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STAGWELL MAKES MOVE ON MDC

Stagwell Group, a holding company formed by Mark Penn in 2015, has proposed merging with MDC Partners to create a $2B ad/PR combine.

Penn, who chairs and owns a 30 percent MDC stake, said a deal would result in $35M in cost synergies and offer "best-in-class combination of insights, creative, digital and performance."


Mark Penn

Stagwell's $4.25 per-share offer represents a 263 percent premium to MDC's June 24 closing stock price of $1.17

MDC has formed a special committee of the board to evaluate Stagwell's officer. "We are committed to maximizing shareholder value and, if it makes sense to proceed, we will do so in a thoughtful and diligent manner," said Irwin Smith, lead independent director of the company.

MDC recorded a 0.3 percent dip in first-quarter revenues to $327.7M and a $2.4M loss.

Its PR units include Allison + Partners, KWT Global and Hunter.

Stagwell's PR properties are Finn Partners, SKDKnickerbocker, Sloane & Co. and Wye Communications.

DELOITTE DIGITAL CHIEF TAKES OGILVY HELM

Andy Main, global chief at Deloitte Digital, will be the new CEO of Ogilvy, taking over for John Seifert, who announced his plan to step down in April.

Mark Read, CEO of WPP, said Main "has demonstrated the effectiveness of blending creative, technology and consulting services."

He said Main's "belief in the power of creativity to transform businesses and the importance of people and culture in organizations aligns closely with our vision for WPP and our agencies."


Andy Main

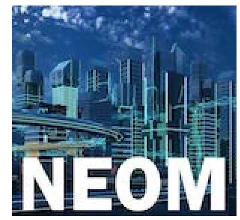
Main began his 25-year career at Andersen Consulting and moved to Deloitte Consulting in 1999 as a principal in the high-tech practice. He took over the chief digital spot in 2014.

He called the Ogilvy brand synonymous with creative and strategic excellence "We have a great opportunity to help clients deliver sustainable growth by using Ogilvy's creative genius to transform not only brands but entire businesses," he said.

Seifert began his Ogilvy career in 1979 as an intern in Los Angeles.

RUDER FINN INKS $1.7M PACT FOR SAUDI CITY

Ruder Finn has a $1.7M one-year contract with Saudi Arabia to develop a website and social media campaign for Neom, the $500B mega-city that is supposed to be the centerpiece of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's plan to diversify the Kingdom's economy.



The independent firm will station two to three employees in Saudi Arabia to work on the campaign. Staffers in New York and Asia will support them.

The campaign will pitch Neom as a model for sustainable living, "a place that is focused on setting new standards for community health, environmental protection and the effective and productive use of technology," according to RF.

The PR push also may shape US public opinion and members of Congress about the development of Neom.

RF's contract includes a COVID-19 provision calling for it "to use all reasonable endeavors to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among its personnel, the employer's worksite and any person at the employer's worksite."

The agreement also notes that RF, which is headed by Kathy Bloomgarden, is a women-owned business with a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. The firm will use its local network to recruit and train women in the community to support customer service.

The Saudis also have Teneo working to promote Neom. It signed a six-month $840K contract in January to manage the communications department of Neom.

PHRMA'S ZIRKELBACH GOES TO EXXONMOBIL

Robert Zirkelbach, executive VP-PA at the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, has moved to ExxonMobil as head of global issues and advocacy.


Robert Zirkelbach

The six-year PhRMA veteran developed and guided communications strategy overseeing its media relations, digital/social media, advertising, message development, internal communications and executive visibility.

Previously, Zirkelbach did a seven-year stint as VP-strategic communications at America's Health Insurance Plans. He was in charge of the team responsible for the association's media relations, public policy communications, and grassroots and issue advocacy. Zirkelbach also positioned AHIP for the rollout and implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

He also served as press secretary for Congressman Jim Nussle (R-IA).

BRAND TRUST UP, SAYS EDELMAN REPORT

Consumers, whipsawed by the COVID-19 crisis and demonstrations for racial equality, are putting a greater emphasis on brand trust when purchasing a product, according to a special report of the Edelman Trust Barometer released June 25.

Trust is now the second most important factor in buying a new brand (53 percent) or becoming a loyal customer (49 percent), trailing only price and affordability, according to a survey conducted May 27-June 5 in 11 countries.

That's a jump from fifth place a year ago, when trust ranked behind product performance, customer service, retail presence and ingredients.

Edelman found that 44 percent of consumers started using a new brand "because of the innovative or compassionate way" it has responded to the virus. That's a seven-point jump from an April poll.

Forty percent (up six points) stopped using a brand because it did not act appropriately to the pandemic.

Earned media (44 percent) only trails personal experience (59 percent) and nearly doubles advertising (23 percent) in building trust in a brand.

FULL PICTURE REPS KARDASHIAN/COTY DEAL

Kim Kardashian West is using Full Picture PR for her $200M alliance with COTY Inc. to expand her KKW Beauty's product line and open new market categories.

Kim Kardashian

Her team will lead all creative efforts including communications, building on Kardashian West's 300M followers across social media and her standing as a major influencer among beauty consumers worldwide.

Coty, which will take a 20 percent stake in KKW Beauty, acquired a 51 percent stake in Kardashian West's half-sister Kylie Jenner's brands in January.

Christy Welder, executive VP at Full Picture, handles the Kardashian West deal.

Desiree Gruber launched Full Picture, which has entertainment, beauty and fashion accounts, in 1999.

It has offices in Los Angeles and New York and has represented clients such as Condé Nast Entertainment, Google, AOL and Victoria's Secret.

H+K HIRES BLAIR'S EX-PRESS SECRETARY

Hill+Knowlton has hired Tanya Joseph, who served as UK prime minister Tony Blair's press secretary and is a trustee at the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, as managing director of its specialist services unit in London.

Trained as a journalist, Joseph did a stint as managing director for public affairs at Grayling and ran her own consultancy for nine years.

She also was director of campaigns & public policy at the Nationwide Building Society, vice-chair at the Fawcett Society and while at Sport England, Joseph crafted the award-winning "This Girl Campaign" to encourage girls to be physically active.

At H+K, the specialist services group includes corporate advisory, behavioral science, executive coaching, internal communications and crisis/reputation management services.

ALABAMA RELEASES EDUCATION RFP

Alabama is seeking proposals from agencies specializing in marketing services that can implement a campaign that increases perception and awareness of the Yellowhammer State's teachers.

Scope of the work also calls for targeted ad campaigns via traditional (TV, print, radio, billboards) and digital (Internet, social) media as well as marketing merchandise, and maintaining and updating social media accounts.

Proposals are due by 4 p.m. (CST) on July 6 and should be sent to: Mr. Jacky P. Todd; Administrator – Office of Operations; Alabama State Department of Education; 50 N. Ripley Street, Room P305; Gordon Persons Building; Montgomery, AL 36104

Bidding agencies should include their original proposals and four copies as well as an additional electronic copy on a USB flash drive. All bidding agencies must register with The Alabama Department of Finance, Division of Purchasing as a state vendor.

Questions related to this RFP should be directed to Office of Operations administrator Jacky P. Todd, jtodd@alsde.edu.

Download the RFP (PDF).

ECOLAB PARTNERS WITH TEAM WPP

Ecolab, provider of sanitization and disinfection services, has hired WPP to promote how companies that use its services can position themselves as the gold standard of cleanliness as economies reopen in the post-COVID-19 era.

Serving the food, healthcare, hospitality and industrial markets, the St. Paul-based company has just introduced the Ecolab science certified program.

Combining advanced chemistry, public health training and audit verification, the program launched following research that found consumers feel safer when hotels and restaurants raise cleaning protocols to include hospital-grade disinfectants and third-party audits.

"Ecolab's science-backed solutions, tailored by industry and location, are needed now more than ever, and WPP is perfectly equipped to help us get the word out," said Ecolab CEO Doug Baker.

WPP's Ecolab team includes Hill+Knowlton Strategies, Landor and Wavemaker.

MICROSOFT SHUTTERS RETAIL NETWORK

Microsoft has announced it is closing its 83 retail stores, abandoning its plan to mimic Apple's successful strategy. They have been closed since March due to COVID-19.

The company, which will take a $450M charge for the shutdown, said retail staffers would shift to corporate sites to handle customer sales, support and training.

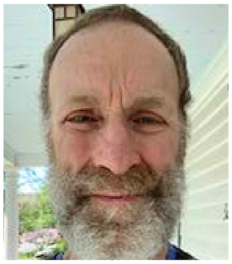
"We are grateful to our Microsoft Store customers and we look forward to continuing to serve them online and with our retail sales team at Microsoft corporate locations, David Porter, Microsoft VP, said in a statement.

Microsoft said its digital storefronts on Microsoft.com, Xbox and Windows reach more than 1.2B people each month.

WE Communcations handles PR for Microsoft.

THE (UNEXPECTED) JOYS OF CLIENT BILLING

I'm no diarist. I've never kept a journal or a scrapbook, nor even a day planner. Let others have their social calendar. But every month, with meticulous detail, I compile a jam-packed summary of everything I've done over the past 30 days, not for personal reflection but to present to clients of my press relations practice when submitting an invoice.



Allan Ripp

Billing is the bane of my working life—and my home life, considering weekends and holidays are often spent playing catch-up reconstructing all the projects, work product and results our small team has delivered for those who pay our retainers.

No matter how much is delegated or what software tools are available to capture activity, as proprietor I need to ensure our statements are coherent and defensible when some higher-up asks the inevitable, "What have you done for us lately?"

There's an old three-step rule in professional services: tell your clients what you plan to do, then tell them what you're doing and cap it off by telling them what you've done.

These days, hitting those marks can drain your battery, never mind what your actual job entails. Clients want to see all your work revealed like a dissected frog open for inspection.

And everything must be measurable. Have we secured more media placements, in higher-quality outlets, with greater circulations (viewership) in more markets than we did the same time last year? One client sadistically devised unheard-of new categories for us to track: opportunities presented that didn't pan out, and the percentage of an article his firm was featured. Even when it doesn't move the needle, such metrics make for good PowerPoints. No wonder our recaps cover pages of bullets, arrows, links and other do-daddish proof of deliverables.

In recent months, as the pandemic has squeezed the economy and so many livelihoods, I've found a new appreciation for our forensic invoicing. Enjoy it? Never. But as long as I can show that our slate is full and reflects a job well done, it means we're still in the game and making a contribution. If I'm billing, I must be working and have some trace of a professional pulse. And I don't need to be so sheepish when checking up on unpaid bills from three months ago!

We've had our share of hits. I'm constantly reminded that PR is a cost center, not a revenue generator and that accounting departments will always regard us as vendors. We love you, our clients tell us, we just can't pay you what we did before the coronavirus. Many of our fees will never return to pre-COVID levels, vaccine or not. I cringe when a client emails to ask, "Can we chat?" knowing it's an opening to some sort of reduction in compensation.

At this point, I'll likely never get to emulate my first PR boss, an elegant old-schooler in double-breasted banker suits who prized his three-hour lunches at the 21 Club. Each month an assistant typed his statements on heavy-stock cream paper with the words "For professional services rendered," followed by a dotted line leading to various large sums. Nothing else soiled the page save his grand signature. His bills were like currency that could be cashed at a teller's window. It seemed an appealing way to make a living: dispense advice, scratch out an agenda for an occasional meeting and watch the checks roll in.

Lately, it's taken every last day of 30 or 31 to complete our invoices for the month before. It's not just the distractions of working from home, where the dog is always staring at me or the dishwasher needs emptying. It's that there's actually more work, even at less pay, because our clients have taken advantage of the crisis to raise their profiles with pandemic-related content to promote. Suddenly, PR is an essential service (something my staff already knew). And I've achieved fresh existential clarity: I bill, therefore I am.

Allan Ripp runs Ripp Media/Public Relations, Inc. in New York.

ONE IN FOUR U.S. PAPERS SHUT SINCE 2004

U.S. newsrooms have existed in a perilous state for years now, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic recession will only further exacerbate the ongoing decline of the nation's local media ecosystem.

According to a June report released by the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, more than one-fourth of the country's newspapers have disappeared in the last 15 years, leaving a growing number of American communities without access to local news.

There are 6,736 local newspapers in the United States—1,260 dailies and 5,474 weeklies—that were still being published at the end of 2019. According to the UNC report, this number reveals an astounding disappearance of 2,155 papers from the 8,891 news titles that were being published in 2004, accounting for a loss of approx. 212 daily titles and 1,943 non-dailies.

In the last year alone, more than 300 newspapers across the U.S. shuttered, resulting in a loss of about 6,000 journalism jobs and a print news circulation decline of approx. five million. At least 30 U.S. newspapers closed or merged between April and May 2020 alone, according to the report.

As a result, "news deserts" have spread across the country, leaving more than 1,800 communities in the U.S. without access to local print or digital reporting. About half of the nation's 3,143 counties have only one newspaper, and two-thirds don't have a daily. More than 200 of the counties in the U.S. currently have no local news outlet whatsoever.

2020 has dealt two once-in-a-century catastrophes—a global pandemic and an economic collapse on par with the Great Depression—which no doubt will result in the continued closure of countless more local newsrooms. Ironically, these events had the effect of driving Americans' interest in the local news in recent months, as homebound residents across the country eagerly awaited updates on how the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting their communities and what steps state and local officials were taking to respond to the crisis.

Hussman School of Journalism and Media's report, "News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?" is the fourth installment in a series of reports on the loss of local news published by UNC's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. Findings were based on a survey of all 50 state press associations as well as a proprietary database collected by the Center over the past 15 years, which contains more than 9,000 local newspapers, 1,400 public broadcasting outlets, 950 ethnic media and 525 digital sites.

AT&T VET BECOMES GOLDMAN'S FIRST CMO

Goldman Sachs has hired Fiona Carter, who exited as AT&T's chief brand officer on June 26, as its first chief marketing officer. She joins the bank on Sept. 1.


Fiona Carter

Responsible for brand marketing, content and global digital strategy, Carter "will work closely with businesses across the firm to apply a cross-divisional lens in our execution in support of our One Goldman Sachs approach," according to an internal memo.

She will report to John Waldron, president and chief operating officer.

During a five-year stint at AT&T, Carter handled global brand marketing, advertising, media, sponsorships, social media, corporate and employee communications.

She also led the telecom's participation in the Assn. of National Advertisers Alliance's #SeeHer campaign to improve how girls and women are portrayed in the media.

Prior to AT&T, Carter worked 11 years at Omnicom's BBDO shop, overseeing the General Electric, Procter & Gamble and Bank of America accounts.

XENOPHON TOUTS UZBEKISTAN'S ESG GAINS

Xenophon Strategies has a nearly $600K contract with Uzbekistan designed to highlight its progress on improving human rights with the goal of ending the cotton boycott erected against the former Soviet republic.

More than 300 US and European fashion and apparel companies have pledged not to knowingly use cotton from Uzbekistan because of the use of forced labor during the cotton harvest.

Xenophon will produce an environmental, social and governance report for Uzbekistan, create a branded communications campaign centered on its governmental reforms, international trade and economic development, and pitch the US media on behalf of Uzbekistan's export promotion agency.

CEO David Fuscus heads the US effort with senior VP Mark Hazlin, VP Jennifer Lay, researcher Tammy Lindenberg and creative director Caroline Davis.

Xenophon's sister shop, Germany-based Cometis, is handling outreach for Europe.

FINN PARTNERS OPENS UP ITALY

The Italian Tourist Board has hired Finn Partners in London to lure travellers from the UK as the country opens up to visitors.

Effective June 3, Italy said Brits could travel there without the need to quarantine.

"The tourism industry is one of Italy's key economy drivers so it is with utmost importance that we open for business as soon as it is safe to do so," Flavio Zappacosta, ITB's manager for UK and Ireland, told the *Manchester Evening News*.

The Finn Partners push will include trade representation, digital media and a dedicated influencer strategy to generate buzz about Italy as the country recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zappacosta expects Finn Partners will provide a holistic approach to destination marketing and ensure that "we are prepared and ready to invite British travellers back once it's safe to travel again."

DOW JONES ALUM JOINS VERITONE

Thor Valdmanis, who was senior VP for strategic initiatives & relationships at News Corp.'s Dow Jones unit, has joined Veritone as senior VP-corporate communications.

He is expected to help the Costa Mesa, CA-based artificial intelligence company create a "unified vision" as it moves into new markets in the US, Europe and Asia.


Thor Valdmanis

At Dow Jones, publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*, Valdmanis led branding relationship and cemented ties with its top 250 global clients.

At Veritone, he reports to CEO Chad Steelberg, who co-founded the company with his brother, Ryan.

Prior to Dow Jones, Valdmanis was at FTI Consulting, where he was managing director for strategic communications.

Earlier, he headed North America for London-based Lloyd's insurance/reinsurance market.

BALLARD HOOKS ATLANTIC SAPPHIRE

Ballard Partners has signed Atlantic Sapphire, which is building the world's largest land-raised salmon farm in former tomato fields thirty miles south of Miami.

The first batch of salmon will be harvested in the fall.

Completion of the four-phase construction project is scheduled for 2030. The farm will employ more than 30K people.

The US imports 95 percent of its salmon. Atlantic Sapphire expects to grab a 12 percent share of the market by 2026.

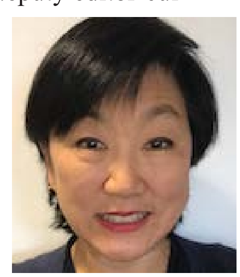
Brian Ballard, who chaired the Trump Victory fundraising campaign in the Sunshine State, represents Atlantic Sapphire with Miami-based executive VP Jose Diaz, a former member of Florida's House of Representatives.

The firm handles economic development opportunities related to domestic aquaculture and trade issues for Atlantic Sapphire, which is headquartered in Norway and listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange.

SUH RETURNS TO NYT

Mary Suh is rejoining the *New York Times* in the fall as acting op-ed editor in the aftermath of the resignation of James Bennet.

The 22-year NYT veteran exited the deputy editor-culture job in September 2018 to join *The Atlantic*'s events team.


Mary Suh

At the NYT, Suh also worked as deputy editor as several departments including politics, week in review and Sunday styles.

The Times also announced that Charlotte Greensit is joining the opinion sector as managing editor and associate editorial page editor on July 6.

Most recently, she was managing editor and deputy of digital strategy at *The Intercept*. Greensit was responsible for newsroom strategy, oversight on editorial processes, budgeting, audience, communications, and hiring.

Earlier, she spent a dozen years at *Time*, working in roles from reporter to senior editor in charge for logistics for international editiors.

THE END OF MEDIOCRITY

For communications professionals, a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic is that it brought an abrupt end to the acceptance of mediocrity. When, overnight, your company must cull 75 percent of its workforce or reduce expenses by half, it becomes suddenly much easier to distinguish between excellence and everything else.


Christine Barney

The questions ask themselves: "Is this person really performing well? Do I need this particular technology tool? Is my agency really delivering?"

Communications is an industry that's ripe with mediocrity. Anyone can hang out a shingle and start offering consulting services. There's no certification or licensing required and voluntary honorifics like PRSA's Accredited in Public Relations have barely made a dent in the population of practitioners. Corporations often promote to incompetence, take the safer route to avoid failure and measure outputs vs. outcomes. But in our new world of rampant unemployment and uncertainty, the mediocre will not survive.

Mediocrity loses to those trading up

Organizations that follow Six Sigma or Top Grading philosophies are comfortable categorizing employees as A or B players who are rewarded if they're in the top 10 percent and expendable if in the bottom 10 percent.

Many organizations are uncomfortable with this "Hunger Games" like approach to weeding out lesser performers, and that's why so many C players linger and even get promoted. It's easy to fire those who are terrible. But those who might have a few really strong skills? Or those who are liked by that one client or that one manager? Firing that person is harder, until, of course, you're forced into the lifeboat and there isn't enough room for everyone.

So, in the wake of COVID-19, not only did many mediocre people find themselves cast out, but organizations looking at their people assets now saw an opportunity to trade up.

You feel like your biz dev person isn't delivering enough ROI? Play the field. You let people go and then got Paycheck Protection Plan funds and now must get your headcount back up or be penalized on the forgiveness of the loan? Why not invest in hiring to add some new capabilities.

The bar just got higher

No matter where you sit in the communications industry, everyone's demanding more. When resources are scarce, you can't afford to keep mediocre performers. Say you have a tool that was supposed to enhance your productivity by 50 percent but delivered only 30 percent. In the past, the argument might be made that, well, 30 percent is still good and the scale would tip toward the easier path of doing nothing versus the more involved steps to make a change.

No one wants to admit they accept average or less, but I believe every organization has a person, tool or vendor that just isn't delivering at expected levels and only gets away with it because mediocrity is easy to ignore. However, in today's new environment, we have permission to be—or in fact are being forced to be … brutally honest.

The current crisis forced the raising of the bar, but it also brought opportunity and accelerated change. If someone had asked you to put on a virtual conference in 2019, you might have said you needed at least six months to plan. Yet thousands of organizations switched gears with mere weeks of planning to salvage conferences and stay relevant to their audiences. Many of them had no technology platforms, but they went from zero to 60 because they had to.

Ultimately, it's clear that mediocrity isn't a fixed state. Any single person, company or technology can rise above mediocrity with effort, inspiration or perhaps a kick in the pants.

Will mediocrity come back like a weed?

Once this pandemic is no longer top of mind, will we go back to our lazy ways? Maybe, but just like working from home is now a mainstay of many organization—and predictions say lots of these folks will never go back—once you get a taste of realizing the power of eliminating mediocrity, and see the impact on the bottom line, my guess is it will be hard to give that up.

We'll live in the shadow of COVID-19 for quite a while; we'll wonder when it will ramp up or mutate or if some other devastating event will come along. The apple cart was upset so quickly, it will be a long time before we feel safe enough to become complacent again.

So, if every action requires you to take a mediocrity test, chances are we in the communications industry will be less willing to fail that test. It will be those with agility, drive and flawless execution who will succeed while the mediocre will be forced to up their game or be watching from the sidelines.

Christine Barney is CEO and managing partner of rbb Communications.

NEWS OF FIRMS

Porter Novelli and **Rabin Martin**, both part of Omnicom Public Relations Group, are forming a strategic alliance, effective July 1. While each firm continues to work remotely due to COVID-19, they plan to jointly occupy New York offices at 220 East 42nd Street in the fall. Their offices and teams will also be working together in London. The agencies will share client referrals and marketing resources as well as new business development opportunities. The alliance is intended to combine the scale and purpose-driven strategy of Porter Novelli with Rabin Martin's capabilities in executing programs and alliances at the intersection of private sector capabilities and unmet public health needs.

LaVoieHealthScience and **Bioscience Valuation** have announced a strategic alliance intended to combine LHS' expertise in strategic communications for health and science companies with BSV's skill in providing strategic valuations. Bioscience Valuation offers evidence-based value, commercial, R&D and economic assessments to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies to support investment and partnering decisions. "Our strategic alliance with BSV will ensure that LHS clients have a roadmap for understanding the value of their strategic assets," said LaVoieHealthScience president and CEO Donna LaVoie.

Asia PR Werkz, a strategic communications and marketing agency headquartered in Singapore, has joined **IPREX**. Led by a team of owner-directors, Asia PR Werkz, which recently opened its first overseas office in Indonesia, focuses on clients in financial technology, government and public affairs, consumer and lifestyle, start-ups and education. Anu Gupta, director of Asia PR Werkz, said its membership in IPREX is expected to help the agency's clients in key markets across the U.S., Europe, Middle East and Asia Pacific.

COMMENTARY

Disney World is going to be hard-pressed to live up to its billing as "The Most Magical Place on Earth" if it sticks to its plan to reopen the Orlando theme park with limited capacity on July 11.

It will be staffed with disgruntled employees who are scared to death of catching COVID-19.

Disney World could become the most nightmarish place on Earth. How's that for a crisis PR scenario?

A petition drive organized by Disney employees calls for a delay in the reopening the park due to the spike in COVID-19 cases in Florida.

Addressed to Orange County mayor Jerry Demings and Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer, the petition notes that theme parks are not deemed essential businesses.

It reads: "As individuals who work in the bustling tourism industry in central Florida, we are responsible for ensuring the safety of our guests and our fellow magic makers… This includes our health and wellbeing. We are encouraged to say something when we see something that we deem is unsafe so we're speaking up… While theme parks are a great way to relax and enjoy free time, it is a non-essential business; it is not fair to the people who work there to risk their lives, especially if they are at risk or have family members who are at risk. People are more important than making a profit."

Disney fans also have expressed their opinion about the reopening. They swamped Disney's advanced reservations booking system, when it opened for business on June 21.

White House economic advisor Larry Kudlow, who apparently moonlights as an epidemiologist, assured America that a second wave of COVID-19 is not in the cards.

He may be right.

Unfortunately, the first wave of coronavirus isn't finished with the US yet, as the virus spreads in Texas, Arizona California and Florida.

True to form: President Trump is now frantically looking for a new target to blame for the spread, a move designed to cover up his own fault in failing to prepare the country in January for the impending outbreak.

At first, he blamed China and returned to the racist "Kung-Flu" term during his disastrous "rally" in Tulsa. He also has trotted out the World Health Organization for blame, saying it was somehow in cahoots with China and guilty of withholding valuable scientific data from the US. That didn't gain much traction.

Politico reports that Trump is now teeing up the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as the fall guy for the 120K COVID-19 deaths in the US.

He's especially upset with how the CDC is calculating the state-by-state death toll from COVID-19 because every fatality reminds Americans of Trump's failure to come to grips with the public health emergency, diminishing his re-election bid.

Ironically, the CDC headquarters in Atlanta was the site of one of Trump's worst photo-ops, the one where he wore a red "Keep America Great" hat, played scientist, took a bow for controlling the virus and bashed critics.

He also unleashed the Big Lie about how anyone wanting a COVID-19 test could get one. It's been all downhill for the president since that appearance.

Trump, who wants to pull the plug on COVID-19 testing to keep the numbers down, can't be too pleased with CDC director Dr. Robert Redfield telling Congress the pandemic is "the greatest public health crisis our nation and world have confronted in a century."

The American public has caught on to the president as the *New York Times*/Sienna College poll released June 24 found that 58 percent of respondents disapprove of Trump's handling of the pandemic, 38 percent approve.

Despite assurances from Dr. Kudlow, 57 percent of Americans think the worst is yet to come. Fasten your seatbelt.

COVID-19 has infected American brands in the eyes of many Europeans, according to research from Morning Consult, which found that 40 percent of consumers in the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and France have a less favorable opinion of US brands since the pandemic.

That decline has led a drop-off in Europeans buying US brands, opting instead for more local ones or private/store label products.

Aggressive PR spending by consumer packaged goods companies will be needed to reboot the image of US brands in Europe during the post-COVID-19 era.

Hats off to Barri Rafferty for her decision to quit the CEO spot at Ketchum for a corporate communications gig at scandal-ridden Wells Fargo.

She probably got out just in the nick of time as Omnicom chief John Wren tightens the screws on its PR properties.

In announcing Rafferty's rise to the helm, Ketchum boasted that she was the first female leader of a global 5 PR firm.

But who knows? The firm has long boycotted the O'Dwyer rankings, which require CPA attested-to financials.

Despite the Ketchum hoopla about Rafferty's elevation to the CEO slot, her two and a half year reign was a "cup of coffee" compared to predecessors Rob Flaherty (five years), Ray Kotcher (12 years) and Dave Drobis (six years). North American president Mike Doyle is replacing her.

Rafferty said she's leaving Ketchum because she wants new challenges and the chance to participate in a transformation project.

But no firm holds a candle to Ketchum, which hadn't exactly knocked it out of the ballpark under Rafferty, when it comes to challenges and transformation.

Ketchum is in the midst of a major cost-cutting overhaul and Omnicom just merged its Brussels operation with Porter Novelli.

Rafferty certainly left Doyle a full plate.

At Wells, Rafferty will report to Bill Daley, vice chairman. He's a tough taskmaster, as well as former US secretary of commerce and chief of staff to president Obama

We wish her all the best. —*Kevin McCauley*

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