



The Beautiful Plan

Publishing Strategies from Patron Saint Productions

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Believe It or Not!

A case history

by Steve O'Keefe

The first major assignment I received as an online book publicist arrived on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1994, when HarperCollins called to ask me about a campaign for the book, *Masters of Deception*. Last year, when consultant Tom Woll dropped me a line on December 22 about promoting a new edition of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, I should have suspected good things. Little did I know that it would lead to the best work I've ever done, which concluded today with the mailing of Ripley's Freaky Friday books to Norm Deska at Ripley Entertainment and Morty Mint at Mint Publishers Group.

Your Assignment...

...Should you choose to accept it, is to use the Internet to publicize *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* to the age 10-15 market, libraries, and schools. That's what Morty Mint asked for after an introduction from Tom Woll. What would you do?

Morty Mint is a book distributor with a difference – his focus is brands. The former president of Penguin USA, Mint resuscitated the *Guinness Book of World Records*, probably setting a world record in the process for the greatest edition-to-edition leap in sales of any book in print. Now he proposed to do the same with Ripley's flagship book.

Ripley Entertainment is a multimedia conglomerate that encompasses a well-known cable television show hosted by Dean Cain. They have a syndicated newspaper column, a syndicated radio feed, theme parks in several major cities, an aquarium in Florida, plus books and other licensing deals.

Ripley's executive vice president Norm Deska, along with Morty Mint assembled the team that assembled the book. Miles Kelly Publishing, a major British children's reference packager wrote the copy, negotiated the rights for thousands of color photos and did the layout, printing and binding. Morty arranged for sales in Europe, Australia and the Far East and handled the shipping, warehousing, sales and distribution in North America through his own organization. The end result is an oversized hardcover jewel, 256 full-color pages, 9" x 12", with a holographic cover lined with rows of eyeballs that move. Retail price, \$25.95 – a great value and a terrific Christmas present for the target audience of teen boys and girls.

The Plan

So, what plan did you come up with? "What's the budget?" you ask. "You tell me," Morty responded. I quoted him three campaigns – small, medium, and large. He took large.

Let's look at the numbers from a different perspective. What would you do if you had only ten percent of the book's marketing budget to work with? The initial print run was (are you sitting down?) five hundred thousand copies. Now you know the level of risk this publishing enterprise was exposed to.

Here's my beautiful plan. I can only reach a target audience of 10-15 year olds

online by going through a web site that is already inside the "safe surf" gateway schools and parents install to reduce access to mature content. Secondly, I am most likely to reach librarians and teachers by positioning the book as an educational resource – not just a collection of fantastic oddities.

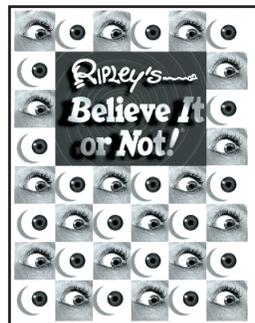
I proposed, therefore, that we create a ten-week branded chat program from the book, recruit an "award winning teacher" to teach it, create a teacher's guide at the junior high school level, and find an education portal that's inside the safe surf gateway to host the program and push it into schools. Morty and Norm paid me for the plan and paid me to execute it.

The planning part of the campaign took three months. We called the program "Ripley's Freaky Fridays" – not particularly original, but descriptive. Chats were to be held every Friday from 1 to 2 p.m. Eastern Time (10-11 a.m. Pacific Time) during the fall semester – our best chance for catching our target market at school and in the mood to have a little fun. You remember what Friday felt like in junior high school, don't you? Now all we needed to do was find a teacher and an education portal willing to play along.

The Set-Up

In order to pitch teachers and portals, I needed a better description of the program, including what we expected them to do. Working from the galleys, I drafted two key documents: 1) a web page describing the program with a list of the ten dates and topics to be covered and 2) the teacher's guide for the first week of the program – to illustrate what we planned to create for participating teachers every week.

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The teacher's guide contained three segments: a brief excerpt from the book, a few trivia questions we called "Ripley Riddles," and a set of discussion ideas for teachers to use before or after the program or to assign as homework. We put these on the Patron Saint Productions web site and started pitching.

As always, the best marketing ideas come from the book itself. Reading the book, I learned that Robert Ripley was an intrepid explorer who was into global culture back in the days when that meant traveling by camel or mule. The content of the book skews more toward science than any other junior high school subject. We decided our best shot at an educational program was junior high school science teachers, with a secondary audience of technology teachers and librarians.

In many schools, the librarian leads the way in information technology. They're often the ones who build the school web site and set those safe surf filters. The promotional materials we created for Ripley's Freaky Fridays stressed fun, science, and collaborative technology – in a safe environment with a real teacher.

The Portal

This plan all sounds very good, but the catch in all good plans is, can you actually deploy it? Our partner portal had to have chat facilities to host the program. Open chat rooms on the Internet are essentially cesspools stocked with pedophiles and transgender match-makers. That's the perception, anyway, and it's sadly on-target in many cases. So sites that offer chat facilities are often blocked by safe surf software. Finding a site that has moderated chat facilities and is trusted enough to get inside school gateways is no small feat. Morty and Norm were paying out the rope and I was fashioning it into a noose for myself, promising an elaborate program dependent upon the kindness of strangers: a portal and a teacher.

The search for teacher and portal was conducted simultaneously during the summer of 2004. My staff and I researched education portals and narrowed the choice to a few sites: DiscoverySchool, allied with cable television's Discovery channel; Scholastic, the powerhouse publisher of

Harry Potter and already a licensing partner with Ripley Entertainment; and Yahoo!igans!, the young adult search engine I helped launch years ago in a campaign for Random House.

We ended up partnering with ePALS Classroom Exchange <<http://epals.com>>, an education portal with chat facilities that has 9 million registered students and teachers and 4500 registered classrooms. ePALS is the most trusted name in classroom connectivity. Sheila Strickland, head of business development for ePALS, was enthusiastic about the program. When ePALS hit us up for hosting fees, I felt the noose I had created tightening around my neck. We eventually came to terms which I am not at liberty to discuss due to a daunting non-disclosure contract ePALS required.

On July 15, we issued our first news release about the program, with ePALS listed as the host site and the ambiguous "award-winning teacher" listed as the instructor. We had ten weeks until school came back into session and four months until Day One of Ripley's Freaky Fridays. Now we just needed a teacher.

The Teacher

Ripley's came through. It turns out they have a relationship with an award-winning junior high school science teacher: Dean Ortner, "the million-volt man." He's been on the Ripley television show and travels the country with an educational program called "Wonders of Science." However, I still wanted to try to find a teacher who was not already associated with Ripley's to boost the educational credibility of the program.

So I did what any good online publicist would do. I went to Google and typed-in "award-winning junior high school science teacher" and the river of links parted to reveal a White House web site listing the names, affiliations and e-mail addresses of the winners of the Presidential Medal of Excellence in Teaching for 2002 and 2003. I found 20 junior high school science and technology teachers on the list and pitched every one of them.

After explaining the program, the modest honorarium and winnowing out those who couldn't handle the time slot, we had two teachers: Marilyn Steneken, a life sciences teacher from Sparta Middle School in New Jersey, and Leslie

Blanchard, a former junior-high school science teacher and currently technology coordinator for the district in Plaquemines, Louisiana. I asked Ripley's to use both teachers and they said yes.

The Web Site

With teachers and portal in place, we needed to start recruiting junior high school science teachers to participate in the program. We began by drafting a set of instructions. I had learned a thing or two about producing chat programming for schools during campaigns for Random House's

Teachers@Random web site in the late 1990s. Here's the first thing you should know: teachers will sign-up to participate, but they'll never attend unless someone from the school's technology department babysits the connection. Our instructions were designed for both teachers and technicians.

In order to participate in this program, here's what the school needs to do. First, they must be members of ePALS. Second, they must register to get a password – a safeguard protecting the sanctity of the chat environment for children. Third, they must be in front of a computer connected to the chat room between 1 and 2 p.m. ET on Friday. The instructions we wrote explained how to make those things happen and suggested ways to use the program as a learning experience.

When a classroom participates in a chat, the ideal configuration is to have only one computer connected to the chat – the teacher's. Students can either gather around the computer or the chat can be projected onto a screen so everyone can see. Teachers should then either type questions for the students or let students take turns typing their questions on the teacher's computer. That's the gist of the instructions we prepared.

As these set-up documents started mounting on my web site, I suggested that Ripley's host them on their site, too, to drive registrations for the program. Ripley's obliged by registering the URL "riplesfreakyfridays.com" and installing



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the promo materials overnight. The web site was not anticipated in the plan or budget, but has become the legacy of the program. You can go there today and find 10 teacher's guides, 10 chat transcripts, all the set-up materials, and feedback from teachers. It is an impressive installation: simple, cheap, and compelling.

The Promotion

If you were my client, what would you think about the program so far? What if I told you there's a catch: no trusted education portal will allow commercial programming on their site – unless, of course, substantial fees are paid for that privilege. Even then, you're going to get the online equivalent of a PBS sponsorship announcement. Would you approve this program if you thought your brand would be buried?

Much to their credit, Ripley's went along, playing out a little more rope so that I could reinforce the noose I was tying for myself. With everything in place, it was time to generate news coverage, drive registrations, and ultimately secure attendance for the chats. I had to do that without clubbing people over the head with the brand. The response to the first news release was tepid. We scored one major hit, however. Online marketing campaigns often come down to one major hit that makes it worthwhile, but you have to pitch a lot of people to find that outlet.

Our big hit was the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA). Debra Shapiro, Associate Editor of the house organ, *NSTA Reports*, answered our prayers. She responded to our news release suggesting a write-up in the September/October issue of the print periodical – the back to school issue – circulated to thousands of high school teachers and school librarians throughout North America. Both of our award-winning teachers, it turns out, were also members of the NSTA. We not only got the print plug, but multiple mentions in NSTA's e-zines and on the NSTA web site.

With only one big media hit, we turned to our tried-and-true online publicity tactics to boost visibility. We offered the lesson plans to dozens of web sites that archive lesson plans. We were able to self-install the plan on several of these sites. We posted messages to over 50 online dis-

ussion groups for junior high school science teachers, briefly explaining the program and offering to send instructions and lesson plans. We even pitched over thirty blog masters of junior high blogs – the least productive effort of the campaign, yielding only two blog mentions.

The Show

On Day One, Friday, September 17, 2004, we had over 35 classrooms registered to participate in the program. Attending the first chat were our two teachers, a representative from ePALS, a couple people from Ripley's, a ghost typist I hired to assist with the chats, one of my employees to keep a transcript, and myself as ringmaster. About eight classrooms showed up for the chat. Attendance never got better than that.

We syndicated lesson plans every week. We did a second round of discussion group postings. We issued a second news release. We purchased a small amount of online advertising for the program. We drove registrations up to 60 classrooms before it was over. But no more than eight classrooms ever attended a session of Ripley's Freaky Fridays. In fact, attendance hovered between a low of two classrooms and a high of six for the remaining nine weeks. Why couldn't we get 30 classrooms into those chats?

About two weeks in, I polled the teachers who registered, expecting them to say they forgot or couldn't get the technology to work. The responses were a study in the human condition. One teacher had been diagnosed with cancer. Another had suffered a heart attack. Many teachers couldn't manage the narrow time slot. Most teachers were participating using the teacher's guides and transcripts – not attending the chats. Only two teachers had tech trouble – small problems that were quickly solved.

The Results

How do you measure what actually went down in a one-year online marketing program? Sales? I wasn't asked to generate sales. I was asked to get the book in front of junior high school-aged children, teachers, and librarians. I wouldn't know how to measure sales anyway. What measure would you use? Furthermore, I operated in an environment where blatant branding would not

be tolerated. Not only could I not measure sales, I couldn't guarantee the sponsor would be mentioned – though embedding the brand into the program's name helped insure some coverage.

Judging the results based on attendance at the chats is like opening a trap door under my feet. I hung myself. It was a disaster.

Judging the results based on the exposure we generated for the brand removes the noose from my neck. Thousands of teachers, librarians, and junior high school students heard about "Ripley's Freaky Fridays." That little afterthought web site we created for the program had an average of 200 unique visitors a day, over 500 unique visitors on the peak day, and over 10,000 sessions to date. Go ahead and Google the phrase "Ripley's Freaky Fridays." Six months ago, that search returned zero matches.

Judging the results based on the sales turns my noose into a halo. *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* went on sale October 5. On October 20, Morty Mint sent the following brief e-mail: "After 2 weeks on sale we have just been informed we hit the *New York Times* Best Seller list at #5 this weekend." When I suggested he use the documents from the online campaign to whip bookstore buyers into a frenzy, he told me, actually, the book was sold out. Five hundred thousand copies spoken for already.

Crediting my work with those sales would be just as absurd as judging the value of Ripley's Freaky Fridays based on attendance at the chats. If you judge the results of this campaign by the goodwill generated for the brand, you probably get the most accurate measure. Read the transcripts. What went down in that online classroom was nothing short of amazing. Children learning to use collaborative technology while having fun and learning about science.

When much of New Orleans evacuated for Hurricane Ivan, we were online talking about how hurricanes form. The day Mount St. Helens erupted, we had been chatting hours earlier about how lava is made. As the U.S. presidential election neared, our teachers were fielding questions about stem cell therapy. The unanimous verdict of those dozen or so regular participants in the chats: "We love Ripley's Freaky Fridays!" What's that worth? To quote a popular ad campaign: Priceless.