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MARKET FOCUS: Weathering the storm

Craig McGuire - 11 Oct 2004 00:00

A recent spate of hurricanes is not stemming the momentum built up by the Sunshine State's PR community.

Driven by a robust economy fueling growth across multiple sectors, the Florida PR industry gained substantial momentum through most of this year. That is, until the Sunshine State was ravaged by four successive hurricanes in less than six weeks. However, just as resilient Floridians continue to inspire the nation as they dig out from under the wreckage, it will take more than a handful of hurricanes to keep the state's PR industry from regaining its ground. From a real-estate boom to the rising number of companies relocating corporate and regional headquarters to Florida, the state's PR scene is likely to continue its ascension. Today, Florida faces stunning losses of some \$25 billion due to damage caused by the storms, according to Newark, CA-based Risk Management Solutions - prompting the largest relief effort ever undertaken by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Losses from Hurricane Jeanne alone should climb between \$4 billion and \$8 billion, according to the research company, based on "an assessment of the hurricanes characteristics at the time of landfall and its projected path." The storms pummeled Florida's \$50 billion tourism sector (which includes a 392,000-room hotel industry), hammered end-of-summer Labor Day weekend sales, shuttered businesses across the state, hit Orlando's three major theme-park resorts (Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando, and Sea World Orlando) with losses in the tens of millions, and stranded countless commuters at airports. In the brief lull between Hurricanes Charley and Frances, the state agency that promotes tourism had planned a media campaign to deal with the impact of Charley. "We received calls from the governor's office immediately following Charley asking for specific media relations support," says Lisa Mozloom, MD at Golin Harris, Miami. Unfortunately, the campaign was withdrawn when Frances threatened the state. As storm after storm crushed Florida communities before sweeping up the Eastern seaboard, state and federal officials were not the only ones slapping together contingency communications programs. "Clients who have retail outlets in Florida were forced to double up on their communications efforts," Mozloom says. "Before the first hurricane hit, we called all of our current and even former clients to offer help in case of a drastic hit." "We helped one client shift key parts of its operations to another state so that their service wouldn't be interrupted," says Patricia Thorp, president of Thorp & Co. "As Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Ivan blasted through Florida, CEOs were pulled in two directions at once: caring for employees, yet minimizing the opportunity cost of lost billing due to the storms." On the client side, internal PR pros also scrambled to shore up contingency plans in the face of onrushing storms. "With the third hurricane to hit our state in about three weeks, along with other pressing company issues, I wasn't able to concentrate on much else," says Kathy Lussier, communications director at Winn-Dixie Stores. **Enjoying the boom** The story has not been exclusively about weather damage, however. In fact, Florida's PR practitioners are

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actually enjoying somewhat of a boom in many areas. For instance, the state continues to cement its reputation as a power base for Latin-American/Hispanic-American influence, generating a steady stream of account work. "The bottom line is that the US is the world's third-largest Spanish-speaking country," says Manny Ruiz, president and CEO of HispanicPR Wire, the press-release distribution service that launched in 2000. "Many marketers do not understand that there are as many Hispanic people in the US as there are actual people in [all] of Canada." Moreover, whatever happens in the US Hispanic space has increasingly become of interest to businesses in Latin America. "Major investors in many Latin American countries are looking at the US as a prime market for expansion," Ruiz says. "For that, they are doing some major campaigning and targeting of Hispanic audiences in Florida and other major US cities. For PR agencies, it represents amazing opportunity." "Florida-based clients are keenly aware of the importance of Hispanic marketing, which is evidenced by the number of general-market agencies that offer Hispanic services, as well as the growing number of Hispanic agencies in Florida and nationwide," adds Mozloom. Obviously, this trend is having a tremendous impact on recruiting in the PR industry. In the past two to three years, the industry has seen a growing demand for multi-city, pan-state services which - in order to adequately target the increasingly diverse nature of the population - are translating into more multicultural, bilingual programs, says Rissig Licha, EVP, Fleishman-Hillard Miami/ Latin America. "As a result, firms are being forced to match their personnel roster with the community's profile," she adds. "As a result, staffs are now more diverse than in recent history." Still, there's more to Florida's PR scene these days than howling hurricanes and Hispanic prosperity. From a corporate standpoint, the state is increasingly being viewed as an attractive location for headquarters, a major boon to the PR landscape. For instance, a larger number of companies have opened regional and/or corporate headquarters in the state. Among them are Adelphia, with its southeastern regional HQ in West Palm Beach; Office Depot, with its global HQ in Delray Beach; Club Med, with its North American HQ in Coral Gables; Kraft Latin America, with its regional HQ in Coral Gables; and Discovery Latin America/Iberia, with its HQ in Miami. All five happen to be clients of Florida PR kingpin Burson-Marsteller Florida. "I can only speak on behalf of Burson and its clients," says Amy Federman, media practice director at Burson Florida, "but a good portion of work comes from companies with public and community affairs needs, consumer branding and product positioning, tourism, hospitality, and issues management needs," "Florida is gaining national attention as a key player in politics, business, entertainment, and international affairs," Federman notes. "The trends driving Florida's PR industry are many as the state is so diverse. In my opinion, however, the key factors are tourism, multinational and multicultural and issues management, including litigation communications support, public policy/public affairs, elder affairs, growth/development, and issues management." Still, Federman feels that despite impressive gains made in recent years, there exists ample unfulfilled promise. "While many communications firms in Florida are established and have extensive experience in many markets in the state, none have taken a statewide stance and opened additional full-service offices in other markets outside their primary cities," she says. "We also need to be more proactive in selling our services and capabilities and positioning the return and outcomes to various audiences." Culturally speaking, Miami's South Beach has become an international destination, scoring PR coups by luring major events like the MTV Video Music Awards and Latin Grammys. At the same time, Florida has experienced an unusually potent real-estate boom over the past year, creating opportunities for many PR firms - lucrative work that is usually short-term and mainly promotional and event-driven. "Sure the real-estate industry is booming, but it is also very competitive," says Christine Barney, chief executive at RBB Public Relations. "Every developer and sales agency wants to put the spotlight on their project through media relations and creative events. They need PR assistance to do so." **Gaining clients across the board** In addition to real estate, numerous agencies have brought in clients from a wide range of areas, including professional services, healthcare, and pharmaceuticals. "Because Florida does not have a strong manufacturing base, many opportunities exist for service-based businesses to work with one another," says Thorp. "More professional-services firms hired PR counsel this year than we've ever seen before." And, as in many other portions of the country, healthcare is also a major growth area, says Rod Caborn, EVP of PR at Orlando-based Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell. Unlike other regions, though, Florida is virtually guaranteed to sustain its growth in healthcare services for one unique population trend. "Florida has an enormous senior population, constituted of residents already retired, Baby Boomers about to retire and a 'snowbird population' that swells Florida's 17 million full-time residential base by two million each winter," Caborn says. "This huge population will have increasing healthcare and medical needs that will exceed national norms for healthcare." Additionally, Caborn is eyeing international trade: The Port of Miami, Port Everglades (Fort Lauderdale), the Port of Tampa, and Port Canaveral (near Kennedy Space Center) are four of the busiest ports in the US. "Florida has not totally capitalized on its ability to benefit from its geographic and physical advantages to facilitate international trade and commerce," Caborn says. It is unlikely, though not beyond the realm of possibility, that another hurricane could sweep in off the Atlantic and smash Florida this season. However, PR pros are eyeing a storm of a different kind is on the horizon. "Florida desperately wants to lose its image as 'The Chad State,'" says Thorp, referring to the voter recount in Florida that dominated the 2000 presidential election and gave the election to George W. Bush, brother of Gov. Jeb Bush (R-FL). "Floridians don't want to make the kind of headline news they made four years ago," Mozloom says. "That is why so many are anxious to confirm that our state leaders have done everything possible to ensure success at the polls. Voters here want their elected officials' words of assurance to be

true." As such, political and public affairs agencies should do quite well...at least until next hurricane season.

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