

MARKETING

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Making it on Broadway

In the NAFTA economy, Canadian PR practitioners have some real advantages

By BOB PICKARD

When I moved to the New York area in 1995, I didn't think that doing PR in the U.S. would be all that different from practicing the craft in Canada. After all, before founding Environics Communications with Bruce MacLellan and Michael Adams, I had worked for more than four years at Hill and Knowlton, the grandpappy of U.S. public relations, in a profoundly North American city – Toronto – where so many PR firms are owned by Americans.

But PR *is* different in America, and in a way that is actually a competitive advantage for Canadian practitioners.

My primary source of concern 'off the boat' here was the kind of anxiety we all face in a new job or school: being a newcomer in an unfamiliar environment. This feeling was particularly acute because Environics was the first Canadian-owned PR firm to establish operations south of the border.

I quickly discovered there was nothing to fear as a Canadian PR immigrant in America. The first lesson I learned is that everything positive we Canadians associate with Americans – the hard-work ethic, can-do spirit, respect for success – is absolutely true. Better yet, there is nothing negative Americans associate with Canadians, except for not actually being Americans.

Overall, being Canadian is not much of a marketing issue for Environics; we don't wrap ourselves in the Maple Leaf, and we don't hide behind the Stars and Stripes by pretending that we're 'really' American.

Instead, we explain that Environics is a North American PR firm with a solid team of Americans and Canadians both in both countries working to deliver results and excellence on a continental basis. We point to our experience on both sides of the border and persuade U.S. prospects to become clients based on a track record and team that they believe will get them the same results.

This is the real truth of doing business here: at the end of the day, companies use PR to add value and support their business strategy. If what we do makes them money, then they don't care for a moment that the firm is owned by Canadians.

We can put it in exactly those straightforward terms when we talk to U.S. clients. That's because

business discourse is far more direct here than in Canada. North of the border, brazen sales pitches can be seen as pushy or vulgar. Here, an oblique approach is sure to underwhelm. If you don't come right out and ask Americans to buy what you're selling, they just won't.

The same holds true for pitching the press on a story. One of my co-workers, a heavy hitter when it comes to media relations and an authentic New Yorker, has often astounded me with her lapel-grabbing approach. She dismisses my milquetoast Canadian-style sales pitch as being (you guessed it) 'too nice.' Who do you think has scored more and bigger hits? I'm still trying to catch up.

But to observe that PR is different in the U.S. is not to say that it is somehow superior.

Person for person, pound for pound, I have no doubt that Canadian PR professionals have the edge over the American PR talent pool. Writing skills, familiarity with advanced technology on the desktop and an understanding of the world beyond one country's borders – these are Canadian advantages and exportable skills. I'm not saying that all Canadian PR people are better, or that all American PR people are lacking – each country has an ample number of both kinds. My contention is that there's a higher percentage of top-drawer talent in the Canadian system.

I have found that relationships with journalists are more difficult to develop in the U.S. because of the sheer volume of media. Volume means less time per journalist, and dealing with the same people less often.

When most people compare the U.S. with Canada in a quantitative sense, they simply multiply by 10. In the PR business, my own best guess is to multiply it by more than 20 when it comes to the sheer size of the media community. My old database in Toronto had about 2,500 names on it. The one I use now has 48,000, from *The New York Times* to *7-Ball Magazine*.

So overall, U.S. PR is bigger, not necessarily better. But one thing is for sure: we know all about America, and they know so little about Canada. That really counts at a time when the NAFTA economy has finally arrived in public relations. PR capital and skills will more readily flow across a border that, for better or worse, is becoming less important in the communications world.

If they look outward, adopt a North American approach, hire a talented team of Americans, and take entrepreneurial risks, Canadian-owned PR firms are well-positioned to do as well in the U.S. as American-owned firms have done in Canada. That's an important point: free trade in PR is nothing new, but it's all been in one direction – until now. There is absolutely no reason why public relations can't become part of Canada's trade surplus with the U.S.

And I don't just mean serving Canadian companies that want PR in America from a Canadian firm, or U.S. companies that want PR in Canada (although we do both). I'm also talking about Canadian-owned firms doing PR in America for American companies, which is most of what Environics does in the U.S.

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