

Insight & Opinion

How Public Relations Has Changed

Julie Ann Kodmur

AFTER 32 YEARS AS a publicist, it recently has seemed to me that the practice of public relations (PR) has never been more difficult. By that I mean quantifiable results are not only very hard-won, but the “quantifiable” isn’t always so “quantifiable.” A high score comes along, “but is the writer ‘meaningful’ enough?” the client will ask. We all are hoping for a “silver bullet” but disagree about how to launch it or what the components might be.

Public Relations Back Then

I lived through a scenario once that spoiled me for defining success in a wine PR context. Back in the early 1980s I helped introduce Moreau Blanc, a new idea from the venerable Chablis house **J. Moreau & Fils**. I was working for **Frederick Wildman & Sons**, and the quaint townhouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan was home both to Wildman’s New York distributorship, with a room full of salesmen deployed to the furthest reaches of the five boroughs, and Wildman’s national sales team, with tentacles across the country.

We had launched Moreau Blanc with an elaborate lunch and tasting for the New York wine writer corps. The next day’s *New York Times* column sang the praises of the wine. As it happened, I was in the office early and had gone to the distributorship office to drop off some paperwork. I remember vividly standing in the room as all around me phones were almost literally ringing off the hook. I started picking them up—one after another, it was a chorus of voices demanding to buy Moreau Blanc. That was a PR fantasy come true—a true “silver bullet.” Great wine had been put in the hands of savvy media, who understood a trend in the making and had a thirsty audience ready to pull out their credit cards.

Another solid PR program that was meaningful in those days was the winemaker dinner. In the early 1980s the restaurant **Lavin’s** in Manhattan was one of the first to stage these, and there was a time when I walked the Champagne producer **Christian Pol Roger** from table to table, each group of people eager to meet him, their faces gleaming, questions and compliments bursting from them as soon as Christian stopped to talk. The diners considered themselves in the presence of a celebrity and were delighted to bask in what they saw as an enlightened ritual.

Good or bad, winemakers are a dime a dozen today, with their celebrity status sadly a bit diminished, and the “winemaker dinner” has become almost an outdated cliché of a term and a PR program. Yet, an articulate winemaker with a sense of humor can still get the attention of a room full of people—or of a jaded wine writer sitting across the lunch table. That is one effective publicity effort that hasn’t really changed and won’t change even as we slide into the future.

Julie Ann Kodmur is an award-winning publicity and marketing consultant and freelance journalist. She received her B.A. from Stanford University and did master’s degree course work at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts. She lived in New York City before relocating to Northern California. She worked for Sotheby Parke Bernet, Frederick Wildman & Sons, Renfield, Seagram Classics and Trefethen before launching her own PR consultancy in 1997 in St. Helena. She has been a panelist on publicity and marketing topics at numerous wine industry symposia and has served as a wine judge. She has taught public relations and journalism at Pacific Union College in the Napa Valley. More at www.julieannkodmur.com and www.wineprturnup.com.

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Mia Malm, president of **Malm Communications**, said that what’s harder today is “the explosion of new voices and the decline in number of ‘A-list’ print outlets, meaning there are now hundreds of people you need to know. And at the same time, the competitive landscape for wine brands gets larger every day. So the job of cutting through the noise gets harder and harder.”

“I don’t think at its core the practice of public relations has changed all that much,” said **James Caudill**, director of public relations and hospitality for **The Hess Collection**. “What has changed are tactical approaches, the speed and constant din of communication, the need to reach disparate audiences, including international ones.” He said that the work week is now quite literally 24/7. “Where I used to focus on a small number of influencers, I consider now that nearly anyone I engage is an influencer for someone, so I try and treat everyone with an equal measure of interest and respect.”

“Our communications tools have expanded, and the news cycle is immediate,” noted **Jan Mettler**, partner at **Boss Dog Marketing**. “In this fast-paced, overcrowded world, fundamental principles still apply, including that an image is the result of 1,000 consistent acts, not a single score and that you must know your audience (and your audience’s audience). It is essential to be familiar with writers’ works and publications. In addition, brands must find their core message and be distinctive and memorable,” she said.

Today, new PR tactics include building strong websites, engaging with wine writers and bloggers and joining in on the conversation with your customers via social media, among others.

The Importance of the Website (AKA The Press Kit)

One other universal PR basic that remains critically important is a winery’s website: today it functions as a *de facto* press kit, the storehouse of high-resolution photos, logos, wine fact sheets and winery history. It is every publicist’s fantasy to wake up to fully realized profiles of your winery client, all achieved in the middle of the night, so to speak, because the writer found all of the necessary materials available on the website.



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Put Up a Program-Specific Blog

I recommend that wineries put up blogs and websites for specific programs. For example, **MerlotFightsBack** was a campaign **Swanson Vineyards** mounted that encompassed competitive Merlot tastings across the country conducted by the winemaker in conjunction with a feisty website (the comment page had a backdrop of a pair of boxing gloves). The media really got into the spirit of the effort, with lengthy articles in the *New York Times* and many other publications.

What about a website that's literally just a press kit, full of downloadable materials? An example is www.buccellatrade.com. Or another idea: honor a special wine with its own site, such as www.cooksflat.com.

Wineries are Now 'Publishers'

Definitively new today is the concept of a winery as a producer of content, a publisher. **Jim Sullivan**, vice president of PR and marketing, **Castello di Amorosa**, explained: "The ability to be a global publisher is in everyone's reach—it's their mobile device in their back pocket or their laptop in a WiFi-connected coffee shop. And as a result of our connectedness, the pace at which communication happens has quickened substantially, and the responsibility of managing the brand in a personal and meaningful way while protecting the reputation of the company has never been greater. Any PR campaign today needs to add value, inspire and uplift people with the right message to the right audience. And because communication today is digital—digital chat, video, apps, mobile, social media, etc.—the challenge is to add value while recognizing it's all about building relationships with real people."

Kimberly Charles of **Charles Communications** has pioneered a publishing approach with her **Brandlive** channel: "In real-time you're able to connect with writers, critics and reviewers to assess our clients' wine, spirits and other beverages directly with the person who crafted them. No longer do we have to go on the road, spending money and time traveling to visit writers in person, which from time to time had cancellations and missed meetings. Now we can connect virtually online simultaneously with multiple journalists around the country."

Social Media: Facebook and Twitter

Opening social media accounts and engaging with the consumer and publishing winery information on these outlets are increasingly encouraged when it comes to marketing tactics. It is important to have a plan, though.

"Community management and global brand voice is a new aspect of what I do in PR now," Malm said. Consistency of goal, message, logos or naming conventions across all social media platforms is important, she added.

Tiffany Van Gorder, general manager at **Balzac Communications & Marketing**, said that today there are so many more opportunities for wineries to be in direct contact with every level of the market. "We did a recent **Twitter** Tasting for the **Franciacorta Consorzio** where two dozen wine bloggers around the country were sent the same set of wines to taste on the same day at the same time. The resulting reach of the tasting on Twitter was over 1,200 tweets, with more than 4 million impressions and reached nearly 300,000 followers. A huge success all around," she said.

Castello di Amorosa in Calistoga is unquestionably one of the wonders of the modern wine world, a one-of-a-kind gold mine as far as public relations content is concerned. "The castle is visually stunning, which helps in our digital media PR campaigns," explained Sullivan. "In a digital visual world, where our tools include **Pinterest**, **Instagram** and **Facebook**, pictures are king, so it doesn't hurt to have a beautiful subject. For us, any PR campaign we do incorporates visual images of the castle," he said.

The Importance of Sommeliers

New York-based publicist **Marsha Palanci** of **Cornerstone Communications** noted that "when I started the agency, it wouldn't have crossed my mind to recommend to a client that we hold a late-night event for sommeliers. However, with sommeliers' increased influence and status as the new rock stars of the hospitality world, we pay special attention to them. Recently we produced several highly effective, after-hours tastings around the country for **Rías Baixas Albariño** wines. We created environments where sommeliers can taste our clients' wines in a relaxed, non-pressured environment."

Bill Smart, the director of marketing and communications at **Dry Creek Vineyard**, agreed, noting that "top sommeliers can often be as important as an A+ member of the media."

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Some Things Never Change: Know How to Tell a Story

“What’s stayed the same for the past 15 years is that it’s still our job to tell stories,” said **Lisa Adams** of **Adams Walter Communications**. “Stories are now crafted in a way that the information can be disseminated across multiple platforms, such as trade news sources, sales outreach channels and social media for various audiences, including the media, the trade and consumers.” She added that “the number of traditional journalists has decreased while digital media has boomed.”

Smart explained that “good wine PR people understand how to take something that seems very small and make it seem very large.”

“You still need to make great wine, but today you have to have a story,” offered **Tim McDonald** of **Wine Spoken Here**. “Telling that story is the important piece, and PR people are the way to get the story out. There are a million conversations on wine every day, and a winery has to have a good reason to be part of those conversations,” he said.

The Wrap

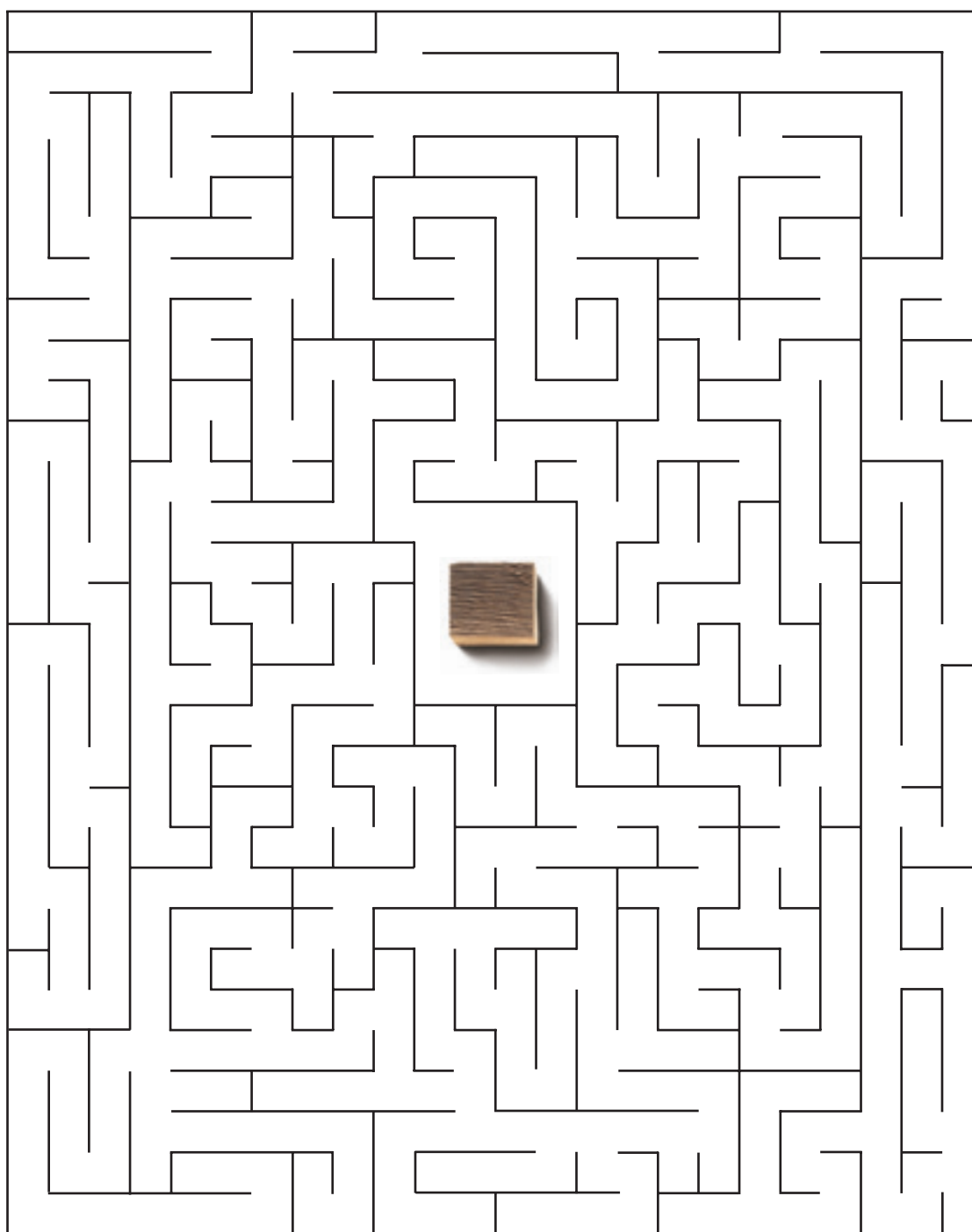
My career has encompassed a full spectrum of programs intended to extend a brand’s identity and reach, ranging from a **Guinness Book of World Records** entry, to a **Thomas Jefferson** impersonator presenting a line of Bordeaux wines, to re-issuing archival Champagne posters. Then there was the time **Vogue’s** wine writer loved the bag of vineyard dirt that had been enclosed with a sample shipment: he liked it so much he ran a photo of it next to the wine review. Then there have been events, such as taking over a local movie theater with free community screenings of movies thematically linked to wineries (*War Horse* for **Bello Vineyards**, *Date Night* for **Date Night**). I’ve arranged live blogging events at wineries, where the wine writer-bloggers shared their experience with their audiences. Then there is the rich vein of working with authors; for example, author **Jenny Leggatt** traveled to arboreta on the East Coast, presenting her new *Cooking With Flowers* book supported by flower-labeled **Bandiera** wines.

“Words, words, words,” groaned Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. “Show me!” he shouted. That may

well be how PR has changed over the course of the last decade or two: as publicists, we now can make all of those words—and stories—come alive through old and new channels, never forgetting that any successful PR is still built one word and one writer at a time. And, in fact, there may not be one silver bullet any more but a fleet of PR-guided drones, deploying reviews, conversations and awareness, building a buzz many points of light at a time.

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