

REAL ESTATE WEEKLY

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The Good Word: You can't tell a story if you only know part of it

When I was a kid, my mother used to say, "accentuate the positive." I eventually discovered her optimistic aphorism was the opening hook of a popular postwar Johnny Mercer tune that continued with even more hopeful words of wisdom, i.e., "eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative and don't mess with Mister In-Between."

Over the years, these words – and this song -- have stayed with me as a kind of mantra, as well as philosophical component of my various careers. But in this day of digital media, a crisis, i.e., bad ink, requires more than feel-good lyrics. Stemming a potential media wound invariably calls for immediate action, comprising a workable plan with a flexible strategy and extensive outreach. In order to be effective, it is imperative that our clients trust us and are able to be as candid as possible.

My first experience with crisis management came early in my career. Prior to becoming a communications professional, I was a writer, mostly for trade publications. When I segued into PR, the clients who came to me were developers of luxury condominiums, residential brokers, management companies, etc. In my world, the closest thing to a crisis was when a client was either overlooked for a story or edited out.

A few years into my relatively young career, I took on a controversial account. It was exciting and we were getting great ink. It turned out that some of that very press became a lightning rod for our client's more unconventional practices. The positive coverage we had been accruing couldn't completely counter the bad press, which ironically began with community blogs long before optimization, as well as a local politician trying to win an election. Frantic, I called upon one of the great and generous communications pros in the industry for advice. He agreed to see my client and afterwards told me he couldn't help someone who was not forthcoming. He suggested I resign the account: I did.

Lesson learned: You can't tell the story if you only know part of it. So much of our business is based upon trust and we work closely with journalists who are, more often than not, really smart, inquisitive folks -- and skeptical by nature.

When I was writing and constantly on deadline, I was often grateful to work with publicists who could quickly provide me with useful information and resources. So

when I decided to open my own shop 14 years ago, my objective was to be a good partner to media by offering diligent follow-through and solid story ideas. And when certain questions could not be answered because of confidentiality agreements, etc., I knew the drill: rather than dodging the question, I would explain that some queries are unanswerable.

But today we also live in a world of opinion writers on blogs, as well as earnest online reporters who often don't have basic tools, such as fact checkers, or even the time to use them because of 24/7 news cycles. And there are those who are encouraged by a limited readership that latches onto bad news, often adding their own salacious comments – always anonymously, with irrelevant information and innuendo. And it gets optimized.

So in the rare event that one of our clients is the target of a potentially damaging story, the first thing we first do set up a meeting and get the facts. We sit down, face to face, and ask the hard questions, the kind that we feel are germane to reporters' stories. From those answers, we develop strategies that our clients are comfortable with – and their lawyers, too. I realize that most lawyers are inclined to say as little as possible in a crisis situation with media. Theoretically, it's not a bad tactic either, just as long as the important points are made, clearly and succinctly.

But when a lawyer advises our mutual client to avoid a query altogether and not return a reporter's call, then that can be problematic. Our recommendation, generally, is to have someone on our team to reach out to the reporter to find out about the story and ask for a list of questions, which will also define the tenor of the piece. If our client is uncomfortable with an interview, we act as spokespersons. The key here is communicating quickly. In most cases, reporters are on deadline and if they don't get the information directly from the subject or spokesperson, they'll seek it elsewhere; often from someone who is less informed or may have a negative agenda. And that's where the problems really begin.

Throughout the process, we always accentuate the positive. So if the story that gets published is at all damaging, we will already be out there with a different message. The fact is, our clients do dynamic things and there will always be plenty of ways to sing their praises. To mitigate bad press, we go into mega communication mode by spreading the good word about their important work -- and that gets optimized, too!

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JUNE 12, 2013 - ALEXANDER MARKETING IN THE NEWS - By Orlando Rodriguez

Don't pull your hair out, call a PR person



Linda Alexander

It's a broker's dream. After weeks of preparation for a major open house launch party, potential buyers show up in droves, drinking wine, socializing and ultimately making bids.

So many buyers appear that three sales agents are needed on hand for quality service. A few buyers make verbal offers, sparking a bidding war and making developer and broker very, very happy.

Later that night you get a call. Apparently, during the open house, a few customers seemed to have misplaced their cell phones.

No problem. It happens. But two women also lost their purses and a man reports his wallet missing. One of the expensive shower heads was removed. A piece of rented artwork is gone. Reporters from Real Estate Weekly call your office about an "Open House Heist" that is making the rounds on the real estate rumor mill.

Now, it's a broker's nightmare. What do you do?

"The first thing they need to do is stay calm," said Florence Quinn, president of Quinn & Co. Public Relations, whose clients list includes names like LeFrak, Glenwood and Ogden.

"Put a plan in place and communicate with people who need to know immediately what that plan is. You want to let people know that you are aware of the situation, that you are looking into it, and that you are working closely with the authorities."

But those responses need to be organized.

That's where the utilization of a public relations professional, learned in the ins and outs of crisis communications, is needed, industry leaders say.

"The most important thing with a crisis plan is to have one," said Jennefer Witter, CEO and founder of The Boreland Group Inc., who represents uber broker Jacky Teplitzky and architect Scott Spector, among others. "If you have a plan that is as detailed as possible, you can communicate and get the message out that you want in a timely manner."

PR professionals say that it is imperative for a firm to have a crisis communications plan in place well before an emergency appears on the horizon.

Rough situations often happen by surprise and bad publicity sometimes comes from the most unexpected places.

"If you recall back in 2010 there was a lot of media coverage on Google having bedbugs," Quinn said. "That story got leaked because someone tweeted about it with a friend. That's why it is very important that people not post to social media, even if they tell a loved one and not the rest of the world."

For large companies, employee communication polices, rooted in crisis communications plans, may be spelled out for new hires during training. But in the case of real estate brokerages, salespeople and brokers are not employees, but independent contractors.

"A crisis is a crisis whether you are Fortune 500 company or a top real estate brokerage firm," said Witter. "[The brokerage] should have a list

of five things that could impact them, what their major threats are. They should outline how they are going to address it." One of the newest threats in the digital age is online news, where a story once viral can be duplicated, re-published and referenced by a multitude of bloggers and journalists.

Unlike print, where a publication can run a correction, viral communications take on a life of their own, Tweeted hundreds, even thousands of times in an hour, and can live on for years.

"A negative story that is years old can continue to damage a company's reputation, even if it wasn't true to begin with," said Linda S. Alexander, president of Alexander Marketing. "It's already embedded in the search engines, so it's there for the long run."

The veteran publicist, who works with retail phenomenon Faith Hope Consolo and Harber Group International among others, said, "Our goal is to provide as much up-to-date information as possible to media that is correct, progressive and positive. Although people tend to be salacious and often revert to negative online teases, there are ways to optimize positive stories, thereby pushing the negative ones down the chain."

Although it is critical that a firm respond to negative publicity, it is just as important, experts say, not to say too much either.

"I think sometimes people want to over-explain themselves in a crisis because they go in defense mode," said Quinn. "What you don't want to do is fan the flames, to keep it going. You don't want to give any more information that might inadvertently make a reporter think that there is more to the story."

Even though the advice is to limit the information, experts say that it is imperative to be honest and truthful when disseminating what you have decided to disclose. Mistruths, they say, do not help the situation in the long run.

"The key is to go into immediate first gear at the hint of a negative story," said Alexander. "First and foremost, we advise our clients to be truthful when speaking with media and avoid obfuscations as much as possible. If they are uncomfortable speaking to media, we become the spokespersons. Our job is to dispel any possible innuendo or negativity and provide accurate information."

Whether done internally or via an advisory PR firm, in the age of the 24-hour news cycle where citizens have as much access to the public sphere as the journalists of yesteryear, industry professionals say in the end, it is better to be prepared for the unthinkable.

"Sandy was a once in a lifetime event, at least as far as we know now, but there are other things that can happen in the day-to-day of the real estate world," said Witter.

"If you look at the past year, we had the crane collapse on the Upper West Side — that came out of nowhere. There have been instances during open houses where there have been thefts of property when buyers come in to look around. How do you manage that? What if a company has a lawsuit against it?

"Having a crisis communications plan is so critical because it allows you to address crisis when you are in the middle of it in a cohesive, well thought out manner."

(EXCERPT)