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Image need overhaul? Hollywood PR vet offers help

By SANDY COHEN – 3 days ago

LOS ANGELES (AP) — It's 2009. Do you know where your public image is?

More places than you might think. In the era of social-networking, even private people have public images. And those images may need upgrading, says veteran Hollywood publicist Howard Bragman, who suggests using proven Tinseltown techniques to shape your public persona.

"Ten years ago, this was not a skill you needed unless you were at the highest level of Hollywood or Washington," he said. "Today it's a skill that most people who are aggressive and ambitious need.

"If you own a business, if you're an environmental activist, if you're president of the PTA, you have a public image."

Bragman offers a how-to book for non-famous folks who want to overhaul their images: "Where's My Fifteen Minutes?: Get Your Company, Your Cause, or Yourself the Recognition You Deserve," which is due this month.

Drawing on more than 25 years as a publicist and crisis counselor, Bragman takes readers step by step through the Hollywood publicity process: shaping an image, hosting events, working with media and overcoming mistakes.

"You don't have to hire a publicist. You don't need a huge media campaign. But what you do need is some intent and some vision of what you're trying to achieve," he said. "I consider the book sort of 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' in the new millennium."

Bragman has guided Monica Lewinsky, Paula Abdul and Isaiah Thomas through scandals. He's put on parties with Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor. He helped Mischa Barton navigate the Hollywood landscape and Ricki Lake reintroduce herself to a national audience.

"I think his advice can work for anyone," Lake said. "All average people ... they wanted their 15 minutes of fame, and they were regular folks."

Marlee Matlin, a longtime client of Bragman's, said his image-shaping approach is especially helpful during bleak economic times.

"In this world where everything changes so quickly and competition gets fiercer by the minute, the idea that you need to get your foot in the door through tried-and-true concepts that have worked so well in the entertainment business (and) personal PR makes perfect sense," Matlin said in an e-mail.

Bragman, 52, began writing the book seven years ago, when he was a professor of public relations at the University of Southern California. Rather than being "the man behind the curtain who nobody knows," Bragman said he wanted to unveil the secrets of public relations and explain how they can work in everyday life — particularly in the Internet age.

These days, image management isn't an option, Bragman said, but a critical step for staying competitive and getting ahead.