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P.R. Man for Two Popes: Ed Eisen Stands Alone

BY DAVID MOORE

The editorial offices of SEP have set up elaborate safeguards to hold at bay the importunities of P.R. folk. Initial callers are vetted through voice mail. Those circumventing this checkpoint get passed on to a managing editor who runs the show from a bunker of reinforced concrete, 30 floors beneath the earth's surface. She wields her invective to such shocking effect that it's shorted out three censor devices installed on her phone. Only one man could slip through this high-tech fortress.

THIS STORY wasn't supposed to be written. Or, maybe the story was scripted from the start and I just didn't—couldn't—know it.

I was close to assigning a story on the subject of media relations to a man who built a 30-plus year career becoming an expert on the subject. As we went back and forth over specific coverage, something began to gnaw at me. I fought its power as best as I could



Patemostro

Ed Eisen reads national magazines on the Radio Information Service for the blind.

but, in the end, gave in to its inescapable rightness. The writer himself was the story.

Like a jazz riff, Ed Eisen's long career in journalism and media relations is remarkable for the continuities running beneath improvisation. He started off in the 1950s spinning Patti Page and Teresa Brewer songs for

top-40 radio. The 1960s found him hosting talk radio, producing television news and editing *The Fort Lauderdale News*. In 1966, he went to work as a reporter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and garnered several awards covering the gritty underbelly of American culture. In 1968, during a wave of terrorist fright, Eisen won a Philadelphia Press Association award by planting a phony bomb in a government building to expose its poor security.



PROFILE

His tenure at the *Inquirer* lasted until 1971, when he did a brief tour of duty as director of public relations at Thomas Jefferson University. The P.R. bug had bitten Ed Eisen.

In 1974 he joined Gray & Rogers, a public relations firm based in Philadelphia, and two years later he managed what would become the defining "account" of his career. The firm handled public relations for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. So, when the 41st International Eucharistic Congress convened in that city for one week during August of 1976, the Vatican, by extension, became a client. And Eisen was put in charge of promoting the holy event.

It proved a huge undertaking. The Eucharistic Congress assembled priests, bishops and some one million "pilgrims" for a series of liturgies and diverse cultural events focusing on the theme "hungers of the human family." Eisen's task included scripting promotional material, setting up press centers and conferences, and training 100 volunteers—mostly nuns and priests—to help out. "Everybody was saying, 'What's this Jewish kid from Brooklyn doing running the world's largest gathering of Catholics?'" Eisen jokes.

The answer, it turned out, was "plenty." Though religion played only a limited role in this event, Eisen the *journalist* knew all too well that finding the perfect angle was decisive, whether you covered an event as a reporter or sold it as a flak. Here, Eisen butted heads with Congress planners. It was one thing to devote the Congress to a sacred theme; it proved quite another to make that theme

the core of a much-needed national publicity effort. "The campaign got off to a terrible start," Eisen says. "The Vatican's approach to publicity was to get the word out that Jesus had answers to the hungers of the human spirit. This worked well with the religious press, but the secular press weren't buying it. We needed to play another card. The kind of card that the entertainment industry would play."

And that card seemed obvious to Eisen. "Who was coming to the Eucharistic Congress, that's what the mainstream wanted to know," Eisen says. Distinguished guests did include activists like Archbishop of Brazil, Helder Camara, "apostle of the poor," as well as more mainstream notables like Grace Kelly, Mother Teresa and President Ford. Under Eisen's guiding hand, this new tactic worked. "Once we played this card, we got big, big press," he says. Success also provided Eisen with the moniker he brandishes to this day. Because Pope Paul VI was too ill to attend, a papal legate by the name of Karol Wojtyla filled his place. In 1978, Archbishop Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II. And Eisen, too,

was promoted, from Philly Flak to "P.R. Man to the Pope." Actually, two Popes.

Eisen returned to journalism in 1978 as business writer and bureau chief for *The Philadelphia Bulletin*. But when the paper's presses ground to a halt in 1982, Eisen was out of work for nine months. He decided to form his own public relations firm and, working from his home office, soon built up an impressive client list

that included Braniff Airlines and Campbell Soup. This success notwithstanding, Eisen would continue to innovate: pioneering guaranteed public relations in Philadelphia; setting up a free marketing hotline service; and volunteering as a counselor for a free job search program called *Career Crossroads*.

Eisen's experience may or may not be unique, but what he's made of his experience is certainly instructive. For, in a very specific way, he's derived wisdom from the zany convergence of his two careers, and he's derived a highly transferable skill from his firm grasp of the principles of newswriting. Eisen *knows* the key role played by audience, message and medium in the construction of a good news story. He knows a good story turns on conflict, trends, localism, oddity, impact, timeliness and fame. And, finally, he knows that a good flak marries the client's agenda with that of the media.

And Eisen says it is this knowledge and application that's been lost on many practitioners now entering the business.





In recent years, Eisen has turned a somewhat jaundiced eye upon developments in his industry. "Years ago, the best media relations people came out of television, newspapers, magazines. They knew the hows, whys and wheres. They'd come from places like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Not today. It is now a business peopled by amateurs who largely have never

worked for a magazine or a radio or television station. And that is a pity, because they are the people giving P.R. a black eye," Eisen says. Many an editor will likely identify with Eisen's criticism of those who call when they shouldn't, or badger on deadline, or simply don't know what different media want.

Eisen the industry critic is no mere pontificator. Though he still spends about 30 percent of his time

executing media relations campaigns for clients, most of his time is spent as a media coach for corporate communications staffs and executives on the fine art of media relations. "The rule of the game is 'know thy media,'" Eisen says. "The golden rule is tell the truth, because if you lie you're going to be found out. I have and will fire a client if I feel the client is having me say or do something that's a cover-up. Because I'm an independent consultant, I can just say good-bye." He recently left a law firm that was being less than candid about what it wanted. "I couldn't do that if I were in-house."

Eisen's latest passion seems a natural outgrowth of his career in both style and substance. He is at work on a do-it-yourself marketing book whose title, *Stand Alone*, was inspired by the ad for Dove ice cream bars adorning the nation's billboards. Eisen is careful to exclude no one as a potential reader of his work-in-progress, but he points out that the book should find a highly useful place on the shelves of a certain group of professionals lacking the budget or inclination to hire marketing directors.

Indeed, as Eisen works on his latest project, he applies the same publicity formula to his own work that he does working on another's behalf. First, the Goal: national publicity for a book on self-promotion; next, the

Audience: a group of readers eager to gobble up a book on one of their major concerns; finally, the Medium: a magazine targeting the chief concerns of this audience.

The Result? Gentle reader, judge for yourself. ■

Some Elements of Style

How do you get your story printed in tomorrow's *The New York Times*? What will it take to have your message trumpeted on the *NBC Nightly News* tomorrow or at the very least ... in your community newspaper? Here are some story elements that will help:

Impact: The largest local bank merger in history.

Oddity: Multimillion-dollar award for buyer of a lemon auto.

Conflict: Lawyers form an organization to combat negative P.R.

Known principle: Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell will discuss the plight of the city's homeless with President Clinton.

Trend: Actors by the thousands are leaving the profession to become lawyers.

Forecast: A new material will be rolled out next week to replace the troubled silicone breast implant.

Survey: A poll of 1,627 young adults in Boston says they have difficulty understanding their foreign-born professors. The youngsters say an accent doctor needs to be called in.

—From Ed Eisen's 66
No-cost Ways to Grow Your Business

