



MASTERING THE ART OF PR

Shepard Doniger

By Drew Farmer
Images courtesy of BDCG, Inc.



Public relations is an art form and it takes a true artist to work with brands and connect them with consumers. Shepard Doniger is one of the recognized artists of the PR industry and has been honing his craft for the last 30 years. After years working on Capitol Hill and IBM, Doniger launched his own PR firm in 2003.

His agency, Black Dog Communications Group, www.blackdogcomm.com, has since grown into a powerhouse in the PR field working with a number of major corporations as well as emerging businesses.

Doniger's portfolio is filled with campaigns for some major players in business.

Visa, the former Bank One, Braun, and Seiko are just a few of the names that Doniger has worked with over his career building PR and marketing campaigns.

Now, with over three decades of experience, Doniger is still waking up each day with the same passion he did when Black Dog Communications Group launched in the early 2000's.

Shepard, you have been working in the public relations industry for 30 years. Can you start off by telling us how you got involved with public relations and how your career started?

My career began as a graduate student in Washington, DC. I had a deep interest in politics, so I went in search of an internship on Capitol Hill.

I was fortunate to secure an internship with Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania and parlayed that into a full-time position as a Legislative Assistant after six months.

Politics being aligned so closely with the ability to communicate, and with my next move to New York City as a campaign consultant working the strategy and media on political campaigns for senators, mayors, members of the house and others, I was using all the communications skills amassed over time.

After starting a family, I decided to leave politics and take a position as Global Director of Public Affairs at IBM. Again, communications was an essential part of

my job. From there, it was on to managing two offices of PR firms in NYC and then opening my own firm.

So, it's quite evident that communications and both building and swaying opinions was deeply ingrained in my DNA.

You have led some amazing campaigns during your career and been in charge of some major players in business. You worked with companies such as Visa USA, Olympus, Seiko, the US Virgin Islands and the former Bank One in the past. What were your experiences like working with those brands and how did that help you create your own agency, Black Dog Communications Group?

First, having worked at IBM gave me an insider's perspective on how big companies operate.

I learned the politics involved with internal audiences, how the pace of a global organization was a world away from the political environment I'd cut my teeth in and how such organizations are layered when it came to decision-making -- at least at

the time. Upon switching to the agency side, I had the benefit of knowing how to navigate the various audiences these large organizations were made of. I knew how to be creative within boundaries to help them make the right impression with the audiences they wanted to reach through specific messaging. With all of that experience and having played in both arenas, as the client and then the agency/vendor, I baked all that experience together and opened an agency that understands how the big guys work and used my campaign experience to be agile enough to service emerging businesses and brands as well.

Doniger started Black Dog Communications Group nearly two decades ago. It has been a long journey for the self-made entrepreneur as he has built the brand along the way. With his experience in both politics and in the corporate world, Doniger has been able to use his vast amount of expertise to grow the communications company into a thriving agency.

Black Dog Communications Group was founded in 2003 with offices in Florida and New York. Can you explain the journey from starting the public relations agency to this point now, 17 years later?

As an entrepreneur, business owner and hands-on communications consultant overseeing staff and managing clients, the journey continues.

Add to that the constant requirement to refresh business with new client opportunities and the need to evolve in the ever-changing PR business and each day brings a unique set of challenges -- and that's what makes it so interesting. While I may be doing things differently because of new technologies, social media and more than I did 17 years ago, much of the work developing solid go-to-market messages and creative stories, protecting client's brands and opening up new opportunities and audiences for clients remains the same. The phrase, "The more things change the more they stay the same," is certainly applicable but the way business is conducted, the speed at which we must operate and the channels we use to communicate have certainly changed.

What services and expertise can clients expect when working with Black Dog Communications Group?

Our clients can expect a full-array of communications and social media services. However, for me it always starts with the

messaging and matching the right message to the most important audiences for each client. How that message is delivered and through what channels are also essential factors.

Some clients come to us with products they want to promote in specific markets and among certain audiences.

Others come because they want some crisis communications planning or may be involved in handling a crisis situation.

It may sound cliché but each client comes with unique needs and while they may mimic to a degree something we've done before, I have found that in the end, no two clients' needs are exactly alike and the lessons from all of them often find their way into each assignment we handle.

Black Dog Communications Groups' portfolio is as unique as the company itself. Doniger has worked on campaigns for a wide variety of businesses in a number of sectors.

Not only has it given him a chance to learn about different industries, but it has led to growing a strong reputation. Now, brands seek out Doniger to run their unique communications campaigns.

Black Dog Communications Group has worked with a variety of brands from sectors including beverage, not-for-profits, food, financial services and tech. Is there one industry that you prefer to work with or do you enjoy the challenge of working with different brands on their campaigns?

While I/we enjoy the variety of clients and industry verticals we work in, I specifically enjoy the crisis communications assignments we come across.

I thrive on the pace and the fact that such situations are often moving targets requiring real hands-on management.

I love the real-time nature of each crisis challenge and in the end, the satisfaction of helping a company, brand and sometimes an individual navigate the predicaments they get into or are put in.

Of course, social media has added another important layer to each situation and the response time has been shortened even more than it used to be but again, that's a part of what I like most. It's a true adrenaline rush.

Can you explain what crisis communications is and how it works?

Crisis communications by definition is just that, a crisis. Now, that can take a variety of forms from an industrial accident to negative reviews and comments in social media (think the Peloton commercial and its backlash that cost the company more than a billion in market value) and beyond.

Anyone who owns a business, produces a product, provides a service, employs staff and has a personal or professional brand to protect needs to consider planning for a crisis and do so in advance.

Unfortunately, in the environment we are in with instant responses online via Twitter, Instagram and other channels, planning in advance for a crisis should be a must, a standard part of doing business.

For most, it's not if, but when something that could be or is a crisis can happen and you must be prepared. In terms of preparation, there should be a well thought out and organized plan. That plan should include who is going to speak, if indeed you decide to do so, and it's almost always advisable to work with a professional who has been through the crisis exercise before.

A good rule of thumb is to make every effort to avoid having a one or two day story become a two week or lengthier issue from which it is tough to recover. That doesn't mean you cannot stand your ground but you must act decisively if actions are prudent at the time.

Shepard, you have a background working in politics. You worked in strategy and media for politicians such as Ed Koch, US Senators John Heinz and Arlen Specter. What was it like to work in the political arena and how does it differ from the work you have done with Fortune 500 companies?

Working in politics is more often than not reeling from one crisis to another and the pace of communications is almost always a sprint. At the corporate level, it can also be that way but not as often. Social media, the need to pay attention to it and often to respond to it has hastened the timeframe from the prior era. Passion also plays a strong role in politics and I would say more so than in the Fortune 500 environment. That's not to say that there's no passion in business and that passion doesn't impact large corporations and their consumers/

customers. It certainly does and you need look no further than the issue of climate change and the #MeToo movement to see the evidence. However, in my experience, the passion surrounding such issues as second amendment rights and the right-to-life are among the most contentious I've encountered.

According to Doniger, a lot has changed since he opened Black Dog Communications Group as the world of public relations moves even faster. Social media is one of the biggest game changers communications has seen and it has affected a lot of what happens these days. But, social media isn't the only major change Doniger has experienced.

Public Relations has changed greatly since you opened the doors to Black Dog Communications Group in 2003. What are some of the ways you have had to adapt since starting the firm?

It seems like everything has changed since we opened the business. Timeframes to respond have shortened, there are more channels to communicate through and monitor, clients can become closer and interact more intimately with their audiences.

The media have morphed and downsized as well with many more independent influencers to reach who are participating in storytelling, reviewing and critiquing clients. Yes, things have certainly changed and we have adjusted accordingly. However, there are certain constants as well. You still need to shape a good message that both differentiates from the competition and continues to address the key needs and desires of target audiences. Building trust with ones customers, keeping them informed and responding to their questions and inquiries in a timely fashion hasn't changed. Making people feel respected in terms of how you deal with them and what you communicate to them is just as important today as it was then. Again, one could say for sure that the more things change, and they have, the more they stay the same -- in some ways.

With 30 years of experience, you have seen and done a tremendous amount during your career. What advice would you give yourself if you could go back in time to when you started?

Part of the job is just that, to advise clients about their communications and marketing strategies. You must help carve out a brand position that impacts the target



audience you want to reach and motivate them to do something you want them to do. So, what advice would I give myself if I knew then what I know now? I'd advise myself to keep playing the piano for pleasure and relaxation. I'd counsel myself to read more for sure. From a business standpoint, I'd spend more time and resources promoting the agency because we certainly suffer from the shoemaker's children syndrome. We do the work for our clients yet neglect ourselves in the process. We can always do more to promote Black Dog and the great work we do.

Shepard, what is the future of Black Dog Communications Group and what can clients expect from it?

Clients can continue to expect first-class and senior-level advice, counsel and contacts that will help them build and protect their brands, businesses and reputations. Clients can continue to expect to hear what they need to hear and not what is expected. Black Dog will continue to provide the professional support and creative thinking it has for almost two decades that focuses on results and protecting and growing what our clients have built.

What is a day in your life like?

With nine dogs and a pet potbelly pig, the work starts long before I look at and respond to the first email, so my days are always hectic. One constant is a morning run to Starbucks with my wife so we get at a little together time before our chaos begins. She owns a high-end luxury and corporate travel company. Then it's a whirlwind of handling the varied needs of current clients that can range from developing a press release strategy, contacting a Bloomberg reporter about an Artificial Intelligence consulting client, developing a

"contest concept" to attract consumers to download a free personal finance app and drafting remarks for a tradeshow appearance by a CEO client. On top of that, I hope each day yields additional word-of-mouth potential business, so we can keep the funnel filled. Of course, there are calls with my kids who are working and in graduate school and the regular unforeseen client and other responsibilities that arise. It's the organized chaos that keeps me going.

Shepard, what is something people don't know about you?

People would be surprised to learn that I am a huge Formula 1 racing fan, that I know a huge amount about designer brands thanks to my wife and daughter and believe it or not, I watch the Hallmark Channel for mindless relaxation.

Can you share two of your favorite quotes with us?

John Lennon—When asked after a US tour and how he found the United States, Lennon responded, "We went to Greenland then took a left."

Michael Jordan—paraphrasing here, "I've learned more from my failures and defeats than from my successes."

If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?

I'm giving you two. First, I'd like to find a way to prevent everyone under the age of 50 to stop using the word "like" seventeen times in any statement or sentence and even in their texting. Seriously, because I believe so strongly in family, I'd like to have the power to make every family unit cohesive and strong because that's where the success of any society resides.

Doniger has parlayed his incredible experience in politics and the corporate world into running a successful communications agency. As the company's website states, it is "Public Relations with Teeth," and Doniger knows how to bite into work on behalf of his clients.

The company has been in business for 17 years. From crisis communications to press release strategy, the veteran of public relations continues to grow his brand with every client challenge.

For more information on Black Dog Communications Group and Shepard Doniger, please visit www.blackdogcomm.com