

All About the Content

Public relations leader Risë Zywotow Birnbaum '74 offers her perspective on news, PR, and their relationship in the digital age.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

There is such a need for content nowadays. Journalists, online media folks, bloggers—they all need content. There's around-the-clock news rather than 5- or 30-minute broadcasts, and on the Web, the space is endless.

Journalists—whether they're in print, television, radio, or online—go online searching for stories. It's an interesting dynamic that's going on. Consumers are not the only ones going online for information. It's also the journalists.

Our job in PR is to help a client communicate messages by incorporating that message into information that's interesting and valuable to the client's target demographic. We've got to provide the news folks with information that's going to be beneficial to their audiences, or they're not going to be interested.


News people and PR people work very well in the sandbox together. They need each

other. We'll talk to the journalists, and they might say, "I'm thinking of a story, but I'd like to present it as a debate and I need a spokesperson." And we'll find a couple of credible spokespeople. We try to steer the story in the direction that news folk are looking for, while continuing to deliver our client's message. Naturally our clients are looking to have their messages framed in the most positive ways. And we're, of course, looking to do that, but in a way that news folks will be interested in.

Social media is a phenomenal way to engage people, and some clients still don't realize it. Some clients aren't willing to stick their toe into that yet because they know that once you're online, you're also subject to public criticism. But we have a social media practice in which we oversee the Facebook and Twitter sites for our clients. It's been very successful for the clients that have used it.

When someone posts disparaging comments on a client site, we have to get a handle on their veracity. Sometimes they're true. Someone might say, "I went to your restaurant, and the service was terrible. It took 40 minutes to get my meal." In that case we might come back and say, "Wow, that's so good for us to know," or "You're actually right. We know that Tuesday was a tough day and we're going to be redoubling our efforts."

I founded zcomm 22 years ago. Over that time, we've had clients in every possible industry you can imagine. Some clients are commercial, and others, there's nothing commercial about them.

Right now I'm working with the Department of Housing and Urban Development on a public service message about fair housing. The goal is to make sure that the message is heard by a particular audience—in this case, members of a particular ethnic community. Sometimes we develop an entire campaign for a client—the internal and external communications, events, videos, social media. On others, we work for an agency on just one portion. On this project, we're the arms and legs. 

Risë Zywotow Birnbaum '74

Washington, D.C.

Current Job: Founder & CEO, zcomm (www.zpr.com)

Previous Job: ABC News network correspondent

Current Home: The Watergate

Home at Rochester: Hill Court.

"It was called 'Phase.' And I was part of the first group to move in. It was like having a brand-new apartment. It was just heaven."

Goal: "I want to get illustrated in the *Wall Street Journal*. But not because I'm going to jail."

