

CALENDAR

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COUNTERPUNCH

Not a publicist but a problem-solver

By CALVIN NAITO

I could barely contain myself after reading Juan Morales' article, "Movies Turn Press Agents Into Evil, Conniving Sultans of Spin" (April 28). No cup of coffee needed that morning to get me going.

As someone who works with the media for a living, I have to take exception to the popular portrayals of publicists in movies. Furthermore, the publicists quoted in the article did not sufficiently explain the true role of PR and defend what is a difficult but noble profession.

We have a hard life. Society is in an "age of public relations." I agree with some of the quoted sources that publicists are "all-purpose" and "the most harried and anxious and traumatized" of people in a work setting. If you want to consistently make positive news for your clients in, for example, Los Angeles — the nation's second-largest media market — you need a valuable repertoire of skills. In a setting so large, diverse and distracted, it is difficult to cut through the clutter and noise and ensure that your story is seen and heard.

Good publicists ensure that their clients' stories make the news in an informative and entertaining way. Despite performing this vital function for a vast audience, the profession — ironically — has a bad image. PR has bad PR. Many people view PR as a dishonest specialty, a field that spins clients out of awkward

situations and flat-out lies when necessary. Even I am reluctant to describe myself as a publicist, so negative is its connotation. And actor Al Pacino in movies like "People I Know" doesn't help!

If others are willing to use swords to rid the world of Saddam, then I will not hesitate to use a pen to help slay the stereotype of public relations.

A publicist is on a leash held by the client and can roam only as far as the principal allows. If unfettered, the publicist would, in dealing with reporters, run in harmony with these basic guidelines: Be honest but discreet. Hustle and get back to them as soon as you can. Help them sort out and visualize the story by providing them with information that is timely, clear, accurate and useful.

Effective media relations pros are pragmatic problem-solvers who know that fixing is better than faking. For example, they advise chief executives to operate under the assumption that the media will investigate their organizations. Such problem-solving publicists speak truth to power and lead the CEOs' minds to actively identify shortcomings, for example, in business plans, workplace practices and personal conduct. The aim is to correct such deficiencies before walking the media gantlet.

The publicist occupies an inherently political role between the executive and celebrity (who often has a mammoth ego) and

the media/public. If astute, the publicist will have the clearest picture of reality. The PR person knows what the star looks like without the makeup on. He or she is talking directly with the press, senses the nature of the story and has enough detachment not to get overly emotional, as many celebrities and executives invariably do.

In an ideal situation, the quality publicist's perspective and skills are fully utilized. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Sometimes the principal irrationally kills the messenger. Often, the client ignores the counsel, and the publicist may be put in the awkward spot of trying to pitch and defend the indefensible. They are forced to be loyal soldiers and follow orders, even though they know better. In spite of this, the best publicists do not lie. You don't have to tell the public everything, but everything you tell them must be true. We do the best we can with what we are given.

The publicist often operates in the cross-fire between image and truth. We dream of days when we can persuade clients to be largely what they strive to project. When this happens, we can smell the "sweet smell of success."

The fundamental facts are: The best way to make positive news is to do something positively newsworthy. The best way not to get bad press is not to do something bad. Publicist Tony Angellotti is right when he says,

"You cannot control the press." However, he should have added that celebrities and other principals can control their personal behavior.

We crave working on a product launch (be it a movie, government social service program or whatever) or for a company or decision-maker that is topical, socially redeeming and human. But when there are limitations, as there usually are, we still try to do our job for the client, truthfully. Managing relations with the public is a difficult and honorable profession — you just haven't seen it in the movies yet.

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