

# Behind the Headlines with Marian Salzman

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This past January, Marian Salzman, CEO of Havas PR North America, published her latest book, *Agile PR*. The book gives insight into how to craft expert messages for a hyper-connected, always-on world. Salzman and her team at Havas PR give a variety of insights including how to master the brand narrative, how to craft a story, and how to make a client's brand **the** story. While PR has always been a challenging and evolving field, the media landscape today makes it necessary to stay agile and attentive.

This week, I got to speak with Salzman about combining a love for words with a love for impact measurement, a foolproof way to approach strategic communication, and her secrets to media relations success throughout her career.

## How did you get your start in PR/ Communications?

I was part of an entrepreneurial magazine startup — I took a year away from my graduate program in sociology at Harvard to join friends — and fell equally in love with the editorial and marketing sides of the business. Then I wrote a book on first jobs to avoid having to have one, and then began writing features for magazines. I stumbled into a media relations role in a financial PR agency and knew instantly I liked life in, and around, media. This was in the days of fax machines and pitches dropped into the mail, of journalist lunches and genuine relationships between PR and writer, so it was a good time to learn — even though everything I mastered in the late 1980s is completely obsolete. I liken it to being a veterinarian specializing in dinosaurs.

## The communication and PR industry is constantly evolving. How can brands keep up?

We all need to treat our work lives (our personal lives, too) like an extended graduate education. I have never met a seminar I didn't want to cherry-pick—i.e., maybe not do all the heavy reading but definitely willing to hunker in and keep learning. The basic rules of transparency, accuracy and timeliness are constants, but digital and amplification have changed everything. Today, it's about knowing which measures matter most in terms of KPIs and ROI. So, 30 years later I am combining my love of the words with my love of the count. Who knew? Maybe it's proof of that career adage about finding something you love; in my case it seems to be about surfing the smart waves.

## What are the keys to maintaining a positive brand reputation?

The keys to maintaining a positive brand reputation are the same as they've always been: do your homework, know the truth, monitor the moment, understand the key influences, use influence smartly and fairly, and never disconnect. It sounds exhausting — and it can be. Or think of it as living agile for work — it's about knowing the problem, identifying and constantly modifying the solution, staying on the game at all times (24/7, and 365 is the now), and using all the tools and tactics that have emerged to make us faster, slicker, and more thorough. Also, never forget how to apologize, course correct and revise. Reputation management is a fabulous exercise in brand managing in permanent beta, constantly revising and tweaking, whether it's for a person, issue, product or problem.

## Digital has transformed the way we communicate. What opportunities does digital present for PR? Is there a downside?

Digital just is. The idea of discussing the dial tone in the 1990s is about as relevant as worrying about digital today ... we are all working in real time/fast fail/constant improvement/etc. Digital means your test for publicizing, promoting and influencing is turbocharged with constant connectivity and the endless trialogue of the story – the comments and the comments on the comments. Another wrinkle –energizing and exciting but also scary – is that you can't control your environment; a story keeps being revised with individual inputs, some true, some false, some smart, some silly, some even dangerous. So reputation management becomes about brand and idea stewardship versus command and control. In this day and age, it's about agile influence, knowing where you want to drive a story, and using all the smart stuff available to manage that influence. Always-on is the new first advantage. Remember, in today's world, the story never sleeps.

## What are some of the key components of a successful strategic communication strategy?

We have a new approach we call FEPAM: Familiarize, Engage, Produce, Amplify, Measure – and constant improvement is necessary (we are measuring to make it better not just for the sake of KPIs, but those matter, too). Today's PR agencies are not just press-release-creation machines – in fact, conventional releases are very last year (or two). Instead, we are architects and general contractors creating perfect tiny homes (aka small, efficient programs) that ladder together into perfect planned communities.

## It is increasingly important to strategically utilize paid, owned, and earned media. How do you leverage each differently and what advice do you have for approaching these different types of media?

Paid, owned and earned are now your basic team – you want each one to enhance the other – and Amplify is what makes Familiarize and Engage sing collaboratively.

## What is your secret to media relations success?

Craft the news, be the news, know the news. It all sounds obvious, and yet the big opportunity is to think like a news owner and write like a Pulitzer Prize winner and curate visuals remembering the adage “a picture is worth 1,000 words.” In today's world, it is also about knowing how to craft the perfect email headline or 140-character pitch for text messaging and Twitter.

## With so much content saturating the marketplace, how can you ensure your messaging resonates?

For every successful campaign, such as “climate change” versus “global warming” (a great United Nations Foundation case of ours where we worked with influencers to evolve the language around climate), or for every #GivingTuesday and HeForShe (two other UNF movements we've waged successful campaigns around), we have had a more traditional campaign that generates results but doesn't necessarily sizzle among the target audiences. The biggest difference is the creative process we undertake and the client's level of fearlessness; are they prepared for the 80/20– which equals superb results, whereby 80 percent favor you and 20 percent still behave disrespectfully? Does the client have the thick skin they need to have a big winner?

## Rapid Fire Round:

1. **If I could master one skill I do not currently have, it would be...** Spanish; I would love to be fluent.
2. **My favorite electronic device is....** my iPhone, followed by our burglar alarm in Tucson.
3. **My ideal day off would include...** fishing in a clean lake and swimming with my golden retrievers.
4. **My spirit animal is....** a panther.
5. **If I could join any music group, it would be...** the Rolling Stones, as a groupie (only circa 1990).
6. **If I could bring one fictional character to life, it would be** Harriet the Spy **because** we all need that optimism and innocence.

**Tags:** PR, behind the headlines, Marian Salzman