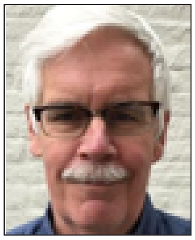
Kevin McCauley
Editor-in-Chief

O'Dwyer's Newsletter

50 Years 1968-2018

The Inside News of
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August 12, 2019   Vol. 52 No. 31

WPP'S PR GROUP SLIPS 2.6%

WPP recorded a 2.6 percent dip to $273M in like-for-like revenues for its Hill+Knowlton, BCW and Finsbury-led PR unit during the second quarter.


Mark Read

CEO Mark Read blamed the lackluster results in the financial PR sector in Germany and UK for the slippage.

The PR business was down 1.5 percent to $530M during the first-half.

Reed said WPP's overall 1.4 percent drop in life-for-like revenues was "slightly ahead of our internal expectations."

He continued to "simplify" WPP by unloading 44 associate companies during the past 18 months and letting go of 3,100 people.

Reed noted "there will be a lot of twists and turns along the way" of his three-year turnaround plan, which is still in the early stages.

Investing in new leadership and creative firepower, especially in the US, is a top priority for Read, who took over for Martin Sorrell last September.

JOELE FRANK SHOPS AT BARNEYS

Joele Frank is handling the bankruptcy of Barneys New York, the luxury retailer that fell victim to the changing shopping environment and high rents relative to market demand.

The 96-year-old company, which employs 2,300 people, plans to keep its Manhattan, Boston, San Francisco and Beverly Hills outlets open and shutter stores in Chicago, Las Vegas and Seattle.

CEO Daniella Vitale said the Chapter 11 reorganization will provide Barneys the breathing room needed to conduct a sale process, review current leases and optimize operations.

BARNEYS NEW YORK

She promised that the partnerships and relationships with the "world's best designers and brands," customers and employees will continue for "many years to come" as the company executes its "forward thinking vision of what retail should look like today."

Meghan Repko, Dan Moore and Jacob Silber of Joele Frank Wilkinson Brimmer Katcher handle Barneys.

SDSU SEEKS MARKETING HELP FOR STADIUM

San Diego State University is looking for an agency that can develop a marketing strategy for a proposed $250 million multi-use stadium project.

The envisioned stadium would seat 35,000 and support SDSU Aztecs football games and NCAA championship games, as well as professional soccer and special events such as concerts.

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Scope of the work calls for devising slogans for the project; narrative, branding and creative work during the stadium's construction process; video to boost sponsorships and ticket sales; a TV campaign; a social media campaign; and promotional work during football and basketball seasons and generating promotional ideas for special events.

Services are set to start September 1 and will run for three years, through SDSU's first football game at the new stadium, anticipated to take place in the fall of 2022.

Proposals are due by 2:00 p.m. (PST) on Aug. 21 and should be sent to:

Contracting and Procurement Management Office
Administration Building, Room 116
5500 Campanile Dr. AD 116
San Diego, CA 92182-1616

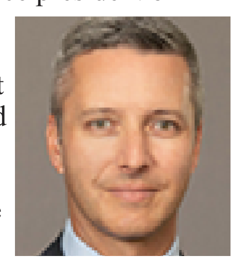
All bidders must register with Planet Bids to read updates and notifications related to this RFP.

Questions are due by 2:00 p.m. (PST) on Aug. 14 and should be directed to assistant director of contract and procurement management Jeff Fratt, jfratt@sdsu.edu.

Download the RFP (PDF).

RESTIVO BOARDS UNITED AIRLINES AS VP

Steven Restivo, who has been vice president, corporate communications at Comcast since 2013, is heading to United Airlines, where he will be vice president of global corporate communications.


Steven Restivo

At Comast, Restivo led external communications in support of Comcast NBCUniversal's suite of residential and business products. Before coming to Comcast, he was senior director, corporate communications at Walmart. He previously was vice president in the public affairs group at MWWPR.

In his new position, Restivo will be charged with developing and implementing proactive communication strategies to advance employee communications, media relations and the global response team. He will also work to shape the airline's public image.

CABRERA NAMED CCO AT GENERAL MILLS

Jano Cabrera, who was previously senior vice president of corporate relations at McDonald's, has been named chief communications officer of General Mills.


Jano Cabrera

Cabrera succeeds Mary Lynn Carver, who left the company last month.

Before his stint at McDonald's, Cabrera served as worldwide vice president at Burson-Marstellar. He was also the founder of strategic communications and advocacy firm Carthage Group Communications, and worked in Baghdad as a senior media advisor for the National Democratic Institute. During the 2004 campaign, he was communications director for the Democratic Party.

In his new post, Cabrera is in charge of communications strategy, corporate brand, employee and executive communications, product brand PR and crisis communications.

SLOANE & CO. WORKS VITAMIN SHOPPE DEAL

Sloane & Company is representing The Vitamin Shoppe in its acquisition by Liberty Tax Inc., a deal valued at about $208 million.

Liberty Tax, the parent company of Liberty Tax Service and Buddy's Home Furnishings, says it intends to fund the $6.50-a-share transaction with up to about $170 million in debt financing, available cash and the issuance of common stock.

The purchase price represents a premium of more than 43 percent above Vitamin Shoppe's Aug. 7 closing price of $4.54 per share. The Vitamin Shoppe operates more than 750 retail outlets under The Vitamin Shoppe and Super Supplements banners.

Sloane & Company managing director Dan Zacchei and senior vice president Joe Germani are handling the deal.

FORMER PELOSI COMMS CHIEF TO RIAA

Brendan Daly, who served as communications director for Nancy Pelosi from 2002 to 2011, has been named chief communications officer for the Recording Industry Association of America.

Daly comes to RIAA from the Save the Children Action Network, where he was senior director, communications. He was previously director of public affairs for the U.S. Department of Energy and an executive vice president at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide.


Brendan Daly

In his new role, based in Washington, D.C., he will head up the RIAA's media relations, creative, research and economics and Gold & Platinum awards executive team, reporting to RIAA chairman and CEO Mitch Glazier.

"Brendan brings a wealth of substantive and management experience to the RIAA," Glazier said.

ACCOUNTS IN TRANSIT

Weber Shandwick has been selected by **USAA** as its lead corporate communications agency. Weber Shandwick will provide strategic, creative and operational campaign and public relations services to USAA in support of its overall brand and lines of business. The agency's Washington, D.C. office will lead the work. USAA is the leading financial services provider for members of the military, veterans and their families. Founded by a group of Army officers in 1922, it provides insurance, banking, investment and financial advice solutions.

French/West/Vaughan has been selected by **Sercy Spiked & Sparkling** to provide support for the brand's initial launch into the spiked seltzer market. FWV will provide Sercy with public relations support, as well as social media counsel and influencer relations management. The product will be targeted at "spiked seltzer consumers looking to embrace products that mimic their active, social lifestyles." Sercy will initially be rolled out in its home state of North Carolina before expanding distribution nationally and beyond.

Zapwater Communications has been retained by **Packed Party**, an Austin, TX-based company that sells gift and party packages. Zapwater's scope of work will include media relations, influencer relations, and events and partnerships for all aspects of the brand's business. Founded in 2013 by CEO Jordan Jones, Packed Party's products are available online as well as at such retailers as Paper Source, Neiman Marcus and Dillard's.

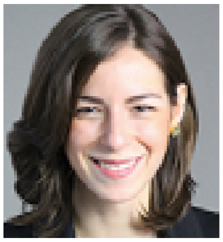
DeVries Global has been selected as global communications AOR for IHG (InterContinental Hotels Group). The relationship encompasses IHG's luxury and boutique brands: Regent Hotels & Resorts, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants (outside of the Americas) and Hotel Indigo. DeVries has been tasked with raising awareness of IHG's luxury credentials, executing consumer activations and driving preference for its luxury portfolio. The agency will produce brand PR campaigns, handle media relations and support key new hotel openings.

Carolyn Izzo Integrated Communications is partnering with **MW Music & Wine**, a specialized service company that works to bridge the music and wine industries through marketing, promotions, and sales. CIIC will lead public relations and marketing efforts for the company's services and products, including MW Experiences, a series of events that feature well-known musicians who have their own wines, as well as emerging performers from MW's talent roster. The agency supported MW on its kick-off event earlier this summer and will launch a campaign that includes working with press, influencers and corporate event planners. ey will also seek partnerships and work with MW executives to secure cross-promotions with like-minded companies.

WALL STREET AND SILICON VALLEY FACE OFF

Apple Pay and Google Pay own the digital wallet market. Amazon and Alibaba have already loaned billions of dollars. And Facebook wants you to use Messenger to pay your friends back for dinner. Make no mistake, Silicon Valley tech giants are climbing into the financial services playground.

In the decade following the recession we've seen fintech startups precipitate incremental change in the financial services space. Disruptors have reimagined components of the financial services puzzle and nudged Wall Street into the digital age, creating the competition necessary to force traditional financial companies to compete on multiple fronts: product innovation, user experience, transparency and value.



Julia Bloch Mellon

But ultimately, fintech startups and Wall Street giants played nice. Many financial services companies saw the writing on the wall and decided that if they couldn't move quickly enough to incubate those innovations in-house, they could join forces with newcomers through strategic partnerships. It turned out this was the beginning of a mutually beneficial friendship, resulting in a huge win for consumers.

In 2015, Jamie Dimon gave his ominous warning that "Silicon Valley is coming." Wall Street was able to weather the storm in subsequent years, but they're not out of the woods.

With a deep user base, tech looms large

For Wall Street, Big Tech poses a threat to financial services that is, well, bigger. Amazon, Apple and Alphabet—currently the second, third and fourth largest companies in the United States—have something that the small fintech start-ups lack: Scale. A lot of it.

If Fintech 1.0 was all about plucky startups working to elevate the standards that consumers expected from financial services companies, Fintech 2.0 is about Silicon Valley behemoths turbocharging that mindset with the backing of billions of dollars of capital.

These companies bring to the table the best cloud, data and AI resources on the planet. No one knows better than these giants how to surround a customer with an experience so seamlessly connected that the ease of use is worth the sacrifice of privacy (something traditional financial firms have struggled to deliver).

This is, in part, because most tech players have kept reputations as friendly giants. Their Net Promoter Scores soar high above big banks. People are willing to give a company like Google all their information if it makes it easy to toggle between their laptop, their phone and an IoT device. What if Google's deep data troves could give you a holistic view of your financial picture too?

What does this mean for Wall Street? The bar for best-in-class UX is about to be raised again.

2020 could impact competition

Regulatory headwinds could slow Big Tech's penetration into finance. Just last month, Congress made moves to stymie Facebook and friends from launching their take on a cryptocurrency, Libra, with the aptly named "Keep Big Tech Out of Finance Act." And, in the first Democratic debate, Senator Elizabeth Warren called for the breakup of America's largest tech players. With an election coming, it remains to be seen whether the House and Senate will turn red, purple or blue. But the parties in power will influence the future role that Big Tech can play in the financial services ecosystem.

Regardless of how things evolve, in the early innings of Fintech 2.0, Big Tech has changed the game.

The future of financial marketing comms

Let's face it: Wall Street and Silicon Valley come from very different marketing communications schools of thought. As they square off to fight for share of wallet, there are marketing and communications lessons that Wall Street and Silicon Valley can learn from one another.

Dear Big Tech, don't forget thought leadership: In the years following the Financial Crisis, finance became commoditized—in product and cost—and the best way to win customer trust was in a race to capture share-of-voice through thought leadership.

Big firms launched thought leadership programs—often composed of a combination of proprietary research, earned media, content, and social/digital activations—that dug into consumers' emotional relationships with money, explored the role gender dynamics plays in investing and provided the tips to help people navigate financial decisions. Part group therapy, part actionable financial insights, consumer finance marketing communications became more human. This financial expertise and thought leadership is what sets traditional financial players apart from tech giants.

As Big Tech matures in the financial services realm, it could stand to take a leaf out of Wall Street's book, by going to market above product, addressing consumers' real desire for financial tips, education and empathy.

Wall Street, it's time to evolve your value prop: Wall Street also has a lesson to learn from Silicon Valley.

If Big Tech knows how to do one thing, it's to cultivate a user experience that is simple, well-designed and engaging. As these tech players dive fully into the financial services competitor set, customer expectations for user interface, PFM, smart analytics and AI are about to climb yet again.

In order to continue to thrive, traditional financial players will need to prove that they can match their counterparts in cultivating a compelling user experience that centers around an excellent product. As tech players challenge traditional financial models, Wall Street will need to make sure they're focusing on price, product and innovation as much as their competition is.

Wall Street has shown itself to be resilient and—by and large—willing to evolve to keep up with their customers' expectations. If they can continue to lead the way in financial thought leadership while delivering on UX, they stand in good stead for the future.

The financial services marketplace is entering a second wave of rapid evolution. But if Wall Street and Silicon Valley can learn a little from each other, then, ultimately, the end user will come out on top.

Julia Bloch Mellon is Senior Vice President of Financial Services at Bliss Integrated Communication.

SANDY SPRINGS, GA NEEDS MARKETING PLAN

Sandy Springs, Georgia is looking for an agency that can assist with the creation of a destination marketing strategic plan for Sandy Springs Hospitality & Tourism, the destination marketing organization that promotes tourism, meetings and trade shows in the city. The Fulton County city, which is part of the Atlanta metropolitan area, is Georgia's seventh-largest, with a population of about 107,000.

Sandy Springs Hospitality & Tourism is seeking a consultant that can devise an actionable, three-to-five-year strategic plan to identify tactics for maximizing Sandy Springs' value to attract visitors; use research and stakeholder interviews to create a profile of the Sandy Springs' tourism markets; establish marketing goals and identify target audiences to increase the DMO's return on investment; identify opportunities for tourism product development, destination enhancement and partnerships; establish sales goals and objectives; evaluate the organization's internal structure to identify operational gaps and strategic opportunities; and developing purpose statements.

Brand development is not a goal of the DMO's strategic plan.

Proposals are due by 2 p.m. (EST) on Aug. 23 and should be submitted through the city's online Bonfire Portal: **https://sandysprings.bonfirehub.com/projects/view/17847**.

Questions are due by 5:00 p.m. (EST) on Aug. 14 and should be sent via Bonfire under Message - Opportunity Q&A to: **https://sandysprings.bonfirehub.com/projects/view/17847**. Questions may also be directed to Sandy Springs contract specialist Dezirae Gaines, purchasing@sandyspringsga.gov.

Download the RFP (PDF).

PINTO TAKES W2O EXECUTIVE COMMS POST

Veteran journalist Barbara Pinto has been named practice leader, executive communications at W2O.

Pinto joins the agency from FleishmanHillard, where she was senior vice president, focusing on strategic message development, presentation coaching, reputation management, crisis communications and media/communications coaching for C-suite executives at global brands.

Barbara Pinto

She spent over a decade at ABC News, contributing reports to "World News Tonight," "Good Morning America," YahooNews and other ABC News-affiliated broadcasts and platforms. Prior to ABC News, Pinto was a correspondent for CNBC and a news anchor at MSNBC and CNBC.

She will work with W2O group practice leader, executive communications Mike Huckman and group director, executive communications Patrick Ryan to strengthen the firm's executive communications offering, which counsels C-suite clients and senior-level managers on corporate and media strategy, reputation management, presentation and media coaching, and crisis and issues planning and management.

NEWS OF FIRMS

FleishmanHillard and **Memo**, a platform that gives PR and communications professionals access to earned media insights at the article level, have formed a partnership. Under the partnership, FleishmanHillard will be able to obtain article metrics from publishers on Memo's data marketplace as well as collaborate with Memo to create custom analyses based on clients' business goals. Memo has agreements with publishers including Condé Nast, Forbes, *New York* magazine and the *Washington Post*.

GCI Health is expanding into the German market. Effective Sept. 1, Hamburg-headquartered **Hering Schuppener Healthcare** will move under the GCI Health umbrella. Both firms are WPP companies. Hering Schuppener co-owner and managing director Horst Müther and managing partner Katharina Tolkmitt will continue to lead the operation, both reporting to GCI Health chief executive officer Wendy Lund.

Wendy Lund

Prosek Ventures, the investment arm of Prosek Partners, has announced a strategic investment in Qwoted, a business network platform that was launched in Q3 last year by **Vested**. Prosek Ventures' investment is intended to accelerate the development of new features, as well as fueling sales, marketing and customer service. Jennifer Prosek and Russell Sherman of Prosek Partners will join the five-person Qwoted board alongside Vested's Dan Simon, Binna Kim and Seth Rosenstein.

MEDIA MANEUVERS

The agreement reached between **Gannett** and **GateHouse Media** to merge the two newspaper chains may have hit a snag, according to an article in the *New York Post*. The Post article says that the share price of New Media Investment Group, the holding company that controls GateHouse, took a 33 percent hit following the Aug. 5 announcement of the deal. If the deal stays on track, the combined company, which is to be run under the Gannett name, will be led by New Media chief executive Michael Reed.

Facebook is looking to get into the video-on-demand game. According to *Variety*, the company is launching a test to sell subscription VOD services directly to users. The test, which will roll out over the next few weeks, is only available to U.S. users. No traditional television channels or streamers such as Netflux or Hulu are part of the test. Facebook is also working on its own set-top device that would connect users' TV sets to their Facebook profiles.

At the ***New York Times***, revenues are up—but profits are down. The New York Times Company reported on Aug. 7 that while its Q2 2019 revenue showed 5.2 percent growth over the same period in 2018, its operating profit slid to $37.9 million from last year's $40 million. On the advertising front, digital ad revenue was up, while print advertising showed a 8 percent drop. However, print ads still top digital ads in revenue, with print bringing in $62.7 million and digital racking up $58 million.

FACEBOOK INFLUENCES MOST PURCHASES

Despite exhibiting waning popularity among younger audiences—and despite weathering several recent user-data privacy and security scandals—Facebook remains the number-one platform when it comes to influencing consumers' buying decisions, according to a recent report released by business news site The Manifest.

According to The Manifest's report, more than half of social media users surveyed (52 percent) said they're likely to make a purchase from a brand they follow on Facebook, more than the total number of consumers who follow brands on Instagram (16 percent), YouTube (11 percent), Pinterest (10 percent), Twitter (6 percent), LinkedIn (2 percent), Snapchat (2 percent), and Reddit (1 percent) combined.

Altogether, more than two-thirds of respondents (67 percent) admitted making a purchase after seeing an advertisement via social media.

Facebook's success as a gateway for customer conversion undoubtedly stems from the fact that the platform still accounts for the lion's share of overall social media activity in the U.S. But the site's audience also appears to be a factor, as the report suggests that different social media platforms influence men and women's buying decisions as well.

According to the report, women are more likely to make a purchase from an ad on Facebook (56 percent), Instagram (17 percent), and Pinterest (14 percent) than men (45 percent, 12 percent and 3 percent, respectively). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be driven by ads they see on YouTube (18 percent) and Twitter (11 percent) than are women (7 percent and 3 percent, respectively).

Age also appears to be a predictor into consumers' decisions to make a purchase after seeing an advertisement on social media. More than three-quarters of Millennials (77 percent) said they're likely to make a purchase after seeing an advertisement on social media, compared to 69 percent of Generation X members and 48 percent of Baby Boomers.

About three-quarters of respondents (74 percent) said they follow brands on social media and virtually all of them (96 percent) reported interacting with the brands they follow in some way or another. The most common way consumers interact with brands, according to the report, involves liking brands' social media posts, an activity cited by more than half of respondents (51 percent). Nearly a third (31 percent) said they write reviews, 22 percent said they mention brands on their own profile, 2 percent said they direct message brands and 18 percent reported tweeting at brands.

The Manifest's "2019 Consumer Social Media Survey" polled approx. 540 adult social media users in the U.S. Research was conducted using brand intelligence research company Survata.

The Manifest is the sister site of D.C.-based research and consulting firm Clutch.

ON THE MOVE

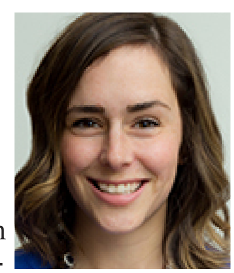
imre has hired **Shanee Cohen** as executive vice president, consumer practice and **Stephanie Friess** as senior vice president of public relations. Cohen comes to imre from KWT Global, where she led brand strategy, business development and client services. She previously was senior vice president and partner in FleishmanHillard's New York office. In her new post, she will lead imre's consumer division, overseeing the agency's longest-standing client relationships while creating a vision for what's next among a mix of durable goods, automotive, sports, retail, CPG and OTC brands. Freiss joins imre from Marina Maher Commnications, where she was group senior vice president, serving as lead for several P&G beauty brands. She has also worked at MSLGROUP, DeVries Global and BCW.

Shanee Cohen

Brandeis University has named **Dan Kim** senior vice president for communications, marketing and external relations. Kim will join Brandeis Sept. 1 from College of the Holy Cross, where he is currently vice president for communications. He previously served as executive director of communications and marketing at the University of Michigan College of Engineering and director of news and information at West Virginia University.

Memjet, which provides digital inkjet printing technology, has appointed **Oscar Ibarra** as global marketing communications director. Ibarra was previously chief client services and strategy officer at marketing services agency Movida24. He has also been executive vice president at Citizen Systems, and led his own multicultural marketing agency, BTL Network. At Memjet, Ibarra will be responsible for leading a global marketing and social media strategy that encompasses both consumer-facing communications and B2B corporate initiatives.

Toronto-based commercial real estate services firm **Avison Young** has hired **Melissa Dinslage** as global director of internal communications. Dinslage comes to the firm from Conagra Brands, where she served as internal communications director. She previously served as senior manager, communications at Cars.com and manager, internal communication at Sara Lee Corporation. In her new post, Dinslage will oversee the development of internal initiatives, platforms and channels to advance Avison Young's brand while facilitating internal marketing efforts, operational efficiency and employee engagement.

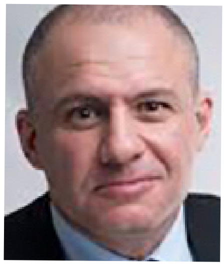


Melissa Dinslge

ChromaDex Corp., a dietary supplement and food ingredient company based in Los Angeles, has named **Megan Jordan** chief communications officer and senior vice president of global corporate affairs. Jordan has led the communications function at the company as a contractor since February. She was previously senior vice president, corporate communications at Herbalife; vice president, corporate communications at Southern California Edison and senior vice president at MSLGROUP.

COMMENTARY

Some 400 Uber employees were in for an unpleasant surprise as the ridesharing company laid off a third of its worldwide marketing staff—the largest round of layoffs Uber has initiated since 2009. The marketing employees were notified of the sudden changes in their employment status on July 29, a week before the ride-hailing giant was due to report its second-quarter earnings.



Ronn Torossian

Uber, which debuted its IPO to a disappointing result earlier this year, has been struggling to maintain with huge losses and a faltering business model that has investors feeling nervous. In an apparent attempt to pull operations even closer to the vest, this move may backfire on the company.

Did Uber make a mistake in laying off such a large number of its internal marketing staff? Only time will tell. However, the biggest takeaway from this action is that marketing isn't of high value to the powers that be; or at least, it's assumed that the remaining staff can keep the marketing machine running.

The undertone of this action is that marketing is not valuable enough for Uber to continue investing in the staffing needed to keep such a large organization running. Previously, Uber's in-house marketing team was about 1,200 employees strong.

And while 800 employees can still handle their fair share of work, think of just how large of a company Uber is. As the business continues to grow, and more competitors emerge, having competent and competitive marketing will be necessary in order to navigate the chaos.

Uber has had its fair share of marketing faux pas—or, at the very least, public relations mishaps. From sexual assault allegations levied at drivers to an ill-fated initiative to put self-driving cars on the road, Uber has had plenty of dark marks on its record.

With that checkered past in mind, is laying off marketing staff the best move? Perhaps in an effort to move budget around or bow to pressure to "lighten the load," this move seemed to make sense. However, marketing is an ongoing process, and it must be constantly updated and analyzed in order to measure effectiveness.

Putting this responsibility on a staff that has been reduced by 30 percent may not be a recipe for success.

In the meantime, the remaining marketing staff will likely now be tasked with a larger workload, which can interfere with creativity and deep work quality. Of course, this is pure speculation until the results of this layoff are seen. In fact, Uber itself has said that these layoffs are not an indication of Uber's belief in the value of marketing. Instead, the brand is positioning the move as a way to define a stronger, more unified narrative. Perhaps the dissension in the ranks was higher than the public got wind of.

It remains to be seen whether or not Uber can regain control of its own story. With a leaner marketing staff, the results could likely go in any direction.

By the end of this year, charismatic billionaire Richard Branson will see his value grow out of this world. In the coming months, Virgin Galactic will become the first publicly listed company to send humans to space, beating Musk's SpaceX and Bezos's Blue Origin to the punch.

Things weren't always this rosy. A few years ago, Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo crashed into the Mojave Desert, causing the death of a test pilot. Branson's ambitious space tourism venture looked to be on the rocks. Ever the publicist, however, Branson was able to set the tone of the incident and steer his company onwards and upwards. Virgin's crisis management is just that good.

In the wake of the accident, Branson's first comments were made on Twitter and, later, a blog post. By reacting quickly and positively, remaining empathetic and staying faultlessly visible, Branson turned a potentially reputation-destroying incident into a pitch perfect case of best practice crisis management. How did he do it?

First, the man knows what he's doing. This wasn't the first time Branson handled a PR crisis with flying colors. In 2007, he handled the Virgin train crash tragedy in Cumbria, after which his handling of the crisis was described by the editor-in-chief of *The Independent* as "genius PR." Secondly, the press likes him: when he appears to be grieving, they believe him. When he apologizes, they accept it. When he heralds the heroism of all those involved, the media do not suspect a hidden agenda. Branson has built a hard-won rapport with the public and is consistently given the benefit of the doubt in return.

Not convinced? Compare his handling of the Mojave Desert crisis with the way Malaysian Airlines dealt with the tragedy of flight MH370. After weeks of waiting with scant news, the relatives of the passengers were rewarded with a mere text message from the airline that the plane was assumed to be lost with zero survivors.

Or consider the handling of a 2009 incident on the Eurostar when some 2,000 passengers were trapped under the Channel Tunnel for close to 18 hours. While holidaymakers were reportedly advised "not to breathe so hard" amid dwindling air supply, pre-scheduled social media messages were posted at regular intervals throughout the ordeal. Talk about tone-deaf.

Few brands have been fortunate enough to land a CEO like Richard Branson, a leader with a natural flair for crisis communication. Still, even the highest hurdles can be overcome with the right groundwork; studying the master at work is a good starting point.

Ronn Torossian is CEO of 5WPR, a leading PR Agency.

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