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● Talent Chase

August 28, 2006

Martin Waxman, Palette Public Relations



Roxanne Cramer

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A PR veteran of more than 20 years, **Martin Waxman** has done virtually every type of PR: entertainment, books, corporate, crisis, internal and many, many product launches. He says he "kind of fell into PR, after a career that includes standup comedy, writing two books, copywriting for an ad agency, producing films, freelance journalism and writing for TV". As president of Palette Public Relations Inc, a boutique Toronto PR agency he co-founded in 2004, Waxman says the constant changes in the industry keep him energized. "I enjoy creating ideas and coming up with a plan and then, opening a paper or magazine and actually seeing those clips filled with key messages. That's still a big thrill."

Who was the most influential person in your career?

Mark Breslin, CEO and founder of Yuk Yuk's, has been the most influential person in my career. Believe it or not, I started out as a comedy MC and worked with Mark, who has an amazing eye for a story and is really media savvy. He taught me how to write a press release, make the headline a grabber, how to develop a media list (read the paper part 1), talk to media (I later learned that was 'pitching the story') and how to scan newspapers to see if you were covered (read the paper part 2, otherwise known as media monitoring).

What one event shaped the PR professional you have become?

I have had a pretty varied career. In the 90s, I was a writer for a much maligned Canadian television variety show (that shall remain unnamed). Our contracts had just been renewed, we did a New Year's show and came back elated after the holiday to find out we were cancelled, just like that! That was a very strange, sobering and almost surreal experience. I decided to take stock of my life. I had one child, another on the way, a former writing gig and not too many great prospects so I made a decision to take charge of things and hang out

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my shingle as an agency (just me at the time, but I had dreams) that specialized in arts and entertainment PR. That was 12 years ago and I haven't looked back.

How do you upgrade your skills and/or stay current?

I recently completed my APR and it was a great experience that really opened my mind to our industry's history, best practices and communications theory. Do I use these every day? No, but it's a very good grounding to have. I'd recommend accreditation for anyone who's serious about a career in PR. I also try to read (fiction, business books, magazines, subway ads, you name it), watch TV and films, listen to what people are saying and generally try to pay attention to what's happening around me, to keep abreast of current trends.

Do you still talk with the media and conduct media relations?

Yes. I don't do as much pitching as I used to, but I try to keep up with key editors. I really love pitching and it is one thing I encourage students to try.

What was the worst thing that ever happened to you in the workplace?

The low point in my career was when we were promoting a scratch and win contest for a fast food chain and I pulled up to a bingo parlour in a seedy part of Toronto on a Friday night with a guy in a full chicken suit. You have to picture this: a blue town car stops, the chicken and I get out, a few teenagers try to pick a fight with the chicken and we rush into the bingo hall for cover. And believe it or not, it went down hill from there.

What is it about your job that still makes you say WOW?

Seeing media clips are always my biggest thrill. When I open a paper or magazine or turn on the television and see something that I helped place, that's a great story, with key messages and maybe a photo - that never ceases to excite me.

How many newspapers do you read a day and which ones are the most influential?

I try to read two or four newspapers. My personal favourites are the **Globe and Mail** and **National Post**, but I also like the **Toronto Sun** (I'm a sucker for tabloids). Subway papers (**Metro, 24 Hours**) are great; they're like the Internet in print and give a great capsule look at what's going on. And since you see so many people reading them on the subway, you know they're well read.

**What books do you read for fun (what are you reading now)?
What is the most influential PR book you have ever read?**

I just finished reading Philip Roth's new novel, **Everyman**. He's one of my favourite authors and this, like all his books, is intellectually challenging, darkly funny and filled with incredible insights about life. As far as PR books go, I found Malcolm Gladwell's **The Tipping Point** extremely eye opening, in that it gave me a whole new perspective on how ideas (stories) are spread. Although it predates blogs, I feel the content can offer a good understanding of the way things 'catch fire' in the blogosphere. (According to his test, I believe I'm a connector.) And, if I can give a plug to one of my clients, Caliper Canada, I recently read, **Succeed On Your Own Terms** by founder Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney. It's an inspiring collection of reflections from high achievers (in industry, sports, entertainment and public affairs) and how they were able to achieve their personal visions.

How do you balance the demands of a 24/7 workplace with personal time?

You can't work 9 - 5 in an agency but hopefully, there are 'normal' weeks when you aren't going crazy, you notice you're moving at a more of a snail's pace and you can finally catch up on things. I try to make sure I don't miss any personal special events, like my daughter's singing/piano recital or my son's hockey games.

How do you dress for success?

I used to have long hair and only wear jeans, but anyone who's met me in the past eight years may find that hard to believe. If you happened to bump into me on the street, you'd probably find me in either a suit or sports jacket and pants, but these days, no tie (though I do like wearing them).

What your signature feature helps you stand out?

I don't think it's a signature feature, but the vast majority of my shirts are blue.

What's your one essential piece of technology?

I think it's my laptop, though I just got a Blackberry in January and it's quickly catching up.

How do you reward top performers and retain key staff?

As a two year old agency, that's a question we're starting to face. I believe in bonuses or profit sharing and time off to regenerate.

What advice should every junior PR person heed?

Become a media junkie. Read, read, read ... newspapers, magazines, books, posters, ads ... you name it, read it. And watch, TV, movies, theatre. Listen to music. Keep your eyes open and pay attention to all the little details of life. Don't just rush everywhere, take time to notice things. You really have to train yourself to do that. If you vary your way into work every once in a while, and keep your eyes open, you may see something new.

How do you keep your clients happy and focused on moving key programs forward?

We do the best work we can and make things as easy as possible for our clients. It sounds simple, but what it means is that we try to adapt to our clients' processes rather than squeezing them into ours. We're also always upfront and honest, stay on top of deadlines, take responsibility, learn from our mistakes, laugh and have fun. And we try to be smart, too.

What challenges do you see in 2005 for your company and your career?

I think the biggest challenge for us will be growth. We started Palette with two people and now we're seven. That means we need to start thinking about our culture and bringing in processes for managing our work. It also means I know I'm going to have to let go and delegate more.

Roxanne Cramer is President of Cramer & Company, which specializes in strategic consulting and retained executive search assignments for Public Relations, Marketing Communications, Investor Relations and Public Affairs.

Roxanne has extensive experience with recruiting for and working in the communications field, including consulting and agency management. She holds a B.A in Economics and Marketing from the University of Guelph and a CAAP from the Institute of Canadian Advertising.



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