

# Publicity Stunts Still Earn Attention

By Marcia Yudkin

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Who says publicity stunts are passé? Outrageous staged events designed solely to show up on the evening news still get the job done when they're clever and fun.

Stan Heimowitz, owner of Celebrity Gems in Castro Valley, California, recently successfully dramatized in the streets of San Francisco the fact that IntraLinux, a small software company -- Heimowitz's client -- is challenging Microsoft, the industry giant.

Outside the Moscone Center in San Francisco, where Microsoft was launching its new product Windows 2000, a Bill Gates look-alike was matched against a Penguin (IntraLinux's mascot) in a boxing ring whose four corners were held up by Penguinettes. The Penguin pinned Gates, naturally, while a plane towing a banner that read "IntraLinux" flew overhead.

This creative bit of street theater made its point to onlookers and the media alike.

Publicity stunts go back at least to the days of showman P.T. Barnum, who announced his circus' arrival in town by hitching an elephant to a plow beside the train tracks. This raised such a ruckus that it's still against the law in some states to plow a field with an elephant.

Suspense became an element in a stunt featured on the front page of the Los Angeles Times in 1980 when the paper challenged Bob Allen to make good on his boast that he could be dropped into any city with \$100 and 72 hours later own several properties without paying down payments. While readers wondered if Allen could really do it, the author of Nothing Down indeed pulled it off.

Attention-getting can go high-brow too, as when actor Norman George, who portrays Edgar Allen Poe in a one-man show,

persuaded the city of Boston to rename Carver Street, where the creator of "The Raven" was born, for the poet in connection with the 180th anniversary of Poe's birth in 1989.

The same dramatic elements come into play every year when we have another Take Our Daughters to Work Day. The media get to shoot colorful, charming footage of young girls in places they don't normally visit, and then they can add a smidgeon of controversy by quoting people who think girls don't deserve favoritism over boys.

Publicity stunts and milder special events aren't ever a sure thing. Your parade can get rained on and a breaking news story elsewhere can pull the media away. When Massachusetts retailer Rick Segel sponsored a gala contest for the Best Hairdresser of Medford, the fur coats that bore contestants' numbers got switched, causing prizes to be awarded to the wrong people. Two judges walked out and fistfights almost broke out among the hairdressers.

Despite the risks, Stan Heimowitz had such a hoot with his IntraLinux Penguin vs. Gates bout that he floated himself as a publicity-stunt impresario to PR and ad agencies. The whole event cost just \$3,700.00, Heimowitz says, including the actors and costumes. Compare that to the cost of a color magazine ad that gets two seconds of a reader's attention!

Marcia Yudkin [marcia@yudkin.com](mailto:marcia@yudkin.com) is the author of the classic guide to comprehensive PR, "6 Steps to Free Publicity," now for sale in an updated edition at Amazon.com and in bookstores everywhere. She also spills the secrets on advanced tactics for today's publicity seekers in "Powerful, Painless Online Publicity," available from [www.yudkin.com/powerpr.htm](http://www.yudkin.com/powerpr.htm) .

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