



## A Chef's Primer on Publicists

By Emily Bell

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Ever since the first food professional rose to a height of unwieldy prominence, there has been the need for a professional mediator to manage expectations, soothe wounded egos, and generally develop an influential industry image. And with today's rabid consumption of chefs-as-personalities, whether in the restaurant, on the pages of a book, or on one of the many chef-studded food shows, the restaurant newbie needs a capable publicist the way a rookie quarterback needs a left tackle. So for the chef or restaurateur on the fence about whether (and, quite frankly, how) to use publicity machines most effectively, we've culled experience and insight from food publicists across the country with their feet firmly planted in the 'biz.

### Qualifications

What makes a good publicist? To the outsider, the food publicist might just seem like a suit-clad media bouncer, intermittently shooing and luring the fat cats of culinary criticism. But at the heart of a good publicist is a sincere passion for food, something a chef can easily identify with. In fact, the most prominent common link between all the publicists we reached out to was a critical respect for the business of cooking. "To be a food publicist, you would obviously want to have a real passion for food and dining and service," says Lissa Gruman of Gruman-Nicoll in Seattle. "And I love to cook, and I have, long before I got into the business."

And Gruman, who represents restaurants like Seattle's *Cafe Juanita*, isn't alone. Publicists nationwide consider it a pivotal element of the job. "You have to truly love food," says Marlo Fogelman, of Marlo Marketing/Communications, "and have the passion to learn about everything from ingredients to wines to technique to trends." With offices in New York and Boston and clients like Nantucket's *American Seasons* and Boston's *Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks*, Fogelman knows passion isn't just a bonus—it's qualification. "It's simply too hard of an industry to be in unless you simply love it." Words from a publicist, spoken like a chef.

For Mary Reynolds of the Atlanta-based Reynolds Group, representing *Craft* and *Craftsteak Atlanta*, among others, a lifelong passion for food gives her insight into how best to communicate a brand. "Someone who lives to dine out," says Reynolds, "[who] continuously reads about the latest food trends, enjoys cooking, and religiously watches food-driven television shows is most likely to find success conveying their infatuation to potential guests as well as the media."

Jennifer Baum of Bullfrog & Baum thinks it's great when an employee "gets juiced by a chef," showing genuine personal eagerness. For Baum, whose firm has dozens of clients nationwide, excitement is essential. And for a chef, this translates into highly motivated publicity. Phil Ruskin agrees. In his New York-based Ruskin International, with clients as varied as Valrhona Chocolates and *Dirt Candy*, Ruskin looks for "someone who sits down with a chef and is really jazzed by what the chef does." As Ruskin sees it, "a publicist, is after all, a story teller. What we do is tell the story, communicate what the chef is about—their food, their brand, their whole persona. You want somebody who understands that."

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## History

Of course, most of Baum and Ruskin's new recruits have matured, professionally speaking, long after the dawn of the celebrity chef, at a time when it's accepted, even obligatory, to see chefs as potential stars. But the media and public weren't always disposed to pay attention to the person at the helm of a restaurant kitchen or behind a cookbook. Only a few decades ago, in fact, the landscape for culinary professionals was drastically different, with most chefs laboring in relative obscurity.

Or so it was until trailblazing food publicists like Fern Berman, now the head of Fern Berman Communications, first ushered chefs out of the kitchen and into the public eye. "I felt strongly that chefs should be seen as the talents they so often are," Berman recalls. "So we began talking to journalists and editors about covering the mystery presence behind the kitchen door, or behind the book," says Berman, who started her own firm in 1986. "To put it mildly, that seemed to work out."

Not only did it work out—it exploded. The late twentieth century saw the rabid consumption of the food personality by the American audience. Seeds planted decades prior—with James Beard's 15 minute segments on "Elsie Presents" to Julia Child as the gawky, lovable "French Chef"—effectively erupted in the late twentieth century, which saw the birth of 24-hour food television and ubiquitous online food coverage.

For her part, Berman had a key role in developing food-world royalty, with Julia Child, Sirio Maccioni, and Jean-Georges Vongerichten among her illustrious roster of clients. And it was only upon such a base that modern food publicity grew—with big names acting as the foundation for the ever-expanding temple at which today's foodies, press, and professional gourmands worship.

## Modern Practices

What's evolved since is nothing short of a multimedia food frenzy that practically necessitates a publicist—whether a chef aspires to stardom or plain, old fiscal solvency. "There are so many outlets now," says Baum. "You have to have some kind of plan in place that steps you up above the fray." According to Baum, it's possible for chef-owned and smaller operations to use publicity "in a creative way that doesn't cost a lot of money." Besides the "6 to 12-month, full service PR programs for bigger chefs and restaurants" at her company, Baum says they "also do smaller contracts for smaller restaurants that want a push out of the gate and are more local in their outreach.

All the publicists we spoke to agreed that outsourcing publicity wasn't always possible for each and every chef—"some restaurants can't afford it," Fogelman says plainly—but they all agreed that the online expansion of food media outlets means nobody has to toil in total obscurity. In food as in most fields, the Internet has changed the prospects for smaller businesses. And publicists are taking advantage of this relatively inexpensive forum with campaigns tailored to a chef's ambitions and desired visibility. As Berman, who saw it all evolve, explains, it's about "matching the client's goals with the right media."

Of course, vetting possible media forums adds another layer to the publicist's job. "It's an investment of time," says Ruskin, who remembers the days of media dinners for *Brasserie Les Halles* with individually signed invitations. "If you're following conversations on Twitter about a client, if you're seeing what people are saying on social networking communities about your clients, and if you want to engage in those conversations—all of those are good in that, at the end of the day, it helps your client communicate with more people. But it's harder in that it means there's a lot more platforms," says Ruskin. "There are that many more arenas that you have to manage and be involved in." Fortunately Ruskin sees a synergy between publicists of older and younger generations. "Younger publicists are showing more traditional publicists the ropes with new technology and how to apply it. And publicists from my generation are able to share the more traditional approach with younger publicists. So there's a place where they do converge."

For his part, a chef should be very clear with their publicist as to how actively they'd like to engage the media. There are more options than ever before, and picking the right way to advertise your operation—be it via blog, newsletter, or a healthy Tweeting habit—can make the difference between reaching the right crowd and reaching, well, nobody. Baum explains: "If your market is an old school, older demographic, then they're not going to be responding to what's online as much as a younger demographic." And watching the outlets of publicity evolve over the years has given Berman a nuanced sense for what information belongs where—and when. "Some stories work in all mediums," she explains, "while other stories should be targeted to specific media. It's about understanding nuance, and appreciating what each journalist needs."

## Everybody's a Critic

Fogelman, like most of her peers, doesn't exactly regret the rapid expansion of the food media, but neither does she consider it a sign of increased self-awareness within the industry. "Today the breadth may be greater, as we arguably have more outlets—online outlets like food blogs, consumer reviews, discussion boards, etc.—but the depth of the outlets is not what it was 10 years ago, when everyone read the local paper, *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*." From what Fogelman observes, replacing the trusted, if slightly elitist, media outlets of yesteryear with an array of largely online outlets has diluted quality with quantity, making it harder for the chef to navigate alone.

Gruman agrees: "I think the bane of restaurant existence right now is the 'everybody's a critic,' 'everybody's a blogger' thing." Her firm maintains its own blog, with constant updates and positive press to keep their clients' brands visible and approachable. Many publicity firms are moving into social media as a counter measure to getting lost in what Baum calls "the fray." At Bullfrog & Baum, clients use social media as part of a "plan that bypasses the media and goes directly to the consumer." Generally speaking, the mixed blessing of online media has enabled the publicist to turn the tables: "there is power in it," says Gruman, "and I think we're all seeing how to maximize that power."

Keeping all these things in mind, the chef seeking out new publicity should look at a publicist's client roster and compare notes. Do the restaurants and talent represented resemble your establishment or your goals? "Be an active media consumer and notice which restaurants get the right kind of coverage," advises Fogelman, "and then find out who's doing their PR." After that? Keep serving great food. "Ultimately, it's the publicist's goal to get people in the doors," says Reynolds. "It's up to the restaurant to make certain guests have an exceptional experience—and want to return."