

Unintended Consequences Getting Your Goat?

By Bob Kovitz

Some times, the theory of unintended consequences gets the best of us. When planning a public relations or marketing campaign, you can be certain that somewhere along the way, there will be a result that you hadn't counted on — for better or worse.

We're not talking about airplane noise drowning out the golden words spoken by your CEO at a carefully-arranged press conference, or the sudden multi-car pileup on Interstate 10 that causes all reporters and videographers to race from the parking lot rather than cover your client's grand opening. Those are just the vagaries of everyday life. You control for what you can and hope for the best.

But there are forehead-slapping instances where "what were they thinking?" becomes the question of the day.

The magazine for city managers, *Public Management*, once carried a regular column called "Fabulous Flops." Managers were encouraged to share some of their best ideas that had somehow gone awry. The results were pretty interesting reading for anyone considering a career in the local government sector.

One flop concerned a city in Florida. The local sewage treatment plant was using its treated effluent on the grass that grew around the plant. The result was an unqualified success. The nitrogen-rich turf never looked greener, and the city was justifiably proud of its environmentally sound practice of recycling a precious resource.

But, there was a problem (the *first* unintended consequence). The grass was growing so fast that the city crews couldn't keep up with the necessary mowing and trimming. Therefore, the land around the plant was beginning to look like an overgrown lot, causing embarrassment to the city fathers.

The solution? The city manager went out and purchased two goats! The voracious herbivores were received with much fanfare including a parade in their honor and a contest among schoolchildren to name the two living lawnmowers. From a community and public relations standpoint, the initiative was dream — a win/win for everyone and a testament to the city manager's cleverness.

Except....

One day, one of the treatment plant operators went out to check on the goats. Guess what? No goats. Since the treatment plant was fenced in on three sides and had a canal running on its fourth side, there was no way for the goats to have escaped. So, where did they go?

Enter the *second* unintended consequence. Astute readers will have already realized that anything living along a canal in Florida is fair game for the local alligators. And, so, the famed goats became lunch. And the city manager had a story to submit for "Fabulous Flops."

This is not to say that well-thought-out public relations opportunities should be skipped lest they turn into alligator food. In an era where we're competing for the public attention, we should be using every tool at our disposal to capture even a couple of seconds of that attention. Some very successful local campaigns—the annual MixFM and Community Diaper Bank diaper drive and the Community Food Bank's "Stuff the Bus" come to mind — use publicity-generating events to help their organizations meet their goals.

For certain, we need to put as much energy into planning the events as publicizing them. Perhaps 90% of the contingencies that you plan for will never occur, but that doesn't mean that you don't take them



into account. And debriefing after the event will ensure that any future plans will be built on your successes (and will help to minimize the speed bumps the next time you plan a similar event).

You may never find yourself or your business in the position of requisitioning goats. But that doesn't mean that you don't have some options to chew over. So, before you find yourself on the horns of a dilemma (and before we run out of goat metaphors), learn to accept and even enjoy the unintended consequences of your public relations campaigns, even if there are alligators lurking in the canals.

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