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In the Know with a PR Pro... Meet Mary Shank Rockman

Name: Mary Shank Rockman

Title: President and CEO

Company: MSR Communications

Client Base Includes: Almaden Valley Athletic Club, CPP, Inc., Eco-Festivals, Faculte, Organization Metrics, RentWiki, Safe Harbor, San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Center, SpinVox



Background

Sociology was part of my major, and through this discipline, I learned a lot about people and what makes them who they are. It was a natural fit with the field of advertising, where I started my career. Advertising gave me a platform for creativity, how to think about brands, and understand how the messages about those brands impact people and their perceptions. Then I went into product marketing where part of my responsibilities as a Product Marketing Manager was PR. What I loved about my job was being able to more fully understand consumers' needs and desires and demands, how to meet those needs with a particular product, and how to market products- by communicating product and brand messages to their target audiences. Of the three Product Managers where I worked, I got the most media coverage for my product lines - it seemed to come naturally to me.

My first story was written by Don Clark, who was with the San Francisco Chronicle at the time. I came up with a clever way to position a very nebulous product to him, and he ended up publishing a 5 column article with photograph in the Chronicle Business section. I realized I had a knack for telling a story to readers, and the company asked me to start their first ever Public Relations department. I went on to become an Account Supervisor for Ketchum Communications Technology Group, where I conducted promotions for Hewlett-Packard, Price Waterhouse LLP, and Levi Strauss & Co. After two years, I was recruited to be a Senior Manager in the Sybase PR department and quickly ran their product PR, and then was promoted to Director of the PR department. I was the youngest female director in the company. I was responsible for corporate product PR and overseeing international communications, as well as Executive Communications. That was an incredible experience! This was a company that had been a media darling for 10 years, and then they released a product that had its share of technical challenges, which resulted in a negative image. During the four years I was there, I helped turn around the company from a perception perspective. A company in distress is an incredible training ground! .

After four years of wearing the weight of a multibillion dollar company, I decided I needed change. I wanted to start a family, and I wanted more flexibility. I left, took a month off, and went to a health spa to clear my mind. I talked to a woman who had started her own business, and immediately started to



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put my business plan together on a napkin. I began thinking about the different needs that could be helped by a strategic, results-driven boutique PR agency with senior-level talent involved on a daily basis in every aspect of a client's business. The dot-com industry was really taking off at this point. I started the business with three clients: one dot-com, one interactive television company, and one enterprise company. Within two months, I was hiring, although still working out of my living room. After six months, I decided I needed an office to support me and my team and all of the new business requests. The interesting thing is that the foundation and pillars of our company: strategy, service, relationships, and results, are still as important today as they were back when I opened MSR.

It's Business Time

What's the first thing you do when you get the office in the morning?

I will have already checked my BlackBerry and responded to urgent items prior to getting to the office. Once I get in to the office I greet everybody; check in with the team, see how everyone is doing, if there are issues or questions that need addressing. Then, I make my to-do list so that I know exactly what my priorities for the day are. I do that twice a day- once in the morning, once in the afternoon.

What is one thing that you know now that you wish you had known when you first started in PR?

I know now that relevance is most important when delivering a compelling pitch to a reporter. Understanding what interests the reporter's readers and what is relevant to them will likely peak the interest of the reporter. If I have those things, that cold phone call is not so scary because I know that I am offering something useful and resourceful to them.

As the playing field for PR is evolving (social media, online publications, etc.), how do you advise PR professionals to build relationships and win ink?

You have to have a voice-to-voice relationship. I am an old school PR gal - relationships are everything. You can start a relationship online, but you need to know that person. You can't just have a relationship with the person over e-mail or social media. You have to know what compels the writer and its audience, and that can't only be achieved over written word. Creating relevance is what will enable the relationship, as well as understanding how to provide them with information they and their readers care about. The biggest achievement is when a PR person can make themselves and their clients a resource for reporters; to do that you have to present them with information that is relevant and interesting.

Up Close and Personal

Home state: Native northern Californian - one of the few.

Favorite thing(s) to do when not at the office:

I like to enjoy good food and good wine with my family and friends. I love to travel, volunteer, exercise, and watch "chick flicks".

If you could travel anywhere, where would you go, and why?

I have a very soft spot for Europe - I love to travel there. I love the culture, the family orientation, the languages and the food. I also love the laid back nature of Europeans. St. Barts is another favorite of mine. I love that island, it has the most beautiful beaches and the French-Creole cuisine is fabulous.



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What song best describes you?

Don't Stop Believin' by Journey, because you have to have faith in yourself and everything you do. You have to believe that anything is possible.

If you were banished to a deserted island, what is one thing you'd take with you?

My family.



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