



Rosetta Public Relations – Communications Briefing November 2008

BRANDING YOUR LEADER – CREATING AND ENHANCING VISIBILITY FOR EXECUTIVES

The term ‘faceless corporation’ tells it all. It’s a basic human trait to identify more with a person than with an organization. One is a ‘who,’ the other is a ‘what.’ Typically companies address this in two different ways (although these two strategies can overlap in some circumstances). The first is to create a strong brand; brands can be imbued with a personality that audiences can identify with. It’s what branding guru David Aaker calls “the brand as friend.” A company can put this persona out in the public space for its audiences to interact and connect with.

Quick quiz: who is the CEO of Starbucks?

- a. Jim Donald
- b. Howard Schultz
- c. Walter Morrison

Followers of the company will recognize Schultz as the current CEO (Donald was ousted early in 2008 and Morrison is actually the inventor of the Frisbee). My point is that in this circumstance it’s not Schultz who matters but the personality of the Starbucks corporate brand – a somewhat snobbish, know-it-all coffee fiend of a friend who wants to impress you with her good taste.

The second route is what I want to talk more about – putting an actual public face on an organization, not just a brand persona.

Quick quiz: match the names to the organizations

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| a. Steve Jobs | e. GE |
| b. Richard Branson | f. Apple |
| c. Jack Welch | g. Hollinger |
| d. Conrad Black | h. Virgin |

(Although you likely guessed them all, here are the matching pairs: a-f, b-h, c-e, d-g).

Obviously these names belong to the stratosphere of global business leadership but visibility can also be attained in smaller ponds and outside of the business world. By lending his name to his winery, Robert Mondavi became its public face. In the arts Richard Bradshaw was the face of the Canadian Opera Company.

Both Mondavi and Bradshaw are, ahem, dead. This leads us to a serious question – what to do when the public face is no longer available due to death or departure? Although substitution with another personality (drawn from the executive suite or parachuted in) may seem an option, it's not. Companies must shift from the real face to the branded entity, like advertising firm, Ogilvy, has done after its mercurial founder, David Ogilvy, retired (but that is a discussion for another time).

WHY PUT YOUR LEADER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Your executive suite is going to be in the spotlight to some degree in any case but what we are talking about is deliberately cultivating a public persona and communicating it to your audiences. What's the value of using your leadership as the public face of your organization?

1. Efficiency. You are leveraging an existing asset, not building a new one.
2. Speed. It's often more rapid than brand building. This is especially true for smaller companies like those approaching their first initial public offering. To go from 0 to 60 with a corporate brand requires significant investment and effort over time. Sometimes it's simply easier to put the CEO out front as the public face of the company.
3. Distinctiveness. The personality of your leader will inevitably set you apart from the pack. Say what you like about Eugene Melnyk, he was always interesting. As the public face of Biovail for much of that company's life, he helped distinguish it from the 70 or so other biotechnology companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange.
4. You sometimes have to work with what you've got. Outsize executive personalities may overshadow a corporate brand anyway so going with them is easier than trying to swim upstream.

THE HONEST ASSESSMENT

Not every leader is destined to be a superstar CEO. The options available to the owner of a string of carwashes are fewer than those open to someone who runs a multinational car manufacturer. Here are some basic questions to ask when considering if this approach is right for your organization:

1. Charisma – the power to attract, inspire and influence people. How much does your leader have? Is he self-effacing or brash or somewhere in between? I'm not talking about public speaking skills or a good eye for clothes (failings in these areas can be fixed) but rather something like charm that makes you want to like the person or at least provokes a strong response. Think of Bill Clinton.
2. Are you going to be limited to your niche or can your leader 'play' outside of this space? Example: if your leader is the head of a major hospital, could she also be positioned as an expert on broader topics like health care trends? Ask yourself who else besides the obvious audiences could be interested in your leader's story?

3. How much is your leader comfortable revealing? Is it 'warts and all' (personal details) or a carefully massaged public persona? The first is obviously more authentic but determine the level of comfort before proceeding.

AUDIENCES

Now that you've audited the situation and you have a sense of the basic materials you can work with you need to understand the audiences for your public face. This involves understanding not only who they are but also what expectations they have of your leader (and any biases in play). There will be several obvious and not so obvious audiences to assess as well as audiences you want to but don't presently engage with. Organize these by 'obvious fits' and 'stretches.' Don't forget to include all the major aspects of your leader's activities (including volunteer work and personal life) when making this assessment. Here's an example of the first steps of a (fictional) assessment:

Bob Chin, PhD, is CEO of Red Rain Biotech, a privately held company getting ready to list on the stock exchange. Bob previously served as the company's chief scientific officer. He came to biotechnology later in life – he was a high school science teacher before going back to school to study immunology. In his personal life Bob is an avid mountain biker, having competed semi-professionally while in university.

Obvious audiences:

- Local and national biotech communities
- Life sciences investment community
- Government agencies funding life sciences research
- Universities and academic researchers involved in immunology
- Health care providers
- Professional and industry associations

Stretch audiences:

- Science educators
- Education administrators
- Policy-makers
- Students and parents

Imagine if we created the 'Dr. Bob' persona – because of his experience as a science teacher, he could set himself up as an advocate for science education and a role model, leveraging his own life story. As a mountain biker he has a certain 'cool factor' that could work to his advantage in speaking to kids about science. Building profile in this space could reflect back onto his obvious audiences and positively shape their impressions of both Bob and Red Rain Biotech.

The next step is to test this hypothesis by detailed audience research. What do they expect to hear from someone like Bob? What do they really want to hear? What would surprise (and possibly inspire) them? From a practical perspective, rank the audiences by size and influence so you can apply your resources most effectively.

ARCHETYPES

We are more comfortable with people who fit established, familiar roles. You can capitalize on this by shaping your leader's story to fit a common archetype. Here are four of the most common archetypes in use:

1. **Evangelist** – this is the impassioned champion of the organization and its products/services. Sparked by an idea, every opportunity is given over to communicating that vision. Think of Steve Jobs of Apple. A rarer variant is the **Saint**, someone whose selflessness is tied to a public-minded vision, like Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank.
2. **Outsider** – this is the person who bucks the establishment. Who knew that Sir Richard Branson, a lacklustre student whose first business was growing Christmas trees, would end up as a global business leader with an empire of 360 companies?
3. **Unlikely hero** – similar to the Outsider, this is the person who, because of some obvious flaws, doesn't seem like the type to succeed but has somehow overcome the odds and done so. The computer genius with no social skills who goes on to found a successful software company is one version of this archetype.
4. **Regular guy (or girl)** – it doesn't matter if a person's story is a true-life adventure; what counts is connecting with the audience. An average Joe/Jill who achieves success is a person that we can easily identify with. Former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, played this well, characterizing herself as a greengrocer's daughter.

These are the necessary first steps. From here you need to create opportunities to convey the public face, including performances (Dr. Bob, in our example above, could present the public face of Red Rain Biotech at industry investment conferences, media appearances and local high schools). Coaching your 'talent' (your leader) is also vital.

Generating a public face for your leader is work; so is maintaining and strengthening it. But the result is greater visibility as well as a deeper and richer engagement with your audiences. It's a path worth serious consideration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McIvor founded Rosetta Public Relations Inc. in 2006 after a career in the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care that bridged both communications and health policy. He has managed communications for many government initiatives. Paul also provided crisis and risk communications to the government, helping to manage crises like the SARS outbreak. Prior to his time in government Paul worked in investor relations, helping companies raise capital and navigate their first few years as publicly traded corporations.

416.516.7095 mcivor@RosettaPR.com www.RosettaPR.com