

Imagine. Create. Inspire

PRSA International Conference

Orlando, Florida

Oct. 15 -18

By Stu Opperman, APR

The opening session of the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) International Conference featured Cable News Network (CNN) Anchor and Special Correspondent **Soledad O'Brien** and **Peter H. Diamandis**, chairman and CEO of the X Prize Foundation. O'Brien, the daughter of an Afro-Cuban mother and Anglo-Australian father, spoke first about some of the difficulties she had fitting in as a bi-racial child, but also how the experiences shaped the adult and journalist she would become. Now producing documentaries and the host of CNN's "In America," she shared anecdotes about the people she has met in her television career and how, in most cases, it was the humanness of their story that intrigued her. Soledad also cautioned the PR professionals not to expect their story pitches to stand up if all they had to offer the media was statistics. Numbers can help tell a story but the story is always the person and America, she said, was made up of inspiring, diverse, and opportunistic populations.

Peter Diamandis spoke primarily about innovation and how it is the key to moving societies forward. His company, the X Prize Foundation, inspires great thinking by offering large amounts of prize money to strategic thinkers in areas like science and technology to provide the incentive for them to collaborate and solve problems. Diamandis told of being so convinced about what could be invented and accomplished in X Prize's contest format that he offered his first \$10 million prize in the aerospace industry without having any real idea where the money would come from. His presentation featured a number of quotes that were inspirational, my favorite being, "The best way to predict the future is to create it yourself."

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The first professional development workshop I attended was "Storytelling for the Digital Age" by **Johna Burke**. Like O'Brien, Burke, a senior executive for BurrellesLuce, spoke of the importance of the story and how it is critical that it drive an organization's goals. She offered specific tips to attendees to insure their information rises above the clutter:

- Target the story through the proper channels
- Identify primary, secondary audiences and what messages they will absorb
- Simplify messages, communicating in language that the audience knows and understands
- Create connections; first impressions have huge impacts for brands
- Don't forget to use video in the pitch and presentation
- Leverage the user's experience by positioning benefits that fill in voids/gaps in the audience's experiences
- Balance quantitative and qualitative feedback
- Engage the senses
- Be relevant

Burke says the 'call-to-action' is underutilized in PR writing and "one of the strongest tools in the PR arsenal." She also urged practitioners to maintain perspective, even in a crisis. "It's PR, not ER."

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Being a sole practitioner and small business owner, I was eagerly anticipating the next session, "Growth Strategies for Independent Practitioners," hoping it might provide some insight from those who have willingly left agency/corporate jobs to fly under their own banner.

The takeaway from this session was that there are three ways to grow a small practice:

- Use subcontractors when needed (virtual agency)
- Expand thru acquisitions (boutique firm)
- Partner w/ other firms (agency partnership)

While each of the speakers represented an organization that grew through one of those ways, the presentation was amateurish (please don't read your Powerpoint slides to me) and, like a bad movie, never made me care about the success or failure of the central figures I was hearing about. The speakers got bogged down in the minutiae of their own personal journey and never gave the big picture perspective that might have aided a recent independent or one who was considering the leap.

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My second day in Orlando dawned with the presentation of the Gold Anvil award to **Cheryl Proctor-Rogers**, APR, Fellow PRSA, a former CEO of PRSA. She was humbled by the recognition and thanked some of the people who had helped her along the career path. She quoted one mentor as saying that those who received awards should "be grateful, be gracious, and be gone."

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Following Proctor-Rogers was a keynote address by **Chris Brogan**, a thought leader who works with online communities, social media, and related technologies. Though this was my first time hearing Brogan in person, he immediately felt like the smart and funny professional friend we'd all like to have. He spoke humbly about himself, answered questions from PRSSA students with heartfelt advice, and said he sees PR people as "passionate relationship-minded storytellers."

Brogan also spoke about the "human digital channels" and how they are based on real interactions, not something on a website or turned up by search engines ("be the shopkeeper, not the shop."). He recommends cultivating visibility, earning leverage, and belonging to communities in which you have already earned trustworthy status.

PR people are in sales and customer service, Brogan reminded us, whether they believe it or not. When selling a story to a blogger, for example, review his/her last ten posts and 20 tweets, not only because you are looking for a successful outcome but to show that the relationship matters.

Speaking of Twitter, Brogan (nearly 200,000 followers) said that medium should be more a reflection of what has your interest as opposed to what you are doing. While clearly a rock star in the social media world, he warns that it isn't everything. Your website (yes, you still need to have one that represents your organization professionally) is home base and social media are outposts. The physical world, Brogan assured us, still exists and is the place where real success can be found. One last thing, he said, "once you get the stage, share the light."

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Ann Wylie, whose session was called, "Think Like a Reader," was the first workshop I attended following the keynote address. She was the first of numerous speakers I heard who focused on the importance of answering the audience's "What's in it for me?" question. She quoted Zig Ziglar's famous quote, "Nobody wants a 1/4 inch drill, they want a 1/4 inch hole," to reinforce that the emphasis of any writing must be on the benefits to the reader. Our jobs, she said, was to get into our readers heads, just getting information out was not nearly good enough. People don't buy the features of something nor do they buy its advantages. What they do buy is what it does to improve their lives.

The reader is always the story, even if the audience is everyone. She cited the editors at *USA Today* for figuring this out early in the game. While others would use the headline "Death rate drops," the nation's newspaper would counter with "We're living longer" for the same story. She also cautioned about overloading audience's with overly-frequent correspondence, just because it is inexpensive to distribute. "Information may be free but (your readers) attention is expensive," said Wylie.

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Next up on my personal agenda was a stop at "Media Training: Develop and Deliver Compelling Messages," with **Debbie Weatherhead**. Weatherhead took her audience inside preparation, message development, and delivery in her presentation, emphasizing that the messages delivered must describe, differentiate, and address the benefits to the audience (again, answering their "what's in it for me?" question).

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Michael Smart ("How to Pitch Overworked Journalists and Harried Bloggers and Come Out Unscathed") was an example of the quality of presenter that can usually only be found at major events like the International Conference. While he discussed the new rules of media relations (formulas for pitching, anatomies of perfect pitches, the importance of interest-grabbing subject lines, framing story ideas, building relationships, etc.), it was his easy-going style, use of video examples, and first-hand knowledge of media relations that had everyone interested and engaged. He shared the 'perfect' email pitch to the media (compelling subject line, 1 graph intro, 1 graph description of story angle, and any flattering comments you might make about something the journalist has recently done) and assured attendees that the first correspondence is merely designed to get permission to send information. It doesn't need to, nor should it try to, get a commitment to do an interview or cover story.

Best of all, Smart shared real stories of people who heard his presentation, as we were doing at that time, and used its techniques to get coverage in the *Wall Street Journal* and other major media outlets. In several of the examples, the PR people he spoke of were considerably less experienced than many of us in the audience, which provided a sense that these results were available to everyone who has ever picked up a phone or made an email pitch. Smart's session also inspired, to the point that many of us wanted to engage get a *New York Times* or NBC News reporter before dinner.

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It was easy to miss **Jerry Ross** at PRSA's recent International Conference in Orlando. The session he spoke at was on the last day of the event, at a time when many attendees were more focused on checking out of their hotels and making travel connections. The executive director of the National Entrepreneur Center spoke to no more than 60 people in a breakout session at the end of a long corridor far from where the keynote speeches were heard.

But, in many ways, Ross' message was the most important delivered at the event. He didn't speak about how to measure social media campaigns or engage Gen Y, but about entrepreneurial thinking, the business behind the PR craft. His message was that there is opportunity even in the most chaotic of economies, and it was there for those who could harness their internal fire, fuel, and focus. Ross encouraged those in the room to macro manage their careers and stop micro-managing the daily tasks on to-do lists. "Don't confuse activity with accomplishment."

While it is easy for PR pros to wrap themselves in the blanket of direct deposit and feel secure, Ross said it is the entrepreneurs who will succeed in the "innovation economy." They are the ones who will have clearly identified their unique competitive advantage and found their niche, not as employees who can write press releases but as business owners who know their customers pain and how to relieve it.

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