

February 2007

## **Six Tips to Avoid a Communications Disaster in Hotel Takeovers**

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

All too often these days hotel acquisitions and management takeovers happen without any communications plan in place before the announcement is made to the media. A lot of attention is given to lawyers checking announcements, but little to thinking through the implications to all of the people who will affect the hotel's success after the takeover – from government officials, the media and travel trade, to staff and condo owners. And yet, the stakes are great. Ineffective handling of the announcement can result in lost business, tarnishing of the image of the property and management company (did they sell because business was weak), staff defections, and poor government relations. Here is a list of six tips to remember before making the announcement:

1. Involve your public relations manager or agency from the onset as well as the PR rep of the other company or property. Bring them in to develop a communications plan when negotiations get serious, and certainly before the letter of intent is signed. The PR manager or agency that has been handling the hotel knows the sensitivities and any existing issues that need to be considered or addressed.
2. Identify all possible audiences (“publics”) who might be impacted by the change, from staff and media to government officials, condo owners (if applicable), and the industry.
3. Prepare a statement asap that can be used to address any inquiries or calls as soon as serious discussions are taking place. This should be used reactively if there's a leak and the media should call and / or if the staff start to spread rumors. The timing on the release of any statement is delicate. You don't want to act prematurely; however, you also don't want false rumors floating around which can be just as damaging if not more so.
4. Prepare a “Q & A” where you anticipate all questions that will be asked by different parties and the answers. This will avoid your getting caught off guard by an eager reporter or top client. Ensure that all staff -- from the bellhop or doorman on up -- understands that they are to direct all inquiries, including those from guests, to the PR manager or other responsible executive.
5. Lay out tactics for addressing each of the publics. Sometimes a news release or letter will suffice or other times a major event or personal calls to key clients and opinion makers is called for. You also need to develop a plan for communicating effectively with employees (the employees should hear the news before it is given to the media).
6. Decide which of the parties will be the media contact. If the existing hotel management will be out immediately after the announcement, then there's no question; however, if there will be an overlap and if the desire is to maintain the value of the hotel name, it is critical that the current public relations contact be listed to project the continuity of management.

Above all, Prepare, Prepare, Prepare.

## Ten Building Blocks To Turning Around The Image Of A Distressed Destination

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

1. **Get out the positive news.** There is always something positive to say and write about even in what seems like the darkest hours. New tourism appointments, new flight service, new attractions, increased cruise ship arrivals, festivals, events, hotel packages and hotel developments make for positive news that helps balance the negatives.

The question always arises about how to deal with U.S. State Department travel warnings? Keep in contact with senior U.S. government officials in your destination and definitely put them on your mailing list to receive your news releases.

2. **Target niches.** The fracturing of travel niches and offshoots of special interest travel are exploding as never before. Special interest travelers are desperate to reconnect with their own kind and it's easier to reach them than ever before via low/no cost options such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, SMS (Simple Messaging Service), multicasting, podcasts and the exponential number of online media and blogs. Exploit these niches by focusing on growth areas such as art, historic, and educational travel. Consider tapping into 'Voluntourism' - the integrated combination of charitable voluntary service in a destination combined with the traditional elements of travel and tourism - arts, culture, geography, history, and recreation. Target "edgy" magazines and outlets with offbeat, unusual angles. And don't forget to reach out to expatriates living abroad, urging them to become the new tourists in their own country, generating nostalgia and enthusiasm for their heritage and history.
3. **Celebrate your celebrations.** Normalcy is marked by parties and celebrations. With good reason New Orleans tourism's first priority after hurricane Katrina was to stage and promote its annual Carnival. Use every opportunity to tie into these events with hotel packages, discounted fares etc that will encourage travel and generate news.
4. **Promote a destination within a destination.** Cities within a country can promote themselves as a stand alone destination. An excellent example is the job done by Cartagena, Colombia.
5. **When the time is right, make a big splash.** Get out there and make big announcements at the right place, the right time. Leverage these opportunities to get the most attention. One of our first initiatives in getting tourism back to Grenada after the U.S./Eastern Caribbean intervention was orchestrating a press conference with Cunard cruise line at the White House. This was to announce the resumption of cruise ship calls.
6. **Reach out to opinion makers and media in the industry.** Opinion makers create the "buzz" and set the agenda as they're listened to by colleagues. Reach out to them with one-on-one meetings.
7. **Images speak louder than words.** Today's world is inundated with news and multimedia. It's about less copy and more about images, which will ultimately make the most impact. One of the best investments you'll ever make will be in strong visuals and video footage.
8. **Have a crisis communications plan to minimize the damage when a crisis occurs.** Define what triggers a crisis and execution of the plan. Sometimes the best course of action might be to wait and see rather than risk fanning the fire. Be prepared with a plan spelling out key audiences

and laying out staff and equipment requirements. Have a communication chain of command (internal and external), practice crisis scenarios and recommended action, and have prepared statements and templates of news releases on hand.

9. **Do media training.** It's not just what you say but how you say it. Designate a dedicated spokesperson and make sure that person is media trained, practicing the handling of anticipated tough questions and key message points.
10. **Image building is a process.** Continuity is crucial throughout a changing environment. Marketing programs require cooperation on the part of the destination's departments, programs and offices, which is ever more important in times of transition. It's no good to embark on a program, and then change or abandon it after a year.

(This is a summary of a speech given by Karen Weiner Escalera at the Haiti Tourism and Economic Summit held in Miami, Florida in July 2006)

## **Watch Out Miami, Here Comes Generation Jones**

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

Miami, the right place at the right time. Times led by the gestalt of the baby boomers, the “me” generation, driven by achievement, success and individuality. Miami is now famous for its love of conspicuous consumption, celebrated for its money and power and its philosophy of “viva yo” (cheers for me). More is more. However, is change in the wind?

If you follow prominent trend watchers from near and afar, the times are already changing. And change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not slow going, so hold onto your hats and look out for Generation Jones (ages 41 to 52, the largest generation in U.S. history [www.generationjones.com](http://www.generationjones.com)) who will be leaving their mark and setting the agenda.

Trend watchers, including Chris Sanderson of the Future Laboratory, cite a move to a “considered but conservative view of culture, values and social attributes”. Even Todd Cunningham, SVP of Brand Strategy and Planning at MTV, icon of the Diddy crazed generation and all that it stands for, said values are what will resonate with the young, who are reverting to the beliefs of their grandparents’ upbringing. Where Boomers were driven by individuality and self, the new generation will be more civic minded, embracing a sense of community. As Sanderson said, VIP will come to mean “Very Important Planet” where the environment and ecology will resonate as never before, along with the practices of fair trade and ethical brands. It’s happening. General Electric announced that they’re “going green”, Starbucks has touted their fair trade practices for some time, and even Wal-Mart just announced they’ll be selling organic foods.

The trend setters will not be the Paris Hiltons and Lindsay Lohans of the world, but celebrities who ally themselves with social issues. It’s no coincidence that George Clooney, who donated his five-figure Oscar goody bag to a charity auction and made a highly publicized trip to Darfur, is on the cover of Vanity Fair’s environmental issue and is profiled alongside other environmentalists, such as Julia Roberts and Ed Norton. “Brangelina” is hotter than ever – not only for their celebrity but for bringing Third World philanthropic issues to the forefront –education, land mines and refugees, to their high profile attendance at the World Economic Summit in Switzerland earlier this year.

Authenticity and essentialism will make a comeback across the board, from the food we eat to packaging and even architecture...doing good for our bodies and the environment. We’ve gone as far as we can go with dishes like parmesan infused snapper with foam of green peas and raspberry coulis. How about a piece of truly fresh grilled wild snapper caught that morning (as opposed to fresh frozen) with just harvested organic peas? Rather than another designer-branded condo or public area devoted to zen, Generation Jones will be looking for architecture that is green and luxe. Take Austria’s Solar Tube house which utilizes solar rays and deflects the damaging UV ones, or the “inverted umbrella” house in the Bahamas, whose roof pipes funnels scarce rainwater to cisterns. The National Building Museum in Washington just ran an exhibit based on the book “The Green House” whose message is “going green doesn’t mean going granola”.

With Generation Jones, time will be the biggest luxury. Technology was supposed to make us time rich, but we never seem to have enough time regardless of one’s wealth. Quality of life will be increasingly defined by what gives or takes away our time --- traffic probably being the greatest culprit of time deprivation, especially now as South Florida’s population continues to soar. Local consumers, dwellers, business owners and leaders, will need to take a greater part in decision-making on issues, such as traffic, by voting in ballots and with their pocketbooks.

What does all this mean for Miami? The UK's *Viewpoint* magazine dubbed the next era to be the one of "Reenlightenment." Leaders in business and government will need to start the debate and examine civic society, citizenship and rights versus responsibility and, following from that, taking action. It's interesting to note that the Democratic Party is considering the theme "For the Common Good" for their next election platform.

"Going green", having a sense of community and civic responsibility will no longer only be for the Birkenstock and backpacker crowd. Green spaces, environmentally sound architecture, a solid educational system, effective public transport, affordable housing and enlightened urban planning will not only make for good corporate citizens, it will become critical to the economic success and viability of Miami's future. As Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* said, "If you're in business, ignore green at your peril." I'd advise our government to heed that warning.

May 2006

## **Ten Ways to Establish Yourself as an Industry Authority and Media Source**

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

How many times have you thought – I should have been quoted in the article? The authority on the panel? The profiled expert in the magazine?

Getting known as an authority in your field or niche has tremendous benefits both for your professional goals and for your firm or practice. For a new company or consultant, it builds credibility, prestige and awareness. For an established firm, it reinforces a leadership position, helps recruitment, and ultimately generates sales. By building your credentials as an authority, you add to your marketability, enhance your value to your company, and generate press and professional opportunities that could even end up with invitations to sit on corporate boards. Here are ten tips to make that happen:

1. Use research as a platform to establish your expertise. Doing proprietary research is much easier and cost effective today with online sites such as [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com). Also consider teaming up with a market research company or a large firm that has an in-house research department.
2. Write bylined articles for industry journals and online media. These articles place you in databases and search engines so that reporters writing articles on industry topics will find you front and center. Plus, writing clips are a valuable addition to your credentials.
3. Take a stand on industry issues. Donald Trump didn't become known by voicing bland comments.
4. Use your photograph wherever possible. People may not read all the articles, but they do look at pictures, and someone whose photo is consistently featured is viewed as a "Player."
5. Enter award competitions, not only for your work, but also, for contributions made to your profession and community.
6. Get to know the opinion-making media in your industry and in your local community. They may not have time for lunch, but will often be receptive to an informational meeting in their office.
7. Be sure, wherever possible, that news releases bear your quote and that this quote has substantive information. The idea is for the quote to be used, and in order for that to happen, it needs to add value to the story. Work with your Public Relations staff or agency by giving them input. They can't quote what they don't know.
8. Send your company newsletter to industry media and be sure it has your photo and a letter from you to readers (refer to tip #4).
9. Speak at industry conferences. By sharing your knowledge, you create recognition as an expert and as someone who proactively promotes their industry.
10. Make sure your biography is updated regularly. It's your "calling card" to recognition.

Use all 10 tips, pick out three, or feature five. Whichever way you choose to utilize these 10 core actions, you'll no longer be an anonymous face in the crowd. You'll be a star of your own making.

December 2005

## How to Get News Out of Nothing

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

*Build a better mousetrap, and people will beat a path to your door.*

That old adage was long ago disproven by marketers who realize that business success is as much about an effective marketing plan as it is a great product.

This is equally true in hotel public relations. You don't need the newest, glitziest and biggest hotel product to successfully generate media coverage for your property. In fact, with a little planning, strategic thinking and creativity, you can generate publicity for your hotel – virtually out of nothing. And positive publicity can and should play an important role in building awareness and visibility for your property within key target markets.

The following are some suggestions for taking advantage of the many opportunities to generate valuable press coverage for your property:

### Planning

- **Learn the nuts and bolts of media relations.**  
You undoubtedly know the fundamentals already of responding quickly when the media calls, having a top-notch press kit, etc. Also, think strategically about what sets your property apart from the competition. It might be a good investment to bring in a consultant to review your PR strategy and press materials.
- **Brainstorm with your department heads.**  
You'd be surprised at the wealth of promotional ideas that your colleagues can develop if you get them thinking like reporters. Getting your staff to dedicate the time necessary to accomplish this is easier said than done, but it's worth the effort. They need to feel a proprietary stake in working as part of the hotel's PR team and realize that PR is everyone's responsibility.
- **Use government and industry PR offices as resources.**  
City, county and state tourist offices, convention and visitors bureaus and travel industry associations can assist you in publicizing your property. Put them in your mailing list, have their PR people get to know your property, and build mutually-beneficial working relationships with these important offices. It will be time well spent in terms of promoting your hotel.

### Strategic Thinking

- **Capitalize on major trends.**  
A good first step in generating news out of nothing is to get your hotel's key executives "out front" on topical issues. For example, with the recession continuing as the major story of the day, you can promote your general manager or marketing director as a local "authority" on how the lodging industry is coping with this issue.

Develop "talking points" which describe what your hotel is doing to support travelers with value incentives and services and then arrange interviews with the local media.

- **Suggest service articles for the media.**

Just as the hospitality industry is founded on good service, the media always looks for ways to provide readers with useful service-oriented information. Capitalize on this by giving one of your department heads a special title and promoting him/her as an "expert" who can advise consumers on various issues. For example, designate your banquet director as the hotel's "director of weddings," and then pitch media interviews with him or her to give tips on how to save on wedding costs.

- **Promote your restaurant as a trend-setter.**

Promoting your hotel restaurant as the place to "be seen" for celebrities, social figures and business/political leaders is an excellent way to build awareness and traffic. A crackerjack maitre d' who knows who's who, and which social luminaries like publicity, is your key. With timely and accurate celebrity intelligence in hand, you can effectively feed the local society columns, which are always hungry for good news items about who's eating where and with whom.

## **Creativity**

- **Create excitement with contests**

Contests usually can be relied upon to generate media coverage and consumer excitement. For example, to capitalize on a small country inn's traditional turndown amenity of milk and freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies, a contest to search for the "Best Chocolate Chip Cookie" recipe in the country was developed. Through a mailing of one news release to food editors nationwide, we generated media placements for the property in all 50 states and Canada and Europe. In addition, a major publisher used the contest recipes to create a cookbook, which generated additional press coverage for the inn. A contest with a strong "hook" can get your hotel noticed.

- **Score big points with sports programs**

Sometimes the best promotional ideas are right in your own back yard, a fact underscored by Hyatt Resorts Puerto Rico's launching of the Hyatt Caribbean Sports Academy. With four championship golf courses, 21 regulation tennis courts and a complete water sports facility, Hyatt Resorts Puerto Rico was well positioned to "piggy back" on the growing interest in active travel, particularly sports learning vacations.

They creatively packaged their already existing sports and teaching facilities under the distinctive banner, Caribbean Sports Academy, thus helping Hyatt to put its Puerto Rico resorts at the cutting edge of a major travel trend. The result: Hyatt Resorts Puerto Rico received strong media coverage in consumer and trade media in a down travel market.

- **Generate ink with an essay contest**

When Fairmont Hotels decided to upgrade their bathroom amenities, they were faced with a large surplus of the old shampoo at their New Orleans property. Rather than just throw the extra shampoo away, they created an essay contest. The challenge: what to do with the shampoo (the winner got to keep the shampoo.). The contest was held simultaneously with the Republican National Convention, which took place in New Orleans in 1988. The news release, which billed the contest as an opportunity for the Democrats to "wash the Republicans out of their hair" during the convention, generated worldwide print and broadcast media coverage for the hotel.

- **Get creative with holidays and special events**

Reporters are always looking for engaging human interest stories around the holidays. New York's Waldorf-Astoria developed a special men's cooking session conducted by the hotel's



executive chef, who demonstrated ways for Dad to prepare dinner and give Mom a rest on Mother's Day.

Hyatt Key West, looking for a twist on the traditional New Year's Eve Party, held a "Noon Year's Eve" party. They created and staged a noontime celebration at the property's Oceanside pool, which included a Father Time costume contest. The event was fun, different and the media responded with stories that ran throughout Florida.

Hotels are surprisingly fertile ground for creating news and events that can lead to valuable publicity. All it takes is some creative and strategic thinking to unlock your hotel's hidden assets that can indeed generate news from nothing.

## **Top Ten "Must Do's" for a Successful Luxury Hotel Opening**

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

Who said that a celebrity studded gala, a million dollar party, or other big price tags are the only ways to get a new deluxe hotel or resort noticed?

Effective public relations launches don't have to "break the bank". Whether it's a launch or a repositioning of a brand, a technology, a destination or a hotel, certain principles are fundamental to each new challenge: know the competitive environment, plan early and remember the adage that first impressions are lasting ones. Successful PR programs for upscale products just need to have the finest basic ingredients and a big dose of creativity. Here are the top ten "must do's" for a successful launch:

- 1. Start early, a minimum of nine months.** Monthly magazines work as much as a year in advance so to meet deadlines, early is better. Plus, you have to allow time to research the information (always more difficult in a pre-opening situation) and for development of the press materials. The pre-opening period is critical to getting the "buzz" going.
- 2. Get your positioning right.** What sets this property apart from others not just in your destination, but worldwide? What are the points of difference, why would the media care?
- 3. Make sure you have at least one top image to go out with the pre-opening press and sales materials.** Set up a mock spa shot, get an impressive rendering, or maybe it'll be a photo of some unusual service or facility. The image can sell the story, especially in this age of copy-light and image-heavy media.
- 4. Invest in top writing.** Terrific account staff or corporate PR departments aren't necessarily great writers, and brochure copywriters don't know journalistic style. You need a Great publicity writer.
- 5. Hire a pro who has a track record in upscale travel products and knows the upscale media, a niche within a niche.** Plus, you're known by the company you keep and will benefit from an association with other luxury products on an agency's client list.
- 6. Lists are everything (well, almost).** Invest the time in putting together the best possible list that includes freelancers who specialize in upscale products. A good freelancer can do multiple stories.
- 7. Do a professional public relations shoot right after opening** to get a few sensational images, and don't use the photographs you're using for the brochure. PR and advertising image needs are totally different; the former needs images that tell a story, the latter is all about mood.
- 8. Forget the gimmicks in the mailings.** The important media are not allowed to accept gifts of value and even if they can, have no place to put them. Save the money and invest it in photography or video footage.
- 9. Mine for Gold.** Look closely at all angles to find hidden stories. For example, is the hotel's head concierge a legend in the business with the stories to make it interesting? Any unusual facilities or services that enhance the luxury quotient for guests? Some of the angles we've had great success with --- unusual concierges (soap, sleep); spa treatments; hotel as art gallery ("museum hotels");

water features (the resort with 40 pools; a river pool longer than the Empire State Building is high); special services (a butler who irons a newspaper; over the top pool amenities and iPod minis).

**10. Instead of the million dollar party offer the million dollar package,** "ultimate" guest package(s) or experiences not found anywhere else. Our favorites? A vacation for a billionaire, a \$10,000 martini (martini on the rocks as in diamonds), a \$1000 omelette. Even if Bill Gates is the only person who can afford it, the PR interest it can generate is invaluable .Or, you might take the opposite approach, positioning your hotel or resort as the place to be "unplugged" and totally low key.

Everything builds from a strong foundation so once you implement the ten tips, you've laid the groundwork for a successful public relations program. "Program" because to really reap the benefits, there must be a sustainable effort and that effort will see results increase exponentially in year two and beyond. So give yourself the luxury of time, allow for creativity and invest in the basic needs of good writing and photography and you have the ingredients for PR success.

## **Luxury Makes a Comeback in Travel**

*By Karen Weiner Escalera*

Luxury is making a comeback in the travel industry as we go into the last six months of 2004. High-priced boat sales increased 9.5% last year, concierge floors on ships and in pricey hotels are selling out first, the bar on restaurant purchases has been raised to \$300 prix fixes, and a major private jet rental firm reports sales not seen since the mid-1990's. And Americans traveling overseas for the first five months of this year are up 19% over last year.

Luxury is well again, capturing the headlines in its traditional vise, with new spins and with many new media markets. Taking its cue from our celebrity mania, the extravagant is once again politically acceptable news. Whether it's a widely reported \$1000 omelette at a New York hotel or Leading Hotels' "Out of This World " programs such as our over \$16 million, 4 day/3 night package for the Marquis los Cabos Resort in Mexico complete with private concert with Santana and private jet transport from anywhere in the world, over the top is making the headlines. The new battlefield for the luxury message is in design and service. Travel and fashion continue to meld, with big names in fashion choosing to make their mark in the hospitality industry. Ferragamo has several successful small, exclusive hostelrys in Italy; Bulgari just opened their first hotel in Milan; and rumor has it that a Calvin Klein hotel is not far behind.

The service message is an effective way to get "hits "in both magazines and newspapers. Anything quirky, offbeat or fun qualifies -- a unique minibar item, a state of the art pillow , any services for dogs, or unusual alternatives for turndown service. Service jobs that cater to the whims and pampering of the privileged few are all ways to stand out from the luxury crowd. Our sleep concierge was in constant demand for broadcast interviews; other favorites from industry colleagues are a water sommelier, bath concierge and the Director of Guest Desires. These service messages lend themselves to news shorts and graphics which are increasingly filling the travel pages of leading newspapers and magazines as more media follow the lead of USA Today in "going short". As Alison DaRosa, travel writer for the San Diego Union recently said at an industry conference, "Ninety percent of the paper's travel section is now briefs". Or, as Larry Bleiberg, travel editor for the Dallas Morning News reported, newspapers are becoming versions of the internet, increasingly dominated by graphics and "chunklets" of text.

Luxury has a new face. It's not just about "things" but also, wellness -- physically, mentally and spiritually. Feeling and looking well is now the ultimate luxury. Whether it's in-flight massage, yoga retreats, wellness rooms in hotels or medspa treatments, they're all great grist for the publicity mill. The spiritual vocabulary of the yoga age can be especially effective. For a new high end resort called "Esencia", "essence", we evoke the essence of nature, beauty and love, creating a picture, telling a story. In another new spin on luxury, "aspirational" travel to quote Gene Sloan of USA Today and experiential travel are growing travel trends. Studying Shakespeare in Oxford while staying at a top flight hotel, learning calligraphy in Asia, or arranging flowers with a leading expert at Paris' Crillon Hotel are sought after travel experiences in the new travel landscape. Soft adventure or now – soft, soft adventure as in hiking a mile a day – has a new luxury bent, appealing to baby boomers and families looking to enjoy quality time together.

The number of magazines, national, regional and local, appealing to the affluent consumer continues to explode. High end travel agents (Virtuoso), international beach clubs (Nikki Beach Club), cars (Mercedes Benz), and private jets (Elite Traveler), just to name a few, all have their own glossy magazines. American Express will be launching a magazine for its Centurion card members who pay

\$2500 for the privilege of being a member of the newest ultra-exclusive club. The New York Times recently reported six new upscale titles this summer alone in the demographically sought after Hamptons in New York. And one publisher went the extra mile to hand deliver his magazines to the beach houses of the rich and famous. In South Florida's "gold coast", from Miami to Palm Beach, there are now at least 10 English language titles that fit this bill and another four in Spanish and they're all open to the brandishments of public relations practitioners. These media make large features a stock in trade, opening up a wide range of new opportunities for high-end travel products – the newest, the hottest, the latest, preferably with a pedigree of a name architect, chef, or designer.

Any discussion of this market segment has to look at a new category, "the new luxury market." As *Folio* magazine described, "This is the ever growing cohort of middle class Americans who have made the \$3 latte an everyday addiction, who match Gap T-shirts with Gucci and drive a BMW to Costco." In 2003 the market was \$400 billion in the U.S., growing at 15% annually and involving 48 million households with incomes of more than \$50,000."

Ninety four percent of consumers in this group say they trade up on at least one product category according to the Boston Consulting Group. Keep this group in mind in any communications strategy, orienting your message to what *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel* magazine calls "The Splurge." Even here there are opportunities for a service message. One of the ideas we like best? Service plus an upsell. As the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported, everyone wants to be a VIP so sell "specialness," whether it's special access, private facilities, exclusive parties or receptions. Some things never change.