

Publicity Stunts

What Are They? Why Do Them?

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A magician seeking publicity had himself strapped into a straitjacket and hung upside down off the roof of a building where 50,000 people watched him escape and return to safety. That magician was Harry Houdini, and he did the stunt in 1916. Another magician seeking publicity had himself locked into a glass box and hung for 44 days from a spot next to the Tower of London Bridge where everyone could see him starve. That magician was David Blaine, and he did the stunt in 2003.

Publicity stunts are as old as humans who battled on mammoths to show off, and they are as young as a starlet seeking coverage in *People* magazine. They are an effective form of message delivery when integrated with concepts being communicated, and every PR practitioner should be familiar with them.

But what exactly are they? Stunts are like pornography. One knows one when he sees it, but it is not always easy to define why something is a stunt or why it worked or failed. It turns out the word itself is not clear. The origin of “stunt” was a Middle English word, *stunnt*, meaning *foolish, short-witted, short* that was influenced by Old Norse *stuttr* meaning *short, dwarfish*. It was only in 1878 that the word entered a dictionary as “*an unusual or difficult feat requiring great skill or daring; especially: one performed or undertaken chiefly to gain attention or publicity.*”

Publicity stunts have been a business even before P.T. Barnum who supposedly said, “The bigger the humbug, the better people will like it.” Stunts cover many feats and exercises in bunkum. For example:

- Traveling in a barrel over Niagara Falls
- Walking on tightrope between the World Trade Towers
- Roaming streets in the costume of a cartoon character
- Tossing money from the observation platform of the Empire State Building.
- Using celebrity look-alikes
- Posing nude for a magazine

- Dressing a CEO in an absurd costume as Sam Walton of Wal-Mart and Richard Branson of Virgin both did.
- Conducting faux street demonstrations.
- Launching wacky contests such as burying prizes which people hunt or, in one gross case, having sex in risky places such as a cathedral.
- Conducting open auditions for a movie, play or other production.

The challenge of any publicity stunt is to preserve the message contained within it. This is not easy. For example, why did an entrepreneur throw hundreds of dollars off the side of the Empire State Building? I don't know. All I remember is the arrest for causing a riot down below as people rushed for falling bills. Why did a famous television comedian walk around Columbus Circle in New York handing out \$50 bills to passersby with certain first names? I happen to remember why this stunt was done but it failed to promote the Internet Bank that sponsored it (and subsequently failed as a bank.) Why do people sit on flagpoles or billboards, live in cars for days or dance until they fall from exhaustion? To win wacky contests for forgotten products and services.

If there is a consistent failing with publicity stunts, it is this: The stunt doesn't promote the concept behind it. Oddly enough, the reason for this lies in a branch of philosophy called semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems. Philosophers have long known and discussed distinctions between concepts, the sign that communicates concepts and meanings one draws from signs. This gets into many variations, including the cultural acceptance of signs and their meaning. A = A to literate individuals raised or learned in Western European culture but A=? to anyone using a different alphabet. An ancient Mayan could no more understand "A" than we can understand Mayan hieroglyphs. In fact, only a few signs have near-universal meaning – such as stick figures of people. It is ironic that AAA, the not-for-profit, federation of 77 motor clubs throughout the United States and Canada, teaches American motorists the meaning of international road signs. It seems that Americans are not international enough to relate traffic instructions to signs on European motorways.

It is well known in marketing and advertising that connection between concept and illustration should be close to prevent miscommunication. But, it is common for people to remember advertisements but not the products advertised. The failure of 30-second commercials to make their point is the same failure that occurs when publicity stunts are not directly related to the concept being promoted. Holding open auditions for a movie promotes the movie, but swallowing live goldfish or phone-booth stuffing can apply to just about anything. Walking across Niagara Falls has little meaning beyond the athleticism of the individual who performs the feat. Should the person be wearing the logo of a sponsor, it is unlikely the sponsor will gain much awareness from it. On the other

hand, promoting a golf club by having a long-ball driving contest using the club is a direct connection between the product offering and promise.

The challenge to those who create publicity stunts is to design an event in a way that the message is integral rather than buried. This has several considerations:

- **The nature of the stunt:** One could bake the world's biggest pizza, ride a bicycle backwards for 10 miles, stand on one's head for 24 continuous hours. The question is why do any of these things if they displace the intended message? It makes sense for a pizza dough manufacturer to bake the world's biggest pizza, for a circus performer to ride a bicycle backwards and for a manufacturer of headache medicine to have one stand on his head. It doesn't make much sense for the local Elks Club to make the largest pizza, for a police officer to ride the bicycle backwards or for an auto dealer to sponsor head standing. When Segway introduced its two-wheeled gyroscopically self-balancing vehicle, it held a driving demonstration in midtown New York that was taped and shown the world over. The vehicle in its ability to move on two wheels without falling over was a visual stunt in itself. But not all products come with such built-in publicity value. How would one debut a new non-electric razor, for example? The way one firm did it is not the way I would have done it. They sent reporters an elaborate glass block invitation to a press conference packed into an equally elaborate box. A reporter took the time to criticize the agency that pulled off this stunt for wasting time and money. The interesting part about the manual razor is that it vibrates. I think I would have used an invitation that vibrates in some manner, if I felt the need for a special invitation. It might have been a simple card with an on-off switch. With the switch turned on, the card would vibrate. The text might have been along the line of "find out why good vibrations are important in the morning." Some products and services do not lend themselves to stunts: They are too serious, dangerous or uncontrollable. Along this line is a long-ago story of an agency that introduced a new dog food and as the capstone of the introduction, it put some of the chow into a bowl and led the dog to it to wolf it down. To the agency's horror, the dog sniffed the food and walked away. The agency learned two lessons: 1. Make sure the dog is hungry. 2. Don't use a dog.
- **The visual:** Publicity stunts succeed mostly because they are visual. People see for themselves the wacky or unusual feat being performed and in seeing, they receive the message. Houdini could have hung upside down in the straitjacket from entrance door of the building, but it would not have had the visual drama. David Blaine could have placed the transparent box indoors in a warehouse, but not as many people would have seen him. Publicity stunts are meant to have a public as a witness. Hence, it is essential for stunts to be visual enough for the public to want to watch.

- **News value:** Publicity stunts feed on the public's insatiable demand for the new and offbeat and by extension, the news media's desire to feature the new and offbeat. This is why stunts need creativity and novelty that don't repeat what someone did six months ago. If the charity down the street held a dance marathon last year, holding one for your dance company isn't likely to get much news pickup. Rather, one needs to find something else that says dance but expresses it creatively – perhaps dancing while hanging from the side of a building.
- **Results:** The payoff of a publicity stunt is positive media about the message, whether measurable media or immeasurable word of mouth – talk in the coffee room, in Web chat rooms and on street corners. A successful stunt is an awareness accelerator. But it speeds communication of the message, not of the stunt. Water cooler talk or measurable media that do not incorporate the message are worthless. Stunts performed solely for the accomplishment of a feat, such as inserting a thousand needles into one's skin to break a world record are useless from a PR perspective because they are an end unto themselves.

But, it is hard to know what works and what doesn't, and that is the risk one takes in doing a stunt. The skill in creating a stunt takes into account:

- **Place:** As in real estate, success of a publicity stunt is often bound to location. Opening a new hotel is a case in point. I once had the unfortunate task of opening a hotel during a strike against it. The opening ceremony took place on an outdoor deck five stories above the city street. The outdoor desk was so cold that helpers filling balloons with helium could not hold onto them. The weather deteriorated further so that the actual ceremony was performed in a room just off the deck and balloons carrying a "magic key" were walked out into howling wind on the deck where the balloons promptly began to explode from the strain of the rushing air. Such a disaster is vastly different than having a brass band march up main street and play while comely cheerleaders bounce and wave their pompoms. Needless to say, the hotel chain didn't get much media play for its effort. It did, however, get stories about its strikebreaking tactics.
- **Time:** Some say timing is everything. With publicity stunts, timing is a component of success. For the media, early drive time is better when TV or radio morning shows are on the air and when print reporters can do the story and make deadlines easily. If one is going rappel down a skyscraper into the heart of Rockefeller Center where the NBC-TV studios are, it is better to do it during the *Today Show*. The chances of success also are greater if the stunt is timed to another, related event. If one is debuting a new auto at a major auto show, the stunt for the new auto should be timed to the opening of the show when media interest is at its

peak. These points are obvious but one cannot always wait for the right timing to pull off a stunt: One is faced with making one's own timing.

- **Person involved:** Celebrities make news. If a stunt can involve a well-known person, subject of the tabloids, it is all the better for generating media. On the other hand, misuse of a celebrity during a stunt is a large waste of time and money. As in the case of the celebrity comedian handing out money, usable results were limited. If one were to promote an online bank using a celebrity, how might one do it? Perhaps one could hire a world-famous magician and place that person on a program like the CBS-TV's *David Letterman Show* to produce money from thin air and bank it online by having the same 100-dollar bills mysteriously appear on the screen of a computer connected to the online bank. The stunt uses the online bank and banking remotely as both the concept and essence of the stunt itself. The personality makes the stunt possible and interesting.
- **Reason for the publicity stunt:** Stunts can be outstanding in generating awareness or outright disasters. One should have a good reason for doing a stunt before engaging in one, and then spend the time, money and resources to pull it off well. The best stunts are low-cost but high in news value. They are creativity plus planning, planning and planning. And, if there is no inherent news value in the stunt, it needs to be more creative to compensate. Some individuals are creative masters and others are not. If you count yourself among the latter, there are few reasons to try a stunt. Use another approach to communicate.
- **Practicality:** Murphy's Law applies to stunts. "If anything can go wrong, it will." That is why conceiving a stunt and pulling it off are distinct disciplines. One might want to use a BASE Jumper (daredevils who parachute from Buildings, Antennae, Spans of bridges and Earth, such as cliffs) to parachute from the top of a new high-rise, but that requires finding a BASE jumper willing to take the leap, getting permits for the jump, providing emergency personnel if something should go wrong, double checking the weather to make sure high winds or storms are not in the offing, and many more details that can and will go wrong. All this comes long before one issues invitations and sends press releases announcing the stunt. The more ambitious the stunt, the greater the coordination and planning that must go into it. Danger is an ever-present consideration. In the case of BASE jumper, his chute might not open. He could collide with nearby buildings in a sudden wind gust. He could get tangled in a light pole just before landing. One wants publicity, not a disaster story.

Stunts can be elaborate or simple but their importance is the news interest and awareness they generate for the concept/product/service being marketed. Something as simple as blowing up condoms and using them as balloons have been successful in teaching AIDS awareness in Africa and lowering embarrassment about discussing sex. Something as elaborate as flying a

concept car to the US from Europe for a single guest-shot on a nationwide morning TV show also can be effective in establishing a company's design and engineering skills. Stunts are effective communications tools when used well and useless time wasters when not. Like anything else in communications, use them strategically and appropriately to tell a story.

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