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Title: Beauty Gets A PR Makeover

Public Relations Tactics

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Summary: This article relates one PR Practioner's experience in the field of beauty pageants.

Full Text: NEW YORK – Peering out from the black Ford Explorer, Matthew Rich scans the red carpet for paparazzi. Rich, founder of The Matthew Rich Group/P.l.a.n.e.t. PR, is escorting his client, Lynnette Cole, Miss USA 2000, to the opening of a Chanel boutique in Manhattan’s Soho district this December night.

Rich, seated beside Cole, has already briefed his client on the event during the car ride. “This is an opening for the Chanel store and they’re very happy about it,” says Rich, as the SUV turns a corner. “I called and checked with the store and they’re not expecting a huge crush of people, but they are expecting a lot of media.”

This is fine with Cole, who is photo-op ready. The day before the event, Cole was fitted for a clingy, silver Chanel dress, which remains hidden thus far under a dark, winter coat. The 46-year-old Rich is more subtly attired in a dark suit and tie for the cocktail hour event.

Things seem in control so Rich is off, exiting the car and holding the door open for his client. Once inside the already- packed store, Rich strategically helps Cole out of her coat before a pack of photographers perched by the main entrance. They start snapping away, as Cole smiles and turns this way and that. Meanwhile, Rich is busy handing out specially made cards that feature the correct spelling of Cole’s name, her title and his firm’s contact information.

“I’ve had one made up for all our titleholders,” says Rich, who also represents the winners of the Miss Universe and Miss Teen USA pageants on behalf of the Miss Universe Organization (MUO). “When you go through a press line or photo line quickly, you have to pass them out. The photographers love them.”

Apparently so. Well-known party photographer Patrick McMullan, who has regular columns in *Vanity Fair* and *New York* magazine, effuses about Rich and his card practice. “He’s the best at what he does,” says McMullan.

Later in the evening Cole is captured by McMullan with the likes of rappers Lil’ Kim and Eve, and model and host of MTV’s “House of Style” Molly Sims. Cole is also tapped by the Chanel PR team to be filmed for an in-store promotion.

Rich, meanwhile, continues to scan the crowd for contacts and media who haven’t yet spoken to or photographed Cole. He also does a bit of “bodyguarding” of Cole, politely disengaging some partygoers’ wandering hands.

“Matthew knows everyone. I knew a little bit about PR before, but I didn’t really know how hard they worked,” says Cole. “You have to know the right people. You only have a certain amount of time at events and it can be nerve-racking. Sometimes I think I have the easiest job, because I just walk in and talk to whomever wishes to speak to me.”

While the evening out might seem frivolous, Rich’s and the MUO’s goals are anything but. Rich was hired to help redefine and refine the image of the three titleholders in 1997 after Donald Trump and the CBS Corporation took over ownership of the pageants. His work is part of a larger organizational effort, spearheaded by Maureen Reidy, president of the MUO, to redefine the image of all three pageants. In addition to Rich, the MUO also contracts with Ferencom, which handles media for the pageants and helps drive viewership for the CBS pageant telecasts.

“The girls are hip, young and with it. The company has to catch up to where the titleholders are,” says Rich.

The image of beauty pageants — and beauty pageant contestants — could use updating. Mention the term “beauty pageant” and many people still think of big hair and cheesy production numbers, among other déclassé associations.

But if Rich and the MUO have their way, those impressions will be a thing of the past.

An Oblique Route

Rich came to public relations and owning his own firm through an oblique route. A graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Massachusetts, Rich began his career working in the law department of a prominent bank.

“I didn’t like banking,” says Rich, who quit work for about a year to collect and trade art. In the process, he came to know and befriend Andy Warhol.

“He was a PR and marketing genius, and, after being around him for a few years, I got the PR bug,” Rich explains.

Before founding his own firm in 1991, Rich worked at George Trescher Associates and was a partner at HMI, the late Harvey Mann’s firm.

Operating out of a small office on West 65th Street, with three account execs and a two-person support staff, Rich maintains 16 retainer clients, including fashion and celebrity-oriented accounts.

While his efforts on behalf of Cole, Lara Dutta, the current Miss Universe, and Jillian Parry, current Miss Teen USA, clearly inspire him, Rich says that when he was first approached by the MUO, he wasn’t sure it was for him.

“I don’t know what I’d say my image [of pageants] was. I didn’t think it was for me. We run a pretty strong celebrity-based firm and I didn’t see the fit until I got into a dialogue with them. And not just a fit for me, but a fit for them in terms of the media contacts that I have,” he says.

Rich wasn’t alone in his apprehension. According to Theresa Beyer, vice president of marketing for the MUO: “When Donald Trump first asked [Maureen Reidy] to look into purchasing the MUO, she was appalled at the idea. She reported back to Mr. Trump that the company and its ‘products’ were archaic and objectified women.”

Beyer says Reidy also discovered, upon closer examination, that the company had a confused image. Its brand recognition did not reflect an organization that had, for years, been committed to helping women achieve their personal and professional goals.

Reidy’s first move was to bring the company from Los Angeles to New York, before redefining the MUO to “reflect and respond to the styles, fashion and individuality of women in a modern world,” says Beyer.

So far, so good, it seems.

According to Susie Dicker, public relations coordinator for the MUO, the titleholders have been bumped up from B-list status.

“When I was brought on, I was told there was a difficulty in getting them seen. There was a perception that the titleholder was not a celebrity or A-list person, but in the past two years that has changed. Before, Miss USA would not have had a front-row seat at a fashion show or been invited to the Video Music Awards, where now they are,” says Dicker, who joined the organization in 1999.

The effort also involved bringing more high-end fashion into the mix: say Manolo Blahnik not Payless Shoes. It appears to be working, as the titleholders have been able to “borrow” eveningwear from designers such as Fendi, Versace and Rich’s client Randolph Duke. Under Reidy’s direction, the MUO has aligned the pageants with luxury sponsors, including Maurice Lacroix and Mikimoto Pearls. Reidy also hooked up the pageants with relevant women’s causes, including breast and ovarian cancer.

Says Beyer: “Maureen literally took the organization and our three televised events from taffeta, bouffant hairdos and rehearsed speeches — ‘My one goal would be to save the world from hunger’ — to cutting-edge production, couture fashions, leading designers and top-notch entertainment...from ‘N Sync to Britney Spears.”

Public and media relations have been crucial in communicating the MUO mission, according to Beyer.

“All the work we’ve done to create an organization dedicated to furthering the ideals and goals of women today would remain a corporate mandate without the press and PR,” she says. “They, in addition to our televised special events, are the tools to trumpet our message of redefinition. Media can help us break past stereotypes and help the public, future participants and even sponsors see what we do in a whole new, updated and more realistic light.”

Becoming Sound Bite Ready

Before any of the titleholders work with Rich, they all undergo several days of media training through agencies that specialize in different mediums. They are also briefed on their charities.

While Rich is loath to admit any of the winners need much training, he does say it helps establish some uniformity.

Cole, a college student from Columbia, Tenn., says it helped her when working with the media, particularly in the beginning.

“When you take a life that has been one of a college student and substitute teacher and then you are thrown into these things, the lights, the cameras. They’re asking you all these questions and saying ‘turn here,’ ‘turn there.’ It can get kind of intimidating,” says Cole. “But now it’s kind of routine for me. You get out there and you smile, and you answer the questions you can and you move on.”

Among other things the winners take away from the training is an invaluable lesson in how to say “no comment” without offending or, as Cole describes it, “looking like we’re really hurt.”

How does Cole handle personal questions from reporters that are, perhaps, too personal?

“I just tell them that I don’t feel comfortable talking about that issue. For the most part, they’ve respected that and if they persist further, I just stand my ground and say ‘I really don’t feel comfortable,’” says Cole.

It certainly helped Dutta, who has been linked in the New York tabloids to Derek Jeter, shortstop of the New York Yankees and the 2000 World Series MVP.

When asked about the connection, Dutta says diplomatically, “my life is so crazy. I’m really everywhere at the same time that I don’t have the time to devote to a relationship on a commitment basis. So I have friends and I’m really grateful that I have them. They make my life a lot easier in New York and that’s the truth.”

Rich cheerfully offers the MUO’s official comment on the Jeter question: “Miss Universe has many friends and has made many new friends in New York and Mr. Jeter happens to be one of those new friends.”

Of course, the publicity doesn’t hurt.

On The Night Shift

Rich’s main responsibility is coordinating the titleholders’ social calendars and their charitable endeavors. (Each titleholder has an official pageant charity that they speak and work on behalf of during their year-long reign.) He also, on occasion, handles some of their paid personal appearances, though these are mainly handled in-house by the MUO.

When asked if there were products the titleholders would not endorse, Rich sighs: “Cigarettes are out, unfortunately. I say unfortunately because they are a huge market, but it’s not the right thing.”

On average, Rich escorts the titleholders to events three to four nights a week.

Rarely do the three titleholders attend the same events together, in part because of their hectic schedules. Rich says they do get the three together for certain high-profile events, such as the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Fashion Awards and Billboard Music Awards.

When asked what a typical day is like, Rich laughs.

“I love that question. A typical day is you get up and feed the cats and that’s where it typically ends,” he says. “It just blossoms with what phone calls come in, what brainstorming you do.”

“Typically,” Rich’s days go from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.

“I don’t have a personal life,” says Rich. “This is it. Clients become friends, for better or worse. When you’re a small company, there’s no way around it.”

The daunting hours don’t seem to bother Rich, who cites a strong family work ethic — his father served as Inspector General for the U.S. Air Force — as the source for his hard-working ways.

While Rich often mentions the well-known people he has worked with or has connections to, including the eye, ear and throat specialist he shares with Madonna, the fringe benefits — invites to some of the city’s most desired social events — are his least favorite part of the job.

He says he prefers the strategic aspects of his work, such as placing stories in appropriate media outlets.

To help coordinate PR efforts and strategy, Rich meets with relevant staffers at the MUO and pageant account reps from Ferencom on a weekly basis, as he does with all the clients he represents.

“This is not just willy- nilly,” says Rich. “We take hold of a master planner, a celebrity service, and keep in touch with what’s coming up and strategize.”

Examples of favorable placements include the Tony Awards, the opening of the Hudson Hotel (a trendy hotel in midtown Manhattan) and a dinner given by the editor of Vogue on behalf of an AIDS expert, which Rich says ties in with Miss Universe’s official charitable cause.

“Regular PR Tactics And Strategies”

Part of Rich’s strategy involves aligning the three titleholders with appropriate social and charitable events, media and people who can help them professionally once they relinquish their crowns. He also keeps their ages and strengths in mind when deciding which events each should attend.

For instance, certain events might not be appropriate for 18-year-old Parry, Miss Teen USA.

In terms of media, he says they do a lot of Web-based media interviews with Parry because “she’s into that.” Meanwhile he capitalizes on Cole’s and Dutta’s “wonderful speaking voices” by doing a lot of radio interviews.

“The titleholders are true partners in making the pageants hipper and more with it,” Rich explains, citing Dutta’s decision to update her look by cutting her hair to what he dubbed a more “modern, sophisticated” length.

“I’m not a Svengali to these young people. They really blossom forth. I listen carefully to what their needs are,” says Rich.

Part of those needs can include getting enough time for sleep between public appearances and travel engagements. Says the affable Cole: “He’s really good about our schedules. He understands that sometimes we’re really tired and he assesses the situation and adapts to that.”

The goal with media interviews and event placement is the same: to change the perception the public has of the titleholders and, as a tangential benefit, the contests that gave them their crowns. Rich says they want to move away from the “sash and crown” and have the titleholders seen and valued for their individual strengths and qualities.

For example, Rich has been working towards convincing Gloria Steinem, avowed feminist and beauty pageant critic, to be a judge of the Miss Universe or Miss USA pageant. This is an accomplishment Rich feels will not only help their own titleholders and pageants, but the image of beauty contests overall.

It may not be as far-fetched as it sounds.

“The first time I took a Miss Universe out three years ago, I introduced her [Gloria Steinem] to her and she turned her back on her and refused to be photographed,” Rich explains.

However, after he engaged Steinem in a conversation with last year’s Miss Universe, Mpule Kwelagobe, at another event, things appeared to change.

“Gloria was doing this thing against female castration. I said to Gloria ‘I want you to meet someone from Africa who is very opposed to female castration.’ They started talking and when she learned she was Miss Universe, it didn’t matter at all because she had taken a moment to understand the person. They sat together, had a really nice time and pictures were allowed.”

Cole, for one, says that meeting people has helped dispel some of the negative beauty queen stereotypes.

“I think their perception of us is that we’re not really human or friendly. When they ask us questions and get to know us they’re like, ‘You are so different than what I thought.’ And, to me, that’s the biggest compliment,” she says.

Rich concludes simply: “It’s changing the image through association, by where we place them, by the stories. It’s regular PR tactics and strategies.”