gift bag. She's also been successful in securing media attention where oth-

ers may fear to tread. One client is a Toronto sex toy store, whose naughty product line-up may not sit well with conservative media. But Coplick successfully publicized the operation in creative ways, including a 15% senior discount promotion during Canada's Seniors Month celebration in June and the creation of North America's first sex toy registry.

"We were able to find a way to get this client discussed without making people giggle," she adds. Indeed, Coplick lives up to her agency's motto: "People Don't Pay Us to be Shy." **PRN**



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