

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.

CHAPTER 1

Who Am I, and Why the Heck Should You Listen to Me?

You probably don't know me from Adam, but I am known. The media knows me, and more importantly, they know my clients. So I'm here to tell you why you should listen to me.

So you've bought this book. (Or you're sitting on the floor at a bookstore reading it while sipping a latte.) Either way, you're looking for a different way, a better way of marketing your company, your business, or yourself. You've listened to all the "PR Professionals," the "Publicists," and maybe even taken a course or two.

You've learned how to craft a press release and fill it with your latest company news or events. You've come up with a catchy boilerplate and made sure you listed the right contact information. You double-checked the date in the first paragraph, and confirmed all the numbers with your CFO.

You spent a week writing the release, got it cleared by your company lawyers, got a quote from your CEO, printed it on company letterhead, and sent it out to all the editors and reporters in your city.

Finally, it's the moment of truth. Your company has earthshaking news, a major announcement. You're ready to tell the world.

And then you wait.

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 socialmisfit 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!

Anyway, 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 PR I've found, over and over again, is that the best ideas are the simplest ones. The ideas that make reporters, producers, editors, and the public stand up and take notice are the ones that you come up with and everyone else goes, "Why didn't I think of that?" They're the ideas that change someone's most basic way of thinking. Not because you've solved the unsolvable scientific equation, but because you've made someone think in a different way. By subtly altering another person's perception, you've made them think in a way they never before thought possible.

You can learn to do that over and over again, for client after client, company after company, news event after news event. You can learn to do it in such a way that you're not being repetitive, you're not being boring, people don't think of you as a onetrick pony. You can grow your ideas and your company, just by altering your perception a little bit.

So throw the latte cup away (it's probably cold by now, anyway), buy this book, and start reading. The public won't know what hit them.

CHAPTER 2

PR Basics

I'm going to devote one or two pages to the PR Fundamentals. These aren't the PR Basics, which will comprise the rest of this chapter. The PR Fundamentals are even more basic than the PR Basics! The Fundamentals give you the ten-second cocktail party overview of what Public Relations is.

A beautiful woman walks into a bar. You see her, and go over to her. You tell her, "I'm spectacular in bed; you should really come home with me." That's advertising. Chances are, she won't believe you and most likely, you'll get a drink thrown in your face for your trouble. Why should someone take anything you say about yourself with anything less than several grains of salt?

So let's try again.

A beautiful woman walks into a bar. You see her, and you're mesmerized. But instead of going over to her and telling her how great you are in bed, her best friend, also in the bar, does it for you. She goes over and says, "You know, that guy over there, the one who's checking you out, I've heard about him. He's amazing in bed. He runs his own company, drives a Porsche, has a cat, and is nice to his mother. He's an all-around perfect guy. You should really go over and talk to him." As she's finishing her little speech about why you're so perfect, another friend goes over to her and says, "You and that guy would be totally perfect for each other. He's so sweet!" And so on, and so on. Finally,

she comes over to you; “I hear you and I have a lot in common. Buy me a drink.”

That, in a nutshell is fundamental public relations. You’ve created a basic story. Somehow, through good chatter, a wellpositioned message, a good story, you’ve crafted a message that has gotten out to the masses. It’s been heard and retold by other people; it’s been given credibility.

You can tell your story in a number of ways, if you’re a company. You can issue a press release. You can take a reporter to lunch and tell him or her in person. You can hold a press conference. You can create a wild and wacky stunt. There are many ways to get your message out. Which one works for you? It all depends on the message you’re trying to get across.

Has the company stock taken a massive tumble after top management was caught stealing funds? Probably not a good time to create a wacky stunt. But launching a new soft drink? Take the hottest day of the year, and fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool with it. If it’s carbonated, all the better. Invite the world over to swim with the bubbles.

Quintessentially, good PR is taking some kind of story, either good or bad, putting your specific angle or “spin” (although I hate that word) on it, and then convincing reporters, editors, producers, and the public, to talk about it.

That’s it! Go forth and prosper.

So why does it feel like it’s so damn hard to do?

Because hundreds of thousands of companies are trying to do it every single day, and there just isn’t enough interest to go around. So the media (and as a result, the public) has to be picky as to what they find interesting, and from whom they want to hear more.

So your job is not only to craft a good story and pitch it to the right people, but also to do it in such a way that you make people want to hear more. In fact, you'll know you're doing your job well when people ask *you* for more information, rather than you having to go and force it on them.

GOOD PR VERSUS BAD PR VERSUS NO PR

Five (true) examples of bad press releases that got absolutely no attention, whatsoever:

1. Acme Company moves to higher floor in same building
2. President of Acme Company to give speech
3. Acme Company Allows "Office-Wide Hawaiian Shirt Day, every other Summer Friday"
4. Acme Company launches new product
5. Acme Company hires new VP

Hey! Wake up! You just nodded off!

I know. Those were painful, weren't they? But why?

Well, let's look at them. While moving to a higher floor might be a wonderful accomplishment (Hey, we've outgrown our office and hired four new people; we're going from the 5th floor to the 8th!) who, outside your office, would possibly care?

Your CEO is giving a speech. Unless he's Bill Gates or Richard Branson, and about to launch a brand new product that will appeal to at least 97 percent of the world, don't bother sending this kind of release to more than the few editors who already know you. Don't waste your time (or electrons, or the reporter's time) by sending it out widely.

Hawaiian Shirt Day. Do I really need to say more? The frightening thing is, this was an actual release, issued by a real, live company in 2002. They thought it would make them look cool. Trust me. It didn't. Man oh man, how it didn't.

You're launching a new product. This actually could be some news. But not presented like that. Again—who's your audience? Where is the release going? What's the product? Why is it different? Sadly, too many people get so involved in the day-today, they forget that people outside their walls have no idea about the product and need to be educated.

Finally, the classic "new hire" release. This has some merit, if done well. If not, it hits the trash before it's even opened.

There are many ways to recognize bad PR. Not unlike a bad date, bad PR gives off warning signs. Following are a few of the most common, along with the crucial "what-not-to-do" rules they illustrate.

The "No news" warning sign: This is a dead giveaway, and the most obvious of the no-nos. You're moving up four flights to your new office. To put it bluntly, NO ONE CARES. If you were leasing the entire building, yes—it would matter. You're switching offices. It's not important.

Rule: If it's not important, it's not worth talking about.

The "Doing it to kiss the CEO's butt" warning sign: Do you really want to put out a press release that the CEO is speaking to the local senior citizens' center? Will that really

bring the media? Highly doubtful. What it will do, though, is cost you time, money, and effort, not to mention forcing you to deal with the CEO's wrath when no media shows up anyway, as you predicted.

Rule: If the CEO wants his butt kissed, find a nonpublic way to do it.

The "Am I the only person who realizes how damn STUPID this makes us look?" warning sign: Sometimes clients, or people in management, do certain things (because they think it'll result in an increased coolness factor) when in actuality, it does exactly the opposite—it moves the needle on the Dork-o-Meter off the charts. This is delicate, because it's up to you to teach the clueless how horribly bad their idea really is.

Rule: If you cringe while reading it and want to hide your face, the media will pity you. And pity will NOT get you positive press.

The "New product! Check it out, I've got a new product here," warning sign: This one is tricky, because it hides itself. Everyone is so excited about the new product that you forget that (1) not everyone is aware of it and you *are* indeed going to need to explain, and (2) you haven't re-invented Pi. While it may be the most important thing to hit your company in the past 20 years, for the rest of the world, it's Tuesday.



Rule: A new product, on its own, does not guarantee press. It never will.

The “*Tad Johnson has just started working here*” warning sign: Fortunately, this warning sign has a great and easy litmus test: Go ask three people in your industry who don’t know that good old Tad is joining your company if they know who good old Tad is to begin with. If two of the three do not, then mentioning Tad’s name will *not* get you a table at Spago. You can still issue this release, but you’ll want to adhere to certain rules, the least of which is the “Because you’re not Bill Clinton, that’s why,” rule.

Rule: If you’re not famous, simply putting your name in the title of the release will not get you media attention.

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

Reporters get, on average, upwards of 200 emails a day. How many do you think they really look at?

Much like that statistic that says hiring managers look at resumes and make a decision in less than six seconds, so do reporters when it comes to wanting to find out more. Think about it for a second: each email a reporter gets asks for, at the very least, his or her time. *Please use your valuable time to cover my story.* But a reporter only has so much valuable time. In fact, with deadlines the way they are in today’s 24-hour-news-ondemand world, reporters have less time than ever.

Ask any public relations professional over 50, and he or she will tell you—it used to be a lot easier. You wrote a press release when you had real news. You sent it to reporters, via mail (regular mail!). That meant you typed it up (on a typewriter!) put it in an envelope, addressed and stamped the envelope, and then dropped it in the mailbox. (Amazing!)

But that's what you did. And the reporter would get it, and read it, and either print it straight, or get back to you with questions.

Then faxes came along. Then email. Now, any idiot with an idea can buy a list and send out a press release to 10,000 journalists in 14 seconds, the majority who have absolutely no interest *whatsoever* in your so-called news. Multiply each piece of "news" by several follow-up emails saying, "Hi, just checking in, did you get my really important news?" and you can kind of start to figure out how the love-hate relationship between journalists and public relations people got started.

To compound the problem, too many students are graduating with degrees in Public Relations, and start working for their first employer with the horrible assumption that "pitch to the masses, follow up, follow up, follow up" is the best, most effective way to do PR. And they're wrong.

Nowadays, more reporters are turning away blind pitches within four seconds of receiving the email. The subject line will determine whether an email gets opened, and the opening line determines whether the email gets read. This isn't a steadfast rule to which every reporter adheres, but I can tell you, more and more reporters simply don't want to waste their time reading pitches that continue to be off target, not what they cover, or simply put, bad.