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Public Relations, Marketing and Event Planning for New Product Launches and Visibility into Education Markets



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“When I started my own agency I definitely wanted to stay focused on education because this is where my passion is and I believe you should do what you are passionate about. That is where we have been ever since.”- Kati Elliott

CEOCFO: Ms. Elliott, would you tell us about KEH Communications?

Ms. Elliott: We are a public relations firm that focuses on education. We work with mostly companies that sell products and services to institutions -- anywhere from early childhood up to adult education. We also do some association work in the education space and we work with consumer companies who sell educational games and toys to parents.

CEOCFO: Was that the idea from the beginning or did it develop over time?

Ms. Elliott: It was definitely from the beginning. I actually went to school for both public relations and education. I double majored so I am doing exactly what I went to school for. I started out teaching and then was an editor for an educational magazine for a few years before I went to an agency working in their education division. When I started my own agency I definitely wanted to stay focused on education because this is where my passion is and I believe you should do what you are passionate about. That is where we have been ever since.

CEOCFO: What are some of the challenges unique to the education industry as far as public relations and marketing?

Ms. Elliott: From a company standpoint, a lot of times there is not a great understanding of how the education space works. Because of the way schools purchase materials, a real understanding of that needs to be there in order for companies to be prepared for the long buying cycles in the space. Understanding how educators like to be talked to is another thing and it is not like selling to businesses or consumers. Most educators are in it for the betterment of our country so you cannot talk to them about how your products are going to increase revenue or make them cooler because that is not what they are focused on. You have to understand that the industry is very unique in the way that it purchases, the way people talk to each other, the way they learn from each other and use that to show you are a company that supports education, can make their jobs easier and that you are in it for the long-haul. Once you are in education and you are a successful company, the longevity is great. Unlike the consumer market where you might see a product peek at eighteen months, here products are around for years and years. It is a great market to get into if your service truly supports education.

CEOCFO: With all the new ideas, services and products coming out in education, how do you break through with your offerings?

Ms. Elliott: There are a few ways. First understanding that educators want to know if a product works before they purchase it is why many companies in our industry test products in schools in a pilot setting so they have some proof of validity of the product. Another way is to make sure you offer multiple opportunities for training and professional

development. Also, providing resources to make sure your product is being implemented with fidelity is one way to make sure that it is being used the way you want it to. Many times the person who purchases the product in the education space is not the person who is using it. If you don't offer additional resources, your product might get purchased and then just sit on a shelf and never be used because the person who is supposed to be using it is not trained on how to use the product successfully. All of this has to be a part of providing a product to education.

CEOCFO: *Would you walk us through examples of the type of companies you work with and what they might ask you to do?*

Ms. Elliott: We work with a variety of companies, from large companies to startup companies. For instance PublicSchoolWORKS is a company that works in the school safety compliance and regulation areas. They do staff safety training, student accident reporting and they provide online tools to help schools meet the many requirements and laws they have to keep schools safe learning environments. PublicSchoolWORKS' system easily manages the whole process for schools and it simplifies a very complex process that schools have to deal with to keep students and staff safe. When we first started with them, there were about four employees at the company and they were mostly focused on Ohio. We did a lot for them such as writing marketing materials, creating conference presentations and website copy and we launched them to the national market. We also did straight PR where we were getting them editorial coverage about what schools are doing around safety and compliance. Now they are a much bigger company and in addition to doing their customer newsletter and case studies, we are focusing a lot on getting stories about their customers out to the media.

CEOCFO: *In a testimonial on your website being aware of the cost in your marketing is mentioned. Do people recognize that is part of your approach?*

Ms. Elliott: Yes they do. Because we work with a lot of startup companies, when they start with us they are small with small billings. We want to make sure PR is providing the best bang for the buck so we do those things that get them the most targeted visibility. It isn't hard to help a company grow when we like what they do and believe in their product and see how it can help benefit education. When you work with startups, you have to be very flexible on cost. I can tell right away if someone starting out doesn't understand the education buying cycle and they want to overspend on PR in the beginning. Our goal is to help our clients be successful in the space and not bankrupt in six months.

CEOCFO: *How important is staying ahead of the game?*

Ms. Elliott: You have to be entrenched in the space. I have been in this industry for many years and it is what I know. I attend industry conferences and I read industry publications. You just stay on top of it because it fits your passion. A company might hire a larger named agency that deals in a lot of different areas and then they let them go and come to us because the other agency does not know education like they should.

CEOCFO: *You seem to have a lot of projects. Are there some that you enjoy more than others?*

Ms. Elliott: I have a degree in early childhood education so I love the early childhood space .Right now I am big on organizations and companies that are working to make sure that every student graduates college ready. We have been promoting schools that work with children who come from difficult situations and trauma to turn their lives around. For instance, we work with Apperson and they have a product called Evo Social & Emotional, which is an assessment for understanding a student's social and emotional skills. If students have poor social and emotional skills, it can get in the way of academic performance. Even teachers need good social and emotional skills to be able to handle the variety of students they see. Apperson does a lot with schools and out of school time programs that are working in high poverty areas. These kids come from tough situations where they may be raised by a sibling or by no one at all. Those students need a lot of help in the area of social and emotional learning because they have not learned how to control their emotions. If they cannot control their emotions, they will not focus on what we are trying to teach them in the classroom.

CEOCFO: *How do you get around the politics involved?*

Ms. Elliott: Education administrators are tasked with making sure schools are running efficiently and producing educated children. They are not going to purchase a product that is not going to help with that. We try to educate the industry on things that are important to them. For instance, if there is a new law that impacts schools we want to make sure they know about it and have the resources they need to meet that new law. For instance, there is a new law in California about how to train people on the handling of chemicals. With the new law cleaning wipes call into the category of chemicals. I would imagine that most education systems do not know about this law yet and do not have a solution to train all of their staff on the new law. By pushing it out in the press we can help make sure schools are aware of things they need to know.

CEOCFO: *Do use social media and newer methods of marketing?*

Ms. Elliott: We still do a lot in straight public relations. It is funny because people ask how we handle bloggers and websites. Just because they are online doesn't mean they shouldn't be treated as media. If they have a good following,

we treat them like we would any other media outlet. We promote to them like we would any other media person by finding out what they are interested in and if we have something we think would fit with what they write about we pitch them accordingly. With social media we do a lot of connecting our clients to their customers. We make sure that if they are going to be somewhere, at a conference for example, the customers know about it. If they are doing any kind of special promotions we want customers to know about it. We sometimes use social media to ask their customers questions and ask for feedback on things. We also monitor social media to make sure that if there is a question, it gets answered right away.

CEOCFO: *What has changed in your approach over time?*

Ms. Elliott: It has not changed that much even though the tools are different. We are still about forming good relationships with people and that is what PR should be about. I do not think that will ever change.

CEOCFO: *How is business?*

Ms. Elliott: Business is good!

CEOCFO: *Why choose KEH Communications?*

Ms. Elliott: If you are looking for a targeted approach to launching or supporting a product or service to schools or families, we can help. Go with someone who is entrenched in the industry.

