

Back to PR basics

Mark Borkowski on using the lessons of the PR founding fathers to keep it real in the 21st century

At my first post at the Wyvern Theatre at a time when dinosaurs roamed the earth, I discovered that ingenuity was essential when it came to delivering an audience. With a limited marketing budget, under-resourced marketing department and just a bunch of leaflets and a few posters, I quickly understood that it was about generating word of mouth.

In the days before mass communication, the only way to spread the word was by telling other people and waiting for them to pass it on. We've been using that template, in one form or another, since I set up business 17 years ago. Way back in the earliest days of showbiz, the founding fathers of modern PR, including Edward Bernays and Harry Reichenbach, pioneered the idea of engineering consent on behalf of their clients. And they did it by word of mouth.

In 1917 Reichenbach devised a campaign for a Fox film that had failed to live up to the commercial hopes of its producer, William Fox. The picture, *Over the Hill at the Poor House*, had no problem filling the cheap seats – perhaps because of its title – but, presumably for the same reason, the more expensive orchestra seats remained stubbornly empty.

Reichenbach persuaded Fox to remove the offensive P-word and abbreviate the title to *Over the Hill*, he

orchestrated an advertising campaign with endorsements from prominent names and, most brilliantly, he staged a series of street spectacles aimed at creating word of mouth. Saving his best stunt for last, he sent out swanky-looking couples in evening dress from all corners of midtown New York to parade through the theatre district, stopping wherever they saw crowds to discuss loudly which film they should see that night.

Within a week, box office takings had doubled and *Over the Hill* went on to run for a year in New York and subsequently became one of the most profitable pictures of its time.

He did this not by targeting the cognoscenti, as PRs have tended to do in these days of the Opinion Former, but by keeping it real – spreading the word at street level.

The key to word of mouth in the 21st century is the blog (increasing at the rate of 100,000 a day, with 1.3 million new posts a day – Technorati). They're contagious. Not for nothing do we talk of 'viral' campaigns: bloggers are an incestuous lot and it doesn't take long for themes and messages to spread. It's simple, fast and free, and probably the prime influence on us today, even if we don't know it. It is, however, important to realise that word of mouth is not – and never should be – regarded as just another marketing tool. You don't set out to create word of mouth. You don't

try to manipulate word of mouth. It is most potent when it's in its purest form: as the articulation of a direct and personal experience. And it's nothing new: for generations people have used word of mouth and for decades companies have experimented with how best to exploit it. The key is connectivity.

Earlier generations of publicists did not have the internet but they still understood the importance of connectivity: the value of the audience and the danger of making them turn against you by conning them. It's not just about getting your message out there – it's about getting it believed and trusted.

The internet has put a completely new spin on word of mouth, allowing the public unprecedented access to information about the behaviour of the companies behind the brands and providing them with a communications platform for expressing and sharing their thoughts and opinions – it's a two-way street. And that feedback should never be viewed as negative: it's a vitally valuable asset. Genuine feedback – real responses unbiased by 'weighted' questions in sponsored surveys – is what every business needs. And it's free.

Of course word of mouth is evolving constantly, as a result of the explosion in social networking and the resultant paranoia bred in many businesses. Of the 35 million blogs online today,

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multiplying at the rate of one every second (Robert Scobel, co-author of *Naked Conversations: How Blogs are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers*), many are discussing products and brands – it's an opportunity too good to be missed.

The arts arena should lead the revolution in reinventing word of mouth in a digital age. Many modern communicators own the high ground by developing ingenious methods to connect to a marketplace. The arts world enjoys a special place in the hearts of consumers and the risks that are taken to create a piece of work are far greater than the risks that commercial marketers take in attempting to peddle a faceless product.

The emotional connection the art has with its audience needs to be energised. Publicists and marketers since PT Barnum have been more creative in their means to generate audiences. To comprehend the future, one must understand the past. The lessons that have been learnt from the publicists of old have always been a starting point for me on how an audience can be stimulated. Naturally, there are processes that have to be employed but the process of word of mouth is what it all boils down to.

Marketers can constantly re-engineer the wheel. Those in the arts should have the confidence and strength to be the vanguard. ●

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