

Katherine Rothman, Respect Needs to be Earned

Helene Ramackers



As the CEO of KMR Communications, Katherine Rothman knows the inner workings of the PR industry by heart. Cutting her teeth by being employed at communication firms focusing on broadcasting, TV talk shows and celebrity musicians, she ventured solo just over two decades ago, specializing in the health

and beauty industry. With her knows-what-she-wants attitude and million-dollar smile, Katherine has turned a small company into a flourishing business.

Katherine, tell us a bit about yourself – your formative years, schooling, studies, etc.

I grew up in Short Hills, New Jersey a suburb about thirty minutes outside of Manhattan. Although Short Hills is a small town, we have some well-known former residents such as designer Rachel Zoe, actress Anne Hathaway, and Patti Stanger from Bravo's 'Millionaire Matchmaker.' I have two of the most amazing parents a daughter could want. They have been happily married for fifty years! I also have a younger brother whom I adore. I was a bit of a tomboy growing up. I pitched for my town softball team and did gymnastics. My parents put a tennis racquet in my hand when I was seven years old. I later played for my high school team and was an all-state singles and doubles player. I went on to play tennis for my freshman year at American University in D.C. Eventually, I transferred to NYU. I had always loved New York City and NYU had a program specifically for the music business which was my career goal at the time, however, my degree is in communications.

To be quite honest, studying in school was never my passion. I was always fiercely ambitious, but I yearned to be an adult and out in the work world. I was always getting after-school jobs because I wanted real life experience. While in high school, I did everything from working in retail, teaching tennis, and representing a rock band trying to secure club bookings for them in Manhattan. My mother forced me to quit an after-school retail job during my junior year in high school because I had to study for the SAT's. I was not happy about it. I believed working benefitted me more than memorizing dates, formulas and equations that I felt would be inconsequential to my future. As a teen, I had a vision for what I wanted to do as a profession when I became an adult. I paid close attention and excelled in the subjects in school that I felt would help more toward that end.



(L-R) Sharon Bush, Katherine Rothman and Chance Spiessbach

You started off in the early 1990's, working for a firm representing high-profile celebrities in the music industry. It must have been quite exciting 'rubbing shoulders' with the rich and the famous?

My original goal was to be in A & R (artist and repertoire) at a record label. I had attended NYU as part of my university schooling because they had a program for the music business that no other school offered at that time. I changed paths as I realized that the music industry was very much a male-dominated profession and that I might be better served in a more female-friendly business such as PR. I worked for a PR firm that specialized in music venues, entertainment, and recording artists.

One of the firm's clients was The Hard Rock Café during the peak of their fame at the original location in Manhattan. I worked on PR events hosted by singer, songwriter, Carole King and Paul Shaffer from The David Letterman Show. I also had the opportunity to be involved in PR campaigns for superstars such as Janet Jackson, Boy George, Carly Simon, Iggy Pop, and gospel duo Bebe and Cece Winans. I had done an internship prior to this position at Frontier Booking International, a firm that was owned by the late Ian Copeland whose brother Stewart was the drummer for the Police. This internship introduced me to an unbelievable world at the age of 18. I was given all-access passes to concerts, sat next to Axl Rose at Rolling Stone magazine's 20th-anniversary party, and saw artists such as Sting (a Frontier Client) in the office on a regular basis.

In addition, Frontier hosted events for the new music seminar that I was able to attend. NMS featured over 150 CEOs and other executives, leaders in the emerging music business along with over 100 artist performances. I later worked for Sting's management company. My life came full circle in 2008 when my firm produced an event with Sting as our special guest for the evening along with Russell Simmons and cast members of 'The Real Housewives of New York.' Part of that event aired on the show. It gave me an opportunity to reminisce with Sting about the 'good old days' at Frontier Booking and industry people we had in common.



Katherine Rothman, Lucy Arnaz "Believe in Miracles" Event to Benefit The Little Baby Face Foundation @The Sky Club, Metropolitan Life Building, ©Patrick McMullan | Photo - Thos Robinson/PMC

After that, you were employed at a Manhattan communications firm where you worked with broadcast personalities and TV talk shows. What are your fondest memories of working there? The firm Ferencomm is still in business

today. I worked there during the early 90's before reality TV, when talk shows were in their heyday. At that time, the firm predominately represented shows such as 'Gordon Elliott,' 'The Charles Perez Show,' and 'America's Talking', a cable television channel focused mainly on talk-based programming, created by NBC and spun off from economic channel CNBC. We also did premieres for Hallmark Hall of Fame movies which were very exciting for a 20-something starting out in PR.

At that time, network and cable TV was king. There was no internet, Netflix, or other streaming available. Everyone discussed what they had collectively watched on TV, as TV drew higher audience numbers per show than it does now due to the diversification of media. Being a part of TV at the epicenter of our world was exciting.

You took the bold step in 1998 and opened your own firm, KMR Communications. What were the initial stumbling blocks and how did you overcome them?

I must say that starting the business was the easy part! The more challenging aspect was being a 28-year-old young woman. At the time, my typical client was a 55-year-old male physician. Today, people are promoting earlier on so the median age we see is younger and more women are seeking PR. Furthermore, I had some staff members who were older than I.

Respect is something that needs to be earned and I found that I had to really prove my expertise and that I was worthy of the CEO title. We were also lucky to grow very quickly. Within the first three years of starting my firm, we had twenty employees and clients located all over the world. I had no prior training in employee management. That became a skill I had to learn in terms of delegating responsibility, finding team leaders, training people, and a system of checks and balances to make sure everyone was accountable in their roles. The most challenging part of being a young agency owner was handling rapid growth while keeping up high standards and deliverables for our clients.

What made you choose consumer public relations, specializing in the health and beauty industry?

Before I started my firm, I spent several years working for a PR firm that specialized in physicians. At the time it was a very unique niche, and it still is to a degree. I came to really understand medicine, the business side of it, particularly as it pertains to elective medicine. When I decided to open KMR Communications in 1998, medical/health PR was what I knew best and it was an under-explored, but much in demand, sector of PR.

As dermatologists and plastic surgeons were developing their own skincare lines and 'medi-spas', it became a natural progression to branch out to include beauty clients such as skin care companies, salons, spas, haircare products, and eventually fitness. Beauty, health, and fitness really do tie together. I did not want KMR Communications to become a 'generalist' PR firm. I wanted (and still wish) to remain a boutique agency that is very specialized.



Samantha Cole and Katherine M. Rothman

What do you love most about the PR industry?

I love developing the concepts behind a campaign. When one is promoting a dermatologist, skincare company, or plastic surgeon, we have now shifted to a more immediate media environment where content is everything. We can write a great piece of content for a popular online magazine-web-site and have the article explode online with coverage on sites everywhere. It's incredible!

The media always has a very simple need: good expert resources. We make it a point to be in touch with producers and media across all platforms, so we're considered a one-stop-shop for top-tier physicians, dermatologists, fitness industry experts, skin and hair care lines, plastic surgeons, psychologists, women's health specialists, nutritionists, and internists.

Devising savvy and timely hooks is always a fun challenge. When we secure a placement for a client on 'Dr. Oz' or 'The Doctors', as a PR firm you have to win that slot for your client among the hundreds of e-mails producers receive per day. The questions for us are always: What's trending? What do consumers need and want to know? What topic can we present that has not been re-hashed time and again in the news? How can we become part of the conversation right now? Given social media and the democratization of news, we're thinking about what headlines will inspire a social media share. It's a very different game than it was over 21 years ago when KMR Communications was first founded.

What is your ideal work environment?

My ideal work environment is a boutique where I, as the CEO have total hands-on involvement with all of my clients and constant communication with my account executives. I like to run my company internally with a warm, familial atmosphere that encourages creativity and sharing of ideas. On the client side, I like them to feel that they are being served with all of the efficiency and attention to detail they would receive from a large corporation, however, with a much more personal touch and individualized attention.

Describe a typical day in your life.

I'm a great believer in exercise as a stress reliever. I begin my day early in the morning working out with my personal trainer. He has introduced me to boxing which I had never done before. It's one of the many different workout modalities we do. It's not only great for core strength but cardio as well. I also have a 14-year-old dog – a Bichon Frisee who needs my attention before and after work. My workday is spent brainstorming ideas for client campaigns, pitching to media, writing press releases, doing business development and new business meetings, planning events, supervising my amazing team members, and paying close attention to meeting and surpassing our client's expectations.

After work, you can find me dining out at any number of Miami's great restaurants, going to networking or industry-related events, and supporting charities that are close to my heart. On the weekends, I love to go to the beach, play tennis, work out and read. Just because one is no longer in school does not mean learning should stop. I am constantly reading to stay up on the latest social media trends, techniques, communications platforms and anything else that keeps me on top of my game professionally. When I really want to 'zone out' I go shopping or watch Bravo's 'The Real Housewives' franchise. It is important to give your brain a rest to recalibrate and gain a fresh perspective.



Katherine Rothman & R. Couri Hay

What challenges have you encountered in your career?

There are always going to be clients with unrealistic expectations as to what PR can do. I tell prospective clients who are first-timers to PR, that it is an effective means of increasing brand awareness and hopefully translates into ROI – but that it is not a winning lottery ticket or ‘get rich quick scheme’. I believe in providing realistic benchmarks to clients and managing expectations.

What is challenging is when there may be other PR professionals who will make grandiose promises to win prospective accounts or make guarantees that are not realistic. I would rather stay honest and lose an account to someone who is winning that account based on falsehoods. There have been many clients who have come back to us after being ‘burned’ by other PR firms and have said, ‘I wish we listened to you originally, we had a bad experience and need your help’.

I assume you have traveled – what have been your favorite destinations and why?

I love to travel and experience new cultures, scenery, people and foreign languages. I speak French quite well and being able to communicate in a country’s native language is a huge asset. Some of my favorite destinations are St. Tropez because it is beautiful, fun, glamorous, and full of A-list celebrities.

Favorite hotel: Château de la Messardière.

I love Paris because of the architecture, romance of the city, the food, shopping, and the many interesting tourist sites. Venice is amazing because it is a place that

looks like no other with its winding canals through the island city, amazing shopping, warmth of the Italian people, and as a Jewish person, I love seeing the Campiello Delle Scuole or 'little square of the synagogues'. Favorite Venice Hotel: Hotel Excelsior.

The Greek Islands are also so special, seeing the white architecture of Mykonos contrasted against the blue sea and the caldera in Santorini. Favorite Santorini hotel: The Vedema. I visited Dubai around 2008 when it was going through their huge construction boom and rode camels in the desert. Seeing the ancient desert contrasted with the burgeoning Las Vegas type city was fascinating.

Morocco was an exotic experience especially staying in a hotel like La Mamounia which is so steeped in history as well as visiting the souks and the former home of Yves St. Laurent. I have been to almost every Caribbean Island and love the warmth of the people and Reggae music.

One of my favorite islands is Antigua which literally has a beach for every day of the year. My favorite hotels there are Carlisle Bay and The Curtain Bluff Hotel. Lastly, Monaco is a place I could return to again and again. It is the cleanest tiny city in the world and like a real-life paradise. It was a thrill to stay at the Hotel De Paris right next to the famed Monte Carlo Casino – the world's quietest and most sedate casino! For a quick getaway for those who live on the East Coast, St. Barth's is a French-speaking Caribbean island, with incredible French food and the Joie de vivre of the French people. You can't go wrong with any hotel on this island, however, I love Isle De France.

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