



Small Town Girl With Big City Smarts



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Editor

Operating a successful Midwestern public relations company that competes head-to-head with some of the leading big city firms might seem overwhelming; that is, if you don't know Lisa Orman.



The energetic and truly devoted president and founder of Madison, Wis.-based KidStuff Public Relations is a spin doctor extraordinaire using big city smarts to support her growing portfolio of 23 clients, some first-time manufacturers.

"Obviously, if a New York- or LA-based client wants a local agency that they can see face-to-face often, then I won't compete for that. But for clients who are comfortable that we live and work in a virtual world, and have team members scattered around the country and globe, who are looking for rates at half to a third or less than big city agencies charge, we are a great fit. We have been hired often because a client is in the Midwest themselves, or have been in their past, and they prefer the Midwestern work and cultural ethic. They also like that we are in the central time zone, readily available to other time zones," said Orman.

Speaking of time, Orman spends nearly 97% of hers at her desk reading through nearly 250 viable emails daily, scouring toy industry and professional trades to keep up with the latest trends, and most importantly, crafting strategies that will create a sense of urgency among journalists, retailers, and ultimately consumers, to seek out and purchase her clients' products.

A strong infrastructure also keeps things running efficiently with good business tools like Quickbooks for invoicing, Inflow for inventory management of client samples, UPS Worldship to send product samples out professionally and efficiently, the fastest Internet service available in the area, managed IP phone service, Skype, the most up-to-date software for photography, documents, etc. A redesign of its website is also done every few years.

It seems to be working as her clients have been the recipients of NAPPA Gold Awards, Parents' Choice Awards, the Family Fun Toy of the Year, and the Good Housekeeping's Good Buy Award. Personally, Orman has been featured in PR Week, honored with two Wonder Women in Toys Awards, and was featured in Wisconsin Woman magazine.

"I have learned that in order to be successful and help your clients' thrive, you need to always do as you promise and do it well. It isn't always easy because some clients don't understand how sacred relationships are with the reporter who may need a sample ASAP, a quote to round out a story or a key piece of information on deadline," said the mother of Emily, 17 and Jack, 14.

Being sensitive to the needs of the press stems from her own seven-year stint as a writer for publications such as the Des Moines Register, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek and USA. She also spent time as a retail and media strategic marketing consultant, traveling the world to see and learn about the best retail concepts in the marketplace.

Borne out this experience were the building blocks for her career which started about 17 years ago when she learned the ropes from a neighbor who owned a public relations company that specialized in real estate.

As luck would have it, she spotted an ad that Zany Brainy was looking for a store manager for a new store in her then hometown of Chicago and it clicked. If they are looking for a store manager, then surely they'll need a publicist to pave the way as they entered the new market.

A meeting led to the Zany Brainy gig (her partner opted out after the first year) and seven years of learning the ins and outs of the toy business while also compiling a long list of key manufacturer and press contacts.

When Zany Brainy filed Chapter 11 in May 2001, Orman was not only without her first client, but only client. Some time spent pounding the pavement and using her vast resources has led to a full client roster; a mix of first-time manufacturers like Funnybone Toys, Slick Sugar and Neatnik Saucer and small to mid-sized companies like Peaceable Kingdom and Prime Time Toys who have great ideas and products, but need some professional guidance.

"Much of my early experiences provided me with the qualitative and quantitative analysis to have the confidence to tell the top executive what they need or don't need to do in order to be successful," she explained.

To keep her skills fresh, Orman is an active member of the Public Relations Society of America, a group that offers "extremely updated and expert articles for publicists and the latest media trends. We use Cision for our media database and frequently view webinars on the latest tools, trends and "how-to" tips. She also studies other companies websites and Facebook pages to see what they are up to and keeps a running dialog with editors of the major trade magazines and national media.

These strong relationships have helped Orman and her small staff get clients write-ups in popular magazines and newspapers, nominated for key awards, booked on TV shows and featured on mommy blogs.

Among her greatest accomplishments was helping Citiblocs earn 37 awards in two years (including a recent nod as a finalist in the 4th Annual Fat Brain Toys Awards) for its wooden construction blocks and a spot on the Today Show as well as the success of CARES Kids Fly Safe, an FAA approved child aviation restraint harness developed by a recently retired 73-year-old client who didn't know anything about the business. With Orman's help, the product left the confines of a ziploc bag and thrived with a website, marketing plan, attractive packaging and ultimately a manufacturer in Amsafe which purchased the patent and rights and has sold nearly 100,000 to date.

She is hoping to lock in yet another success story for new client Locker Lookz, a company founded by two moms that specializes in creating adhesive-free wallpaper, battery-operated lighting and decorative touches for lockers. After the first year, store penetration rose from 80 to 1,200 outlets and got a great boost from a page one story in "The New York Times" as well as segments on "Good Morning America" and "The Ellen DeGeneris Show" this past October.

But not every client finds a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. In fact, tempering clients' expectations is one of the most challenging jobs of a publicist. "I always explain to clients that exposure on a primetime talk or morning show, in print or online is fabulous, but it won't necessarily translate into instant sales. Sometimes it's the slow build that truly creates a buzz."

At the end of the day (many long ones spent strategizing, putting out fires and calming fears), she believes that "public relations is a brand practice, and your publicist is a keeper of your image. They should help you with clear messaging so that consumers and retailers know what you want them to think of when they hear your company or product name. Many times clients get cluttered in their messaging and get bogged down in their back story or aren't clear in their branding message, so we help them gain focus and be clear. We help them understand where they fit in the market. You know you've done your job when a media outlet calls you to ask for something about a client when they are working on a topic that relates to that branding message, or when customers walk into stores asking for a product or company by name," explained Orman.

Getting products in front of mommy bloggers remains a top priority. "We first understood the importance of mom bloggers about six years ago and their impact on us and our clients continues to grow. We have evolved and will continue to change how we communicate and work with them. They are invaluable in the future because the trend toward online and mobile research before consumers will buy products will continue. Therefore, blog reviews will become more and more important to have and use in the right ways to convince other moms to buy our clients' products and services. I think you have to both be open to change and new ways of working together, but at the same time, stand firm on principles and be clear on the business relationship," said Orman.

The wordsmith is in a good place right now and wants to continue to lead in the new areas of communication and technology, and help clients understand how to use them to their best advantage. For the future, she sees herself in "the same place, at the same desk (hopefully with some of the same clients along with new ones), but nevertheless, working in new and innovative ways we can't even imagine using yet."