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## The Importance of Public Relations and Earned Media

### Spotlight: Susie English – Perfect PR

Skiing is in the genes for Susie English who grew up in Park City, Utah, home of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Team. Her father, Chuck English is Director of Mountain Operations at Deer Valley Resort where he has been since 1985 when she was two years old. Following in his footsteps, English went on to work as Director of Communications for Ski Utah, representing and working with all 15 ski resorts in the state.

English went to school and skied with many future Olympians including two-time gold medalist, Ted Ligety. She was a soccer teammate of Julia Mancuso, a lifelong friend of Tanner Hall and ski buddies with silver medalist Jeret "Speedy" Peterson. "It was an amazing place to grow up and I've been so lucky to know a lot of amazing ski athletes because of it," she says. "It's pretty fun watching the Olympics when you know the athletes personally."



Susie English

After majoring in Marketing and Finance at the University of Denver, she returned to Utah to work as marketing manager for Rossignol Ski Company where she stayed for eight years before moving on to Ski Utah. "Working for Rossignol was a great start to my career and I was able to learn so much, ski all over the world and live back in Utah," she says. At Ski Utah, her responsibilities included outbound media events, local media relations, hosting inbound media trips and pitching media nationwide. "My job is to create brand awareness and demand for the Utah winter sports product through earned media placements," she explains. "Being back on the tourism side of the ski industry is great. I'm passionate about Utah skiing both personally and professionally!"

The job was a perfect fit, she says, and what better person to promote a ski area than a bona fide local who has grown up skiing there, with a family history on the administrative side of the ski tourism industry. So what does the job of Director of Communications entail? On a day-to-day basis English liaised with the Utah Office of Tourism, Visit Salt Lake, Park City Chamber and Visit Ogden. "Ski Utah is a membership organization so I also work with members that help me host media including ski shops, restaurants and attractions," she explains.

Another important facet of her job was working with international media interested in writing about or filming in various Utah destinations. This can have its challenges, particularly with tight deadlines and the increasing need for journalists to do extreme activities in order to create headlines. "I've had interesting requests from 'I don't eat anything that is red', to 'I don't ski' (and they are on a Ski Utah press trip). It's always exciting in PR and keeps you on your toes," says English. Ski Utah uses Cision Point to monitor media coverage. "I also work closely with our public relations firm (Mfa) to pre-approve press trip attendees and then to monitor coverage after the trip. We don't expect immediate coverage but hope to see something within two years of the trip," English explains.

Like everything else in the ski industry, public relations has changed over the years, particularly with the advent of social media. "PR professionals have had to change their pitching methods from sending mass press releases to more targeted, focused outreach," English explains. "Many media members now get many of their story ideas from social media, especially Twitter, so keeping up on all of the trends is more and more important." Out of a total of 10 employees, Ski Utah has a team of three people managing online content and social media channels.

Another focus for a communications director is to keep abreast – and ahead – of the competition. In Utah's case this is Colorado, California and other areas competing for out-of-state winter visitation. "We definitely watch what other states and ski resorts are doing across the country for ideas and trends," says English. "We also work with other states on specific programs, including Learn to Ski and Snowboard Month and the Bring a Friend Initiative."

So, what are pre-requisites for a career in winter sports PR? Firstly experience and understanding of the tourism industry, English says. In order to gain hands-on experience of the area, she recommends internships at resorts or with ski companies or state tourism agencies. "Ski Utah has a fabulous internship program and past interns have gone on to work at Visit Salt Lake, US Ski Team, Petzl, Ski Utah and more," she says.

And the perks of a PR ski job: plenty of skiing and living in a beautiful mountain environment within a likeminded community. "I'll get 70-100 days on skis each year, mostly for work," says English. "The people I work with, at Ski Utah and the resorts, are really amazingly, talented individuals. We are not just co-workers but friends who ski, ride bikes, and BBQ together." She also travels extensively throughout the USA, meeting with intriguing, unique media, all snow sports focused. "It is so much fun to create new relationships with media, hear about all of their amazing travel adventures and ski with them in Utah," she concludes.

When it comes to the winter sports product, English thinks that family appeal is one of the biggest factors that will ensure longevity for skiing. "Utah's resorts, specifically Alta, see generation after generation coming out for the same week every year for their annual family ski vacation," she explains. "It is pretty fun to see family grow up coming to Utah and introduce the next generation to the tradition." She also thinks that enjoyment at every level – from beginner, through intermediate, to advanced – will ensure that snow sports perpetuate as a way to have outdoor fun in a beautiful, wintry setting.

One of the things Ski Utah has been addressing recently has been flat skier days and participation following the 2008 financial crisis. "Many of the participants are aging, so it is a big focus for Ski Utah to introduce young skiers and snowboarders to the sports," English says. "The 5th and 6th Grade Passport is a wonderful program that Ski Utah has been doing for over 10 years to help make the sports more accessible for kids. We also have a 4th grade program where a staff member educates the kids on health benefits, costs and more related to skiing and riding and then takes them for a lesson. All of Utah's resorts have school programs as well."

Despite the fact that Utah encompasses two of the three ski resorts which do not allow snowboarding, English thinks snowboarding has been a plus for the industry: "It opened up the options and brought more young people into the sport. Snowboarding numbers have been decreasing in recent years, but a lot of those people are still on the mountain, just on skis." And she says that Alta and Deer Valley re-evaluate their anti-snowboarding policy on a yearly basis.

For the future, English envisions an increase in joint, reciprocal or multi-resort ski passes. "With Vail Resorts Epic Pass program many other resorts are now offering additional benefits for their pass holders," she explains. "It was been an interesting trend to watch and many of the Utah resorts are following suite. Utah's resorts are part of passes like the Epic Pass, Mountain Collective, Powder Alliance and Wasatch Benefit."

**Sources:** Interview with Susie English November 2014

## Introduction to public relations

The field of public relations (PR) is growing. In the U.S. alone, the PR industry is comprised of more than 7,000 companies bringing in estimated annual revenues of \$11 billion, and offering a diverse range of services from media relations to event management (Pozin, 2014). There are many types of media available to PR specialists, and these fit into three broad categories: owned, paid, and earned media. Owned media is defined as communication channels that are within the

organization's control, such as websites, blogs, or email; while paid media refers mostly to traditional advertising, discussed in Chapter 6. Earned media, on the other hand, is generated when content receives recognition and a following outside of traditional paid advertising, often from publicity gained through editorial influence. Critically, earned media cannot be bought or owned, it can only be gained organically, hence the term 'earned'. Since most of this earned media is gained through PR activities, this chapter will mainly focus on PR and its various techniques. PR is broader in scope than publicity, its goal being for an organization to achieve positive relationships with various audiences (publics) in order to manage effectively the organization's image and reputation. Its publics may be external (customers, news media, the investment community, general public, government bodies) and internal (shareholders, employees).

The three most important roles of PR and publicity in tourism and hospitality are maintaining a positive public presence, handling negative publicity, and enhancing the effectiveness of other promotional mix elements (Morrison, 2002). In this third role, PR paves the way for advertising, sales promotions, and personal selling by making customers more receptive to the persuasive messages of these elements. Ultimately, the difference between advertising and public relations is that public relations takes a longer, broader view of the importance of image and reputation as a corporate competitive asset and addresses more target audiences.

A variety of PR techniques are available to tourism and hospitality organizations. Those applicable to marketers in the winter sport tourism industry are highlighted in Figure 7.1 and discussed below.



**Figure 7.1:** Selected public relations techniques available to marketers