

Making the Magic

How Public Relations is Handled at the Disney Parks

Elizabeth DeMeo

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Stuart Schwartz, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

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Amy Bonebright, M.A.  
Committee Member

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Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.  
Honors Director

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Date

### Abstract

The Walt Disney Company has always been an organization that has prided itself on its corporate image. One of their biggest successes has been their 11 theme parks across the globe. Ever since its creation in 1955, Disneyland has been known as "the happiest place on earth." However, many wonder how this reputation came to be and how it is being maintained today. To find this answer, one must look to the creative minds behind Disney's public relations. By examining the Disney parks and their public relations history, tactics, crisis management and current and future campaigns, companies can find out the secret behind the success of the Disney parks and find out what works and what does not. By doing so, companies can take a page out of Disney's PR playbook and learn some lessons from the House of Mouse that will help them develop public relations strategies for their own organization.

## Making the Magic

### How Public Relations is Handled at the Disney Parks

#### **Introduction**

Say the word "Disney" and immediately you will have an idea in your mind. Maybe you will conjure up images of pixie dust, fairytales and dreams coming true. Most likely, you will be thinking of one of the Disney parks. According to Disney writer Theodore Kinni (2011), Disney has 11 theme parks that operate in five locations in North America, Europe and Asia. Probably the more well known of these are the United States parks: Disneyland in California and Walt Disney World in Florida. Both parks cover a large portion of land and draw huge crowds every year. However, what makes the Disney parks truly unique is the magic behind them. The Walt Disney Company makes sure that everyone who enters their gates is treated as a special guest, so they can have the experience of a lifetime. Many wonder how Disney has managed to create this magic that has been a part of their theme parks for over 50 years. To find the answer, we must look to the creative minds behind Disney's public relations, from the opening of Disneyland all the way up to the most current marketing campaign. Through careful examination of their history, tactics, strategies, crisis management and campaigns, we can discover what it really means to make the magic behind "the happiest place on earth."

#### **The History of Disneyland's PR**

The official Walt Disney Parks & Resorts fact sheet (2013) referred to Disneyland as a "unique destination built around storytelling and immersive experiences" (p. 1). This statement is not merely an exaggerated public relations pitch; it is actually true. At the time of its opening on July 5, 1955, Disneyland was very different from all of the

amusement parks of its day. Nothing like it had ever been attempted before. This is all due to the man in charge, Walt Disney. It was his vision that gave the park direction and a corporate image that would last for decades to come.

### **Walt Disney's Vision**

Disney research and quality control specialist Bill Griffiths (n.d.) explained how Walt Disney received his inspiration for Disneyland in the 1940s. The story goes that Disney would often take his two daughters to small amusement parks on the weekends. During these trips, he began to envision a different kind of park: a clean and safe place that both children and their parents would enjoy. According to Charles Ridgeway (2007), a press agent who worked at Disneyland during its early years, Disney did not want Disneyland to be just another run-of-the-mill amusement park. He wanted it to be unique and to have a certain image that was different than most of the parks of his day.

Originally, Disney had planned for this park to be built across from the Disney Studios in Burbank, California (Ridgeway, 2007). However, he eventually turned his focus to the 160 acre orange groves in Anahiem, California, just 30 miles south of Los Angeles (Griffiths, n.d.). He found that the land was perfect for what he had envisioned, so he bought it. He and his brother Roy originally planned to spend \$4 million on the creation of this new park; however, six months later, they had spent \$11 million (Ridgeway, 2007). Disney realized that in order for the park to be completed, he would need more money.

### **Early PR Efforts**

**ABC television deal and opening broadcast.** In order to receive these funds, Disney decided to make a deal with The American Broadcasting company, or ABC. They

lent him \$4.5 million in exchange for a piece of the park and outdoor food concessions. This of course, was not the only incentive. ABC also wanted Disney to produce a weekly show. He agreed and used this show, called *Disneyland*, to promote the park 10 months before its scheduled opening (Ridgeway, 2007). For Disney, this was clearly a win-win situation. He would air this weekly show for ABC and receive the funds he needed and free publicity for his park all at the same time. In reality, this was the first public relations campaign that Disneyland had run.

The first *Disneyland* episode was broadcast on October 27, 7:30 p.m (Griffiths, n.d.). According to Duncan Wardle, Vice President of Disney Parks PR, Disney used television to show a behind-the-scenes look at the park he was creating; for example, he introduced the audience to the parks' animatronics and showed how they were built and designed (Schwartzman, 2008). During the time of the first *Disneyland* broadcast, work on Disneyland had already begun, and Disney had planned to have it ready on July 17, 1955 for a live opening broadcast from within the park (Griffiths, n.d.). According to Griffiths, this opening broadcast, called *Dateline Disneyland* was considered "the most ambitious remote broadcast of a major event todate" (para. 4). For this opening day broadcast, Disney chose three famous television and movie stars to serve as hosts: Art Linkletter, host of ABC's daytime show *House Party*; Bob Cummings, star of 1950s and '60s comedies such as *My Living Doll*; and Ronald Reagan, movie actor and future president of the United States (Griffiths, n.d.). Disney also invited several celebrities to the opening, including Danny Thomas, Debbie Reynolds, Frank Sinatra, Jerry Lewis, and Buddy Ebsen (Ridgeway, 2007).

The *Dateline Disney* broadcast opened with Hank Weaver introducing the show: "This afternoon, Disneyland, the world's most fabulous kingdom will be unveiled before an invitational world premiere and you our guests" (Marks & Disney, 1955). The show then jumped to the live broadcast in which Linkletter, Cummings, and Reagan gave their eyewitness accounts of Disneyland's opening, which included Walt Disney's famous dedication:

To all who come to this happy place, welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past, and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world. (Griffiths, n.d., para. 9)

This dedication was followed by a celebratory parade down Main Street and a brief introduction to the several themed lands such as Frontierland and Fantasyland. Thus concluded the opening day broadcast (Marks & Disney, 1955).

The *Dateline Disneyland* broadcast turned out to be a success. According to the ratings, about 90 million viewers had tuned in for the live broadcast (Griffiths, n.d.). Disney's 10 month-long publicity campaign had paid off. People all over the United States had experienced the opening of Disneyland by watching it live from their televisions at home. It was truly a historic moment not only for the park, but for the future of public relations and marketing.

**Handling negative publicity.** Despite the success of the broadcast, the opening day of Disneyland was actually far from perfect. According to Ridgeway (2007), who before his work as a press agent was one of the reporters covering the opening, the day

was hot and the park was overcrowded. Disneyland was only supposed to be opened to those who had received special invitations, included the celebrities and members of the press. However, many people had received counterfeit tickets and snuck into the park when they were not supposed to (Griffiths, n.d.). In addition, the rides broke down frequently, and the restaurants ran out of food. Due to these and several other problems, the opening of the park was commonly referred to as "Black Sunday" (Ridgeway, 2007).

Several Los Angeles business writers wrote very negatively of their first day at Disneyland, and other members of the press warned others to stay away. Fortunately, according to Ridgeway (2007), these negative reports aroused curiosity, and encouraged members of the public to come out and see Disneyland for themselves. In the first seven weeks, more than one million guests visited the park, despite the warning of the critics. Ridgeway said, "The park soon became known around the world as a place where show business celebrities and millions of ordinary people went for something new and different" (Chapter 2, para. 2). Despite the overwhelming attendance, Disney still wanted the press to have a good impression of his new park. So he and other Disneyland managers decided to invite the press guests back a few at a time. Some even went on personal tours of the theme park with Walt Disney himself (Ridgeway, 2007). Of course, this was all after certain changes were made to deal with the problems that had plagued the park on opening day.

**Making changes.** According to Ridgeway (2007), Walt Disney knew that learning from past mistakes was the key to making Disneyland better. "We'll make mistakes, but we'll learn to do it better than anyone," Disney said (Chapter 2, para. 24). During his time at Disneyland, Ridgeway recalled Walt Disney walking the park, talking

with guests and asking for their suggestions for improvements. Ridgeway said: "Walt's management style was totally different from that of most of today's big corporations. He knew exactly what would make the public happy and had supreme confidence in his ability to make the right choices" (Chapter 2, para. 29).

These choices that he made helped improve the quality of the park in several ways. One of these was crowd control. According to Ridgeway (2007), Disney devised a way to deal with the crowds waiting in line for a ride by setting up roped queues. He knew that people waiting in line could be easily bored, so he hired entertainers to keep the guest busy during the long waits. Ridgeway said Disney also insisted upon keeping his park clean. In the early days of Disneyland, cleanups would happen after the park closed. Disney decided that this was not enough; the park had to be maintained during the day as well. "Keep it clean, they discovered, and it will stay clean. Let it collect all day and there will be a mountain of trash" (Chapter 3, para. 18). These were just some of the few ways in which Walt Disney and his employees continued to make Disneyland better after listening to their customers. These business strategies and cleanliness standards are still being used at the Disney Parks today, and they are a part of what makes the Disney experience unique.

### **Present-Day PR Strategies**

#### **Today's Vision**

Walt Disney's vision for the Disney parks is one that is still maintained by his company. The official Disney Parks and Resorts fact sheet describes the Disney vision as a "commitment to excellence in quality, storytelling and guest service that has been a hallmark of our organization for more than 50 years" (2013, p. 1). In his podcast

interview, Wardle discussed the advantage of the Disney Company being founded by a storyteller; he said that it gives Disney a unique legacy and allows for them to provide a special experience for guests (Schwartzman, 2008). With this legacy comes great responsibility, however. As the world changes and technology marches forward, the Disney Company has had to adapt their strategies to cater to the demands of today. These include relevant public relations tactics such as brand management, media coverage, and strategic philanthropy. Some of these tactics were even pioneered by Walt Disney himself.

### **Implementation**

**Brand management.** As stated earlier, Walt Disney had intended for Disneyland to be unlike any theme park in the world. This idea was reflected in everything from its construction to its organizational culture. Ridgeway (2007) said that Disneyland had been designed as a work of art, with bright colors, trees, flowers, and decor that matched the theme of each respective world. To accomplish this, Walt Disney hired artists, engineers, sculptors, and special effects people from his film studio to help with the construction of Disneyland. He referred to them as "Imagineers" (Mendenhall, 2005).

The engineers and designers were not the only ones given unique names however. In order to maintain the idea that Disneyland was not an amusement park but a live show experience, Walt Disney referred to his employees as "cast members" and their uniforms as "costumes" (Ridgeway, 2007). These names are still used today and are all part of the brand image that Disney had envisioned so long ago. Therefore, the officials at the Disney parks understand how important these elements are in creating that unique image and have worked hard to maintain it.

**Media coverage.** Ever since the opening of Disneyland, the Disney company has always incorporated media coverage into their public relations strategies. Today, this media coverage is still a driving force behind Disney's publicity. Reporters and press people are always invited for every new attraction or major anniversary that Disney holds, ensuring adequate coverage of every event (Ridgeway, 2007). This included Disneyland's 50th anniversary celebration and other major campaigns, which will be discussed later. Often the Disney company will pull out all the stops to promote the launch of a new campaign or anniversary, creating a memorable event with the purpose of getting as much media attention as possible.

**Strategic philanthropy.** Part of a good public relations campaign includes strategic philanthropy and community responsibility. According to their official fact sheet (2013), Disney "believe[s] that being a good global citizen means using our companywide resources to make a positive change in the communities in which we operate" (p. 2). In 2013, Disney's charitable giving reached \$370 million; that same year, they also celebrated 30 years of their VoluntEARS program, an organization made of Disney cast members who volunteer their time with charities and community service (Momdjian, 2014). At Disney, they prioritize their community involvement, showing that they care enough to volunteer time and money into making the world a better place.

### **Disney and Crisis Management**

In any business things do not always go according to plan. Such is the case for the Disney parks as well. Despite how orderly and well-managed Disneyland and Disney World can be, crises can still occur. Some may be the fault of the park, but others may be completely due to circumstances beyond anyone's control. No matter what the case may

be, it is important for a prestigious company such as Disney to be equipped to handle these crises and maintain the reputation that they have worked so hard to cultivate.

### **Park Accidents**

Accidents happen, and the Disney parks are no exception. Even the "happiest place on earth" has had several tragic accidents. These accidents, which happened in the late '90s and early 2000s required Disney officials to adopt a comprehensive crisis management plan. In a case study on Disneyland's crisis management, California State University Fullerton student Susan Stewart (2004) said that in the past, "Disneyland's modus operandi in times of crisis was to perform internal investigation and maintain a tight lid on the incident, so as not to spoil the magical image of the park" (p. 4). However, this all changed after a fatal park accident in 1998.

**Columbia ship accident.** Stewart (2004) explained that on Christmas Eve of 1998, a cast member attempted to tether the Columbia sailing ship to the dock before it had fully slowed down. An 8 pound metal mooring cleat broke off the ship and hit a married couple, killing the husband and severely injuring the wife. The employee who tried to tie up the boat also ended up with a lacerated foot. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article, Disneyland officials kept the police away for over 4 hours after the accident occurred, and only let them on the scene after employees had cleaned up most of the blood from the accident (Yoshino & Reza, 2003). Stewart's case study (2004) reveals that Disney did not release any details until two days later, when they made a brief statement about checking over the mechanics and structure of the ship involved in the incident. Eventually, the investigation uncovered that the accident was caused by the employee, who lacked adequate training due to budget cutbacks made after Disney's 1997

financial evaluation. This was the first time that Disney had ever been fully at fault for a park accident.

Details about the accident spread quickly and the press went wild, decrying Disney's negligence. Due to lack of information and poor crisis management, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Orange County Register* released several negative press statements about Disneyland (Stewart, 2004). In spite of all of this, Stewart (2004) explained that Disney continued to remain quiet in an effort to preserve their image. They did not issue a public apology, take responsibility for the accident, or even try to assure the public of the safety of their other rides. Instead of preserving their image, the Disney Company only managed to make matters worse by keeping silent.

**Safety revisions and campaign.** Despite all that had happened with the 1998 accident, Disneyland officials did not put significant changes into effect until after a second accident occurred two years later. According to Stewart (2004), in 2000 a 4 year-old fell out of Roger Rabbit's Car Toon Spin Ride, receiving permanent brain damage as a result of the accident. This time Disney learned from the past and cooperated with the investigation. However, they still remained quiet in an attempt to maintain their image. Once again, this only resulted in negative press.

It was after this accident that Disneyland officials realized they needed to change the way they handled their crisis management. They began to implement a new safety campaign. In doing so, they hired Leslie Goodman as their new Vice President of Strategic Communications as well as promoting Greg Hale from Regulatory Compliance to Chief Safety Officer (Stewart, 2004). Thanks to both Goodman and Hale, Disney was able to revise their old policies and put together a two-phase safety campaign.

Stewart's case study (2004) outlines the two phases of Disney's new safety campaign. In phase one, which began in June 2002, Disney put together a 30-page report on safety, as well as a public awareness campaign to let their guests know of their new safety measures. This included press releases, fact sheets, and information available on their official website. Phase two, which began in May of the next year, was much more involved and even a bit creative. During this time, Disney put together what they called the "Wild About Safety" campaign. This campaign, featuring Disney characters Timon and Pumbaa, helped to educate guests about park safety in an entertaining way without distracting from the fantasy of the park. For this campaign, Disney created clever taglines such as "Keep Arms, Hooves, Tusks and Tails Inside the Vehicle" (p. 10). Disney integrated these safety taglines into almost all of their print materials, including guide maps, brochures, activity books and even trading pins. The second phase had barely been in place for very long until yet another accident happened at Disneyland. This time however, Disneyland officials were ready.

**Big Thunder Mountain Railroad accident.** According to Stewart's case study (2004), the real test of Disney's new safety campaign came on September 5, 2003. That day, there was an accident with the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride. A train derailed leaving 22 year-old Marcelo Torres killed and 10 other guests injured. Immediately after the accident, officials contacted central command, who called 911. Within minutes, the paramedics and police arrived, and Disney handed complete control of the investigation over to them.

Stewart (2004) said that the biggest difference was how Disneyland handled the crisis. They no longer kept quiet. Disneyland president Cynthia Harriss released a

statement offering condolences to the families involved in the accident and referred all investigation related questions to the authorities. Even Disney CEO Michael Eisner drove from Burbank to Anaheim to hold a press conference about the accident. He expressed his apologies and assured the public of Disneyland's cooperation with the police to get to the bottom of the accident. This was the first time Disney had ever held a accident-related press conference, and the public noticed. The *Los Angeles Times* released an article about Disney's handling of the accident and quoted amusement park safety advocate Kathy Fackler, who despite being one of Disney's biggest critics applauded them for their handling of the accident (Yoshino & Reza, 2003). Needless to say, Disney's crisis management was a huge turnaround from the 1998 Columbia ship accident, and was even called "a near-textbook example of crisis management" by the *Los Angeles Times* (para. 5).

### **Disney & 9/11**

It is also worth noting how the Disney parks handled another crisis: the terrorist attacks of the September 11, 2001. These attacks happened when Islamic terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners, crashing two of them into the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth plane was also headed for D.C. but crashed in Pennsylvania after several passengers managed to fight off the terrorists. Huffington Post blog writer Jim Hill (2011) wrote an article about how Disney responded to the tragedy. Their two main concerns were keeping their guests safe and maintaining a calm atmosphere. As soon as word broke out about what had happened with the World Trade Center in New York City, the Disney Company closed all their

theme parks in the states. They feared that due to the high volume of guests, the parks would be a prime target for another terrorist attack.

In Hill's article (2011), a veteran cast member recalled that the employees immediately ushered the guests out of the park. While they did not make a public announcement about the terrorist attacks, the cast members did inform individual guests who asked why the park the was closing. As they left, the visitors were given complimentary tickets to make up for having their day cut short. One of the tourists recalled returning to the resort that day and seeing all the cast members trying the best they could to keep the guests calm and make them feel safe. The parks reopened the next day, but the crisis management was far from over.

Hill (2011) said that in the days following 9/11, cast members had to continue to keep their visitors happy and keep their mind off of what happened. One cast member who worked the Jungle Cruise ride remembered having to change his comedy routine, which included a joke about a plane crash. While it had been innocuous before, the joke suddenly seemed inappropriate in light of what had occurred, and the employee had to recognize this and make the appropriate changes. The cast members said that the hardest part of all of this was "work[ing] 8+ hour shifts 'making the magic' to distract everyone from the heavy shadow of the 9/11 attacks" (para. 31). Nevertheless, the employees did their job in a commendable show of crisis management.

### **Successful Campaigns of the Past**

#### **Happiest Celebration on Earth**

One of the more notable campaigns was the "Happiest Celebration on Earth." This was an 18 month-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of Disneyland, starting in

May 2005 and ending in September 2006 (PR Newswire, 2005). In an article for Ad Age, Michael Mendenhall (2005) referred to the campaign as "an opportunity to remind people of their bond with the Disney theme park" (para. 10). It was also the first time that all the Disney parks worldwide joined together to celebrate. Two important aspects of this campaign was the official 50th anniversary podcast and the live simulcast.

**Podcast.** One of the unique things about the "Happiest Celebration on Earth" campaign was its embrace of modern technology. Specifically, this was through the use of the podcast. According to a press release on PR Newswire (2005), Disney held a three day podcast from May 3 to 5 of 2005. This official podcast included celebrity interviews, music, stories of Disneyland's history, and finally, live coverage of the official 50th celebration. The Internet audio show was free and available for anyone to listen to through Disneyland's official website.

In his interview with Schwartzman (2008), Wardle said that this podcast allowed the company to engage their audience and start a dialogue with them. He also discussed how the podcast offered fans the opportunity to get a behind-the-scenes look at the Disney parks. While there was a concern as to whether or not this would spoil the "Disney magic," Wardle explained that the choice to let the audience in on the secrets was something that Walt Disney used to do with the Disneyland show back in the 50s. Thus, this podcast was a great opportunity to follow in the footsteps of their founder and offer that same look behind the curtain. The same behind-the-scenes look was a key factor in the live simulcast as well.

**50th celebration and live simulcast.** On May 5, 2005, the official 50th anniversary celebration of Disneyland began. Regina Hinrichs (2005), a member of the

press who was attending the event in Orlando, described the celebration. All the Disney parks worldwide participated in the simulcast through a live satellite feed set up on a large screen right next to the castles of the respective parks. In California, former and current CEOs Michael Eiser and Robert Iger spoke about Disneyland's heritage and Walt Disney's vision. According to Hinrichs (2005), the real surprise occurred with the appearance of 93 year-old Art Linkletter, the host of the opening day broadcast of Disneyland back in 1955. After the live simulcast, each park held their own festivities. In Disney World, Broadway stars such as Jennifer Holiday and Andrea McArdle performed their renditions of classic Disney songs. Lastly, in pure Disney fashion, the celebration day ended with fireworks and confetti.

### **Where Dreams Come True**

Shortly after the "Happiest Celebration on Earth" campaign came to an end, Disney was already at work on their next campaign, "Where Dreams Come True." According to the official fact sheet (2008), the campaign started in 2006 and ran until 2008. In the press release (2006), several elements were highlighted as key factors in this new campaign. Following the success of Disneyland's 50th anniversary, Disney decided to focus once again on a worldwide scope for the campaign, incorporating "consistent global messaging" into all 11 Disney parks (para. 4). The marketing team at Disney also wanted to encourage their consumers to customize their own Disney vacation; for example, allowing for visitors to receive their own personalized park tickets (Fact sheet, 2008). The press release (2006) also announced the hiring of top advertising talent, such as photographer Gus Butera and directors Tarsem and Leslie Dektor. They would be working alongside Disney's in-house creative team to put together a unique advertising

campaign with a clear message that could be used to promote all of Disney's parks worldwide.

**Year of A Million Dreams campaign.** According to the press release (2006), the "Where Dreams Come True" campaign included a sub-campaign known as "Year of a Million Dreams." This was announced with a special press event in New York City in June 2006 (Weiss, 2009). Launched on October 1, 2006, "Year of a Million Dreams" incorporated a giveaway in which cast members would award "a million dreams, both large and small, to guests selected through random process" (para. 12). These dreams could include anything from a stay in the VIP hotel suite inside the Cinderella castle at the Magic Kingdom in Disney World to private meet-and-greets with Disney characters. The first of these dreams was awarded to the Spangler family from Ohio just five days after the campaign launch; the family got the entire Magic Kingdom to themselves for a day (Fact sheet, 2008). Even the decor of the Disney parks was changed to reflect the "Year of a Million Dreams" campaign, with banners on streetlights and bright pastel-colored swirls on the monorails and signage (Weiss, 2009).

Despite the apparent success of the campaign and the increased attendance at the parks, Yesterland essay writer Werner Weiss (2009) noted several gripes he had with the campaign. First of all, due to the odds, there was no real guarantee that an average family traveling to a Disney park would win anything at all, let alone one of the bigger grand prizes. Weiss said, "It's hard to imagine a family planning to spend thousands of dollars on a Walt Disney World vacation because they just might be picked at random to win something" (para. 23). Secondly, the decor that Disney used to mark the "Year of a Million Dreams" clashed with the already established themes of the parks and their

respective worlds. Instead of being a subtle reminder, the decor only detracted from the overall experience and took away some of the magic of the parks. Lastly, the promotion went on for what Weiss believed was way too long. Instead of ending in 2007 as it was originally scheduled, Disney's marketing decided to extend the campaign into 2008, including more prizes and other slight changes. By then, Weiss feared that the campaign had become tiresome and worn-out. However, despite the criticisms of Weiss and several other Disney fans online, the campaign continued and manage to become a success.

**Annie Leibovitz photography.** As part of the advertising campaign for "Year of a Million Dreams," Disney commissioned American portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz. She created a series of photographs using celebrities to recreate famous Disney scenes, such as Scarlett Johansson as Cinderella running away from the ball as the clock strikes twelve (Maclelod, 2007). Other notable celebrities used for the advertisements included pop star Beyoncé Knowles, actress Whoopie Goldberg, and British soccer player David Beckham (Keck, 2007). These portraits appeared as print advertisements in the March 2007 issues of several popular magazines including *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *GQ* (Maclelod, 2007). The glamorous Disney photos gained quite a bit of recognition in press. William Keck (2007) of *USA Today* wrote, "When it comes to wishing upon a star, Annie Leibovitz has far more influence than Jiminy Cricket" (para. 1). Though the "Year of a Million Dreams" campaign ended in 2008, Leibovitz's photos are still available to view online.

## **Current & Future Campaigns**

### **Growth and Changes**

Walt Disney once said, "Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world" (as cited in "Disney Parks & Resorts Fact Sheet," 2013, p. 1). Since the start of Disneyland and Disney World, several significant changes have been made to the parks to make the guest experience even better. More rides have been opened and older rides have been taken out or refurbished. Most recently, in December of 2012, New Fantasyland opened at the Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World. This doubled the size of Fantasyland and added two new castles and restaurants (p. 2). Due to all the new developments and attractions constantly being added, the Disney experience can be new for every single guest, no matter how often they visit the parks.

Aside from the physical changes to the parks, there has also been a slight shift in Disney's marketing efforts. In his 2008 interview with Schwartzman, Wardle predicted that Disney's future public relations efforts would include more consumer dialogue. In other words, he foresaw the company directly engaging their guests with media relevant to them and embracing technology to create interactive experiences. For example, Wardle mentioned Disney's Virtual Magic Kingdom, a virtual online world which allows the 8-12 year-old tween demographic to create their own avatars, play games, and score points to win virtual merchandise. These points can even be earned in the real-world parks, through scavenger hunts and other activities (Schwartzman, 2008).

Wardle also predicted a trend toward including more mobile phone updates and apps for the parks, including a character finder which helps guests locate their favorite

Disney characters within the park (Schwartzman, 2008). This prediction came true with the launch of the "Mobile Magic" app, as well as the more recent "My Disney Experience" app in August 2012. This app allows guests to check wait times for park attractions, look up maps, and even make dining reservations, from both in and outside of the park (Brigante, 2012). Aside from the online experiences and mobile phone apps, Disney has also made great progress in the area of social media marketing, through the use of their public blog and their most recent marketing campaign.

### **Disney Parks Blog**

In 2009, Disney Parks launched their official blog as part of their corporate website. According to Disney Parks' social media director Thomas Smith, the Disney Parks blog "serves as the hub for its social media presences" (Wilson, 2012, para. 5). Smith said the idea behind the blog was to let Disney fans connect with park employees, cast members and Imagineers. More than 70 writers contribute to the blog, posting about 7 or 8 times a day according to a highly scheduled editorial calendar.

The blog authors write about everything, from special events taking place at the parks to behind-the-scenes look at various attractions. Their wish is to let their audience in on more of the Disney experience, generating content that will resonate with fans. For instance, in Wilson's article (2012), Smith noted that using search engine optimization tools, the blog writers were able to determine that their audience was already beginning to search for Christmas-related keywords during the summer. Thus, they planned their blog posts accordingly, listening to their target and providing more of the content they knew their readers would want to see.

### **Show Your Disney Side**

In late 2013, Disney Parks began a unique campaign to make the most of their social media and online presence. This campaign, referred to as "Show Your Disney Side" was first noticed in the summer of 2013, with mockup ads circulating around the Internet (Gundell, 2013). These advertisements featured a girl and boy dressed in the style of Disney characters Minnie Mouse and Woody from Toy Story with the words "Find/share your Disney side. Everyone has one. So this year, let loose, come play and bring out the fun in your family at the place where dreams come true" (para. 4). The guests in the ad were illustrating a trend known as "Disneybounding," which was popularized by Disney fans on the Internet and on social media sites such as Tumblr. With Disneybounding, guests at the Disney parks express their creativity by using everyday clothes to dress in the style of their favorite Disney characters, picking color schemes or accessorizing with jewelry, shoes or purses to give off the impression of a specific character or theme. With the integration of Disneybounding into their marketing campaign, Disney was making a statement: that this new campaign would be all about encouraging visitors to share their Disney experiences using social media.

**Social media all-stars campaign launch.** On the official campaign launch for "Share Your Disney Side," Disney's marketing team had a special plan in store. According to the official Disney Parks blog, on October 31, 2013, Disney invited various Internet celebrities to the Disneyland resort to document their experience and, as the campaign stated, share their Disney side (Glover, 2013). Special guests were specifically picked from their work on several popular social media sites, including YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Vine. Stars included Internet meme sensations Grumpy Cat and

Zeddie Little, who gained fame on the Internet as the Ridiculously Photogenic Guy. Other well-known Internet celebrities such as acapella singer Mike Tompkins and comedian Mark Malkoff were also invited to Disneyland, and featured their experiences in videos which were posted to the Disney Parks YouTube account. This campaign generated quite a buzz on the Internet, and the videos of the Internet stars at Disneyland were shared all across social media.

**Vine Your Disney Side contest.** Another big aspect of the "Share Your Disney Side" campaign was a contest through Vine. According to Disney Travel Examiner Debra Peterson (2013), on October 1, Disney Parks launched their official Vine account and posted up a video detailing a contest they would be running for all Disney fans with a Vine account. The contest was called "Vine Your Disney Side" and the challenge was for fans to create a 6-second video to showcase their love for either Disneyland or Walt Disney World. In order to be considered for the contest, fans had to submit a video under the hashtag #DisneySideContest. Selected videos were placed on Disney's official Vine account beginning on October 7, and the creators would receive \$1000. They would also be entered for a chance at the grand prize: a trip to a Disney park and \$10,000 to make additional Disney Side videos. The brilliance of the "Vine Your Side" campaign was that it called upon Disney fans who were already active on social media to create their own promotional materials for the park. This generated a sort of honesty that would be hard to recreate with actors hired to do a commercial or pose for a print ad, and it would encourage Disney guests to talk about their experiences and share them with others.

## **What We Can Learn from Disney's PR**

### **Deliver Excellent Customer Service**

First of all, if you wish to model your company's public relations after those of the Walt Disney Company, you need to be willing to deliver excellent customer service. In his book, Kinni (2011) highlighted the importance of keeping guests satisfied. If your customers are happy, you can easily convince them to be repeat customers and even to recommend your products or services to their friends. If your customers are unhappy, you may end up losing them, as well as any other business they might have generated through word-of-mouth recommendations. What does good service look like? According to Kinni (2011), this means "exceeding your guests' expectations by paying attention to every detail of the delivery of your products and services" ("Defining Practical Magic," para. 3). As mentioned earlier, Walt Disney had this keen eye for detail when he created Disneyland. His team of Imagineers built Disneyland with the same magic that surrounded the making of their feature films, and his organizational culture continued to nurture the idea of Disneyland being a magical experience instead of a simple amusement park. Campaigns such as "Year of Million Dreams" and "Show Your Disney Side" emphasize the customer experience by offering incentives and encouraging them to make their Disney vacation their own.

### **Remain Flexible**

A second lesson that can be taken from Disney's public relations is the ability to remain flexible. In other words, you need to keep your eyes open for improvements to be made and respond accordingly. This was exactly what Walt Disney did at the start of Disneyland. He talked with guests and got their opinions about what they would like to

see and what needed to be changed. A successful company is never afraid of change. In his interview, Wardle said that it is important to embrace change, as this is the only way to ensure you will stay relevant to your audience and be able to reach them and not get left behind (Schwartzman, 2008). This is especially important in crisis management as well. In her case study, Stewart (2004) advises businesses facing a crisis to tell the truth, back it up with action, listen to your publics, put future strategies in place, and remain calm and patient (Stewart, 2004). By making changes to deal with crises, you show your audience that you care about their perception and are willing to take steps to fix a problem.

### **Connect Emotionally**

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, in order to create a loyal base of customers that are dedicated to your business and its products, you need to connect emotionally with your audience. In his article Mendenhall states that "the greatest brands are those with the strongest emotional connection to their customers" (para. 1) Smith (2012) re-emphasized this idea in PR Daily when he said that exact marketing phrases or campaign taglines may not be remembered "but how we make you feel will last" (para. 21). This emotional connection is something that the Disney company has mastered. For decades, they have branded their parks as "the happiest place on earth." Disney is so much a part of everyone's childhood especially in America. The emotional connection runs deep, and Disney has recognized that and made the most of it through their branding and marketing. If a company wishes to be successful, they must understand the power of emotions and know how to create a product and deliver services that can fulfill that need. If they do that, they can be one step closer to making the magic.

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