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STRATEGIES

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Ben Franklin — our first publicist — invented American brand

History can teach us some valuable lessons about public relations and brand management.

For instance, Ben Franklin was the first to understand the value of public relations. In his inspired new biography, "Benjamin Franklin — An American Life,"

Walter Isaacson calls

Franklin "America's first great publicist," because he consciously created an image in his life and writings, and promoted himself by communicating that image to the public.

As a young printer in Philadelphia, he pushed heavy rolls of printing paper down the street to show his customers he was industrious and hard-working. As a famous diplomat in France, he wore a fur cap to create the image of a frontier sage.

Creating the American brand: At various times in his life, Franklin was America's leading businessman, scientist, inventor, writer, diplomat, humorist and philosopher. He established a successful chain of print shops, wrote a series of brilliant essays

and published "Poor Richard's Almanac," which gave us timeless American adages like "Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" and "A penny saved is a penny earned."

He invented the lightning rod, the Franklin stove and bifocals. He helped write the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He convinced France to support the American Revolution and, after the war, he negotiated the peace with England.

Most importantly, Franklin created a new American identity based on the core values that guided America's emerging entrepreneurs and tradesmen: ingenuity, diligence, frugality, honesty, industry, democracy and public service.

In a sense, he established America's brand and designed the communications strategies that PR practitioners still use today.

Value of networking: Franklin understood networking was a way to blend his social activities with his civic responsibilities to further his business opportunities.

In 1727, he formed a club called the Junto, where tradesmen could gather to discuss the issues of the day and help foster each other's careers. Besides enhancing the reputations of the individual members, the Junto launched a series of important public service projects, including Philadelphia's

first free lending library (so that books weren't just for the wealthy), first volunteer fire department and a college that later became the University of Pennsylvania.

Eventually, the Junto spawned many other business and civic associations dedicated to improving the common good.

Power of the media: Franklin was America's first great journalist. He wrote essays and articles on social and political issues, often under assumed names, designed to encourage public debate and sell newspapers. As the publisher of the Philadelphia Gazette, he understood that by writing the articles, printing the publications and controlling the means of delivery (he helped establish our postal system as Pennsylvania's postmaster), he could control both the medium and the message.

Today, giant media conglomerates such as Gannett, Time Warner, Rupert Murdoch and Clear Channel do the same. And public relations practitioners write and place bylined articles for their clients that are designed to influence public opinion using the power of the media to deliver key messages.

Partnerships and collaborations: Franklin was a master at building these, whether it was in business, government or science.

He trained apprentices at his print

shops, and then set them up as his partners in franchises throughout the 13 colonies.

He built relationships with fellow writers, scientists and philosophers in America, England and France that proved invaluable as the Colonies moved toward independence.

He collaborated with Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on the Declaration of Independence, and he participated in or started legislative bodies, such as the Pennsylvania Assembly and the U.S. Congress.

As you look ahead to 2005, don't forget to look back at the lessons you can learn from history. Like Franklin, a PR firm or consultant can help you enhance your reputation by connecting you to a professional association, writing articles, developing community presentations, building partnerships, establishing loyalty programs for employees and customers, communicating your core values, evangelizing your brand, behaving honestly and ethically, and focusing on programs that benefit the public good.

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