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Howard Bragman on the Worst Mistakes a Marketer Can Make

Q&A: Hollywood Superflack Explains the Importance of 'Authenticity'

by [Claude Brodesser-Akner](#)

LOS ANGELES (AdAge.com) -- Before leaving to become the CEO of public-relations firm Fifteen Minutes, Howard Bragman founded Bragman Nyman Cafarelli, one of the top entertainment-PR firms, which was bought by Interpublic Group of Cos. in 2001.



Howard Bragman

Mr. Bragman has specialized in tricky, radioactive entertainment cases, such as that of fired "Grey's Anatomy" star Isaiah Washington, but he's also handled scads of corporate clients. Now, 30 years after he left Ann Arbor, Mich., for a career as Hollywood's uberflack, he's written "Where's My 15 Minutes? Get Your Company, Your Cause or Yourself the Recognition You Deserve," which is out in bookstores this month.

Madison & Vine: You write that consumers are "cynical, jaded and bored with advertising -- and rightly so." Not that we disagree, but why do you think that?

Howard Bragman: Because I think they are smart; they've lifted up the hood. I'll give you an example: When I do product placement in a film, my nephews will say, "We saw your Champagne placement." It's not sneaky anymore, it's not clever anymore, and it rarely feels authentic. And the vast majority of the time, [young people] are not watching the same media we are, the older people are.

M&V: So how does that inform how PR gets done today?

Mr. Bragman: PR has always had one great gift: credibility. In the day, we called that the "third-party endorsement." Today, I think the word would be "authenticity." I think that [compared with advertising] PR rings more "authentic" with young people, because while they're cynical, they're also gullible. It's a dangerous combination.

M&V: How so?

Mr. Bragman: Because you can put a lot of stuff over on them; it just has to feel authentic.
[Laughs]

M&V: Wow, now that's cynical. You write that your book isn't about how to write press releases but about "finding your place in popular culture." What do you mean by that?

Mr. Bragman: I mean that you have to define and brand yourself. I mean it's a bigger picture than just "Here's how to write a press release." I want people to think in broader terms about branding themselves, whether they're an actor, businessman or performer or activist.

M&V: So what lessons from Hollywood can be applied to everyday business folks seeking to brand themselves? Because, really, is crazy, weepy Paula Abdul going to teach me something about branding?

Mr. Bragman: Guess what: If you own a dry cleaners, I bet you've got a weepy, crazy client. If you're an activist for a cause, I bet there's someone on the other side of the argument who isn't rational about why they think as they do. Part of what I call business-life skills is dealing with all sorts of people. Hollywood is "a third, a third, a third." That is, a third is lovely people, a third is perfectly nuts, and a third changes, depending on the way the Santa Anas are blowing. The point is, in that climate, every one has to tell their stories. It's a narrative world, as my client [producer] Peter Guber would say. And when Paula Abdul goes out to define herself, she doesn't go out with a blank slate. You have to create an image based on where you are -- which goes to the issue of strategy and vision. I've actually done corporate PR for 30 years and Hollywood for 24 - - it's just that Hollywood defines [you] so much.

M&V: In this kind of barren economic climate, though, it would seem that your kind of advice is the first to get chopped in marketing budgets. But you argue that's the worst mistake a marketer can make.

Mr. Bragman: Well, I would argue that the worst mistake you can make is *not* market in this economy. And bear in mind, a PR person has multiple jobs. One is to define the client, but the other is to help define the world your client is about to step into.

M&V: So what's the second-worst mistake a marketer can make?

Mr. Bragman: PR campaigns they launch and then they're done. A PR campaign has to have some legs to it. Just like every movie that opens in Hollywood needs a second-week strategy, corporate campaigns rarely answer the question: Now what are you going to do? Are you going to continue to feed that interest? A launch strategy has to be followed up by a post-launch strategy.

M&V: Your book title suggests that the public has a certain narcissistic sense of entitlement about their publicity. Do you think the democratizing effect of digital media is to blame?

Mr. Bragman: I will tell you a piece of research a friend of mine shared with me. Something like 20% of young people he surveyed said that they believe they will be famous in their lifetimes -- not "could be," "will be." So I think there is a bit of entitlement there. There are certain people that I do disabuse from doing PR ... if there's something criminal in your past, something unsavory. But most businesses, they're going to have their 15 minutes anyway. Why not maximize their 15 minutes?

M&V: How do you deal with bloggers?

Mr. Bragman: I beat my head against the wall, and I burn an effigy of Perez Hilton in my office once a week. [Laughs] You try to dilute it. And we've transcended [the bloggers] with Facebook and Twitter. In the old days, you had to call somebody and get your story out. But after Owen Wilson wanted to tell his story [after his suicide attempt]? He did it on MySpace. Al Reynolds, post-Star Jones? We shot our own [video statement] and put it on YouTube. Before, I needed the mainstream media to disseminate it, but now it's become more like the movie business: They're just the exhibitors.