

Winning PR Campaigns

Irreverent PR Spins Questionable Product Launch into Media Gold

“You want me to promote *what?*” That’s what **Nancy Tamosaitis** (pron. “tam oh shy tus”) of NY-based **Vorticom Inc.** thought when Patrick Carroll, CEO of Freedom Tobacco, first approached her. “I want you to help me launch my first product — LEGAL (pron. “*lay gahl*”) cigarettes,” he said. “That’s right, cigarettes.” The difficulty of getting earned media coverage for a dangerously unpopular product notwithstanding, Tamosaitis had a few more reasons to be concerned.

“It was the most turbulent period in cigarette-smoking history,” she recalls. “A smoking ban in all New York City clubs and restaurants was set to begin in two months. Sky-high taxes had transformed even the most humble product into a luxury purchase. Requests to ‘bum’ a smoke challenged the pack-owner to ask if the supplicant was ‘cigarette-worthy.’ Chased out of their offices, smokers were communing to inhale beneath watchful gargoyles or adjacent to open trash receptacles. Big tobacco, fearful of losing marketshare to upstarts, rallied against offering product on the Internet. New York became the only U.S. state to criminalize Internet cigarette vendors and ban distribution to New York residents. The only thing needed in this epic melodrama was the launch of a new brand of cigarettes.”

Did you catch the sarcasm in Tamosaitis’ last line? That was exactly the kind of irreverent brilliance that made her perfectly suited for the job — to which *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *Fortune Small Business*, the Associated Press and “60 Minutes” can now all testify. In the end, the story of Legal was reported by those hard-won outlets and many more. In total, Tamosaitis captured 200 million-plus impressions. As if that weren’t enough, the media coverage for Legal resulted in 100 new points of distribution for Freedom Tobacco.

Promoting a controversial product like cigarettes obviously requires superior PR skills and no small amount of finesse — not to mention thick skin. All the same, no matter what or who you represent, there’s a lot we can learn from Tamosaitis’ ability to serve the best interests of her “edgy” client without alienating the media or offending consumers. Withal, she not only maintained her integrity, but also emerged feeling mightily proud of her results.

Beat back controversy with honesty and humor.

“Before I began, I didn’t know where the coverage was going to come from,” Tamosaitis admits. “But then I realized Freedom Tobacco is just a company like any other. They have a right to discuss and promote their product to the media. The toughest part of the assignment was that people who are anti-cigarette are really *anti*-cigarette — they view you as the devil. That made me realize that it was all the more important for us to make our campaign funny. Cigarettes are never going to be healthy. That was obvious, and we admitted it. This was a product for consenting adults. So we tried to take a humorous approach.”

For example, Tamosaitis organized a “Smoking is Legal” party the week before the smoking ban was to take effect in NYC. The press announcement she sent read as follows: “As Public Smoking in New York Counts Down to ‘Speakeasy’ Status, Freedom Tobacco Introduces LEGAL Cigarettes.”

The lesson: “Being funny is always important in PR — even more so when you’re promoting a controversial product. Make yourself laugh,” she recommends. “If you’re not finding something funny about whatever the pitch, you’re in trouble. Obviously not every product is going to be funny, but if there is a way to have fun with your story, use it. If you’re laughing about it, chances are reporters or producers will to. At the end of the day, life is too short not to have fun with what you’re doing.”

Kill two birds with one newsworthy marketing plan.

Another key decision Tamosaitis made on this campaign was to enlist the services of Interference Inc., a highly creative marketing firm. “A lot of marketing is boring — e.g., snow bunnies handing out samples in Times Square,” she says. “Everyone has seen all that stuff. You have to do things that are different and a little bit edgy.”

It was Interference that came up with the clever guerrilla-marketing tactic known as “leaning.” The leaners in this case were nothing more than attractive women hired to smoke Legal cigarettes in trendy New York bars and restaurants. They did not explicitly draw attention to themselves other than to openly smoke the brand — but draw attention they surely did. The leaners concept proved so intriguing that “60 Minutes” included the Legal smokers in a segment on covert marketing.

Tamosaitis also secured a front-page “Marketplace” feature in *The Wall Street Journal* by pitching tobacco reporter Vanessa O’Connell the leaning story. “Once the campaign was in motion, I sent her an email with ‘leaning’ as the news hook,” she recalls. “It was a funny, irreverent story about cute chicks smoking — and we

had pictures.”

The lesson: Work in tandem with your marketing and advertising partners. “It helps to be in brainstorming sessions together so you can see what is going on and be in place to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to an idea. You’ll also be able to know when the marketing strategy has PR potential. With a great tactic like ‘leaners,’ we knew we had something newsworthy. At the same time, [our marketing partners] knew when we were going to press and helped us prepare.”

Tie your product to a cause.

“Since Freedom Tobacco is a privately held, emerging company, we determined it could afford to be bold, innovative and clever in its outbound media communications,” says Tamosaitis. “While Big Tobacco companies remained silent on the issue, Freedom would vocalize their position on current and pending legislation to the media. With that in mind, we created *The Right to Smoke Coalition* (at www.rtsc.org), which attracted over 100,000 digital signatures that were then forwarded to government officials. It also provided a platform for Carroll to speak to smokers’ rights in New York and across the country.”

The lesson: “By tying your product to an issue, you can rally people who are passionate about it to come to the forefront,” she explains. “It helped us meet those who are pro-smoking and wanted to make a difference. In addition, building influence got us more ink. Sure, anyone would love *The New York Times* as her first placement, but it doesn’t happen that way. You have to build influence and have it grow out.”

Take risks — break taboos.

Inspired by the outlaw status of smoking — and spirited by the occasional demonizing of her client — Tamosaitis and Carroll devised two giveaway offers that truly fanned the media flames. One was a complimentary lifetime supply of Legal cigarettes to any celebrity who wanted them. The other was a free supply of cigarettes to foreign embassies that would share their diplomatic immunity and open their doors to the smoking public. You better believe the press got wind of that news.

“It was near the end of our campaign, and I realized I was mad at some of the reactions I had been getting,” Tamosaitis relates. “At the same time, I remembered reading about Britney Spears being tossed out of a bar for smoking. Then all of a sudden a line from the movie ‘Network’ came to me: ‘I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.’ I thought, ‘There have to be celebrities who are tired of being demonized for smoking’ — and so I sent out a query on Profnet to see if any PR pros had celebrity clients looking for a lifetime supply of free cigarettes.”

“I didn’t expect [the query] to get global attention,” she continues. “It turns out a West Coast AP health reporter read it and was so offended that she wrote about it.” That controversial AP feature resulted in a 100-percent spike in sales for Legal. In addition, the embassy offer was covered by *The Financial Times*, *The New York Sun* and Wireless Flash News, whose content often winds up on late-night talk shows.

Lesson One: “Stand out anyway you can without hurting the integrity of the brand,” Tamosaitis suggests. “The leaning idea was covert, and the giveaways were a little taboo because they involved smoking. As such, the Legal story had a lot of drama in it. Reporters remember drama. They get so much thrown at them, PR pros need to include a little drama in their pitches to be different.

Lesson Two: “Don’t be afraid to take chances. This isn’t brain surgery. A lot of PR professionals are too buttoned up. You have to let loose and try things. Not everything is going to work, but when it does — and when your idea is truly unique — it is really very satisfying.”

Influence the influencers.

Whenever a campaign involves a hot-button issue, target those op-ed pages. “I strongly recommend pitching op-eds and offering bylined articles — especially when your client is really passionate about an issue,” Tamosaitis says. “Op-ed placements are easy if you’re taking on a topical issue and have someone with the background to speak to it. As long as the piece is well-crafted and well-written, you’re going to get it placed.”

The lesson: “Op-eds are a great vehicle that I don’t think PR people use enough,” she says. “Then again, not every client thinks that way either. It is a PR pro’s job to bring it up and move the needle.”

WINNER’S PROFILE: For this outstanding campaign, Tamosaitis won a silver medal in the New Product Launch, Consumer category at the 2004 Bulldog Awards for Excellence in Media Relations & Publicity. She would like to acknowledge the following: **Sam Travis Ewen**, President, **Interference** and **Rob Young**, Partner, **Flashpoint Advertising**. “Our campaign was a success due to the collaborative work with the best-of-the-best MARCOM partners,” Tamosaitis says. “In addition, **Patrick Carroll**, CEO of **Freedom Tobacco**, is an irreverent, spirited and extraordinarily creative person who artfully worked with the creative team to produce synergistic results.”