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## How To Create PR That No One Sees...And Succeed.

People who work with PR are often limited by the conventional wisdom that PR must be seen to have an effect. In our complicated media and social landscape, however, there's another equally effective approach: create invisible PR that changes the landscape.

Called by many names: Zen PR, Silent Buzz, Viking Spin or just good ol' word of mouth, this method has been used with extraordinary success by such legends as Patagonia and Absolut.

The best way to explain how it works is to start with an example. In the 1980s and into part of the 1990s, Patagonia, the outdoor clothing manufacturer, donated ten per cent of its annual net profits to small grassroots environmental organisations. The donations were never made public, never mentioned in press releases or glossy corporate brochures. The donations were essentially secret. This policy was maintained for well over a decade, resulting in millions of dollars invested where it would do the most good – in small, grass roots organisations with specific, often local issues.

While carmakers and oil companies spent billions to advertise microscopic environmental contributions, Patagonia made an enormous commitment and remained quiet. Was this noble? Of course. Was this good PR? You bet. Even though Patagonia shunned publicity, the recipients of the funding talked to friends, family and neighbours, who talked to friends, family and neighbours. Word spread quickly in precisely the right target group for Patagonia's products – people with outdoor interests – and Patagonia's sales skyrocketed. The company has since made its programme public, but the company still retains the highest credibility. Regardless of whether this program sprang from purely altruistic motives or not, it had a profound effect on the growth of the business and making the world just a little bit better. In its Zen PR years, the company's sales grew exponentially. The bottom line: doing good helped them do well.

### Make money saving the world

The formula for making money on secret PR sounds like something straight from an NGO brochure. Find something that you believe in, not as a marketer or an executive or as a consumer, but as a human being. Is it social activism? Art? Literature? Charity? Bird-watching? Postage stamps? Revolution? Find an indirect connection to your company – an attitude, a tone, anything that's...

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...real and that changes the world just a little in a way that is advantageous to your target group. Credibility and commitment are the best story-tellers. When people are touched personally by something, they talk.

Sometimes it's just a matter of letting yourself and your organisation be human. In the tsunami disaster of 2004, when many of the tourist resorts of Thailand were devastated, a Swedish charter company did the right thing, the human thing. In the first hours of the disaster, it became clear that there were hundreds of dead Swedish tourists, thousands of stranded ones and hundreds of thousands of local victims. It also became clear that through an unfortunate combination of arrogance, ignorance and laziness, the Swedish administration would be slow to react. Fritidsresor, one of the bigger charter companies, sent every available jet to the area filled with supplies, medical equipment, nurses and doctors, bringing home stranded tourists on the returning planes. The woman in charge, became a national hero and the name Fritidsresor will forever be connected with courage and humanity. Heroism in its purest form.

### **L.O. Smith and the Vodka Wars**

Zen PR can also be based on investing in living history. Many years ago, when Absolut was still a young, hot brand, the company was behind a bit of Zen PR that netted millions of dollars of media attention and immeasurable amounts of goodwill. The PR was anonymous, there was not a single mention of the product or the company and the message had nothing to do with consuming the product.

Absolut financed a one-man play.

The play was about Lars Olsson Smith, a 19th century Swedish business mogul, a forgotten legend. A writer was commissioned to write a script, a famous actor was hired to play the part and an Ingmar Bergman protégé was brought in to direct.

Lars Olsson Smith was one of those rare characters whose life was too much even for Hollywood. Rich at 14 and a legend at 23; he was a member of parliament, an entrepreneur and probably the only man in history to officially declare war on the city of Stockholm. The man made a fortune on the vodka market with a new sort of vodka invented in 1879 – “Absolutely Pure Vodka”, the inspiration for the modern Absolut which was introduced 100 years later in 1979. Not once was the word Absolut ever mentioned and nowhere in the play was there ever any reference whatsoever to the modern company or the modern product. The play’s entertainment value was in its comic-tragic portrayal of a man and his times, power plays, love and betrayal. 19th century Sweden was a poor country drowning in alcohol. It was a scandalous era, but a colourful one.

The play was a great success, running for six months to glowing half-page reviews in three of the national newspapers and many of the local ones. The play generated not one, but two spots on the TV news. Vodka is to Sweden’s history what oil is to American’s – moguls, monopolies and misery – and in almost all coverage, the connection was made between Lars Olsson and today’s Absolut. Absolut was associated with artistic excellence and applauded for the courage to tackle such a difficult subject. No money on earth could have bought this sort of credibility. All this in a market where alcohol advertising is prohibited by law.

### **The Moral of the Story**

As media transparency increases and the effect of advertising decreases, PR will become increasingly important in building a successful brand. The more people talk in paid-for media, the less each word will be worth and the greater the value of the grapevine. Conventional PR has its place and can be very effective, but in the future, people will look for real-life inspiration in the brands that they buy. It is our job as marketers to persuade companies to give it to them.

Even if we have to keep it a secret.

By Steve Strid and Claes Andréasson

**Steve** Strid is a copywriter and brand consultant who has worked with global brands such as Absolut, Baby Björn, Ericsson, Sandvik and Light My Fire. He has also published numerous articles in the Sunday Times, the Guardian and the Los Angeles Times.

As the North American area director for The Absolut Company (1989–95) and Director of the Absolut Akademi (1996–2001), **Claes Andréasson** had the good fortune to have been part of a legendary marketing story.

Their new book, *The Viking Manifesto*, is published by Cyan Books.  
[www.vikingmanifesto.com](http://www.vikingmanifesto.com)