

Publicity stunts can take things to the next level

June 25, 2010 - Front Section

I've used the full gamut of publicity and marketing tactics to build brands. Sometimes a publicity stunt can take things to the next level, but you need the right combination: a killer idea, the right pitch, great timing, and knowing your target audience.

In the 1980s I saw Edward Bernays speak. Considered the father of public relations, he pioneered the concept of manipulating public opinion using third-party authorities. One great stunt: In the 1920s, he hired New York society women to stroll 5th Ave. puffing Lucky Strikes. Then, it was taboo for ladies to smoke in public. It got lots of attention. His tobacco client was thrilled.

The High-Diving Horses of Atlantic City (1920s until 1978) made a splash (from 60') drawing thousands to the Steel Pier and hotels. Lots of publicity. Today, the MSPCA wouldn't allow it.

Magician Harry Houdini said nobody's punch could hurt him. A student punched before he was ready and Houdini died (ruptured appendix.) Great publicity stunt. If only he had lived.

Years ago, when the Russian space station Mir was hurtling toward Earth, Taco Bell placed a giant target in the Pacific Ocean offering a free taco to every American if Mir hit the bull's-eye. It missed, but Taco Bell hit the jackpot in free publicity.

In 1993, DC Comics announced The Death of Superman. Sold millions of additional comics. Then came Funeral of A Friend, followed by The Return of Superman. The stunt earned DC \$4 billion.

I've created stunts for clients. I arranged for a client that finances amusement rides and carnivals to pose for publicity shots on horses at the historic Nantasket Carousel. That photo appeared on the cover of a national trade magazine along with a feature story about the company.

Last spring I read about a family that inherited a copy of Mein Kampf, taken from a dead Nazi soldier by their GI uncle in 1944. I arranged for the family to donate the book to a Jewish school client, and invited a Holocaust survivor to accept the book on behalf of the school. The Globe and Fox News carried the story.

The moral: A good P.R. person can create a killer publicity stunt for any client.

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