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Once More with Feeling ...the Art of Wooing the Public

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Public relations is an art, declares Rose Tan, the doyenne of Singapore's own sports public relations industry. And although it's changing rapidly as communications cross multiple platforms, she tells Perspectives@SMU that it's still something that needs to come from the heart.

It may not be rocket science, or even science, but the world of spin has come a long way since Al and Laura Ries' 2002 best seller, "The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR" and even further removed from days of those Mad Men in their corner offices at the Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency. Now the boundaries between advertising, public relations, and marketing are closing even further with the next big thing to land in our personal space: influencer marketing. "It's bigger than PR and bigger than advertising," says Rose Tan of the trend that identifies the individuals that have influence over potential buyers and then orients marketing activities around the influencers. It is heavily focused on the Millennial generation and their renowned 'herding instinct'.

Influencers are so-called, she explains, because they can influence their friends to use a particular product. Techniques used include giving the product free of charge to an individual to use and share with his or her friends, a practice known as seeding.

It differs from endorsements, a common feature of the sports world, because it does not involve any monetary payment. Influencers are not paid, says Rose, because when you pay them you downgrade the entire message. "It's all about product experience and not about product advertising," she adds, "and if he or she (the influencer) likes the product, he will share. If he doesn't like the product, he won't share. Therefore we concentrate on getting the right 'fit' for the product."

A quick look around the sports arenas reveals the extent of influencer marketing. "They let you use their running shoes, football boots and jerseys. When people see you dressed like that, they want to copy you," she adds.

And as the scandals surrounding leading sporting identities demonstrate, people are looking at trust and credibility in their sporting heroes, which means the perfect influencer match must be perfect and finding the right person who best fits the product is essential.

Nevertheless, Tan did reveal to Perspectives that she knows of one coffee company that employs a non-coffee drinking celebrity to endorse its product. "Obviously not a 'perfect fit'," she comments wryly. .

From Mahjong to Sports PR

While Rose is the pioneering force behind sports PR in Singapore, she's also quick to point out that she was never a very sports-minded person. In fact, her favourite pastime is mahjong. She started her career in 1990 as a freelancer selling magazines for the Sports Association, then joined the marketing division of SPH doing advertorial liaison between clients and the editorial team. Then, as now, she was quick to appreciate a niche opportunity when she saw it. In the early 1990s sports was not big in Singapore. "I was surprised to see that 50,000 or more people were going to the games. And it cut across all races and all ages. And that gave me an idea that sports could actually be a tool for marketers", she recalls. As she discovered, there was indeed a market for people interested in sports, and for people to use sports as part of their promotional activities.

She was well ahead of her time. "Getting into business, you must find a niche," Rose says. "First movers always have the advantage." When it comes to entrepreneurship, "you need a bit of intelligence, intuition, and initiative. Intuition is to be able to see something and think it will work; and the initiative to take the first step." The remainder is happenstance.

Yes, there was a fleeting attempt at retirement, "but it was not for me," she explains. "I drove everyone mad. Retirement is not about how much you have in the bank. It's about how ready you are. And I was obviously not ready."

During her six months' absence a lot of agencies were set up, and clients left and went to other agencies. And by time she came back six months later to start another agency, a lot of business was lost.

More intuition and initiative was called for.

Rose set up two more agencies: Crowd (which integrates traditional PR with social and digital media), and MNC, a catchy idea from her staff, who said “we were ‘mad and crazy’ (MnC)”, a firm that specialises in influencer marketing.

However as far as Rose knows, no one has ever mentioned that PR is a life skill, something to be learned, acquired, practiced, and remembered, which means it’s time to teach it. The skill will be one of the cornerstones of The Rose Tan Academy along with her credo that practitioners have to “do everything with the heart, be sincere, and believe in things”.