

News director reflects on PR experiences

For public relations professionals who have never worked in a newsroom it can be hard to understand how or why reporters do what they do. And dealing with the media during a crisis or breaking news can leave even the savviest PR pro jaded about pushy press people.

At the August Minnesota PRSA monthly meeting, KSTP-TV Assistant News Director Mark Ginther spoke candidly about his recent experience on the other side of the news camera.

Ginther acted as spokesperson and media liaison for his family when cousin Tony Basta was murdered while riding a bicycle along Mississippi River Blvd. in St. Paul. The morning after the murder Ginther took a leave of absence from KSTP-TV to help his family. "I told my boss you can fire me if you want to, but my Mom asked me to do this."

After meeting with his family that morning, Ginther scheduled a press conference and began responding to reporter's calls and attempting to control a media frenzy in the face of a personal crisis. This was obviously a very different role for the veteran newsman, and one that led Ginther to speak honestly about the challenges of dealing with the press.

Ginther described Tony's parents as shy people, not comfortable being on the news, but on Ginther's advice the family decided to use the media to try to find Tony's killer. "We organized an afternoon news conference with the police and family," he said. "Every question got answered right from the source. Every request was responded to. We got right in front of it."

Ginther encouraged meeting attendees to be proactive and warned that the minute you aren't open, the press thinks you have something to hide. It is hard not to feel pressured when dealing with insistent reporters, but according to Ginther reporters hear no all the time.

Ginther spoke very strongly about protecting his family from invasive press who



Mark Ginther, Assistant News Director at KSTP-TV, spoke at the August PRSA meeting about his experience dealing with the other side of the camera during a family crisis.

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Important dates to remember

October

6

Friday Forum on Strategic Marketing for Pre and Post IPO companies

10

Classics award entry deadline

19

Monthly meeting at Bravo in Mpls.

22-24

Public Relations World Congress in Chicago

25

Board meeting

November

8

PRSA Skills Seminar at the Radisson South in Bloomington

16

Monthly meeting at Radisson Metrodome in Mpls.

17

Pro-Am Day

December

1

Friday Forum on the Results of the PRSA Ethics Survey

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PRSA heads to the Windy City

It's not often the PRSA National Conference is as close to Minnesota as it is this year. And actually, it's the World Congress 2000, because the conference is being co-sponsored with the International Public Relations Association, so there's the added benefit of being able to network with global practitioners. It all begins Oct. 22 in Chicago at the Hyatt Regency Chicago on the Riverwalk and the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers.

If you've never been to the National Conference, I strongly recommend it. Lest you think I'm a veteran of these affairs, I'm not; my first conference was in St. Louis in 1996 when I was first an assembly delegate. Going to the national conference gives you a sense of professionalism and pride, being able to rub shoulders with 2,000 fellow public relations practitioners. It makes what we do come alive. And you have the chance to hear from some of the best and brightest in our profession. Being that Chicago is in close proximity and at \$675 (for early bird registration) it is a heck of a professional

development deal. Throw in those \$79 one-way airfares to Midway and you've got a very reasonable investment in your career.

If you have not seen the registration materials, one of the more interesting keynoters will be Watts Wacker, co-author of "The 500 Year Delta." Also of interest is Bran Ferren, Walt Disney Imagineering Research, and his topic "The Return of the Storytelling Age." Besides these keynoters there are four specific tracks of hands-on learning seminars and a number of pre-conference seminars to fill out your schedule.

The social events are always fun... this year's opening reception on Sunday, Oct. 22, will be an international theme, and the Tuesday night, Oct. 24, closing party is at the Shedd Aquarium. I hope I'll see a big Minnesota contingent this year!

– David Hakensen, APR
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showed up at the Basta's house or restaurant. "This family doesn't want to heal publicly. So my job is to protect that and keep people like me away."

He said it was relatively easy to manipulate the media and advised his family to do so until the killer was caught, including allowing coverage of the funeral. "If you give them what they want, they will go away," Ginther said. "We opened it up just enough to feed the beast." His instincts paid off when a girl came forward with information about the murder, saying her conscience was getting to her because she had seen so many pictures of Tony in the news.

Although Ginther did not seem surprised by his dealings with local press, he spoke honestly about problems he sees with his profession and ways in which people can use the media to their advantage. "You need to figure out how to use the media – they are like sheep," Ginther explained. "People on my side of the table are not as smart as we get

credit for. Reporters today are not as smart as 10 years ago. They don't ask tough questions and are not well read. They don't even read the paper."

Ginther also talked about how to improve television news. "We on the media side need to hire better, smarter people.



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– Mark Ginther, KSTP-TV



There are people in TV news that are there just to be on TV. Reporters ask stupid questions because they are looking for that perfect eight second sound bite."

When asked if this experience has changed how he treats reporters he works with, Ginther said it has changed how he approaches stories, and "I tend to be harder on [reporters] because I've been through it now."

Although clearly changed by this experience Ginther didn't sound ready to quit his day job. "We

enter people's houses every night – that's an honor. But I guess I would rather be right and last, than wrong and first."

Showcase expertise through Pro Am Day

Don't miss the Minnesota PRSA Pro-Am Day on November 17. This annual mentoring event provides a rewarding opportunity for PRSSA seniors to spend the day with PRSA professionals and learn more about the public relations field. It is also an excellent occasion for professionals to share their expertise and meet potential internship or entry-level job candidates.

"Pro-Am Day is a highlight for students in their PRSSA involvement," said Heidi Sedlacek, co-chair of the Minnesota PRSA Student Relations committee. "Students have expressed on more than one occasion that their Pro-Am Day experience has led to internships or entry-level positions with their host company."

To make the most of Pro-Am Day, here are some tips for a successful experience:

- Familiarize yourself with the students and their expectations of the day. Ask students beforehand what they hope to gain from the experience and use this information to help plan the day.
- Give a company tour while describing the various public relations roles employees have in your company.
- Share your background and insight. Explain how you entered the profession and what is unique about your particular area of public relations.
- Include them in your daily routine.
- Set goals for your Pro-Am Day experience.
- Expose students to other professionals in your company.
- Put your students to work. Consider having them write a news release, conduct online research or participate in a brainstorm session.
- If you are hosting a group of students, plan both group activities and one-on-one interaction.
- Ask students what their plans are for after graduation.
- Introduce students to the company's communication technology.
- Review their resumes or portfolios.

At the end of the day, professionals and students are encouraged to attend a reception at PR 21 in St. Paul from 4 to 6 p.m. This gives both professionals and students a chance to meet and mingle with others.

For more information on Pro-Am Day or to host a PRSSA student, please contact Jennifer McNamara at (952) 851-7279.

– Jennifer McNamara
Tunheim Group

Skills Seminar set for Nov. 8

"What we see depends mainly on what we look for." John Lubbock's words ring especially true in today's competitive marketplace. Tapping into your creative vision is an essential, but sometimes daunting, task.

The 2000 Minnesota PRSA Skills Seminar is your answer, whether you are a seasoned professional or fresh out of college.

The seminar, to be held Wednesday, November 8 at the Radisson Hotel in Bloomington, will focus on "expanding your horizons by directing your vision toward the greater things to come."

Keynote speaker Hazel Reinhardt, Ph.D., state demographer and former *Star Tribune* research chief, will discuss the changing world landscape and how demographics, economics and cultural factors are transforming the face of public relations and marketing. She will present invaluable information on keeping up in this fast-paced and challenging environment.

Other topics include:

- The ABC's of Webcasting;
- Branding challenges in today's marketplace;
- Secrets of successful trade show exhibits;
- Building a non-profit image;
- The political implications and regulatory issues of public relations;
- Communications challenges of an e-business initiative;
- Public relations and fund raising;
- Communications in a small organization; and
- Communicating using Web sites

A cocktail reception featuring a cash bar and hors d'oeuvres will immediately follow the Skills Seminar in the atrium of the Radisson from 5 to 7 p.m.

For more information or registration materials on the Skills Seminar, please call Suzette Wolding at (612) 825-0050. Additional information is also available online at www.mnprsa.com.

– Ryan May
Strother Communications Group

Update

How technology is continuing to change the way we work with the media

A few years ago *PRSA Today* covered an article on the Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace Study — an annual survey that tracks how media use the Web and e-mail in their professional lives. The study examines the growing role of electronic communication tools among producers of print media, the rate of acceptance and usage by the media, and how communications professionals can work with media to leverage electronic tools.

PRSA Today last took a look at this study three years ago, and as you might expect, the march of technology has continued to shape the way print media editors use both e-mail and the Web. Since the last report, the media's use of both the Web and e-mail has grown exponentially.

- In 1996, e-mail lagged far behind the telephone as the preferred method of contact for magazine editors. 1999 has seen e-mail make up much of this ground, with nearly half (48%), now looking to the in-box instead of the telephone as the primary contact method.

- The use of e-mail for contact in the newspaper industry (20%), continues to lag behind the phone (45%), and in person contact (29%), but is gradually increasing in acceptance. In many cases, picking up the phone is still faster than typing out a lengthy e-mail.

- The 1996 survey showed that two-thirds of journalists went online at least once per week. Just three years later, a whopping 71% of journalists report that they go online at least once per day and 80% of newspaper editors are online at least once per day. Of these 80%, more than half report online usage of two or three times per day.

- More than 90 percent of journalists report use of the Web for article research. This figure represents a major

increase from previous years, when the rate hovered around just two-thirds.

- Fifty-two percent of journalists now use the Web for images, compared with only 25 percent three years ago. And, according to some journalists, the use of electronic images will continue to increase as digital images get better in quality.

So what does all this mean for communications professionals? Well, the fact that the media are continuing to embrace electronic communications will have both a positive and negative impact on how we practice communications, and how we counsel our clients or management to communicate with the media. Whether we use electronic, face-to-face, or phone communications, the role of the PR practitioner continues to be essential in delivering information to the media when and how they need it.

Using E-mail for Communication and Distribution

As PR professionals we need to understand how the media use electronic resources and take advantage of that knowledge to help make the most out of communicating to the media. Obviously, e-mail has become much more widely accepted, and electronic e-mail distribution of information is both faster and cheaper than print distribution could ever hope to be. However, the recipient and the message should still determine the distribution method — despite the speed and cost of e-mail we still need to research the recipient and make sure the message works electronically. Sometimes e-mail just isn't right, so it shouldn't be used in every case.

The Web as a Resource

The Web is also having a larger impact on the media. Online resources like the virtual press kit will probably become more important as media use the Web more for research and reference information. Posting items on the company Web site like current backgrounds, executive bios and even photos can be important resources for a journalist who is searching for background information for an article.

Keeping information current and accurate is a bigger challenge as journalists continue to use the Web more for research. As an open forum, companies can no longer control much of the information that is posted, and journalists have access to many more opinions and resources that were not accessible in the past. As PR professionals we can help companies communicate positive and accurate information as well as deal effectively with negative information on the Web.

In addition, companies should understand that media need basic, accurate information that is easy to find and understand. Many companies spend lots of money making virtual press kits that have video, audio and special effects. But, according to the study, journalists are mainly interested in contact information, press releases and photos.

Overall, electronic communication tools have given the media easy access to information, and have given us more ways to communicate with the media. As PR professionals, we need to understand and work with the media as communication changes.

– Amy Fisher and Dan Peters
Padilla Speer Beardsley Inc.

Snapshots: monthly meeting



Local PR professionals enjoy lunch at the Radisson in Mpls. during the August Minnesota PRSA monthly meeting.

Succeed in media relations by anticipating “The Call”

A call from a reporter need not be a nerve-racking experience.

First and foremost, maintain an attitude that a reporter’s call offers a great opportunity to communicate your key messages to key audiences. Anticipation and preparation are critical to optimizing the opportunity presented by “the call.”

Here are few tips on the basics:

- ☛ Anticipate that the public issue or project you are working on is newsworthy.
- ☛ Prepare and maintain an updated bullet list of the key facts about your issue — the basics: the subject, why is it important, what is your desired end result, who is affected or involved, how much money is at stake, the timeline for action, etc.
- ☛ Understand what key audiences truly influence your ability to achieve your issue goals.
- ☛ Identify a goal for communicating about your issue.
- ☛ A good exercise is to envision what you would like as a newspaper headline about your issue.
- ☛ Develop 2-3 key messages about your issue that support your communications goal.
- ☛ Develop a list of short answers to possible reporter questions about your issue, with a focus on tough questions.
- ☛ Develop a response for the question you would least like to have to answer, be assured it will be asked.
- ☛ Practice your answers with the help of a colleague posing as a reporter.

Succeeding in media relations often requires complicated strategies executed by experienced professional communicators. But all success starts with the basics.

– Bob McFarlin
McF Consulting Group, Inc.



Announcements and Opportunities

October monthly meeting update

The October 18 Minnesota PRSA monthly meeting will feature former Minnesota PRSA chapter member and PRSA Fellow Jim Lukaszewski. Lukaszewski's presentation will focus on helping PR practitioners evolve into strategists able to have a direct impact on the policy, direction, and future of organizations. The price for this meeting will be \$30 for members, \$35 for nonmembers and \$28 for students.

Members who have recently changed positions include:

Lisa Marie Dinzeo has joined St. Thomas Academy as director of marketing and communications. Her new address, phone and email are: 949 Mendota Heights Rd., St. Paul, MN 55120; (651) 683-1532; and ldinzeo@cadets.com.

Rebecca Kauten has joined Market Ready, Inc. as client information developer. Her new address, phone, fax and email are: 8501 Golden Valley Rd., Golden Valley, MN 55427; (763) 548-8208; (763) 548-8206 (fax); and rkauten@marketready.com.

Susie Moore has joined Reliant Energy Minnegasco as Web content manager. Her new address, phone, fax and email are: 800 LaSalle Ave., Mpls., MN 55402; (612) 321-4935; (612) 321-4873 (fax); and susie_l_moore@reliantenergy.com.

Joel Swanson has joined BlueCross BlueShield of Minnesota as senior communications consultant. His new address, phone, fax and email are: 3535 Blue Cross Rd., Eagan, MN 55122, (651) 662-2882; (651)662-2882; and joel_swanson@bluecrossmn.com.

Welcome new members

Welcome to new MN PRSA members who have joined recently. They include:

Elizabeth Bjorklund, Bozell Kamstra; **Robert Bossert**, freelance consultant; **Wendy Burt**, B2 Public Relations Inc.; **Trina Dorner Dietz**, Creative Memories; **Jessie Folkens**, Parker Hughes Institute; **Rebekah Gradinjan**, Supervalu, Inc.; **Denise Hamsher**, Lakehead and Enbridge Pipelines; **Anne Kettler**, Fairview Health Services; **Cheryl Leeper**, Lakehead Pipe Line; **Christen O'Brien**, Select Comfort; and **Erin Titcomb**, Thomson Learning.



Don't miss this inauguration!

Lobbying, pandering, partisan politics? Nope. The votes will already be tallied. All that's left is for you to celebrate the best in Minnesota public relations and have a great time with your colleagues. Look for more info to come!

Minnesota PRSA Classics 2000
Inaugurating a New Era in Public Relations

Thursday, Jan. 25, 2001
5:30 p.m. registration
6 p.m. reception
8 p.m. program
Minnesota History Center, St. Paul

PRSA today

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