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REGIONAL FOCUS: On a winning streak

Craig McGuire - 28 Mar 2005 00:00

Hiring is up, PR is back, and the Red Sox won the World Series.

With the Red Sox's dramatic comeback against hated rivals the New York Yankees powering them toward their first World Series win since 1918, Boston erased nearly a century of frustration.

Last year, the PR industry fed on the elation emanating from Fenway Park that transcended baseball, redefining a city and unburdening it from "The Curse." But while the BoSox's win was the headline of 2004, it wasn't the only story last year.

In politics, Boston seized the national spotlight in July, when the Democratic Convention came barreling through town, blanketing the city with 15,000 members of the local, national, and international media.

On the corporate front, mergers of monoliths - such as Bank of America's blockbuster buyout of Fleet - commandeered the city's business pages, prompting panic about what consolidation means to the PR departments of the firms involved, while nonprofits bemoaned the impending evaporating largesse of acquired corporate sponsors.

Not everyone garnered such great press last year, as favorite son John Kerry failed in his bid for the White House, the perpetually leaky Big Dig continued its descent into a PR fiasco, and the Catholic Archdiocese absorbed a very public drubbing over child molestation litigation.

Agency scene flourishes

Last year, the PR community gained more ground on its road to recovery from the devastating downturn that ravaged the local industry just a few years ago. And while it seems highly unlikely that clients will revert to the drunken-sailor spending days that preceded the dot-bomb, like the Red Sox, many agencies are coming off a great year.

"The Boston PR community is a very tight-knit one, almost insular in comparison to other markets," says Tim Hurley, a partner at Porter Novelli. "Firms that are not headquartered here, or have not had a significant presence for several years, have found it challenging to establish themselves."

And though the PR industry might be trending upward, it is clearly a buyer's market, with many clients demanding that pitches incorporate metrics that hold PR accountable for driving specific levels of business growth.

"There is a call for broader PR offerings here, designed to really support marketing as a lead-generation activity," says Amy Berman, president of Corporate Ink. "Budgets are growing - we've seen ours grow 50% with existing clients - but competition is fierce. New

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accounts are still relatively small. Big firms are going down market to pitch accounts they never would have touched three years ago. And we see more rigorous searches, with sometimes 14 agencies involved in the first call."

As with the previous year, biotech, life sciences, and the medical-devices industries continue to pump plenty of business into the PR sector.

"As a result of the explosion in the life sciences industry, Weber Shandwick has grown its practice," says Micho Spring, chairwoman of the US corporate practice. "Assignments in the past year include the opening of Genzyme's green building and Boston Scientific's Taxus launch."

Meanwhile, tech might be surging, but not as quickly as some would prefer.

"I would characterize the tech sector as somewhat disappointing, given the inconsistencies of the market during the past 12 months," Hurley says. "But, we have seen a willingness among technology clients and prospects to get more aggressive with PR program resources, with more RFPs issued now than in the past few years."

Though below historic highs of five years ago, sectors such as telecom-equipment providers, enterprise software, and infotech infrastructure are drawing stronger streams of venture funding, says Phil Greenough, president of Greenough Communications.

"Tech is still licking its wounds, but the pulse is back, and the patient is slowly recovering," says Jim Joyal, a principal at Shift Communications.

Obviously, more business means more hiring and greater turnover, as Bermar reports rampant job-hopping, especially at the VP level.

"Brodeur has added staff in the past year at all levels, including selected senior positions," says VP Ray Thomas. "We are seeing the re-entry of senior practitioners, as well as people experienced in other areas seeking positions in PR. Because of the downturn, over the past few years, the competition for people in the mid-levels is particularly strong. There just aren't enough candidates available."

"Finding exceptional PR people is always a challenge, especially in the current environment where many Boston agencies are now racing to attract talent," says Philip Nardone, president of PAN Communications. "But hiring exceptional people is only part of the equation; the other is keeping them."

Weber Shandwick also added staff last year, growing its life sciences practice and academic expertise in its Cambridge offices, while creating a so-called emergent group as an adjunct to its technology practice to serve the needs of early-stage companies.

Still, hiring full-timers en masse can be an expensive proposition, propelling more agencies to go the 10-99 route of hiring contract employees.

"The reasons are twofold," Hurley says. "First, there are talented communications professionals who are willing and able to work in this capacity. Second, both agencies and corporations are still remaining conservative in their hiring practices." PN has been adding staff since Q3 of last year and is currently looking to hire a few more mid-level account professionals and a few select senior hires, as well, he adds.

The corporate story

On the corporate front, like many major markets, Boston experienced a period of heavy M&A activity last year. Major deals included Manulife Financial Corp.'s acquisition of John Hancock Financial Services, Bank of America's buyout of Fleet, and Procter & Gamble's blockbuster buyout of Gillette.

Internally, corporate kingpins are expecting much more from their PR pros. "Corporate communications in the area is evolving in many respects," says Jim Lacey, assistant VP of corporate PR at MassMutual Financial Group. "Whereas five years ago, we were just grasping the internet, now it is an indispensable tool. Two years ago, the word 'blog' was not in my vocabulary. Now it's something you need to know."

Moreover, Lacey says, in speaking with his peers, he sees more of a demand internally for PR pros to have a better grasp of marketing, brand management, and advertising, and how PR can integrate to those areas.

In nonprofit PR, merger mania has dampened donations, such as the ensuing uncertainty about how Fleet's acquisition will affect its CSR initiatives that benefit many local causes.

"There are [fewer] charitable dollars to go around, and there is about \$1.5 billion in capital that is trying to be raised by the nonprofit community for museums, hospitals, social service agencies, and the like," says Peter Morrissey, president of Morrissey & Co.

And in the public sector, a state budget crunch has lessened opportunities to do state

contracts related to health, whereas in the 1990s campaigns like the "Tobacco Media Education Campaign" provided great opportunities.

Working with local media

Lacey says that "in terms of broadcast media, you actually have an easier time of attracting coverage than you would in, say, New York, because there is simply not as much competition."

"Now that Gillette has been sold, PR professionals are looking forward to new opportunities to pitch *The Boston Globe*, which will definitely need to fill space somehow," says Berman, adding that she has noticed the *Boston Herald* moving to beef up business coverage.

"Unfortunately, coverage appears to have become more negative, thanks in part to the technology slowdown, as well as both the consolidation and scrutiny surrounding the financial-services industry," Hurley says. "The local media have frequently reported on, and seem to have accepted, the notion that Boston will always play second fiddle to New York, San Francisco, LA, or even Chicago as a center of business. The loss of icons like Fleet, Gillette, John Hancock, and Filene's is fueling this trend."

In terms of the Boston-based media, beats are broader, and journalists are much more focused on product benefits, as opposed to cool tech without practical applications, says FitzGerald Communications CEO Maura FitzGerald. "Additionally, customers are critical. If companies can't produce customer testimonials, journalists are not willing to write about them or their products."

Lastly, one barometer as to where the PR industry is headed has been membership in the Publicity Club of New England, the region's oldest such professional organization.

"When times are tough, professional associations feel the belt tightening first. ... And when business is good, we are one of the last 'approved expenses' to be added," executive director Amy Shanler says. "Our membership is on the rise, both for individuals and for agencies."

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