



## **PR TECHNIQUE: GUERILLA PR - It's a jungle out there: doing guerilla PR. Guerilla PR may be all the rage, but there's such a thing as going too far. Sherri Deatherage Green looks at how to toe the line between outrageous and outstanding**

by SHERRI DEATHERAGE GREEN, PR Week USA 16-Oct-00

**Some people think guerilla PR is a creative way to generate buzz. Others say it's just an overused buzz word.**

The concept borrows heavily from Jay Conrad Levinson's tome *Guerilla Marketing: Secrets for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business*. Michael Levine, author of a PR-specific book on the subject, *Guerilla PR*, argues that the difference between the marketing and PR attacks is whether a consumer is enthusiastically told how great a product is, or is encouraged to draw that conclusion him or herself.

Even those most fond of the term tend to describe it anecdotally. Creativity and unconventional thinking lie at its heart, making it hard to define, they claim. Others say guerilla PR must be tied to specific events or time-limited opportunities. Some use the words 'quick' and 'cheap,' although others note that not all campaigns are off-the-cuff, shoestring operations.

Guerillas work backwards from traditional PR practitioners, observes Dave Wolkowitz, an AE with Chicago's PR 21. Instead of first aiming at reporters and opinion leaders to reach an audience, guerilla PR starts with the target group and then looks to the press to spread the message further.

Those who frown on the term define it, at best, as an overused label for just plain-old good PR. At worst, they describe guerilla PR as the kind of reckless pursuit of publicity or last-ditch effort to placate clients that perpetuates the profession's flack-ridden image. Others take issue with the word 'guerilla's' adversarial connotations. 'Battle terms don't help our case,' says Joseph Riser, VP of technology at GCI's LA office. 'The people we're trying to reach are not our enemies. They are our allies.'

Tactics commonly listed in the guerilla PR play book include road shows, street events and other activities intended to draw attention in large crowds. One example was GE Financial Network's summer promotion in which it dropped wallets with scratch-off prize tickets in major cities to promote a new Web site. The skeptical Lisa Giassa, a senior publicity manager for Prentice Hall Press, says the perfect example of guerilla PR is standing in the Today window holding a big sign.

A popular approach in the hi-tech realm is to spread messages overtly or covertly via e-mail, list serves, chat rooms or other electronic venues.

This is also known as viral marketing

HollywoodPR.com used a Web site, along with other tools, to create buzz about the satirical 'chronic film-making dream disorder' to promote the movie Dreamers, for example, says agency president Barry Collin.

Tracey Pontarelli, a Burson-Marsteller director in New York, says viral e-mail techniques can be very effective. Results can be hard to measure, however, and clients lose control of messages, she notes. E-mail must be used judiciously. Some PR folks advocate sending messages only to people who have given permission to receive certain types of ads or information.

'If you spam a bunch of people about your product and they aren't interested, I think that builds a bad opinion about your product,' says Lynn Macias, president of Silicon Valley PR.

Guerilla tactics lend themselves best to campaigns targeting broad, general audiences, practitioners say. They are used commonly to break through the information clutter for consumer campaigns. Road trips or promotions that coincide with trade shows, festivals or sports events can provide opportunities to get samples into consumers' hands.

A clever enough premise might even catch the attention of reporters who usually scoff at writing about something for sale. Jeremy Baka didn't realize how much media attention he would draw when he rented a camel and rode it down Rodeo Drive dressed as Santa Claus promoting the Sega Nomad handheld video game. The Rodeo Drive Business Association told him he would be arrested if he showed up, but he went ahead and hauled the camel out to the famed Beverly Hills shopping district anyway. Drive-time traffic-copter pilots and news crews on the ground picked up police radio talk about the spectacle and converged on Rodeo Drive. Baka escaped without a citation because commuters heckled police for ticketing Santa.

Baka warns against using outlandish tricks unless the client is willing to take some risks. 'You've got to have their buy-in, because the clients are going to be liable,' he notes.

Such techniques obviously wouldn't work for a staid, serious client or product. Technical subjects may not make good candidates either. Impressions left by hit-and-run guerilla tactics are 'about an inch deep,' says Mark Modzelewski, a director in Niehaus Ryan Wong's New York office. Most agree the guerilla approach doesn't work often in the business-to-business arena.

Trade shows are an exception, says Pontarelli, because they concentrate business audiences.

Some guerilla PR campaigns can spin into ethical tightropes. For example, Cohn & Wolfe operatives pretending to be Joe Q. Public called radio stations to report the camel-riding Santa. Debate also exists on whether it's kosher to participate in chat room discussions without telling others you are a PR person. Mark Williams, PR president at Harpell in Maynard, MA, felt no compunction about going into engineering chat rooms and mentioning a client's mechanical design software without identifying himself. 'You come across as being an informed user,' he says. Ethics aside, stealth techniques sometimes backfire. 'People online can sniff out a rat, and they will be unforgiving,' Pontarelli warns.

Swinging on the marketing branches of PR's family tree, guerilla techniques can be viewed as one manifestation of integration. 'These things only work if they are created as a part of a greater campaign structure,' Modzelewski advises. Wolkowitz agrees, especially where cynical journalists are

concerned.

'I would not really recommend doing guerilla PR without traditional PR,' he says. 'You must use them in a complementary manner.'

#### Dos and don'ts

##### DO

1. Use unconventional tactics within the framework of a broader PR strategy.
2. Consider guerilla PR when targeting broad, general audiences.
3. Weigh ethical concerns when deciding whether to identify yourself in a chat room.

##### DON'T

1. Depend on hit-and-run tactics alone.
2. Use flashy, guerilla-style events to promote complex products or serious subjects.
3. Send viral e-mails without carefully targeting recipients.