

Public relations in the film industry



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My summer internship is taken place at a production company named The Exchange and is located in West Hollywood. The Exchange is committed to creating strong relationships between filmmakers, film financiers, and distributors with a concentration on sales, finance, production, and commerce (The Exchange). The Exchange has roughly produced, acquired and sold about 200 films.

I am the public relations intern in the PR department at The Exchange and my responsibilities include preparing press materials and reports, communicate and build relationships with current or prospect clients, crafting brand strategies and content, drafting media alerts and press releases, auditing the PR database, perform research and market analysis activities.

My supervisor is Laurent Boyé, and he is the publicist of The Exchange. His responsibilities are similar to mine but he is the liaison between our clients and the public. He establishes and maintains cooperative relationships with the news media and consumers. He finalizes press releases, and organize events such as film festivals and film premieres. As well, he reaches out to new clients for potential partnerships and sponsorships; then pitches new event ideas to clients and assist them with event planning if necessary.

I only work directly with my supervisor because we are the only people who are responsible for public relations. Brian O' Shea is the CEO and he is directly responsible for all international acquisitions, business affairs, sales, financing, and all distribution activities. Giovanna Trischitta is the COO who oversees the company's overall operations. Nat McCormick is the executive

VP of worldwide distribution, he oversees all sales and distribution activity for the company. Caddy, director of acquisition and works with producers to structure financing for films. Danny Gusman, director of marketing and promotions, responsible for managing commercials, documentary and promotional shoots. Ann Lee, director of legal and business affairs since 2015. She mainly focuses on negotiation of film sales, distribution and finance agreements with some major companies such as Sony, Universal, and Netflix. The team of my company is organized by functions: finance, acquisition, production, marketing, Public relations, and legal affairs.

The general workflow of a publicist in my firm is organized into two types. The first one would be to develop and distribute a press release for a film. The steps are: 1) research or gather background information about the film (synopsis, biography of actors/actresses), 2) choose appropriate images to be offered with release, 3) include additional information or direct quotes to be used in the release, 4) review for approval and make necessary adjustments, 5) arrange newswire distribution and media list 6) stay updated for follow-ups and results.

Sometimes my supervisor also takes responsibility in assisting with events taken placed at film festivals. 1) Pitch an event idea to sponsors who will support the event financially, 2) Once the sponsor approves, we will look for appropriate participants (hosts, actors, actresses) and will contact them through their publicists, 3) search for venues and discuss pricing 4) create and launch publicity plan 5) confirm details with media attendees.

Our clients include big studio films from Disney, Sony, Fox, and Netflix, ranging in budgets from \$5 million to \$90 million. As well, my PR department works closely with Luxury brand groups, international film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Toronto.

One of the challenges as a publicist is that an event does not receive enough coverage from media channels (Traditional media and new media).

Therefore, it is important to pitch event ideas that are in favor of the public and create good contents. Another challenge that my supervisor encounters is that clients or potential clients do not respond to emails right away, everyone tends to procrastinate and leave everything on the last minute. So this becomes difficult when the deadline is approaching. Besides, many pitch ideas are unread or rejected but my supervisor stays confident and continue to pitch creative angles. Since this is an in-house PR, my supervisor is the only publicist in the company which leads to a lack of resources that could limit the visibility of the company and product awareness in the market place. The danger of not being able to be objective, we can't put ourselves in the position of external stakeholders, investors and media to understand their perspective.

There are a few challenges that are crucial to a film production company in the current digital era. Firstly, young audiences are becoming more interested in streamable content that they can watch on phones and tablets. With the rise of Netflix, there is a huge shift from the big screen to the small screen. These internet series provide strong competition to the convention cinema, thus affecting film production companies.

Competing against larger film production companies can also be challenging, studios such as Disney, Warner Brothers, and Universal Pictures who have bigger budgets for A-List actors/actresses. Cheaper digital production methods have helped create more product than buyers. Moreover, production and marketing costs are constantly rising across the film industry and the media and entertainment sector in general.

Literature Review

Public relations is known as the idea to provide positive coverage of a business through the distribution of articles and the endorsement by different journalists (Michaelson & Stack, 2017). Indeed, public relations is not only about media relations, but also represents the delivery of information between organizations and its publics or audiences. As Michaelson et al. (2017) mention, “ public relations is a management function in which aims to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between businesses and the various publics on which its success or failure depends” (p. 4). Public relations was first developed in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries but is now a common communication method used around the world by various types of organizations such as NGOs, big corporations and governments (Hutchison & Pauly, 2017). The development of global communication such as the growth of English as the dominant language, improved public education, literacy, access to media uncontrolled by governments and journalism as a profession is motivated by many historic changes around the emergence of public opinion in the last few decades (Hutchison et al., 2017).

From this internship, I've also gained knowledge on essential PR skills similar to those mentioned in Caroline Black's writing. She describes that writing is one of the most important skills a publicist should have because he/she is constantly writing in different forms, emails, proposals, invitations, online contents tweets and blogs (2014). There are four aspects of PR writing: purpose, style, structure, and content. Purpose is reached by two questions: who is the reader and what is the aim, thus knowing the target audience and having clear communications objectives will result in perfect writing (Black, 2014). A plain style like using an active voice and avoid jargons is vital for PR and other types of business writings, the writing will receive the best result when it's simple and direct (Black, 2014). Black also suggests that compelling content is required to capture readers' attention and lastly, a PR writing needs a proper structure especially for press releases:

Paragraph 1: Summarize the story – who, what, where, when and why. All key information needs to be in this paragraph. Paragraph 2: Put in more details to flesh out the story you have outlined in the first paragraph.

Paragraph 3: Quotes from you or someone relevant to the story. Don't try to cram too many points into one quote – each quote should make one point.

Paragraph 4: Any extra relevant information. Put the word ' ends' at the end of the story. Finish with ' Notes for Editors' . (p. 272)

The second skill that publicists need to have is a good set of interpersonal skills because they are constantly communicating with different people such as clients, colleagues, and sponsors (Black, 2014). Thus, active listening, questioning, note-taking, and maintaining a good body language are all essential. Thirdly, assertiveness is the ability to express opinions and

feelings in a way that also respects the right of others (Black, 2014).

Examples of these situations may be saying no to somebody, giving advice that may not be in favor, encountering challenging clients. Lastly,

Presentation skills seem to be basic but are crucial for PR practitioners because they need to present at meetings, pitch ideas to potential clients and stakeholders (Black, 2014). Being articulated and showing confidence in public speaking are the fundamentals that contribute to being a successful PR practitioner.

Traditional PR VS Digital PR

In recent years, social media has changed the way people consume information that a tweet could have the potential to reach more people than a million-dollar ad campaign. However, the PR work my supervisor and I do still falls under the category of traditional PR. Traditional PR includes trade shows, crisis communications, event coordination, reputation management, sponsorship opportunities, and press release distribution (Camp, 2016).

Traditional PR's press outreach will focus on traditional media outlets such as newspaper and radio, by doing so it can increase brand awareness (Camp, 2016). Even though traditional PR has difficulty with measuring the exact audience reach, traditional PR is more advantageous when it comes to focusing more on brand positioning within a media placement (Camp, 2016).

Camp also mentioned that traditional publicists will evaluate how their clients are portrayed, how messages are being communicated and how many times the brand is mentioned throughout the placement. This method not only requires patience, as print publications will require a long-lead time,

but also publicists need to keep track of which topic was discussed in which month and the publishing date in the print magazine (Camp, 2016).

Camp (2016) also described that a challenging part for both publicist and client is when outreach does not produce results for a long time. According to Peterson (2019), traditional PR works best when the target audience involves a niche group who are avid readers of a specific newspaper. The promotion for a product works better with face-to-face interactions at an event (Peterson, 2019). Traditional PR is still capable to gather important elements for a PR campaign and remains relevant in today's digital world. However, it may restrict one's reach if he/she only uses tradition PR tactics, therefore Digital PR can be utilized along with traditional PR.

Many publicists nowadays may prefer digital PR over traditional PR because of the influence of internet applications. They provide a more convenient way for PR practitioners to deliver information to stakeholders, and to facilitate direct interaction and the maintenance of relationships between organizations and the public (Huang, Wu & Huang, 2017). Digital PR is determined as the management of the communication between an organization and its public through internet applications such as websites, games, instant messaging services with text, sound graphics, images videos and binary files (Huang et al., 2017). Although digital PR has been a popular method for professionals in recent years, it also experiences many problems such as risking technological determinism and shortsightedness (Huang et al., 2017).

Another key difference between digital PR from traditional PR is the ability to build connections with bloggers and influencers, who are key players in today's digital space (Camp, 2016). Camp argued that online influencers may seem like trivia compared to traditional figures, but they often have greater reach with a large number of loyal followers (2016). With this in mind, one of the tasks for digital PR specialists' is to develop and established relationships with bloggers in whichever industry they work to maintain interactions (Camp, 2016). An example would be to share a blog post with followed links that can impact the client's website's domain authority (Camp, 2016). Furthermore, it is important to produce content that is focused on subjects that interest the target audience in a digital PR strategy (Peterson, 2019).

In-House PR VS PR Agencies

Since my job position is considered as the style of in- house PR, I want to discuss the differences between in-house PR and PR agencies because there have been debates about which style is more effective. According to Caputo (2006), hiring a PR agency will be more proactive with media outreach along with a higher level of experience, more outside perspective, a wider array of media contacts and abilities. In addition, an agency not only can offer targeted services and provide a reasonable price for smaller companies but also provide a broader market perspective and gather data that would reinforce the businesses (Caputo, 2006). With this intention, it's important for companies to research on a PR agency's experience before making a decision to hire them.

On the other hand, having an in-house PR team may be better than hiring an agency depending on the situation. If a company views PR as more of an event participation role, then an in-house publicist can represent his/her company at different events with no complication (Caputo, 2006). Caputo explained that an in-house publicist can respond to situations immediately than an outside agency because in-house PR has the advantage of time sensitivity and solutions of spontaneity (2006). Likewise, in-house PR can assist with constructing a company's message with its unique style, this way, information can be delivered quickly and to a suitable audience (Caputo, 2006). In-house publicists also have more time on ancillary duties that a PR agency wouldn't do: traveling for events, meetings with other team members, hosting groups/panels at film premieres and creating internal presentations (Caputo, 2006).

PR and Film Festivals

Since film is the main focus of my company, my supervisor is also responsible for event planning and submitting films to film festivals. He has worked on Cannes, Toronto and Venice international film festival in the previous years. Currently, we are working on Venice which will take place at Venice Lido from August 28 to September 7 of this year. The festival is hosted by La Biennale Di Venezia who is one of the most famous and prestigious cultural organization in the world (La Biennale). The goal of the Festival is to “ raise awareness and promote international cinema in forms of art, entertainment and as an industry, in a spirit of freedom and dialogue. [To organize] retrospectives and tributes to major figures as a contribution towards a better understanding of the history of cinema” (La Biennale). The <https://assignbuster.com/public-relations-in-the-film-industry/>

line up for the film festival includes Venezia 76 competition (comprises of 20 feature-length films and presented as world premieres), Orizzonti (films represent the latest aesthetic and expressive trends), Biennale College Cinema (an advanced training workshop for the development and production of 3 micro-budget works), Venice Virtual reality (includes 30 world premieres of VR immersive stories), and many more (La Biennale).

My supervisor is currently assisting with independent filmmakers to submit their films to Venice and he is trying to plan panels with well-known actresses at the festival with partners of the festival. Planning a strategic event as a publicist is important because it has a clear objective of generating revenue, cultivating positive relationships, or broadening awareness (McCraven, 2018). A strategic event requires a goal, ranging from fund-raising, brand awareness, and company recognition. McCraven (2018) claimed that thoughtful planning from parking, food to red carpets are all significant details that a publicist needs to pay attention to. As well, preparing a backup plan when there is an unpredictable issue and having enough staff and support will provide guests with a good impression on the host company (McCraven, 2018).

Equally important, a strategic event needs extensive researching, planning, training, and flexibility. According to McCraven (2018), another PR implication of event planning is launching a product or brand. With this in mind, it can create conversations on social media that enact as a promoting tactic for the company. All events are a public relations tool for companies and the better the event, the more donors, publicity and awareness a company can get (McCraven, 2018). PR professionals must acknowledge that <https://assignbuster.com/public-relations-in-the-film-industry/>

a well-run event is a successful public relations tactic and a bad event can be a PR nightmare. The success or failure of an event can lead to either good publicity or bad publicity, and the event can have an impact on a guest's perception of a brand and or service (McCraven, 2018).

An example of a strategic event my supervisor assisted was a program called "women in motion" by the Kering Group that was launched in 2015 (Kering, 2019). Kering is a global group that manages renowned brands in fashion: Gucci, Saint Laurent, and Bottega Veneta. Women in Motion's purpose is to showcase women's contribution to the world of cinema, and it has become a platform to change mindsets and improve the inequality between women and men in the field of the arts and culture (Kering, 2019). The Group became an official partner of the Festival de Cannes in the same year. Each year, the women in motion awards are given to influential women and young female talents who seek to strengthen the position of women in the industry (Kering, 2019). Moreover, my supervisor was responsible to assist and plan with the Talks at Festival de Cannes, which were panels to discuss feminism and role played by women in culture with leading figures of the film industry such as Eva Longoria and Emilia Clark. This event not only maintains relationships between filmmakers, Kering, actresses and other inspired women; but it also promotes the idea of women empowerment to the younger generations as a whole.

PR Crisis

An area I did not have the chance to learn about is how to manage PR crises and I wish to learn about it in my future career. I believe understanding how

to handle a PR crisis is just as important as other skills. A well-known PR crisis was the incident occurred at Starbucks last year, the manager at a Philadelphia location called the police because two black men were sitting in the shop, waiting for a colleague but did not buy drinks (Lalley, 2018). A video of this incident was posted on twitter and became viral in a short period. Starbucks was condemned on social media for racial discrimination (McGregor, 2018). Starbucks quickly issued an apology two day later but the public was not satisfied with the brevity of the message. On April 15, Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson issued an apology directly to the public and announced all stores would be closed for one day of “ racial bias training (McGregor, 2018).

According to many PR and communication specialists, Starbucks was not active enough with its response and the initial message appeared as not sincere for a large brand (McGregor, 2018). The order of communications is extremely important when a PR crisis occurs, having employees to communicate with customers as well as social media to reach the public is better than sending a press release apology to the media (Lalley, 2018). After frontline employees are on the same page, the brand then should send a direct message to customers through social media (Twitter) with sincerity, and lastly send a message to investors and media through formal statements (Lalley, 2018). When Starbucks’ CEO appeared in a video responding to the situation, it showed how the brand was more humanized and truly cared about this issue (Lalley, 2018). If brands can manage a crisis effectively, it could regain stakeholder value and increase it within a year of the crisis.

In conclusion, from this in-house PR position at a film production company, I've learned some essential skills of being a professional publicist from a traditional PR approach. Skills such as writing press releases, pitching event ideas to sponsors, and event planning are all crucial to being an excellent publicist. Having no previous experience in public relations, I was able to reinforce my knowledge through this internship to learn about public relations as well as understanding the film industry as a whole. This internship was a crucial stepping stone that would build up success for my future career.

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