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PR firm believes consistent messaging builds trust and long-term customers in emerging CBD market



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CEOCFO: Ms. Mulligan, what is the focus behind M&C Communications today?

Ms. Mulligan: M&C Communications works with inspiring people, products, companies, organizations that are making a difference in the world. Right now, we are focusing on the CBD market because there is so much misinformation. Our goal is to work with our clients to consistently educate customers about the latest CBD research, helping clients build trust, with trust you build long-term customers. Since the market seems to be very promising, to just get out there with factual information where you are very transparent is very, very important. We are trying to build a leadership position for our customers as well as for M&C Communications.

CEOCFO: Would you give us a couple of examples - when a company turned to you, what they were looking for and what you were able to do to help them?

Ms. Mulligan: Let us talk about CBD first. One example is Dr. Zoggs. We have been working with them on reviewing their social media against what we know the FDA has cited as inappropriate communication, such as making sure that every link on their social media is to an article that makes approved claims, not unapproved claims. Right now, the FDA is also looking at user testimonials, because, with the exception of just a few companies, there is no research to back up a lot of the testimonial's claims, so they are anecdotal. The FDA is citing messaging in these areas where you are talking about benefits, pain relief or reduction in inflammation, for instance.

Rocky Ford Growers Association (RFGA) is an example of a group we work with outside of CBD. RFGA was wrongly identified as producing cantaloupe tainted with listeria. This particular listeria outbreak killed more people at that time than any other foodborne illness outbreak in our country. We helped the farmers rebuild the brand by clearing up the misinformation, educating the public on the extreme health and safety measures the farmers were taking to keep the Rocky Ford cantaloupe as safe as possible and most importantly, launched a campaign that taught customers what they could do at home to safely wash and prepare their cantaloupe. Giving customers a sense of control over their health and safety is key in building or rebuilding a brand.

CEOCFO: Going back to the CBD area, how do you vet a company that is turning to you for help as there are so many new entries in the industry?

Ms. Mulligan: The first thing we do is interview the leadership of the company and talk to them about their goals and how important it is for them to take a leadership role. There is a vacuum right now in thought leadership in the CBD

industry. We are going to look and see who is on the board of the company and see if they have scientific and medical advisors on their board. We also look at their social media footprint and what has already been posted on social media. Then we are also going to do a media deep dive to review any interviews to quantify what has already been said. With this information we can figure out where they are positioned. We want to know what their product does and what they hope their product is going to do and how aware they are of the regulations and how important it is to them that they follow the regulations.

CEO CFO: *What is the best way to educate the public? What have you found that works well?*

Ms. Mulligan: It depends on your target audience. If your target audience is Millennials or your target audience is Boomers, then the way you are going to reach them is very different. We really pride ourselves on finding typical and atypical methods for outreach, different channels that you would use, types of publications and reporters that would reach the target demographic. However, then we look outside of the box to see what partnerships are available, what events you should attend, where do you want to be visible and ways for you to talk about your company, even outside of cannabis media. For instance, is the company highlighted in the business media or in the medical and health media?

If we are going after women who are 45- 55, we are going to be targeting different types of magazines than we would if we were targeting Millennials. Therefore, it really depends on the product target. We also work with our companies to figure out their business goals and where they see their target audience, so that we are attracting media and we are promoting events or coming up with unique tactics to reach that target audience. It is hugely important that it is not this scattershot approach across all demographics. You really need to understand who that target audience is.

"Our goal is to work with our clients to consistently educate customers about the latest CBD research, helping clients build trust, with trust you build long-term customers."- Diane Mulligan

CEO CFO: *How do you help your clients stand out at an event when there are fifty/one hundred/two hundred other people showing their products? There are so many other people competing. Can you help a company in how they should be presenting themselves at an event?*

Ms. Mulligan: If we are working with them at an event, we are going to work to be the only one there that is talking about cannabis. Our area of expertise is not to go to the event and help them set up. We may put them in a position as a speaker on educating consumers, thought leadership, or positioning your company in a different way; these are areas of our expertise.

CEO CFO: *Would you tell us about your Brand Protection Tool?*

Ms. Mulligan: Our brand protection tool is designed to discern the most likely crisis scenarios and devise preparation plans, with the entire C suite, that will mitigate negative impacts. We work to imagine every type of crisis then we have a score card that ranks the importance, relevancy and time sensitivity of the potential brand challenge. Some of the things on the scorecard include what is the likelihood that this is going to happen in the next six months to one year, if we work on this crisis now are there things that we can do in the intervening time that would actually make a difference to the outcome of the crisis. We look at what you can do now, so that you can mitigate the negative impact of any type of a brand challenge or a brand issue or a brand crisis and we come up with the top three scenarios.

The other thing that we do is we work with the entire C suite on how these top three crises would impact the different departments in the C suite. For instance, I just recently was brought in by a company with twelve senior VPs in the room and we went around and we put together a plan that included all twelve on all three of the crises and worked through how they could support one another. So the tool is a great team building exercise, because in many situations, especially when you are talking about larger companies, when they think of the different crises that can hit the different areas or different departments that are in their company, they get very siloed. This is a way to pull everyone together to say, "This is how we could break this apart." There will always be a brand challenge lead and a sub lead, everyone in that C suite can do something to help. Many companies think about crisis planning and they do a crisis plan for specific crises, and that is fine, but there are so many different types of crises and brand challenges that you can encounter. It is more important to think about what is most likely to happen in the next six months to a year and how you can put plans in place now.

The last thing we do is that we put together a one-page checklist. This is not a plan that is in a huge binder that is on a shelf that you pull down as a crisis is happening. This is a synopsis plan with an outline, because you have already thought through many parts of the situation and have prepared releases; media, employee and investor messages; technology, etc. Part of developing the Brand Protection Tool comes from our background: M&C is made up entirely of former journalists. We have worked in the smallest markets with skeleton crews, all the way to NBC News in New York. Preparing for and handling crisis was our life. What is interesting is that a crisis then becomes a brand challenge issue. It is something that you are ready to deal with, you are not caught flat-footed and many times it is no longer a crisis, because you have already thought it through.

CEOFCO: *Do many of your clients take advantage of the full range of services you offer?*

Ms. Mulligan: Most of our clients are long-term and many times we are brought in on a crisis and then we are hired with an on-going retainer. For example, we have been working with Rocky Ford Growers Association for nine years now. Once the crisis is over, then you are rebuilding. Our goal with the Brand Protection Tool is to help companies get in front of the most probable situations, to reduce the time to rebuild the brand. We are a full-service agency and we work on everything from traditional and social media to partnerships, influencer marketing and thought leadership. We believe that you must have an integrated approach. In this day and time, to build trust with your target audience, they must hear your messaging numerous times. The key is to fill "the trust bucket," so that when something happens, it is not the first time they have heard of your company and secondly, they already have a feel for your company and they really understand your brand, in which case they are going to feel better about who you are and where you are coming from.

CEOFCO: *People do not always recognize how they should be building a brand, what they want their brand to represent. How do you help a company figure out what their image should be?*

Ms. Mulligan: That is very interesting. Because of our journalism background, the first thing we are going to do, before we even meet with them, is we are going to do all our research. We are going to do a deep-dive into their social media, we are going to review every piece of media written or broadcast about them and we are going to come in with a fresh set of eyes and say, "This is our impression and we are pretty much the general public." That is a great place to start, because that is when you find out if a company truly does understand their image or if they have a completely different view of their image from the general public perception.

Then we develop a plan based on where they are, versus where they want to be. There are usually areas where they are hitting the mark and areas they need to improve. We consider things that we need to do, places they need to be seen, where they should speak, how to give back to the community, plans for communicating to their employees, all contribute to their image. We put together an entire program after we understand their current situation and their business goals.

The bottom line for us? Everything we do is based on goals and measurable objectives. Whatever the company's business goals, we are going to develop measurable PR objectives to help them, because we view ourselves as a consultant to the C suite. Many people think of public relations as kind of fluffy. We meet with our companies every month and review those measurable goals to make sure that we are in line with their business goals and they are seeing how we are moving the needle for them.

CEOFCO: *How do you reach out to potential clients, particularly in the CBD industry?*

Ms. Mulligan: Our clients are mostly referrals. However, we are also constantly looking for companies. For instance, I was just doing my work this morning and I saw that a CBD company had just added the former US Surgeon General to their board. That is a company that I am interested in, because right there, they are showing us their priorities and they are building trust in the audience. In that situation, I will reach out on LinkedIn, start social monitoring, sending them our informational blogs and start to build a relationship. I wouldn't contact them immediately with a pitch because they may not be ready for our help. They are already doing a great job. However, building a long-term relationship is important, so that when they are ready to work with a PR company, they know us, and they know what we do.

CEOFCO: *Where do Tucson and Ireland locations come in to play along with Denver?*

Ms. Mulligan: We have a satellite office in Tucson. I have roots in Tucson and love the market. I also have a partner in Ireland, and we are in talks with a number of companies that are interested in bringing their products to the US.

CEOFCO: *What has changed in your approach over time? What have you learned?*

Ms. Mulligan: For us, the key to success and to long-term relationships is truly understanding the companies you represent, understanding their business goals and making sure that not only are you succeeding in helping them move

the needle, but how you report to them so that they understand the importance of what you do. With PR, especially depending on where we are in the economy, people think either we need it or we do not, the reality is that right now your image is everything and in this time of instant brand management through social media, the brand that you build can be taken down in a day. Therefore, how you build that trust, how consistent you are with your messaging, focusing on your target audience and monitoring the response 24/7 taking care of your brand and your image, is key to you having a successful long-term business and that is what we do.

CEOCFO: *What is next for M&C Communications?*

Ms. Mulligan: Monitoring and responding to the upcoming FDA rules for CBD. We like to work with rock-solid companies, but we also like to work with companies and organizations who have not been able, for whatever reason, to tell their story well but have a great story to tell. Situations where we can help educate the consumer. For example, The Lung Cancer Foundation of America is one of our clients. We manage their public relations, a speakers bureau of people living with lung cancer, and now, [produce a series of podcasts](#) about living with lung cancer for them. Lung cancer is a very difficult disease and most people think that if you get a lung cancer diagnosis that that is pretty much the end. The reality is that in the last five years there have been more advances in lung cancer than in the last twenty years and that there is so much hope. Therefore, in working with the Lung Cancer Foundation of America, talking to people about hope, developing a speakers bureau of lung cancer patients who are years out from the diagnosis because of the advancements in research and yet at the same time educating people that from a funding standpoint, even though lung cancer kills more people than breast, prostate and colon cancer together, lung cancer gets less federal funding, in fact the least funding of any major cancer. Working with companies that spark our passion because of their mission, ethics and getting information out to people that is really going to help them and help their lives; that is always what is next for M&C Communications. That is what excites us.



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