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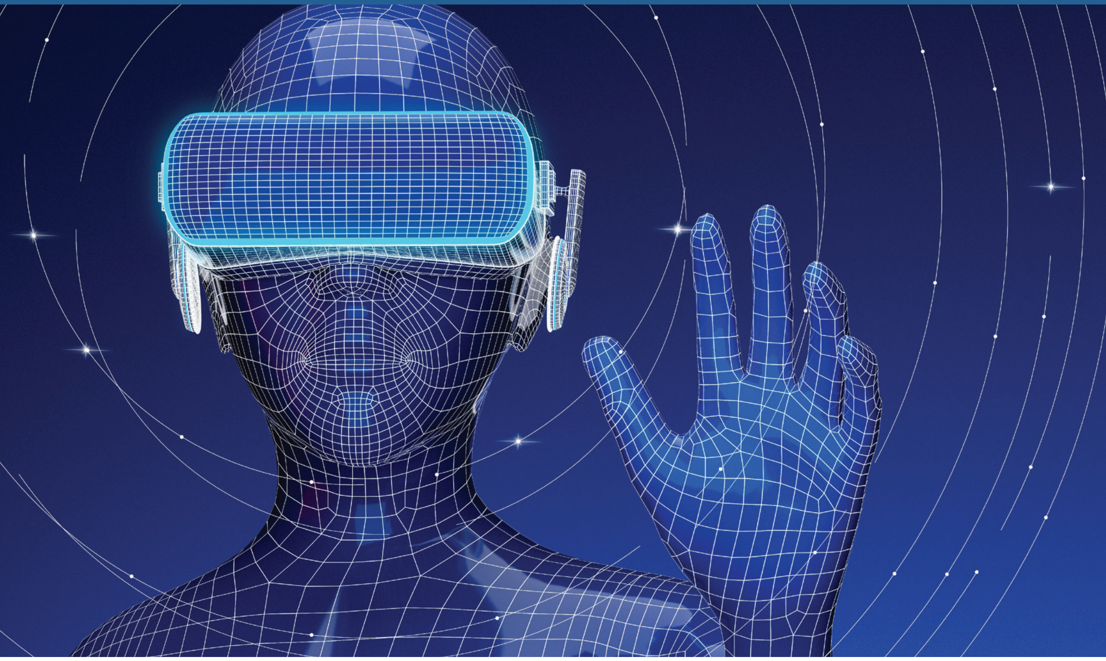
INSIDE THIS ISSUE



METAVERSE

The Metaverse isn't a Certainty, but Certainly PR Pros Should Explore It

We received an email with this subject line: "Marketing EXPERT Says The Time is NOW to Invest in METAVERSE Marketing" (capitalizations are the writer's).

"The metaverse will **absolutely** be the next frontier for advertising and e-commerce (our emphases throughout). The question **is not if, but when** people will adopt it. Larger companies **should inves**t in creating virtual experiences in the metaverse **today**, so that they can be first to market when the technology is more widely adopted."

The email is typical of the absolutism and hubbub associated with the metaverse. But this email writer is not alone. For example, **Gartner** believes "the metaverse will impact every business that consumers interact with every day." Spending on VR and AR, two of the metaverse's major technologies, is estimated to jump from $12 billion in 2020 to $72.8 billion in 2024.

METAVERSE VERSUS META

True, Mark Zuckerberg is bullish on the metaverse, has renamed Facebook **Meta** and claims it's now "a metaverse company."

On the other hand, Zuckerberg also said recently it will be at least 15 years before the metaverse is fully realized. At the moment, Reality Labs, Meta's metaverse-building unit, is bleeding billions of dollars (see table).

Accordingly, the latest plans call for a slowing of Meta's metaverse activities in favor of concentrating on immediate issues. A 40 percent decline in your share price since 2022's start can make you think of today rather than 15 years ahead. More than that, early adopters seem excited about the metaverse, but few others are, surveys show.

Of course, Meta's not alone in slowing its metaverse thrust. The tech sector has taken a bath so far in 2022. And considering the tightening capital markets and a possible recession, the likelihood companies will grow their metaverse investments significantly seems iffy, says Kevin Martin, a director at **Bospar**. "When capital gets tight, obviously, the metaverse and NFT's and other futuristic ideas are… going on the back burner…because it is well down the road."

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Metaverse Spending and Ups & Downs

$800 billion:	Revenue target for metaverse activity by 2024
$10.2 billion:	Amount that Reality Labs, Facebook-Meta's metaverse division, lost in 2021
67%:	Marketers who plan to invest at least 25% of their budget into metaverse tactics in the next 12 months
56%:	Of millennials who say they're interested in using the metaverse
36%:	US adults who say they are interested in the metaverse
30%:	Of the world's companies will have metaverse-ready products and services by 2026
27%:	People who believe metaverse shopping will be the same as in the physical world
25%:	People who will spend at least 1 hour/day in the metaverse by 2026
24%:	Consumers who believe they'll use the metaverse in the year ahead (39% for AR/VR, 17% for NFTs)

Sources: Meta, Gartner, Morning Consult, ProductsUp, Sprout Social Annual Index 2022

PONZI SCHEME?

Similarly, Martin acknowledges there are many critics who consider the metaverse, particularly the crypto portion of it, "a huge rug-pull or Ponzi scheme."

On the other hand, serial entrepreneur and marketer Eric Dahan, CEO, **Open Influence**, sees the commerce portion of the metaverse as a near certainty. "Once there's enough adoption" of VR, which will emanate from gamers, "the commerce [portion of the metaverse] is going to sort of flow."

With some exceptions, like users outfitting their avatars with expensive status symbols–we've already seen a digital **Gucci** handbag sell for $4,000, more than the physical bag–he believes the metaverse commerce experience will resemble online shopping. He concedes, "there's a lot we need to figure out" before virtual shopping gets big. For example, will we all shop in an Amazon virtual space or will it be tailored to you alone? Will every piece of clothing have a virtual model or just some of them?

But it's almost immaterial whether or not the metaverse eventually succeeds. As strategists, it behooves communicators to become familiar with it regardless.

For PRNEWS readers who already are communicating in the metaverse, the article should confirm your activities.

LOOKING AHEAD

Yet its main target are PR pros awash in daily communication issues and who've seen words like *metaverse, Web3, NFT, blockchain and crypto, Roblox and Nvidia*, but haven't explored them deeply.

Inevitably the day will come when one's boss–perhaps resulting from her supervisor's prompting–will approach you and ask a variation on: *What's the Communication team doing about the metaverse? Do we have any content out there yet? If not, when will we? My kid's always talking about Decentraland. Shouldn't we be there?*

Getting you ready for these questions is this article's purpose.

First, take a breath. There's little agreement on what the metaverse is or even a definition of it. Yet, in simple terms the metaverse is a parallel venue to the physical world. Using avatars, you can exist in this world digitally. Already, people have played video games (the biggest draw so far), attended conferences and entertainment events, such as concerts, taken tours, shopped in virtual malls and gathered to socialize.

[**Note**: Readers can familiarize themselves with metaverse terms and AP style here.]

Entering the Metaverse

1. Even though the metaverse is huge, start small, create a learning agenda, including reading and talking to tech experts
2. Don't be overwhelmed, few know as much about the metaverse as they think they do
3. Begin sharing your findings with the C-suite, include spending data
4. Survey your target audience to find out if some of them are in the metaverse now
5. If so, find the top 3 things they're engaging with: games, currency, virtual experiences?
6. Consider whether you want to go it alone or with a partner and if it's a 1-off or long-term project

Source: PRNEWS reporting

To continue this story, please click here.

Confectioners Association's Successfully Sweet Pitch During Pandemic

[**Editor's Note**: With the school year ending, it makes sense that June is National Candy Month, bridging the candy gap between Easter and Halloween. Yet the candy business is much more than child's play. Indeed, during our Q&A with Carly Schildhaus, senior manager of public affairs, **National Confectioners Association** (NCA), she emphasized the group's data-driven approach to communication. In addition, while NCA's 25th annual Snacks & Sweets Expo, held late last month in Chicago, featured 4.5 acres of candy, she touts the business its 700 exhibitors and 16,000 attendees did. Not to worry, she spilled the candy in response to our final question, as you will see below.

However, before that she discusses how NCA's media relations' pros took an offbeat pitching path during the pandemic. While there was a plethora of stories about the awful situation, NCA pitched a slightly upbeat story. It centered on how locked-down Americans embraced chocolate and candy, easing some of their anxiety.

On the other hand, the candy industry, like many others, faced pandemic hurdles. Fortunately, media relations intervened, helping save Halloween 2020 from cancellation.

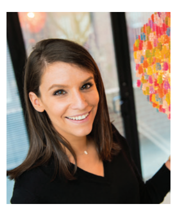
Her responses were lightly edited for space and clarity.]

US Confectionery Sales and Habits at a Glance

$45 billion:	Estimated annual sales of candy and chocolate by 2026
$37 billion:	Annual retail sales of the US confectionery industry (2021), up 11% vs 2020
$21 billion:	2021 US sales of chocolate
$13 billion:	2021 US sales of non-chocolate candy
83%:	Percentage of Americans who "sometimes or always include chocolate and candy in their travels"
76%:	Percentage of Americans who plan to go camping and will bring candy
71%:	Percentage of American consumers who "mostly purchase chocolate and candy" at a grocery store
63%:	Percentage of beachgoers in the US who will bring candy with them
58,000:	Number of workers in the US candy industry
1,600:	Number of candy manufacturing facilities in all 50 US states
11:	Number of related American jobs that 1 US confectionery job creates

Source: National Confectioners Association

PRNEWS: Unlike many other industries that experienced decline during the pandemic, chocolate and some other candy categories saw tremendous sales growth. Did that growth in the midst of decline elsewhere change your pitching tactics?



Carly Schildhaus
Senior Manager, Public Affairs, *National Confectioners Association*

Carly Schildhaus: Yes. The resilience of the chocolate and candy category during the pandemic was precisely why it was such an appealing story for media outlets, especially in the context of the environment we've been in for more than two years.

Chocolate and candy are, and remain, an affordable treat, with options for every taste preference, every budget and every occasion. In a similar way to how chocolate and candy can lift your spirits and brighten your mood, a news story covering a candy moment or the confectionery industry can lift viewership and increase engagement for any newscast.

PRNEWS: Tell us about a victory you've had in the communication space?

Schildhaus: During the 2020 Halloween season, our industry faced a unique challenge. People were questioning whether we would be able to celebrate Halloween, which extended beyond individuals making choices for their families and into public officials making declarations.

We worked to share the message that Halloween could be celebrated safely and creatively–and in most cases, without sacrificing longstanding traditions.

PRNEWS: What did you do?

Schildhaus: Our work included an extensive media-pitching effort that spanned the country, rapid response on social media, engagement of thought leaders in a range of influence spheres, development of external resources and much more. Soon enough, the conversation shifted from if we could celebrate Halloween to how we could celebrate Halloween.

PRNEWS: What's something that you do as a communicator for NCA that might surprise our readers?

Schildhaus: We take a data-driven approach to all of our communication, and activate integrated 360-degree campaigns at key candy moments–we actually call this strategic enabler the Candy360 model of communication.

To continue this story, please click here.

NICOLE SCHUMAN, SENIOR EDITOR, PRNEWS

Audience Listening Taps Demand for Donut-Scented Makeup and Cheetos-Safe Homes

Some of the greatest partnerships are surprises. It's not always about peanut butter and jelly—just ask Martha Stewart and Snoop Dogg.

However, normally there's more that goes into an unlikely marketing partnership than one might expect. The best ones generate buzz, may promote innovation and even spur sales. In some unlikely collaborations, each partner's reach expands as the promotion touches previously untapped audiences.

Take the e.l.f. Cosmetics and Dunkin', formerly Dunkin' Donuts, collaboration. Coffee and makeup? Well, a limited edition, six-piece makeup collection created to look, feel and smell like a Dunkin' experience sold out in 10 minutes.

FINDING INSPIRATION THROUGH A PLATFORM

However random e.l.f. and Dunkin' appears, it was actually data-informed. Indeed, the e.l.f./Dunkin' promotion materialized from a noticeable spark on social. "What worked for e.l.f. was tapping into their community to see what resonated and where it originated," says Liza Suloti, co-founder and chief communications officer at **We Are Shadow**, which worked on the unlikely partnership.

During e.l.f.'s reality show, "Eyes.Lips.Famous," on **TikTok**, audience members were challenged to submit a Dunkin' makeup look. It was a hit. As a result, "[e.l.f.] knew that there was something to lean into," Suloti says.

In addition to the odd pairing of coffee and donuts with makeup, the numbers cast doubt on the pairing. Dunkin' boasts 3.1 million TikTok followers, e.l.f. has just 46,300 followers. However, each saw an opportunity to reach new communities.

e.l.f. partnered with beauty influencer Mikayla Nogueira (12.4 million TikTok followers) as the official e.l.f. X Dunkin' ambassador. Nogueira hosted a TikTok live shopping event on her channel, created a TikTok video, static posts for Instagram and YouTube content for e.l.f.'s channel.

REACHING CURRENT CUSTOMERS

While reaching new audiences is a benefit of unusual partnerships, in some cases, loyal followers of brands expect unusual campaigns.

For example, **Cheetos**' fanbase thrives on fun and creativity, demanding exciting marketing. Followers look forward to Cheetos' next big thing, says Jessica Spaulding, senior director of marketing, **Frito-Lay North America**.

"Whether it's a fashion collab, a makeup line or an innovative tech experience, these types of partnerships allow us to activate in different industries while creating new fans along the way," Spaulding says.

But when thinking about fashion or makeup AND Cheetos…you may wonder: How can we grab a t-shirt or apply lip gloss with all that cheesy orange powder, aka Cheetle, on your hands?

Enter a hands-free solution. In collaboration with **Amazon**, Cheetos created a Hands-Free House. Unveiled at SXSW 2022, its goal was showing fans how they could live their best hands-free life.

As such, the House was completely Cheetle-on-the-fingers friendly. It included tech-enabled entry, smudge-free remote controls and voice-activated appliances, courtesy of Amazon's Alexa devices. Every room was designed to showcase technology that can power activities normally requiring hands.

And for those who didn't attend SXSW, Cheetos offered a digital version of the House.

Similar to e.l.f.'s collaboration, Cheetos' audience inspired the unusual tie with Amazon. "They rock Cheetle on their fingertips as a badge of savory honor," Spaulding says.

In addition to delighting Cheetos' consumers, the activation had an added bonus. It put Cheetos on the radar of tech and innovation-forward media, who normally don't report about the crunchy snack.

LEANING INTO TRUST

And while off-the-cuff partnerships can be buzz-worthy, the examples presented above were intentional and illustrate brands treading carefully. Spaulding says "it's easy to fall into the trap of becoming a stunt. [It's important to] find synergies between both partners to create something longer lasting." Spaulding encourages those involved to confirm they have a matching purpose and goals for not only the campaign, but their overall product.

Making sure you start with similar beliefs can expand on successes and ideas for the future, as Cheetos discovered through their partnership with Amazon.

"The Hands-Free House [brought] together hands-free technology and innovation, culture and food," Spaulding says.

To continue this story, please click here.

BY STEPHEN PAYNE, VP, PUBLIC AFFAIRS & PRIVACY, FELD ENTERTAINMENT

Hurry Up and Wait: Data Privacy for the Communication Professional

The pace of change for privacy regulations shows no signs of slowing in 2022 or in the years ahead. The patchwork of state-level laws in the US will present a daunting compliance challenge for communication professionals, not only for corporate communicators but PR pros in firms, those they represent and their businesses.

Below we offer a brief update on recent changes and what is ahead. As we've said previously, the views here are mine and do not constitute legal advice–which is good, because I'm not a lawyer. We suggest consulting a lawyer about issues you read here.

As many of you will recall from my previous articles (you read them, right?) the US stands nearly alone as a major economy without a universal privacy law. Our approach is sector-specific and based on what type of data and institution uses the data. Think banks and Fair Credit Reporting or doctor's offices and HIPAA.

A SLOW PROCESS IN D.C.

Though the **Federal Trade Commission** (FTC) now has a three-to-two Democrat majority, its attempts at crafting privacy regulations will be time-consuming (we're talking years) and fraught with litigation, though there's some hope. Still, let's not forget privacy. Not to mention privacy is just one of many things on the FTC's regulatory plate.

(Remember that **TikTok** influencer you employed who did not disclose in her video that she was paid? The FTC may want a word with you, but that's for a future article).

To fill the privacy vacuum, states are stepping in, starting with California. Each state has its own differences in scope and rights to make compliance an even bigger headache–and really expensive if done wrong.

Since California enacted the nation's first state-level privacy law, let's start there for updates.

By now all of you should be familiar with the California Consumer Privacy Act, or CCPA (privacy professionals love acronyms). The CCPA gave California residents a variety of rights over their data, including the right to:

- know what data a company holds
- have their data deleted and
- opt-out of the sale of their data, among other things.

CCPA ENDING

CCPA's time is coming to an end with the enactment of the California Privacy Rights Act (CPRA). In November 2020, voters approved the CPRA, which will expand the rights conveyed under CCPA with three very important areas that deserve attention.

First, the new law transfers the enforcement of the law from the state attorney general to the California Privacy Protection Agency. This new agency is charged with writing and implementing regulations for the new law and imposing fines for violations.

The effective date is January 1, 2023, with a 12-month look back. Sadly, the agency has confirmed those very important regulations will not come out until later this year. As a result, companies will have a very short time to become compliant.

Two other areas to consider are the change in the opt-out of sale that will also include the opt-out of sharing data, which has a very broad and inclusive definition.

For instance, if you share data with another company, even if you don't get paid for it, you may have to offer consumers the chance to opt-out of that sharing. Again, regulations on this would be useful sooner rather than later but that is not going to happen.

And finally, the CCPA exempts employer/employee data from the rights granted under the law but that sunsets and CPRA would apply. What does that mean for communicators? Unless the new law is amended, and it may be, if you have employees in California, then they can start asking you questions about what data you have on them, how you use it and where it goes. This could get messy.

MORE STATES IN THE MIX

California is leading the way at the state level, but others are adding to the patchwork of regulations requiring robust compliance planning. Virginia, Utah, Colorado and Connecticut have passed data privacy laws that go into effect within months. They are somewhat similar on data-subject rights, but vary in subtle ways according to:

- who is within scope of the law
- who is exempt and
- how long companies have to respond to requests, etc.

And not to be outdone, as we write, North Carolina is considering a data privacy law, but this one has a twist that should worry all of us: a private right of action for privacy violations not related to data breach.

Earlier this year, Florida considered a similar law and it failed. Let's hope North Carolina is dissuaded. If not, it opens the possibility for a lot of litigation and fines (and plaintiffs' attorney fees).

A USEFUL RESOURCE

Thankfully, there is a resource to help you track these and other forthcoming laws through the **International Association of Privacy Professionals** (IAPP). Tracker (iapp.org).

To continue this story, please click here.

Audiences Respond as Organizations Include Them in CSR Campaigns

The public is tired. It's tired of lip service from public figures, politicians and companies and hearing "thoughts and prayers," or "we promise to…" The public wants change. As PR pros know well, words without action no longer cuts it.

Several organizations are engaging audiences and other stakeholders as they effect social change.

INSPIRATION FROM AN AUDIENCE

Creator of video game League of Legends, **Riot Games** has an audience of 150 million registered players. It saw an opportunity to connect with players as part of a social justice push. Two campaigns, "Dawnbridger Karma" in 2020 and "Sentinels of Light" the following year, helped local communities while players enjoyed a global, in-game challenge.

Rather than pick charities, Riot Games left the decision to players. It communicated the ask through game portals. In the Dawnbridger Karma effort, more than 7 million players logged into League of Legends and voted for one of three local nonprofits in their region. "We've found that players like to have a say as to what cause area or charity their money goes to," says Jeffrey Burrell, Riot Games' head of social impact.

The winning organization in each region received half of a charity prize pool. Other organizations split the remaining 50 percent. Each charity was guaranteed a minimum donation of $10,000.

Players raised more than $6 million in four weeks "to support 46 nonprofit organizations across 15 regions…" Burrell says.

The next year, in the Sentinels of Light campaign, Riot Games encouraged players to join an in-game fundraiser, which netted $5.8 million for local groups.

In addition, more than twice as many players participated in it than in the Dawnbridger Karma campaign.

Maintaining the audience-engagement theme, Sentinels' 15 million players had a choice of activities. They could purchase a charity bundle of a costume, border icons and other items featuring Sentinel Olaf, the bearded berserker in League of Legends. In addition, they could complete in-game challenges in other titles.

But the campaign didn't end with character customization.

"In addition [to the] charity bundle…players had the opportunity to nominate a local nonprofit that was meaningful to them." Nonprofits had a chance to receive a $10,000 grant.

The result was 30 nonprofits across 18 countries receiving grants. Sentinels' success has prompted Riot Games to make charity campaigns an annual event.

"Because we do these in-game fundraisers every year, players know it's coming and they always get excited about it," Burnell says.

POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

Marriott decided it wanted to battle human trafficking, an issue of importance within the lodging industry.

"Marriott has a goal to ensure that 100 percent of on-property associates have completed human trafficking awareness training by 2025," says Garrett Zink, Marriott's senior manager, social impact. Training equips them with "the skills to recognize and respond to potential situations of human trafficking within hotels."

For its original training, in 2016, Marriott collaborated with **ECPAT-USA** and **Polaris**, leading anti-trafficking organizations. The company also talked with other stakeholders, gathering additional facts and information.

"Engaging the community that is affected most by the issue of human trafficking in hotels, including Marriott associates, industry associations and our peers, anti-trafficking organizations and working groups, and survivors, has been essential to this work," Zink says.

In addition, Marriott embraced its competitors. It donated the original training to the hospitality industry. This enabled 670,000 hotel workers to obtain training (as of April 2022).

In 2021, the company decided to bolster its effort. Again, it collaborated with Polaris, which also operates the **National Human Trafficking Hotline** in the U.S. The update expanded the campaign, this time including hotel guests.

Zink says the team developed storyboards and selected scenarios based on calls to the Hotline, as well as consulted with survivors to gauge meaningful input for the training to ensure it is survivor-centered. The **American Hotel & Lodging Association** also came on board.

The group took this information and developed posters for public-facing areas of Marriott hotels—the first time a major hotel company focused on building public awareness about trafficking through signage.

"[We wanted to help] educate guests on common indicators of human trafficking, and how to respond if they suspect a potential instance," Zink says.

Marriott also makes sure the posters are visible during high-traffic times in cities, including metropolises hosting the Super Bowl and World Cup. The posters may also alert possible victims.

"Posting these signs and including these indicators may be a way for a potential victim to realize that someone may be taking advantage of them, and that there is a resource out there that can help when they are ready to leave," he says.

FOLLOWING UP

Involving audiences is just one step. It's important to measure results and garner feedback.

To continue this story, please click here.

Options, Education and Good Delivery: Making the Difficult Media Relations Conversation Easier

You could say there are two kinds of PR pros. Those who respond "yes" whenever the people or company they represent request a press release, thought leadership essay or other form of press coverage.

The other sort of PR pro examines the request for coverage, evaluates where/if it fits in the company's communication strategy and whether or not it will attract media attention. Very carefully, this second type of PR pro offers honest, strategic counsel about the request's viability.

Let's use a request for a press release as an example. When a PR pro receives a release request that contains:

- timely information useful for many readers
- a clear, succinct story and
- relevant data and quotes from top executives
- the PR pro likely will accept that it's got a chance for coverage. She'll probably seek additional clarity, add links for more information and begin writing.

THIS WON'T WORK

The month's *how-to* deals with those times the conscientious PR pro described above is handed a flat pitch. In that case, how does the PR pro tell an executive her proposal lacks a good chance at success?

Everyone knows about letting someone down gently, particularly when the person(s) on the other side of the table pays your salary. But how do you actually let them down gently? Do PR pros have best practices they use during difficult and delicate conversations?

These are far from theoretical questions, we discovered. PR pros had no trouble citing examples of such conversations for this story. "I have them every day," one communicator tells us.

So, let's state the table stakes and expand on them with takeaways and tactics:

The need for a mix of honesty and kindness during these conversations seems clear.

And, if at all possible, hold the conversation in person (if Covid allows) or on the phone if you know the executive well, not via text or email.

"You want to lean on transparency," says Hollie Boodram, PR strategist and manager at **Otter Public Relations**. Adds Jenny Wang, VP, **Clyde Group**, "honesty leads to trust. You're not doing an executive a favor if you don't tell them the truth."

However, mixing honesty and kindness sometimes is the tricky part. "You always want to be kind and respectful," Boodram says, adding quickly, "but brutal honesty can be valuable, because even if [the executive] is a little offended, in that moment they'll appreciate you," Boodram says.

However, Boodram admits appreciation may come later, "when [the executive] realizes you've saved them from [pitching] an article that has no ROI." Adds Wang, "you want to be known as someone who will be straight" with executives.

A key part of delivering a negative media relations message is in the delivery.

All the PR pros we interviewed offered a version of the approach Andy Gilman, founder and president, **CommCore Consulting Group**, uses when discussing media relations issues. "I'm a big believer in positive reinforcement, even when you have to" deliver a message that an executive's idea will garner little press coverage.

Boodram's approach includes asking an executive why she thinks the provided pitch will make a good story. "Go into their background, their childhood even…there's usually a deep-seated reason they think something is news."

This approach shows you're interested in the person's thinking and can soften the conversation's tone. In addition, it provides an opening for the communicator to offer a bit of media relations education.

COME WITH OPTIONS

Another key, the communicators agree, is arriving at such conversations armed with pitch alternatives.

"Avoid the hard 'no'," Wang advises. Instead, "get creative…strategize with [executives] about other ways to obtain coverage." Once you think they've accepted other approaches, "get them excited about these options," she adds.

Boodram terms her own approach "meeting them halfway," or finding parts of an executive's or company's pitch that are useable.

For example, the remit is obtaining media coverage for an executive's award, a brand's redesigned web site or a just-released white paper. These examples elicited varying degrees of groans from our PR pros. An avalanche of recent examples came forth.

"Very few journalists are going to care about [an award announcement], especially if they're at a rival outlet," Wang says. Adds Gilman, an app or new site "is news to you [inside your company], but not to anyone else. There's no hook for it."

NEW PRODUCTS

There are more difficult situations, Gilman and Boodram agree. That's when a company wants coverage of a new app or product. "A story about a new app, unless you're a major company, is too promotional," Gilman says. "There's no useful trend or connection to what's going on in the news."

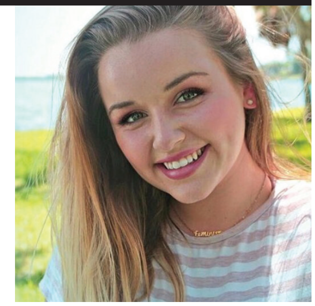
Instead, an approach all our PR pros advocate is finding a trend or another piece of useful news that can carry the company's story with it.

Says Gilman, the "coaching principle here is, 'OK, we have a story that we want to get out.'"

To continue this story, please click here.

KAYLA CASILLAS, MEDIA MANAGER, MUSEUM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

PR Positioned as Advocate for LGBTQ+ Rights and Against Storytelling Ban



Owing to recent political and societal events, communicators have a new perspective as we enter Pride Month 2022. It seems clear the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies face a heavy burden and an uncertain future.

Florida House Bill 1557, or the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill, threatens harm on queer youth. It bans conversation of gender and sexuality in public classrooms. In addition, it likely will increase the anxiety around sexuality and gender in schools, which already is high for LGBTQ+ kids.

In 2015, the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found gay students are at a far greater risk of depression, suicide and substance use. Classrooms are an essential space for growth. “For youth to thrive in schools and communities, they need to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe and supported,” according to the CDC.

Though LGBTQ+-inclusive and gender-affirming children’s books are gaining popularity, Bill 1557 likely will ban having them in schools. In fact, queer children’s books already are among some of the most-banned books in the country. The 2020 Most Challenged Books List (600 titles) notes eight of every 10 of its books share LGBTQ+ themes.

Since 1557 explicitly endangers storytelling and representation, we–communicators–must act.

For PR pros this means crafting public awareness and educational campaigns that advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. 52 years since the first gay rights march, Pride 2022 is an ideal moment to begin as threats increase.

For instance, the recent Supreme Court leak of Roe is concerning in many ways, yet has increased implications for LGBTQ+ people, especially those living in states with strict trigger laws. In 2022, one in ten LGBTQ+ people reported that a healthcare provider refused them treatment. Furthermore, legal principles undergirding the super-precedent may jeopardize queer peoples’ marriage rights.

For a community that faces disproportionate financial hurdles–whether through workplace discrimination or otherwise–the option of medical tourism is not always available. Many times, discriminated groups rely on crowdsourcing and other workarounds to meet basic needs.

Again, PR pros and allies can help. They can advance medical equity for gay and trans women through corporate social advocacy and social media expertise. History is filled with communicators who’ve fought for such rights.

THE WEATHERING

In 1970, transgender activists Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992) and Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002) added new purpose to a budding movement following the 1969 Stonewall riots. The two recognized their community was unrepresented in the first wave of the gay rights fight. As such, they focused on transgender equal rights, founding the **Street Transvestite Activist Revolutionaries** (STAR).

A PR pioneer, Audre Lorde was another queer woman of color whose contributions to activism as an author and poet inspire today’s communicators. Lorde brought attention to the idea of intersectionality in American social movements. Moreover, she spoke about the importance of positionality during her 1979 presentation at the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

> **“What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order for us to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.”**
>
> *—Audre Lorde (1934-1992), American poet, author, activist and PR pioneer.*

Following these innovators, communicators can take several steps to address the current battles facing the LGBTQ+ community.

First, they can advance the concept that it is imperative for gay people to have a seat at the table. LGBTQ+ professionals in the C-suite are only-ies in their organizations and among the few across many industries. Specifically, just four Fortune 500 companies have an “out” LGBTQ+ CEO.

Second, these tables should conduct the research, outreach and reciprocal communication necessary to find how they can effectively help gay rights advocates in their communities. As **BCW**’s Sabrina Browne wrote, “the most impactful campaigns are rooted in long-term allyship.” While each marginalized community faces a unique struggle, communicators dedicated to genuine DE&I efforts are working toward holistic solutions.

Behind the stories we tell as communicators, there are real people with valuable personal insights. This is a field where we are tasked, in different ways, to celebrate humanity and enact change. Let’s try to enact that change from inside-out.

[**Editor’s Note:** Since the **Museum of Public Relations**’ first Pride event, in 2019, there has been a strong focus on continuing assembling a diverse array of PR pros, activists and political leaders to share perspectives. On June 2, 2022, the Museum hosted its fourth annual celebration of the LGBTQ+ community in PR.

Looking toward the future of DE&I for queer PR pros, the event explored urgent issues, offering insight and tactical advice for those ready to raise their voice. See the replay here.] ■

BY DANIEL LEMPERT, VP, COMMUNICATION, RIP MEDICAL DEBT

Storytelling, Data and Personalization Help Debt-Forgiving Group Gain Notice

It's often the case, from startups to nonprofits, that explaining why something is innovative can exhaust a reporter (or potential donor). And that's before you get to the pitch!

In a fast-paced media landscape, making your points quickly is a priority. So, how do PR pros entice potential leads when an issue is complex or technical (OK, read: snooze inducing)? The case of **RIP Medical Debt** is instructive.

THE SET-UP

RIP is a donation-funded nonprofit. It purchases medical debt of patients living at or far below the federal poverty level. The debt is packaged in large portfolios that are purchased for a fraction of their face value.

Once it's made the purchase, RIP does something that sounds incredible: it abolishes the portfolio's individual debts. RIP sends a letter to each person letting the individual know his or her debt, or debts, is gone, at no cost to them.

It's a model that turns the American debt industry on its head. Normally, a debt purchaser will pursue individual debtors. On the other hand, RIP is a counterweight to the American medical system, which too often drops enormous debt on people who can't, and likely never can, pay them.

Most important for RIP's messaging is that its model empowers donors. Since the debt is purchased below face value, one dollar from a donor abolishes $100 worth of medical debt.

THE HURDLE

And yet, to understand what the nonprofit does, one has to dive into the debt ecosystem–which, like healthcare generally, is opaque by design.

In 2014, when RIP was founded, getting donations was a struggle. Medical debt was not a topic *du jour*. Owing to COVID, it's on a few more radar screens now.

Indeed, just this year the White House pledged to tackle medical debt. Even the top three credit agencies promised to erase the majority of negative marks from medical debt on people's credit scores.

Still, medical debt is not a hot issue at many cocktail parties.

In addition, RIP's model was novel. Its two founders were former debt collectors. They lacked the bandwidth to think about branding or coherent messaging. Certainly they knew the issue was important–people shouldn't have their lives ruined because they got sick–but couldn't effectively frame it.

To gain recognition for RIP, its founders wrote a book about their model. They were active on social media. Unfortunately, their efforts at media coverage produced few results.

Eight years later, RIP's abolished nearly $7 billion worth of medical debt for more than 3.5 million people. Below are some lessons learned for contextualizing an innovative organization or company in a crowded space.

TACTICAL LESSONS

Find a hook: Lean into the company's core proposition. Consider what excites you about the company? That's the hook.

Is the company solving the future of food or concentrating on climate change? Providing financial literacy to underserved groups? Exposing urban kids to the arts? Once you think you've found the hook, employ it until it sticks.

As noted previously, RIP's hook is its model. A small donation can abolish a mountain of face-value debt. $10 donated erases $1,000 of a person's medical debt. This hook became the pillar of RIP's messaging.

Get out the message wide: In those early, lean days, RIP's founders wrote a book, "The Patient, The Doctor and the Bill Collector." They sent free copies to everyone in their orbit, including legislators on Capitol Hill. It worked.

A healthcare lawyer who'd received the book heard through the grapevine that "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver," the **HBO** series, was keen to tackle the topic of debt. The show needed someone with knowledge of medical debt. A match was made. The lawyer connected RIP's founders with the HBO series. In addition to running on HBO, the resulting segment about debt was viewed more than 17 million times on **YouTube**. It was kismet for the show and RIP. The lawyer now is a RIP board member.

Use statistics: Data from trusted sources can do a lot of heavy lifting when it comes to contextualizing an issue. You can explain the intricacies of medical debt in the US and why abolishing it is important for days. Yet for the uninitiated, an eye-catching piece of research much more succinctly sets the table. For example:

- The American Journal of Medicine says nearly half of US cancer patients exhaust their entire life savings during their second year of treatment.
- Gallup reports nearly one-third of Americans didn't seek treatment for an ailment during the pandemic because they feared the cost.
- Americans owe at minimum $195 billion of medical debt, despite 90 percent of the population being insured.

Far from being clinical, the right statistics can legitimize your pitch and be emotionally evocative.

Peg your pitch to a trend: During the early days of the pandemic many people saw RIP as a resource. As you can imagine, during this global crisis, the cost of medical treatment was enormous. **The Kaiser Family Foundation** estimated the average COVID treatment bill was $20,000+, after insurance.

To continue this story, please click here.

Engagement with Travel in May Off 38% YOY, But Zoos and Museums Enjoy Growth

Consumer engagement on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **Instagram** with travel-related brands fell 38 percent year-over-year from May 2021 to May 2022, according to data provided by **Shareablee** powered by **Comscore**.

Engagement, or actions, is defined as the sum of likes, shares and comments.

The decline likely is related to the "boom in travel engagement in 2021, when COVID restrictions were lifted in many locations," says Madison Busick, a Comscore analyst.

While Instagram accounted for 53 percent of actions for the sector in May 2022, airlines had a 155 percent growth in Twitter actions year-over-year, which could coincide with customer-service issues and flight delays, adds Busick.

Despite this, just one airline, **Southwest Airlines**, is listed in the top-10 brands (by engagement) on Twitter.

Travel brands include airlines, travel websites and agencies, tourism boards, cruise lines, car rental companies and venues like zoos, museums and theme parks.

FOLLOWERS INCREASE

Despite the decline in engagement, the travel industry saw an increase in followers across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter year-over-year of about 4 percent.

Some of the sub-industries with strong growth were zoos (up 15 percent), hotels & resorts (up 5 percent), and airlines (up 4 percent). ■

TOP US TRAVEL & LEISURE BRANDS ON INSTAGRAM

Based on Total Actions (reactions, comments, and shares) May 2022

Sources:

RANK	PAGE	ACTIONS	CONTENT
1	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	2.8m	66
2	Disney Parks	1.1m	86
3	Universal Orlando Resort	617k	60
4	WDW News Today	563k	83
5	PADI	416k	66
6	Disneyland	408k	11
7	Walt Disney World	372k	10
8	Empire State Building	257k	30
9	MoMA The Museum of Modern Art	245k	24
10	Pure Michigan	194k	27

TOP US TRAVEL & LEISURE BRANDS ON FACEBOOK

Based on Total Actions (reactions, comments, and shares) May 2022

Sources:

RANK	PAGE	ACTIONS	CONTENT
1	Oregon Zoo	795k	21
2	Il mio viaggio a New York	544k	128
3	Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden	528k	68
4	San Antonio Zoo	451k	120
5	Southwest Airlines	338k	28
6	Jack's Flight Club	305k	36
7	WDW News Today	289k	968
8	Big Cat Rescue	288k	248
9	Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum	272k	61
10	Grand Ole Opry	251k	100

TOP US TRAVEL & LEISURE BRANDS ON TWITTER

Based on Total Actions (reactions, comments, and shares) May 2022

Sources:

RANK	PAGE	ACTIONS	CONTENT
1	Empire State Building	290k	141
2	WDW News Today	143k	922
3	Oregon Zoo	88k	21
4	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	71k	120
5	Pro Football Hall of Fame	69k	250
6	Universal Orlando Resort	62k	132
7	Disney Parks	56k	104
8	trivago	46k	11
9	Museum of the Moving Image	45k	114
10	Southwest Airlines	31k	39

Source: Shareablee powered by Comscore, US* Travel Brands, May 2022