

Outrageous
PR Stunts
that Work?!

Can We Do That?!

Peter Shankman



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Finally, Mom and Dad, thanks for . . . wow, I don't even know remotely where to start. It would double the size of the book. So just . . . thanks. I love you both.

Can We Do That?!

And the tumbleweeds blow by your desk, and the crickets chirp.

And there's not one story.

And you're left explaining why—to your bosses, to your shareholders, to your partners, to your clients.

This is not fun. In the PR world, the scientific term for what you're going through is, "This sucks."

We've all been there. The town of No Press. It's a lonely place, full of confused publicists who thought they could make it on a press release alone. It's like a retirement home for PR people who didn't have what it took. Meanwhile, journalists, savvy publicists, and the public are all watching, shaking their heads, saying, "He sent a press release addressed to 'Dear Editor.' He never had a chance."

Fortunately, there is a better way. Back in 1998, I started a small PR firm out of my apartment with one computer, one desk, and one cat. In eight years, the firm has handled PR, marketing, and events for some of the biggest companies out there—American Express, Disney, Juno Online Services, Richard Simmons, The Discovery Channel, as well as some of the smallest—Flying Fingers Yarn Shop, The Scott-e-Vest, the Bla-Bla.com ad network, and a ton of others. Big or small, household names or startups, they've all had one thing in common—they've had very successful public relations and marketing campaigns produced by my firm, The Geek Factory, Inc. These campaigns have generated revenue, exposure, and growth, sometimes beyond their (and our) wildest dreams. In this book, I show you what we did, how we did it, and how you can create those kind of results yourself.

There's only one rule I ask of you as you read and then apply what you've learned here:

Don't be afraid to be different.

Ask my parents. They'll both tell you that from the second I was born (way late and upside down) I always liked to do things differently. Sometimes I'd come home crying and tell my mom that the other kids didn't like me. She'd say that it wasn't

that they didn't like me, they just didn't understand me, because I did things differently. I "marched to the beat of a different drummer," as she phrased it. She told me that one day my uniqueness would help me in the grown-up world. She promised one day I'd find out that not being like everyone else would come in handy.

Of course, like moms usually are, she was right; two successful companies, obscene amounts of media, and tons of satisfied clients later, I'm happy to have strayed from the pack.

At the time, though, I thought she was totally and completely out of her mind. I mean, come on—when you're 11 years old, not being like everyone else is a death sentence. Find me one kid who wants to be "different" at age 11. You can't. No one wants to be different when they're young. Hell, the majority of us don't want to be different now that we're older. But that's the true death sentence, in both business and life. You *need* to be different. Different gets you remembered, not simply recalled. Different gets the recognition and praise heaped on you, and not someone else.

Here's a secret: because the majority of people out there are afraid to be different, it allows people like us to own the ball game, the playing field—hell, the whole damn stadium—as long as we're just a little bit better, a little more distinctive. Be a little bit different, and you'll soar. People will notice. The media will write about you. The world will be your oyster, and all those other trite sayings. You'll be King of the World, or your little corner of it, anyway.

Quick quiz: Who will you remember more: the office mate who sends you a memo properly formatted; on white paper; with the correct subject, heading, and subhead, or the one who drops you an email that says, "Hey, wanna get with you on this project—can I buy you a burger later and talk?"

The answer is obvious. Burger Man will almost always win. Be different. Be Burger Man.

It's being different that got me where I am, and gotten my clients the successful notoriety they've experienced. It's what

put Bacardi on the top of the “Yahoo Most Emailed Photos” page, and what got Flying Fingers Yarn Shop a three-page spread in *The New Yorker*. It’s what put RegisterFree.com on the front page of CNN.com, and New Frontier Media in the *Wall St. Journal*. It’s what got me personally in *USA Today* and on CNN, more than once.

Being different has gotten me virtually all the PR, marketing, and for that matter, personal success I’ve had so far. It’s also been the cause of some of my most spectacular disasters. But learning from them is half the fun.

OBJECT LESSON: WHO DO YOU REMEMBER?

You’re on a crowded subway. It’s packed full of people. You’re standing, holding onto the handrail, drifting off into space, waiting for your stop. Virtually everyone looks the same, right? Try really looking at people tomorrow. It doesn’t have to be on the subway—could be the freeway, the supermarket, the park, wherever you are where there are a ton of other people. They all sort of merge into one faceless, nameless person: “the crowd.”

Well, there’s a reason for that. Your brain simply can’t process every single person you come in contact with on a daily basis. And why should it? We’re all born with the spectacular instinct to *dismiss the banal*. If it bores us, serves no purpose, doesn’t help us run our lives, do our jobs, or be happier, we tend to dismiss it. Every other car on the highway? Not important to us, other than the one in front of us we don’t want to slam into. Other people on the subway? Who cares? They’re not impacting our life in any way; we don’t need to process them.

But, imagine. . . . You’re on the freeway and out of the corner of your eye, you notice a fire-engine-red Lamborghini speeding up in your rearview mirror. You notice how low to the ground it is. You see the shiny, freshly waxed coating of paint. You admire the sleek, smooth lines on the car. It roars past you. You hear the purr of the engine as it gracefully hugs the road. You stare at it, you process it, you take it all in.

That car is a basic example of something out of the ordinary. You didn't expect to see a \$175,000 car drive by you on your morning commute into the office, did you? Of course not. You expected to see Honda Civics, SUVs, and the like. So seeing something like a Lamborghini made you take notice. You remembered it. You're probably going to get into the office and tell your coworkers: "Guess what I saw this morning on the I-10!"

Hey, there's nothing wrong with a Honda Civic. It's a good quality car. But it's not a Lamborghini. You're not going to remember the 30 Honda Civics you saw this morning on the way to work. But you will remember the Lamborghini.

You saw something out of the ordinary, remembered it, and told someone else about it. It got *into your head*. In a nutshell, you did what every publicist goes to bed at night hoping you'll do.

I first realized the power of being remembered (for good or for bad) back in junior high school. I went to junior high on Staten Island, a suburb 20 minutes outside of New York City. If Staten Island had a motto for kids, it would have been "Staten Island: Where being different is wrong." The kids in Junior High School 61 were not really fond of being different—you either fit the mold of what was cool or you were an outcast, destined to spend your sixth, seventh, and eighth grade years in social-misfit land with the other geeks, dorks, and those who didn't belong.

Rather than come home crying every day (which I did a lot, don't get me wrong), I figured out at an early age that it wouldn't be such a bad thing to embrace the differences and learn to capitalize on them. I figured I had two choices: be attacked for my differences, or use them to my advantage. If I did the former, I'd continue to be miserable. If I did the latter, perhaps I could change things. If the latter didn't work, I'd just get beaten up some more—no real loss. But perhaps I could become known for something more than just being an outsider and maybe even turn my daily beat-up sessions into something more productive.

I was born with a learning disability. A "motor-visual impairment," they called it. Basically, I read and processed things

a heck of a lot faster than I could write them. This caused issues in class, because I'd read what was on the board, process it, then get totally frustrated when I couldn't write it down. Some smart doctor somewhere suggested I take a portable word processor to class. This was in the early 1980s—a portable computer still weighed close to ten pounds, but had (get this!) 2k of RAM. Two whole kilobytes! Woo!

Anyhow, try taking your notes in class on a portable word processor when you're *already* not too well liked. Didn't go over too well, and my daily beat-up sessions increased.

But then one day, as I was rubbing out a bruise to my ribs, it occurred to me—I was typing my notes so fast that I had tons of time left. All the other kids were still writing, and hating it. So what if I offered to help them?

Peter's Note-Taking-Service was born. I didn't charge anyone, I just told one or two of the more influential kids (influencer beings—we'll talk about them later) that hey, if you needed today's English or History notes, just let me know—I could print off a page from the word processor's memory.

The beatings slowed down a bit. I became useful. I was still a dork, an outsider, but I was a dork with a purpose. Word spread, and soon enough, I was printing out class notes for some of the most popular kids, the meanest kids, and even one or two other outcasts like me.

That too, was a form of PR. Much like a client who has no news, I didn't (at the time) have much going for me. I wasn't cool, or hot, or good-looking, or popular. I didn't have news. But I had a portable word processor. That made me stand out in a way not one other classmate could. I was able to get people to see the positive possibilities in difference, and that led to an attitude change, a shift. I began to be treated differently, and it made the final year of junior high just a little less terrible.

I used a difference—in this case, my disability—to my advantage. This was the first of hundreds of times I'd turn a disability or problem into an ability or solution over the course of my personal and professional life.

It occurred to me right then that if you just look at things a little differently, the whole game changes. I wasn't the dork with the typewriter, I was a valuable tool for the cool kids. I wasn't another Honda Civic to be ignored on the highway of life, I was a fire-engine-red Lamborghini, zooming into your memory.

Learning to understand how to make something different, or something nontraditional, or even the lack of something (new news, for instance) work to your advantage can put you light years ahead of your competition.

Fast forward to high school. Doing much better now, I'd found a school where everyone was a bit odd—thus, we were all ok together. Of course, that made it a lot harder to stand out. How do you stand out in a room full of freaks when you've learned to use your freak-ness to stand out in the first place?

And how do you pitch your company when several companies like yours are doing exactly the same thing?

You adapt. You find something they're not doing, you do that, and you tell the world all about it.

I went to a school with a really, really, expensive concert hall and theater. We were a performing arts school, so it only made sense. Problem was, there weren't enough people to run it.

Like any school, mine relied on students to pick up most of the grunt-work slack. And what kid wants to do grunt-work on a gorgeous after-school day in April, when the Sheep Meadow in Central Park is calling to you?

You do, if you know what it can get you.

Most people think in terms of what I call "immediate gimmie." That is, if I do X right now, what's the immediate result? Too many people don't think five minutes ahead of the "right now," let alone five days, weeks, or months. In the PR world, which seems on the surface to operate by that same principle of instant gratification, the opposite is in fact true: thinking just a little bit ahead, asking, "Well, what can we get out of this next week? Next month? Next year?" can give you that edge when you're offering a reporter a tidbit of new information.

What happens if a reporter knows that you're always available and your clients are happy to help whenever he needs something? He's going to call you first. Why would he know to do this? Because you thought ahead, and in September, sent him an email that said, "Hey, when you're swamped in a few months, call me—I'll be around to help."

Think ahead.

For me, asking, "Well, what can I get out of working in the concert hall on this gorgeous day?" got me more than I ever imagined. It got me the golden keys to the school, as it were. I was able to go anywhere, do anything, miss class, hand in work according to my schedule, all because I was working in the concert hall. I became known as the guy with the keys to the school. And it was an accurate description. My giving up that gorgeous after-school time in the park got me tons of connections that came in very handy as I went through my days at LaGuardia High School of Performing Arts.

Remember: There'll always be another sunny day in the park, but there might be only one time to get in the good graces of a reporter, or one time to come up with the idea or event that separates you from the masses. Do that right, and you can spend as much time in the park as you want—you'll be brilliant. And brilliant people get to do whatever they want.

How's That Latte? Almost Gone?

So you're still sipping that latte, on the floor of the bookstore. Well, you now have some idea of how I think—and you'll soon learn why I think it's in your best interest to throw reporters out of a plane, or flood a city street with a soft drink. So how do you do it? How do you convince the bosses? How do you convince the board? How do you do it on the cheap? How do you make the media care? How do you create a return on investment?

In the end, it's surprisingly simple. You probably already know what to do, you've just never thought of the rules quite that way before. One of the greatest aspects of event and stunt driven