



Calling PR professionals: Submit and show us your best stuff

By Matt Russell

The anxiety usually sets in about an hour before the cocktail party. As I finish getting ready and make my way to the event, the experience intensifies. Finally, at the moment I'm welcomed by the host, the cycle begins and doesn't let me go until the last salmon pinwheel is consumed and I'm back in the car headed for home.

It's 'the question.'

As a public relations executive, I'm usually the one at every party who is routinely asked what advice I would give to 'spin' that week's high profile scandal or celebrity-gone-wild story. I cringe at every report of a misguided text by a wayward U.S. congressman, a celebrity trashing a hotel room due to a misunderstanding with a paid companion, or an international business executive whose perspective on the official duties of a housekeeper might differ from our own. With every scandal that makes breaking news and trends on Twitter, we PR counselors inevitably find ourselves preparing our answer to 'the question' that we'll surely get later that day.

Regrettably, the number of these incidents has increased over the years, which might lead us to conclude that society could very well have a PR problem. Let me suggest, though, that maybe it's PR that could very well have a society problem -- and that problem is that too few people really know what PR is about.

While crisis communications and crisis planning is an important and necessary practice for every organization, the role of public relations in business today is not simply about 'spinning' our way out of headline-grabbing crises -- contrary to society's perceptions of what its professionals do. It's about the strategic process to understand the values and attitudes of our respective publics, and to use that intelligence to inform how we pursue our business goals from a communications perspective. That's a far cry from 'spin doctoring.' As the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) so eloquently states, we practitioners need to do a better job of "fostering more accurate and better-informed perceptions of the value and role of public relations in the diverse organizations it serves."

One of the best ways we have to showcase our work, and take the cocktail party conversations onto a much bigger stage, is through our annual public relations awards program. Each year, the Southern Arizona chapter of PRSA sponsors the Impact Awards for Excellence in Public Relations. Communications professionals from across Southern Arizona are encouraged to

reflect on their work over the past year, and challenged to submit entries that they believe represent industry excellence. The values and benefits of this awards program are many. First, your entries make a bold statement to your organization's leadership about the value your work represents. Your entries also contribute to the larger-scale educational process we're in together to highlight best practices in the profession. If your work is ultimately honored on the evening of the event, the award itself is a tangible symbol of your dedication to excellence...which will speak volumes to your clients, your customers, your management and your fellow staff.

Although I have been in the PR field for more than 20 years, I hadn't submitted an entry for an awards program until last year. I'm glad we did. Russell Public Communications earned five Impact Awards at last year's event, including the coveted Best in Show Award for PR Campaign of the Year. It now gives us the opportunity to show how deeply committed we are to excellence in our industry, and to the critical roles that research, planning, execution, results and evaluation collectively play in our clients' successes.

This year's Impact Awards will be held on October 25, and it's on track to be the biggest and best event to date. I encourage all public relations and communications professionals in Southern Arizona to submit entries, with early submissions due by July 15, and regular submissions due by August 5. Please visit www.PRSATucson.org for information on award categories, criteria and submission instructions.

I look forward to the cocktail party of the future where I'm asked about things such as trends in PR metrics and measurement, but I know these things take time. For now, I better prepare for the question I will undoubtedly get tonight about Lady Gaga's latest PR stunts.

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