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RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABU

Celebration: Rhoda Weiss, in front of a poster marking the 90th anniversary of UCLA Extension, where she teaches public relations.

## Getting the Word Out

No company is too small for public relations expertise, says Rhoda Weiss. She is chairwoman of the Public Relations Society of America, a trade group with 32,000 members.

By JOEL RUSSELL

**R**HODA Weiss practices public relations 24/7. During her career as a PR consultant, she has traveled more than 6 million miles while working for more than 700 clients around the world. She is president of Rhoda Weiss & Associates in Santa Monica. In her spare time, she has written and published more than 300 journal articles on communications. For the last 23 years, she has taught public relations, marketing and fundraising at UCLA Extension. Currently, Weiss serves as chairwoman of the Public Relations Society of America, a trade group with 32,000 members. The job brings responsibilities ranging from participation at the State Department's Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy to working with 119 local chapters and 40 national committees. Weiss has held a seat on the PRSA board since 2002. A former Kellogg Foundation fellow, Weiss has received a National Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Hospital Association. She has written columns for Health Progress Magazine and Health Services Marketing. She has been named Woman of the Year by Women in Health Administration and received the U.S. Public Health Lecturer Award.

**Question: How would you characterize the state of the PR profession?**

**Answer:** This is an exciting time to lead an industry experiencing phenomenal growth. Employment is up 44 percent since 1990 and is predicted to rise another 36 percent in the next decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This year PR firms reported a 17 percent increase in business.

**Q: What are the forces driving those numbers?**

**A:** Studies conducted by PRSA and its research partners show that CEOs recognize the critical role of public relations in reputation and brand management. As one headline in the Economist put it, "As Advertising Struggles, PR Steps Into the Breach." Also, students studying public relations in colleges and universities outnumber those in journalism and advertising.

**Q: What are the big challenges facing the profession?**

**A:** The challenge is to seek meaningful dialogue among audiences with less time to focus on messages. As speed to market increases, the need to build brand reputation quickly and the reach of business communications accelerate, information outlets proliferate, and public craving of authenticity prevails, public relations professionals are maximizing messages on numerous platforms to impact attitudes, behaviors and decision-making.

**Q: Los Angeles is often associated with show biz and "celebrity" PR agencies. Do you think there is an "L.A. style" of public relations?**

**A:** Entertainment is a major force in L.A. public relations. Sometimes people look at the publicity industry and confuse it with public relations. Publicity is a tiny portion of the business. Especially in L.A., there are a lot of Hollywood people who do publicity. Publicity is part of what we do, but there are a zillion other things as well.

**Q: It sounds like the entertainment industry gives L.A. its style for PR.**

**A:** Yes, but we are seeing the entertainment industry concen-

trating more on all aspects of communications. In fact, one of the fastest growing sectors in PRSA is our entertainment and sports section, and many of its leaders come from L.A. As the second largest media market in the U.S., Los Angeles has some of the best PR professionals in the world.

**Q: What's your advice for executives trying to do it themselves?**

**A:** So many times, small and medium-sized businesses think the world is their target. You see that with retail stores, mom-and-pop businesses. They're trying to reach the world when their audience is really quite narrow.

**Q: Any suggestions for techniques?**

**A:** Letters to the editor, opinion-editorial pieces, a Web site improvement, taking a leadership role in a chamber of commerce or trade association, or serving on non-profit boards. Most important is to prioritize your objectives and then work in budget.

**Q: How about traditional media versus the Internet for PR communications?**

**A:** A lot of small businesses look at the competition and say, "They did this, so we have to do this." Maybe what they really need, instead of a brochure, is a fact sheet, or great links to their Web site, or something else. A consultant can save you tons of money, because they can show you less costly ways of reaching the target audience.

**Q: For entrepreneurs in the PR business, what are the most vibrant niches?**

**A:** Health care, because it's the region's top employer. Environmental is growing, the whole digital universe, entertainment is still growing. And the whole field of non-profit public relations continues to evolve.

**Q: How has the Internet changed PR?**

**A:** It has contributed to the growth of crisis communica-

Please see page 22

22 LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

PEOPLE

June 11, 2007

Continued from page 21

tions. Before, a corporation might have a crisis and no one knew about it. We have these citizen journalists now with video cameras. A good example is the rats running around in a fast food restaurant in Greenwich Village. I went to YouTube and watched it.

**Q: So what's a corporate chief to do?**

**A:** In the fast-food example, that CEO should be jumping out of his pajamas and talking about it.

**Q: Is this PRSA a full-time gig?**

**A:** It's a volunteer position, but it feels like a full-time gig. As for my real job, I'm a consultant in public relations, mostly in health care.

**Q: Where do you live?**

**A:** Santa Monica. I got into rent control early.

**Q: How do you get your news?**

**A:** People are still reading newspapers, but they may read them online. I read the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post online in the morning.

**Q: How do you keep track of all your different jobs?**

**A:** I'm addicted to my BlackBerry, cell phone and laptop - none of which ever leave my side.

**Q: Some journalists refer to public relations as the dark side. Agree or disagree?**

**A:** No, I think both professions are misunderstood. The journalism profession is misunderstood when people say, "this story is one-sided because journalists aren't objective." I grew up thinking journalists should be totally objective, and the journalists I know fit that model - they're ethical, objective and they want to tell a story.

**Q: And yet surveys show journalism isn't respected as a profession.**

**A:** We need to communicate with each other. In many ways, our objectives are similar - to get information out to people. Both professions face challenges, but they won't go away. I cringe when I hear "spin" or "hack" or whatever. Part of what we're trying to do with our organization is to advocate for the profession. We have a code of ethics and people cannot join until they sign it and re-sign it every year.

**Q: What are your passions, professional or personal?**

**A:** I have a passion for diversity and multicultural communications. I was named after my great grandmother who was killed with many of her children, grandchildren and relatives in the Holocaust, teaching me first hand what happens when leaders and populations discount people due to their race, religion, beliefs or ethnic background.

**Q: Who were some people that influenced you?**

**A:** Olivia Breitha, who died at 91 of Hansen's Disease, spent her life on a remote part of Molokai called Kalaupapa. Via letters, phone calls, e-mails and visits, she fought discrimination, tirelessly contacting moviemakers, media moguls and anyone who would listen about the discriminatory use of the word "leper," a disease that ravaged her and her neighbors.

**Q: What is one of your favorite experiences in PR?**

**A:** I was part of a team that helped a community increase the number of potential bone marrow donors. The team used grass-roots public relations to save the lives of those with multicultural backgrounds who needed transplants from matching donors. Within a couple of months, the number of potential donors increased from 2,000 to 35,000, resulting within three years in 50 perfect matches.

**Q: What are your hobbies?**

**A:** I've always liked patchwork quilting. When I worked in Cleveland, I learned it from Amish women. Whenever I go to Salt Lake City, I visit the quilt stores.

**Q: What do you like about it?**

**A:** It's kind of folk art and it embodies a sense of history. For a lot of women, a quilt is an expression of their lives. It's an underrated art form.

**Q: What are your aspirations?**

**A:** I want to finish my Ph.D., but beyond that, I want to make a difference. It sounds corny, but those of us who have these communication skills should try to make a difference in society. I have a friend who used to call me "Cornflakes" because I sound so corny sometimes, but I believe we should live to better the lives of others.

**Q: Where did you learn that idea?**

**A:** My favorite prophet is Rabbi Hillel, who said "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?" I also remember the words of Horace Mann, the first president of Antioch University, who said, "Be ashamed to die until you've won some victory for humanity."

**Q: How has your extensive travel impacted your personality?**

**A:** My recent African trip impacted me because I experienced how difficult other people's lives can be. In Zimbabwe, the doctors and nurses were on strike so the people couldn't get health care. On the other hand, I grew up in a town where very few people went to college and a lot dropped out of high school. All that impacted me. I'm always trying to use my skills to draw people into education.

**Q: PR is known as a high-tension business. So how do you relax?**

**A:** Exercise, theater, movies. And I like to be on an airplane because you can relax.

### Rhoda Weiss

**Job Title:** Chairwoman and Chief Executive

**Organization:** Public Relations Society of America

**Birth:** Detroit

**Education:** B.A., journalism, Michigan State; M.A., psychology, Antioch University; currently completing Ph.D., leadership and change, Antioch University

**Career Turning Point:** Left journalism to work for a health care company. "Public relations in health care is my passion. I see what it can do in terms of prevention, treatment and knowledge of the best options for a disease."

**Most Influential People:** Sam Tibbitts, late chief executive of Lutheran Hospital Society, taught her that professionals should have an educational savings account to invest in their own careers; Alan Guskin, past president of three universities, taught her how to be a leader that thinks about ethics and public dialogue

**Hobbies:** Public speaking, authoring academic articles on communication. Serves on the U.S. Air Force Entertainment Advisory Board and the Global Alliance for Public Relations & Communications Management Board.

**Personal:** Named after her great grandmother who died in the Holocaust. Single.