



PR with a Cause



When you first walk into the offices of Spirou & Associates Public Relations and Philanthropy Inc. it's hard not to feel a sense of being surrounded by a female powerhouse. Flashes of silver, white leather furnishings and luxurious accessories are what greet you upon entry. But don't let the décor fool you, Kim Spirou is definitely a force to be reckoned with. Gord Henderson once referred to her as "a PR Guru" and *The Windsor Star* has called her a media maven.

On this visit to her office, Spirou welcomes us with a firm handshake and a warm and confident smile. With over 25 years of experience in the public relations field she's pretty much been through it all. From helping her clients cope with the aftermath of murder, suicides, gun violence, labour disputes, mistaken mastectomies and pathology errors, these crises are all among the type of catastrophic events Spirou has encountered and has helped organizations face and survive.

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According to Spirou, the term PR is something often bandied about but few people really understand and recognize the power of public relations and the role it plays in ensuring a business or organization is operating in the public's best interest.

Spirou says she is often called by clients in distress and facing a serious crisis. When stepping into jobs involving a crisis she becomes the conscience of that organization, ensuring the steps they are taking in response are the right thing to do. "It sounds like common

sense but you'd be amazed at how often politicians, business leaders and companies mishandle a crisis and make things far worse for themselves. When something bad happens it is important to come clean with everything right away, take responsibility, be candid, honest and hold nothing back. Then make sure you tell how you will make improvements or changes that will ensure a similar thing doesn't happen again," reports Spirou.

In explaining how best to handle a crisis, Spirou is fond of using the example of Tiger Woods and David Letterman in their very different public approaches to managing the news of affairs both had with mistresses. Spirou maintains that instead of responding in a timely manner, Woods let that situation drag on. He didn't confront it and admit to his mistake and he suffered serious reputational and economic consequences, whereas, Letterman took the correct road publicly owning up to his affair and expressing sincere remorse and regret. His approach allowed him to quickly recover from a publicly embarrassing situation.

"As a professionally trained public relations practitioner, I help to ensure my clients make the right choices and operate with the public's best interest in mind," says Spirou. While she prides herself on helping companies and organizations cope with disaster and tragedy, her real passion is helping clients improve their branding, communication and marketing.

Helping companies build names for themselves, earn media coverage and manage their reputations, is what Spirou does best. Experienced in both the public and private sectors, Spirou ensures her clients have a strongly defined brand coupled with the right messaging that puts the human face on their organization and she arms them with the most cost-effective and efficient tools, tactics and techniques to deliver their messages with power and conviction.

Spirou's approach to strategic communications and marketing is unique and thorough. She begins each project with a comprehensive audit of her clients' enterprise, which includes conducting qualitative research. She will typically recruit and facilitate 6-10 focus groups

involving the clients, customers, employees, key supporters, partners and governance structures. She delves into all aspects of people's perceptions and attitudes and she analyzes all past advertising and communication efforts.

From there she synthesizes that information and develops a plan that outlines expected outcomes, key messages, optimal advertising and media tactics and evaluation tools to measure the success of each element. The strategic plan she delivers to her clients provides them with a master blueprint for coordinating all of their branding and marketing efforts. She says this approach takes time but without that key research investment up front, clients may not be maximizing the impact of the precious dollars they are investing in their marketing and advertising campaigns.

With the strong media relationships she has developed over the years, Spirou is uniquely adept at helping her clients find newsworthy elements about their businesses and assists them to create stories that the media may be interested in covering. Capturing the media's attention requires a consistent proactive and on-going approach. "All businesses and organizations have interesting stories to tell; the key is to find the elements that are truly unique, timely and have a newsworthy aspect to them and then properly package them in a form that the media will respond to and consider covering. Earned media is very powerful and far more effective than paid advertising.

In fact, in the book, *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*, authors Al and Laura Ries demonstrate that public relations can help a company and its products get into the prospect's mind and become major brands, better than any other form of advertising and marketing. Brands like Starbucks, Apple, The Body Shop and BlackBerry made their marks not with big ad budgets but with clear and focused PR messages that were aggressively promoted from grassroots out. "PR strategies get a client's messages out with greater impact, greater credibility and greater retention and at a much lower cost," reports Spirou.

The efficacy of PR has been proven time and time again because media coverage and publicity provide the credentials that are needed so that people will pay attention to a brand or product when it is advertised. PR builds third party credibility (in the form of newscasts, newspapers, radio broadcasts and other print) and can ignite grassroots word-

of-mouth endorsement—always the best form of publicity, but even more effective in today's viral internet environment.

Prior to re-launching her company, most recently Spirou served at Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital (HDGH) as its Vice President of Communications and Development. During her tenure with the hospital, she received numerous awards and accolades for her public relations initiatives and, in 2009, was named **Communicator of the Year** by the Ontario Hospital Association.



Anita Harris, retired Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital Vice-President and frequent surveyor for Accreditation Canada, refers to Spirou as "an exceptional communicator with a clear vision for healthcare." According to Harris, Spirou positioned HDGH as a leader in providing the best care possible and worked to ensure HDGH was looked upon positively as the best provider. She adds, "I had never witnessed such widespread and effective communication for a hospital. A large part of her efforts resulted in a glowing three-year full accreditation for Hotel-Dieu Grace with no outstanding issues. During her tenure, there were many times when Kim had to be the public face of the hospital when it wasn't easy to do so. Her efforts were endless, devising and implementing communication plans in order to keep the public well informed of developments."

Former HDGH Board Chair, Egidio Sovran maintains Spirou's work at the hospital was exemplary. "She ably guided us through a

series of catastrophic events and transformed our entire communications program earning her the Ontario Hospital Association's Communicator of the Year Award. She also led the hospital's fund raising efforts and during her tenure she raised more than \$12 million for our hospital's foundation during one of Windsor's deepest economic downturns."

Tony Conciatori, owner of Dolce Vita, a new retirement residence on Erie Street that Spirou & Associates recently helped launch, credits Kim with putting his business on the map. "I could talk for hours about Kim and all the remarkable things she's done for my business. She had a brilliant strategy for promoting our facility and took care of everything we needed to orchestrate a successful grand opening and subsequent effective marketing plan. Her reputation is above reproach and she came highly recommended. She has tremendous experience in her field. I would definitely recommend her to others."

Owner of Farron's Gourmet Butcher shop, Ted Farron agrees. "Kim is a consummate professional, always upbeat. She puts her heart and soul into her work and is a pleasure to be around. I have known Kim for over 20 years and would definitely recommend her to any business looking to raise their profile in our community."

Mary Jo Rusu, who has worked with Spirou on many projects in the past says, "Clients benefit from Kim Spirou's thoughtful and thorough approach to PR and marketing as well as her fundraising expertise. She

knows how to put a case forward on behalf of an organization that will attract donors and supporters to a cause. She's an expert at cause marketing."

Committed to numerous community organizations, Spirou is an active Rotarian and Past-President of the Windsor Roseland Rotary Club. She is involved in several local fundraising initiatives and international humanitarian projects including four missions to Nicaragua and one planned this fall to Ghana, Africa.

"I have been taught from an early age that you must leave this world better than the way you found it," says Spirou. Feeling enormously blessed in her life, she is determined to make a difference and takes on many humanitarian projects as well as pro-bono clients such as In Honour of the Ones We Love, the Do Good Divas and the Well Come Centre for Human Potential, who otherwise could not afford her level of expertise. **SW**