Entertainment Public Relations and Celebrity Representations

Public relations in the arts and entertainment industry encompass a large array of specializations – from museums to television and film, from theater to the music industry. Each of these is unique in its characterization and job descriptions. Arts and entertainment public relations is a high energy and exciting field. Part of the reason for this is the one thing that all of these specializations have in common: celebrities. This paper will discuss arts and entertainment public relations in a general form and will focus more specifically on the representations of these celebrity figures who are such a large part of a publicist’s job. While celebrity public relations may often be portrayed as a glamorous profession, this paper will demonstrate all of the hard work, skills, and patience that go into creating these celebrities’ images. Lastly, it will look at the question of whether or not this is a field that one worth pursuing.

Arts and entertainment public relations developed as the entertainment industry developed itself. As movies were produced, music recorded, and celebrities made, they all needed to be branded. P.T. Barnum could perhaps be seen as one of the earliest public relations practitioners in the entertainment industry. He can also be noted for having given the profession a notably bad “rap” for his extreme exaggeration and hype for his shows (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 39-40). Early on, public relations in the entertainment industry mainly consisted of posters displaying events and people hearing about them via word-of-mouth. Later, writing news releases for shows and delivering them to the press grew to be a huge role. For this reason, early public relations professionals were known as press agents, due to the fact that they dealt most inherently with the press (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). One of the major jobs of a public relations practitioner in the entertainment industry is to let the public know that “the
show’s on the road,” and without today’s modern technology like the Internet and social media, getting in the newspapers was the primary way to do it. Around the 1830s, with the development of the Penny Press and “the availability of free space for news… the [press agent] could reach the huge new audience without paying for the opportunity” (Berger, 2001).

Some of the most notable public relations practitioners to set the stage for the world of public relations include Ivy Lee for his work with the Rockefellers, Edward Bernays for his implementation of research and scientific persuasion, and Arthur Page for his principles of ethics and for getting public relations a “seat at the table” at AT&T (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 45-49). Although their work was not specific to arts and entertainment public relations, it is relevant to all specializations within the field because of the practices and tactics that they revolutionized.

One man whose contributions often go overlooked, and perhaps whose contributions are more relevant to the entertainment and celebrity division of public relations, is John M. Burke for his celebrity brand management of Buffalo Bill (Berger, 2001).

The case of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* brand creation is a very interesting one to look at from a public relations point of view. “Buffalo Bill” was in fact a real person – not just a character – whose real name was William F. Cody. He got the nickname “Buffalo Bill” by hunting buffaloes for the army to eat as soldiers moved into unsettled territory. The first key to *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* becoming an entertainment and celebrity brand was Ned Buntline. Buntline was a freelance writer who started writing “newspaper and magazine articles about Buffalo Bill.” He also wrote dime novels about the soon-to-become celebrity, “one of the most popular forms of reading entertainment in the nation.” Buntline eventually wrote a play on the character, convincing Cody to play himself in his own story. The celebrity was born (Berger, 2001).

The second key to Buffalo Bill’s celebrity brand success was John M. Burke, “an experienced New York-based theatre press agent and actor.” Burke took Cody’s celebrity to new heights. He introduced him to the urban press and turned him into a “national and international
hero.” Burke turned *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* into a big time show through a strategic business plan that included hiring staff and authentic characters, rewriting scripts for larger audiences, creating bigger and better stunts, and finding an investor to put money towards the show as well as the advertising and public relations for it. With a plan in place, Cody’s “Buffalo Bill” celebrity skyrocketed (Berger, 2001).

Let’s take a little closer look at just how Burke branded “Buffalo Bill”. Burke was highly enthusiastic, and knew the importance of manners and public opinion. He served as Cody’s “chief public relations counselor, marketing communications coordinator, and talent scout.” His promotional ideas were largely staged special events and stunts. He wanted things that would generate a lot of publicity. He even dealt with his client’s drinking problem – something that so many publicists have to do nowadays – in the public eye by telling the public that Cody was limited to “four glasses of straight whiskey a day,” although he never mentioned how large. He created programs for the show that were often used in the newspaper articles. He identified “target publics” who would have an interest in the “wild west”. Burke, much like P.T. Barnum, also used hype in the form of parades to advertise. He even signed Sitting Bull to the show for a period of time. Burke was a quintessential publicist of his time, excelling in “media relations and publicity, lining up critical publics and their influencers, special events management, and celebrity image management,” and this was in the 1800’s. If not for him, “Buffalo Bill” would not have been branded as successfully as he was, and certainly wouldn’t have become the celebrity that he did. Burke shows the success that can be made with the right public relations strategy in the entertainment and celebrity world (Berger, 2001).

Public relations professionals in the entertainment industry and who represent celebrities were, and still are, often referred to as publicists. This is due to the fact that the practitioner’s “primary responsibility is getting publicity in the media for his or her organizations and individual clients” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). “When most people think of publicists, they picture someone like Vincent Chase's fast-talking, cell phone-addicted,
workaholic publicist, Shauna Roberts… on HBO’s ‘Entourage,’” states Aly Weisman in her article in *Business Insider*. While most of these characteristics are true of most publicists in the business, “[they] are an integral part of the showbiz machine… whether they’re crafting and actor’s image, babysitting a hard-partying starlet, fielding phone calls from the press, or helming a multi-million dollar movie campaign” (Weisman, 2012). Though it is popular opinion to imagine the glamour and riches that come with working with celebrities, “few… understand the rigors or realities of the entertainment… industries” (Brown, 2012). Building and maintaining the image of a celebrity client isn’t always that easy, and modern communications and technologies have only made it more complicated.

Stephen Cave, who has reviewed many books about fame and celebrity, states: “The fame trade has radically changed. The rise of instant communications, digital media, and mass literacy has all fueled the market for stars. Dedicated TV channels, websites, and magazines… have exponentially increased the speed and volume of celebrity gossip…” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). Such technologies, including the advent of social media and the Internet, make celebrity public relations today much different than in the age of “Buffalo Bill.”

Publicists today do largely the same tasks as any other public relations practitioner. A lot of work consists of writing news releases, associating their celebrity with a corporate brand or philanthropic cause, organizing special events for the promotion of a star client, and crisis management. As Howard Bragman writes: “A good PR person monitors the relationship between perception and reality and keeps things in check” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). Publicists are constantly on the move with delivering “news” to the media while at the same time strategically scheduling personal appearances “on talk shows and in public venues.” The plan is to time such appearances and hype to provide the steady “drip, drip, drip” that is key to keep the celebrity in the public eye (Tilson, 2003).

However, there are times in which stars make it into the media in ways that publicists wish they hadn’t. This is where crisis management comes in. In a way, publicists become the
“handlers” of their star clients, and this in itself, takes a great deal of patience quick problem solving (Tilson, 2003). A couple of examples of celebrity publicity gone awry include Mel Gibson for his drunk driving incident and his anti-Semitic comments, as well as his over-the-phone tirades and “alleged physical abuse of his former wife in 2010,” and Lindsay Lohan with her alcohol problems and constant in-and-out of rehab news (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). Social media certainly doesn’t make this monitoring and repairing client’s images any less complicated. Social media allows for things to spread across the web like wildfire, and the use of social media by celebrities creates an enormous following and has enormous effects on these followers.

Social media communication lends the idea that the contact is more authentic and reciprocal. It allows people to “form emotional connections with celebrities,” whether the social media messages are actually crafted by the stars without preparation or are designed by a public relations staff. Moreover, with no “gatekeepers” to elicit whether or not an ordinary person can respond to a message, social media creates the “illusion of ‘direct’ communication” (Lee & Jang, 2013). It’s safe to say that most people take posts from celebrities rather seriously. Not to say that celebrities don’t craft their own tweets and Facebook statuses, because some of them do. The issue that sometimes arises with this, though, is once it’s out on the Internet it can’t be taken back. If a celebrity tweets something about another celebrity during an awards show or other event and regrets it later, well that’s just too bad. Yes, it can be deleted, but the fact is that people still saw it. When damage such as this is done, it goes viral, and it’s up to the public relations professionals to repair it. However, social media can be effectively used as a tool for this repair as well, such as a tweeted public apology, but image repair takes time and rebuilding.

One of the main differences between celebrity public relations and other types of public relations is how they build a reputation. Yes, public relations in all specializations is generally used to help shape and publicize an image, but a “personality campaign” is a little different than an “organizational campaign.” A personality campaign has its own unique set of steps to promote
an up-and-coming star. The first step is to interview the client. The publicist’s job is to draw out tiny, and what may seem insignificant, details about the rising star and “develop these facts as story angles” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). The next step is to create a biography. They must then assemble a media kit, which includes this biography, pictures, and some video clips that can be released to the media. After this the publicist must plan a marketing strategy. Just like any other marketing strategy, the publicist must determine whether he/she is marketing the client him/herself, or if he/she is marketing the client’s product, such as a movie. The publicist also has to identify the key audiences in which they will be marketing to. Finally, the publicist conducts the campaign. “In most cases, the best course is to schedule the client on multiple media simultaneously” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479). The publicist should do this via news releases, photographs and media kits, public appearances on talk shows and with commercial organizations, and social media outlets. Another tactic that is sometimes used is awards. The publicist should nominate the client for any appropriate awards the he/she sees come up in the news, or perhaps propose a new award to an organization, “which then conveniently declares the practitioner’s client the first recipient” (Cameron & Wilcox, 2012, pg. 471-479).

Representing celebrities isn’t all fun and games, as much of the media often portrays. It takes a specially developed skill set, which often includes a public relations or marketing degree (“Celebrity Publicist: Salary and Career Facts”). As with many other public relations specializations, celebrity public relations requires extreme attention to detail, an understanding of budgets and staying within them, and a pride in one’s own work. Another thing that celebrity public relations practitioners need to keep in mind is that they are never off duty. Something can go wrong at any moment and time of the day or night, and they have to be ready for it. They also cannot just sit back and enjoy the events they are throwing. Representing a celebrity requires problem solving and critical thinking skills, organization, patience, stamina, and the ability to perform seemingly repetitive and boring tasks, such as monitoring news stories and social media,
making hundreds of phone calls, and booking hotels and rental cars, with a sense of enthusiasm and importance (Brown, 2012).

Working in the entertainment and celebrity industry, a publicist will be in a fast-paced and high-energy work environment. As previously stated, a publicist is never off duty. He/she may have to attend promotional and public events other than just ones he/she has planned, such as “red carpet events or photo shoots.” The ability to work well under pressure is nearly a requirement, since there are constantly deadlines to meet and the need to “generate profitable opportunities for clients” (“Celebrity Publicist: Salary and Career Facts”).

Public relations in general is a fast-growing field. The arts and entertainment specialization is no exception. With a median salary averaging around $90,000 a year, along with benefits such as a medical and dental plan, a 401K, and personal days including maternity/paternity leave, it has a pretty good outlook for upcoming professionals in the field. According to PR Week, the 2012 report states that only 15% of practitioners had changed employers in the past year, and of that 15% only 33% were due to layoffs. The rest were of their own accord (Bloom & Gross, 2012). Entertainment is a booming industry, and celebrities aren’t necessarily getting more responsible on their own. Public relations professionals will always be required to help these celebrities keep their reputations up to par.

After all of this information, the underlying question is: to be a publicist, or not to be a publicist? Let’s review. Being an entertainment or celebrity publicist has its advantages. A publicist is working with and advising the stars, and while public relations is first and foremost behind the scenes, there is still an invigorating and glamorous sensation about it. It is set in a fast-paced and high-energy environment that keeps publicists constantly on the move and rarely bored. Plus, the salary and benefits seem on the higher end of the public relations spectrum. However, there are disadvantages, too. Managing a celebrity’s reputation is a patience trying and never ending job. A publicist is always on call. He/she needs to be able to work under high-
pressure situations to find a solution without the blink of an eye. Timing is everything. He/she also must be prepared to have to do menial work as well as planning extravagant events.

Personally, I can’t say being a publicist is a job that I would search for, but it is something that I think would be interesting to experience. Such a fast-paced environment I think might be – yes stressful – but also fun to work in. However, the idea of always being on duty isn’t necessarily an appealing one, and I certainly wouldn’t want to have to deal with celebrities who don’t think before they act in the public eye.
References


