



Newsday Photo/Don Jacobsen

Judith Schwager, Andrew Kraus and Katherine Heaviside of Epoch 5 Marketing in Huntington with their 1999 Silver Anvil Award from the PR Society of America. The firm spends \$20,000 a year on research.

DOING BUSINESS WITH:

PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRMS

Five People to Watch



Mark Grossman, 43, is president of Grossman Strategies in Holtsville. He has a strong political PR background and before starting his own firm in 1995, he worked for nearly six years as former Gov. Mario Cuomo's regional director and ombudsman on Long Island. He was Cuomo's liaison with local governments, civic groups, educational institutions and businesses. Before his appointment by the governor, Grossman spent a year in country government for then-presiding officer Sondra Bachety and County Executive Patrick Halpin. He also held PR positions in the private sector. His firm serves businesses, the education community and the nonprofit sector with publicity, government relations and lobbying services.



John Avitabile, 58, is president of Castle Rock Communications in Hauppauge. Prior to starting Castle Rock eight years ago, Avitabile served as president of Dunwoodie Communications, a PR firm in Manhattan. He held the role of president for 10 years and before that held senior-level positions at several other New York PR firms. From the start, his firm has been affiliated with AMH&E, a full-service advertising and graphics firm. "We have an alliance and we share clients," Avitabile said. Most of Castle Rock's clients are in the high-tech field, including system integrators, software developers and engineering companies.



Donna Autuori is president of Autuori Corporate Communications Inc. in Bay Shore. Autuori started her career at Underwriters Laboratories in Melville in the public information department. "I was baptized in crisis management," Autuori said. "It was the time of the aluminum wire fires." She left UL to work for Stephen I. Greene, a PR and advertising agency in Huntington. She started as an associate and quickly rose to executive vice president.

When Greene decided to close shop and retire to Florida, Autuori decided to start her own business in April, 1995. She brought with her some clients and has grown her business since then.



Dianne Baumert, 35, is president of Baumert PR & Design in Holbrook. Realizing that her part-time work was a full-time job, Baumert decided to open up her own shop. She started her career in 1987 as the Babylon Town beat reporter for Suffolk Life. She then went to work as a public information officer for then-Babylon Supervisor Arthur G. Pitts. She also served in Richard Schaeffer's administration as director of public affairs and director of Citizen Services. In addition, her experience includes holding high-level PR positions at St. Charles Hospital & Rehabilitation Center, Rubenstein Associates and Ruskin, Moscou, Evans and Faltischek. Baumert is president of the Public Relations Professionals of Long Island.



Bill Corbett Jr., 33, is president of Corbett Associates Inc. in Floral Park. He is responsible for the management of the day-to-day operations of the firm and directs multiple PR and government affairs accounts. Since joining the firm in 1991, a year after his father started the company, he has managed more than 60 accounts and projects. In 1997, he became president. His achievements include serving as a goodwill ambassador to Argentina for Rotary International, working on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and serving as campaign coordinator for Assemb. Kemp Hannon (R-Westbury) in his run for State Senate. He has also taught a variety of courses in public relations.

Technology Reinvigorates Public Relations

By Jamie Martorana
Staff Writer

WHEN PR MAN Bill Corbett Jr. makes a pitch, he knows he has only three or four lines to convey his message -- or risk his news release ending up in the trash.

And when it comes to releases by e-mail, it's more like a one-liner.

"It's a lot easier for a reporter to hit the delete button, than take a fax and throw it away," said Corbett, president of Corbett Associates in Floral Park.

So when he recently sent e-mails to local journalists for the Belmont Stakes Fair, his pitch was simple but alluring -- "Pigs Fly at Belmont Park."

"It made people call me back," said Corbett. He wasn't lying. The fair did feature pigs trained to high dive into a pool.

Corbett says about half of his communication with journalists and clients is through e-mail, and, like many public relations professionals on Long Island, he has learned to use e-mail and new media to reach more people.

The burgeoning dot-com industry has helped reinvigorate the public relations industry, which is being called upon more heavily to help relay high-tech messages on behalf of these clients. But even traditional firms are expanding their budgets and incorporating PR into their everyday business, experts say.

"We can expect organizations of all kinds to spend more money on public relations internally and externally," said Stephen Pisinski, chairman of the Public Relations Society of America, a Manhattan-based trade association, and president of the Montgomery Group in San Francisco.

Public relations budgets nationwide grew 24 percent last year, according to the seventh annual Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research Public Relations Client Survey, which polled more than 1,700 executives. Clients reported record public relations budgets, averaging \$4.42 million in 1999, up from \$3.37 million in 1998.

Clients in telecommunications businesses reported by far the largest public relations budgets, an average of \$13.4 million, the survey found.

To keep up with fast-moving changes in technology, PR firms like Corbett Associates say they are becoming more tech-savvy, subscribing to more online resources and, in some cases, forming

strategic alliances with complementary players such as ad agencies, Web developers and other PR associates. Such alliances often involve sharing ideas and clients.

"This is a boom time for PR and ad agencies," said Howard Blankman, chairman and chief executive of the Blankman Group in Garden City. "The Year 2000 will be great for PR people."

To keep up with demand, the Blankman Group has recently absorbed another PR firm, Laura Wiletsky&Associates, to expand its capabilities. The firm also has established a strategic alliance with Baumert PR&Design, headed by Dianne Baumert, president of the Public Relations Professionals of Long Island.

The Blankman Group also has an affiliate relationship with Manning Selvage&Lee in Manhattan, which Blankman says helps give his firm an international reach. The firm says it has signed on its first dot-com client, MaterialNet.com in Great Neck, which connects buyers and sellers of metals.

"He has a lot of work and I can help him," said Baumert, who recently opened her own shop in Holbrook.

Besides Blankman, she formed separate alliances with Sublime Design, a Bethpage Web development company.

To keep up with technology, Baumert has switched from using traditional media directories to a Web-based media manager system called PRality, based in Washington, D.C. It manages e-mails, records clippings and media queries, as well as helps narrow down searches.

"We buy a lot of computer technology and software that allows us to know things, like if there is a reporter in Walnut Creek, Calif., who specializes in staffing," said Katherine Heaviside, president of Epoch 5 Marketing in Huntington, who estimates the firm spends \$20,000 or more annually to keep up with research and technology. "Clients got smarter and they're looking for value. They understand PR is beyond measuring the amount of clips or press you get."

Heaviside has alliances with PR firms in seven key states and is in discussions with a management consulting firm in the D.C. area, that has clients that are interested in doing business on Long Island.

Donna Autuori of Autuori Corporate Communications in Bay Shore says she's aligned herself with several marketing consultants, ad agencies and direct marketing agencies. She also seeks advice from one of her clients, 21st Century Marketing in Farmingdale, on the direct marketing and Internet side of her business.

And HJMT Communications in Lido Beach has a strategic alliance with Classic Internet Service in Syosset, says President Hilary Topper, who adds that the company is beginning to use CD-ROM technology to promote corporate brochures.

R& B Communications Services in Mineola was absorbed last year by close affiliate Rowan & Blewitt, which was itself acquired earlier last year by Manhattan-based Shandwick International, one of the largest public relations organizations in the world.

"We really need that global reach," said Hank Boerner, a principal with Rowan & Blewitt, which specializes in crisis management.

Todd Shapiro of Todd Shapiro Associates in Hauppauge says he's expanded by building niches. Last year, Shapiro started an entertainment division to handle sporting and celebrity events, and this year he created a government relations division headed by Brian Ferruggiari, an Islip Town councilman. The firm has had a crisis management division since its inception, says Shapiro, who does not believe in developing alliances.

"We're a pure PR firm," he says. "We basically focus on what we do best -- getting clients placed on television, radio and newspapers."

Kevin Ryan of Ryan & Ryan PR in Farmingdale says from a practical perspective, "strategic alliances are very difficult to forge," particularly between advertising and PR firms.



Newsday Photo/Alan Raia

Laura Wiletsky and Howard Blankman. Blankman's Garden City PR agency recently absorbed Wiletsky & Associates. "This is a boom time for PR and ad agencies," says Blankman. To keep up with demand, the Blankman Group also has established a strategic alliance with Baumert & Design, headed by Dianne Baumert.

"The biggest barrier is that advertising and PR firms are often competing for the same dollar and that ultimately creates a conflict," says Ryan.

But there seems to be enough business for everyone, others say.

Shapiro feels the need for PR services will grow greater as more news media are created and as old ones expand.

"There are more talk shows and guests needed on an hourly basis and experts needed," Shapiro says.

While this means more opportunities for PR firms to place their clients, it also poses a challenge as more and more competitors enter the field. With e-mail, even one-man shops can sometimes appear like PR powerhouses.

"An e-mail from President Clinton looks like an e-mail from my uncle in Queens," said Mark Grossman, president of Grossman Strategies in Holtsville. "There's no fancy stationery. Technology has allowed smaller firms to compete with some of the bigger firms."

But in the end, experts say, it comes down to the basics.

"Building relationships is still very important," said John Avitabile, president of Castle Rock Communications in Hauppauge. "A PR person has to be very diversified and knowledgeable in a broad range of disciplines."