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A BHR Interview with Julie Freeman, President of Public Relations for the Americas, MMGY Global

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About the Author



With 30 years of experience, Julie is an expert at creating innovative programs that build and elevate travel and hospitality brands through media relations, consumer engagement, and strategic partnerships and events at the local, national, and international levels. She leads the agency's public relations, social media and experiential marketing practice across the Americas in addition to MMGY Global's New York City office.

Julie's hands-on approach is evident, as she's personally involved in overseeing business development plus strategy and implementation of programs for the agency's growing portfolio of clients, ensuring they integrate into overall marketing efforts and generate maximum exposure and impact. In 2023, Julie was

named a Changemaker as part of PR News' Top Women in PR Awards, and she has won numerous HSMIA Adrian Awards for her work. Julie currently serves as Co-Chair of Destination International's PR and Communications Committee and HSMIA's Adrian Awards Steering Committee.

Previously, Julie spent 17 years at Edelman, helping to build the firm's global tourism and hospitality offering as executive vice president and deputy global director.

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Julie, how long have you been in the business of hospitality marketing, and what have you seen as an evolution for creative or effective campaigns?

Personally, I've been in travel and hospitality public relations for more than 25 years, and the agency I work for, MMGY Global, has been focused solely on travel, tourism and hospitality for more than 40 years since its founding in 1981. In order to provide a broad perspective, I spoke with my team, and collectively we agree on the following:

Marketing and storytelling have evolved over time and continue to do so very rapidly as a result of today's technology and emphasis on social media. In order for brands to set themselves apart in the "sea of sameness," they have to think outside the box and collaborate with strategic partners to leverage their messaging and maximize their reach. Effective campaigns aren't just about grabbing the consumer's attention. To develop an effective campaign, it must be relevant and meaningful to the target audience and be highly creative. Brands that truly understand and anticipate the needs and desires of their customers and speak directly to them provide real value. In addition,

consumers will gravitate toward brands that are transparent and true to themselves. Brands need to live and breathe their mission statement. Authenticity is key. Brands will have to own more and say more to help shape public opinion.

Technology has also played a critical role in shaping how brands approach creativity and tell their stories. Social media and digital platforms continue to be at the forefront of how marketers adapt and reach their audiences and connect with their customers. A two-way dialogue between brands and customers is crucial to having an effective campaign. This is an area where we've seen a lot of evolution. Consumers want to be included in the conversation not talked at. Social media will continue to have great impact, and podcasts will continue to evolve, allowing consumers to have a dialogue with brands, influencers and experts.

Finally, the use of data and analytics. By using data to better understand target audiences, marketers can create a more targeted, customized approach, personalizing campaigns that are relatable to the consumer.



In fall 2023, MMGY Global kicked off Costa Rica Tourism's partnership with world-renowned Cirque du Soleil as the official tourism partner in the U.S. for their newest Big Top show, "ECHO." This unique collaboration aligns perfectly with Costa Rica's "pura vida" way of life. Our partnership includes on-site activations in Atlanta and Miami daily from November through April 2024, original in-destination content, a trip giveaway and so much more. As part of the collaboration, Cirque du Soleil traveled to Costa Rica to film an episode of their Cirque RAW series, showcasing Cirque du Soleil talent in the raw and capturing the true essence and breathtaking landscapes of Costa Rica.

MMGY Global has an established history of representing incredible hospitality brands and destinations. Can you share an example of one such brand and an example of an initiative that you'd describe as innovative? And why so?

We have countless examples we could share with you on both the PR and marketing sides of the business. Here's a few that showcase some of the agency's most recent innovative work:

- *Visit Costa Rica:* We launched a series of high-profile brand partnerships, events, and activations to bring Costa Rica to life in a non-traditional way and generate awareness and media buzz.
- *Cirque du Soleil:* Costa Rica partnered with world-renowned Cirque du Soleil as the official tourism partner in the United States for their newest Big Top show, "ECHO." This unique collaboration aligns perfectly with Costa Rica's "*pura vida*" way of life. The partnership includes on-site activations in Atlanta and Miami daily from November through April 2024, original in-destination content, paid influencer promotion, and a trip giveaway. As part of the collaboration, Cirque du Soleil traveled to Costa Rica to film an episode of their Cirque RAW series, showcasing Cirque du Soleil talent in the raw and capturing the true essence and breathtaking landscapes of Costa Rica.
- *Whole Foods:* Through a first-of-its-kind partnership with Amazon and Whole Foods, Costa Rica Tourism sought to provide customers with an essential break when they least expected it. Known for its sustainability and eco-conscious initiatives, Costa Rica is a natural fit with the Whole Foods brand, which already carries many of the country's products in its stores. This organic brand connection was the basis of a fully integrated campaign, beginning with in-store digital displays at Whole Foods that offer customers enriching facts about the country, like how five volcanoes heat hundreds of hot springs for natural relaxation.
- Outside of stores, *Volta* electric-car charging station screens also feature brand messaging, showing users what a true recharge would look like for them in Costa Rica. To reach Whole Foods customers who order home delivery, we designed a paper bag with stunning, hand-drawn depictions of Costa Rica centered around a towering volcano to provide them with an essential break when they might need it the most. Drawing on the ideas of gratitude, sustainability and enrichment, our hand-illustrated bag can be kept or given to others – reused as wrapping paper, colored and displayed, cut and collaged or even used to help ripen fruit. We also

partnered with content creators who have ties to Costa Rica to amplify this message through social-first video.

- *WeWork*: Aiming to bring visitor numbers back to pre-pandemic levels of 3.2M+ visitors annually, we jumped on the digital nomad trend. Our goal was to drive awareness and deliver the new migratory visa for digital nomads' message to the WeWork community of 225,000+ members across 132 U.S. and Canada locations through a multifunctional approach that included digital screen takeovers, e-newsletters, and special surprise-and-delight, in-person events. We hand-selected two of NYC's busiest locations for takeovers, creating a "Pura Vida" experience in the midst of a busy and industrial environment. The program resulted in 19 digital nomads who traveled, providing an economic impact of \$684,000 to Costa Rica for one year.
- *Visit Greater Palm Springs - Meet the Mentors Program*. Visit Greater Palm Springs (VGPS) is committed to advancing the tourism workforce and industry while improving sustainability, diversity, equity, and inclusion across and throughout the region. This past fall, we worked with the VGPS team to craft a program to address these key subjects in addition to a big hole that we felt was missing in the industry – fostering mentorship for students and those new to travel journalism space. With this goal in mind, we created the Meet the Mentors Program, which served as the intersection of a traditional media FAM and a mentorship opportunity, pairing prolific and well-established writers (mentors) with aspiring future travel writers (mentees). We provided mentors with full FAM experience for their own coverage needs while providing them the chance to give back to their own industry. Meanwhile, mentees were able to learn skills first-hand from the mentors and gain in-market experience for a future career. Additionally, mentees were each required to write a journalistic-style story that was posted on the VGPS blog, giving them their first published piece for their portfolio. The program had over 120 applications from aspiring mentees and garnered over 73 million impressions in the media. The thirteen mentors and mentees benefited from lasting memories and new connections to help grow their network and launch their careers in travel journalism. This innovative program will return in the summer of 2024, and we couldn't be more excited to continue this!
- *Visit Myrtle Beach Best*: On the marketing side of the business, the MMGY team for Visit Myrtle Beach leveraged AI and created a humorous new campaign and rebrand that featured a new logo, multiple photo shoots, billboards, and a TV spot, all created with the help of AI software. The campaign ran exclusively on Reddit. The campaign detailed prompts given to the generative AI software to create the various imagery featured throughout the campaign. Visit Myrtle Beach

kept the AI-generated images exactly as they were created by the software, including spelling mistakes such as “Mitarry Best” instead of “Myrtle Beach” in its new logo and wacky images like a sandcastle with human arms sticking out of it. The campaign broke all the rules and received tons of attention!



Are there other industries you look to as inspiration for the efforts your agency brings to the table? How come?

We do look at other industries for inspiration, but most importantly, we look at current consumer trends and the changing media landscape to help us craft creative programs and campaigns for our clients. By leveraging the latest trends, we're able to "newsjack" and find ways to incorporate our clients' stories into the narrative and current news cycle.

Some of the industries we look to for inspiration include:

- Restaurant space for curation and personalized experiences, i.e., menus, restaurant openings, and specialized theme events.

- Automotive industry for cutting-edge campaigns that speak directly to the consumer, innovative content creation, and campaign slogans to capture attention.
- Consumer goods for great for brand partnerships innovative experiences.
- Technology for personalization, customization, and innovative ways to communicate.

What do the travel or hospitality industries need to do to present themselves as "innovative" or a meaningful customer solution?

The Travel & Hospitality industry is first and foremost a service industry; it serves not only travelers, but those who work in the industry. To present itself as innovative, the industry needs to continue to invest in and embrace new technologies. It must continue to simplify processes to provide the best experience not only for guests and travelers but those working in the industry. AI and other technologies should be used to improve supply chain logistics and enhance sustainable operations. Furthermore, the industry needs to continue exploring ways to invest more in training its personnel, providing new, higher-level job opportunities, and retention strategies. And focus on sustainability is crucial. This will lay the groundwork for continued innovation driven at a local level and by extension serve to benefit and improve local economies.



What do you see as the future of innovative public relations or marketing communications?

The media landscape is constantly shifting and evolving. Publicists and marketers should continue to be at the forefront, trying out new technologies, platforms, apps, etc., and figuring out how these can be incorporated into their strategies. Travel marketers must remain nimble in their media relations strategies to cost-effectively target a narrowing pool of influential writers and platforms by prioritizing relationship-building. This includes increased collaboration with freelance contributors, embracing niche outlets, championing new content platforms, and implementing proven syndication techniques for creative storytelling. Here's some of our thoughts on the future of PR and top trends we're following in 2024.

- **TRADITIONAL PR WON'T EXIST AS WE'VE KNOWN IT:** Gone are the days of “tried and true PR tactics.” Clients will rely on our creative ideas, partnerships, and strategic counsel to connect them to consumers, tapping into our deep media relationships across the world to tell stories but in a different way than we have traditionally done. Trends will come and go more quickly than ever before. Journalists will constantly write for new outlets or cover new beats. Media won't necessarily live domestically and might write for outlets in several other countries. Editorial calendars built out a year in advance will be useless. It will be about tapping into timely and opportunistic moments to capture the attention. PR teams will need to be nimbler and more aware of the trends and the changing media landscape than ever before to stay up on what moves the needle for clients, consumers, and media. Successful PR teams will be those that create innovative, interactive, and bespoke experiences in order to tell their clients' stories to media, influencers and consumers.
- **ALL CHANNELS, ONE VOICE:** It will become more important than ever that our work is part of the entire marketing eco-sphere. Our efforts will mirror marketing's efforts, but also marketing will need to amplify the work we do. There is already a great blend between PR/media/content, and the lines will continue to blur. Our work/mission will continue to be the same – provide truthful, authentic information that inspires. PR will need to be 100% fully integrated with digital, broadcast, social, experiential, partnerships, and marketing platforms as the media landscape will be fully digital. Strengths will live in the ability to be nimble. Agencies, already ingrained with full-service capabilities and big-picture thinking will lend seamlessly to a steady transition.
- **DIGITAL STORYTELLING WILL BE KING AND GLOBAL:** Outlets have continued to fold or cease their print editions. Digital stories and online video coverage will be the future of all client coverage. PR will transition to a fuller service paid/earned outlook. More owned, more virtual, more brands using social for PR, more podcasting are where we see PR headed. Looking at the historic trend, we will see an ongoing shift from long-form journalism to roundups and listicles. We have already begun incorporating digital video assets with pitches for posting on the outlets' websites and social pages to drive views and engagement. Outlets are creating videos out of still images for stories we secure. Because media outlets will be all digital, content becomes global. To maintain their relevance in an increasingly competitive marketplace, savvy media organizations have introduced new content platforms and revenue streams to not only survive but attempt to thrive in this new era of media. Our role as PR people is to tap into those new content platforms and find ways to tell our clients' stories in new ways via these platforms.

- **INCREASED BLEND OF JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA:** With the shrinking newsroom came a further blending of journalism and social media. For example, with fewer travel editors and less budget to cover freelancers, hosting of “social editors” from top publications on press trips has been on the rise. These social editors are able to wear multiple hats, yielding both editorial and social media coverage. In addition, many freelance travel journalists have launched their own Substacks or newsletters to have some ownership over their content.
- **INFLUENCERS ABOUND:** More time and resources will be spent on influencer relations. PR must be adaptable and open to exploring new media, such as earned influencers. We will continue to see a rise in paid influencers, but PR clients will expect us to work seamlessly with unpaid influencers as part of our PR scope/budget.
- **PAY-FOR-PLAY, ADVERTORIALS, AND AFFILIATE MARKETING WILL PLAY A MUCH LARGER ROLE IN PR:** We will be navigating increased paywalls - fewer “free” sources of news media making it difficult to place wide-ranging messages and a growing disparity between those who have access to resources and those who don't. Media outlets will want more dollars and incentives to write about clients in the years ahead.