

Image Shaping & Storytelling



IMAGE: HORSE COMMUNITY JOURNALS
& PHOTO: ISTOCK/GLOBALP

In our busy world, it's easy for exciting competition results and new equestrian products to get lost in 24/7 news cycles, and an internet slathered with social media posts and click-bait advertising. But connecting with supporters, introducing new products, and staying top-of-mind with potential sponsors, are integral to the success of professional riders and equine businesses. What can riders and horse industry businesses do to ensure their fans, owners, and potential clients, stay engaged? Hiring a public relations professional may be the answer.

Jaclyn Duff is a Canadian Grand Prix show jumper based in Alberta who came up through the equitation ranks, winning the prestigious 2003 Canadian Equestrian Team (CET) Medal final. Four years ago, she started her professional riding career, and in 2020 she hired Starting Gate Communications Inc. to develop her website and write her riding biography.

"When I was over in Europe competing on Nations Cup teams and riding with Eric Lamaze, it just wasn't possible to have clients," says Duff. "Then when I settled back down in Calgary, I decided to start a business. I was trying to decide the

best way to reach out to people and tell them I was available and what services I offer. I decided to make a website."

I spoke with Duff by phone just after she finished eighth in a \$40,000 Grand Prix class in California, and she was very clear about why she sought help from a professional firm.

"During COVID-19 and quarantine I thought maybe I should just do it myself," she explains. "Then I decided no. I was going to hire someone with experience in the business. I wanted it to look very professional and I wanted it to reach my target audience. I wanted someone who

really knew the horse industry and knew how to lay out a web page that would reach out to my clients or potential clients.”

Duff also felt that hiring a well-known firm would help her make connections with new clients and potential sponsors.

“People want to know what you’re doing. Up-and-coming riders who maybe aren’t on the A circuit really want to know your results. And I feel that’s where PR comes in — where you can reach out to everybody, and there’s a place where they can read your bio, or look at your results, or [see] what horses you have for sale.”

Duff says that when someone contacts her now, she can direct them to her website and send them a professionally written biography that summarizes what she’s done.

According to Jennifer Ward, who founded Starting Gate Communications Inc. in Ottawa in 2001 and co-founded Jump Media based in Wellington, Florida in 2015, “Having a strong social media presence is imperative, as is having an up-to-date website that gives visitors as much information as possible about the services you offer.” But there are a lot of other things public relations firms do, too.

Ward says, “Public relations itself is the favourable promotion of a brand, organization, or person. It encompasses a wide range of promotional services ranging from media and sponsor relations to website development and social media management.

“The majority of athletes who use our services are looking for press releases announcing news of note as well as editorial placements; someone to handle their social media accounts and take care of sponsor relations; and [someone] create and maintain their websites. A lot of riders also have us prepare athlete biographies that track all of their results.”

Ward says that these promotional activities help athletes strengthen their brand, interest new clients, and attract and retain sponsors.

Horse industry businesses and competitions often hire firms, too.

“For horse industry businesses, we do a lot of editorial placements; ad design; regular e-newsletters; and sponsorship liaison,” says Ward. “Due to our contacts within the industry, we can recommend athletes for sponsorship that pair well with a particular product or service. We also arrange speaking engagements for some of our clients, exposing them to new markets and new business opportunities, and handle any



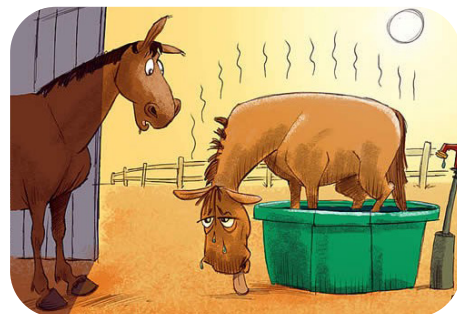
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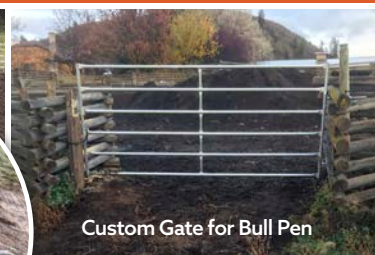
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Show jumper Jaclyn Duff hired a public relations firm to promote a professional image that would help her connect with new clients and potential sponsors. Pictured is Duff competing on the 2012 grey Westphalian mare, Camilla M 4, owned by Windermere Stables Ltd.



PHOTO: STARTING GATE COMMUNICATIONS INC.

Jennifer Ward of Starting Gate Communications Inc. with the 2006 Oldenburg gelding Chacco Kid, owned by the Chacco Kid Group, ridden by Eric Lamaze, a Starting Gate client.

sponsorship commitments that they've entered into."

As for costs, she says, "We offer a standard public relations package that can be tweaked to meet each individual client's needs. But the vast majority of our clients are on an annual retainer. This allows us to really get to know our clients and their businesses and build a strong relationship."

BioStarUS is one business that has benefitted from hiring a public relations firm. Twelve years after starting the equine supplement company in her kitchen in Virginia, Tigger Montague

hired Phelps Media Group (PMG) to get some insight and advice on how to move the company forward. Montague says, "We needed fresh eyes and... wanted to hear new ideas, and ways of getting our message out that didn't depend on heavy investment in social media."

Montague said some of the actions they undertook included being more specific with their email messaging, particularly about their sponsored riders: the riders' thoughts and opinions on training and horse care. "It was more educational and informational than promotional," she says.

As a result, Montague says that company sales have increased along with brand recognition. She notes, "I think my company is much more visible now than it was a year ago. Having a PR firm when launching a new product has been very beneficial, because their contacts and mailing lists are much larger than ours, so the reach was much larger."

Reaching clients and potential clients was something that Missy Clark, who owns and operates North Run, was looking for when she hired PMG less than a year ago. North Run is a show jumping and equitation training facility in Vermont and Florida whose riders have won national

equitation championships almost every year for the past 30 years. Many of those riders have gone on to become Grand Prix jumper riders and successful members of the United States Equestrian Team. But even though the business is well-established and successful, Clark says, "As a business owner, I don't have time to figure out our social media strategy or put time towards marketing initiatives, and a PR firm can handle all of those nuts and bolts."

Consequently, Clark hired PMG to showcase North Run's riders and their accomplishments, plus highlight the organizations she's involved with including Philadelphia Urban Riding Academy, Kevin Babington Foundation, Concrete to Show Jumping, Danny & Ron's Rescue, and The Dandelion Fund.

"They [PMG] have offered creative ideas and ways to reach new people on social media by engaging our audience," says Clark. "I am not sure why I didn't sign on with them sooner, and I am so thankful for all they have done for me in such a short amount of time."

Considering there was a global pandemic in 2020, it seems surprising that PR activities were so effective. But according to Ward, public relations work is

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BioStarUS founder Tigger Montague (left) with two of the riders sponsored by BioStarUS.

really important in times of upheaval. She says, “During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw an increased need for our services, especially among our competition organizers. It was important for horse shows to have an immediate strategy, both in terms of how and if they planned to move forward, and in terms of communicating revised plans to stakeholders, including competitors, officials, sponsors, and even lodging partners in their local community.”

The pandemic affected each business

differently. For Clark, the pandemic meant she had a slower schedule, which gave her time to conduct more in-depth public relations pieces, such as video interviews, plus work on larger projects that she didn’t previously have time for.

Meanwhile, Montague says, “We really didn’t change our PR activities [due to the pandemic]. We experimented with new strategies. We focused on education through Zoom meetings for customers. We also launched new products during COVID-19, whose roll-out was helped by the PR firm.”

But not everyone can afford a PR firm. “Any athlete or organization interested in public relations services should reach out and have a conversation about how it could help their business,” says Ward. “If you are a smaller operation that can’t afford professional public relations services, look at what you can do in-house to promote your business.” She says that having a strong social media presence and an up-to-date website are important promotional tools that most athletes and barns can manage themselves with proper organization and planning.

Meanwhile, throughout the horse industry — pandemic or not — public relations firms are helping riders, coaches, trainers, businesses, and organizations build their reputations and become recognizable brands. They undertake media relations, help with sponsorship development, conduct strategic communications, and assist in reputation management. In essence, public relations’ firms use persuasion and stories to engage audiences and potential clients in positive and strategic ways, freeing up riders, coaches, trainers, and organizations to focus on what they’re best at — horses. ✦

Tania Millen is a regular contributor to this magazine — read her bio on page 84.

Missy Clark hired a public relations firm to handle the “nuts and bolts” of marketing in order to showcase the accomplishments of North Run riders and the organizations North Run supports.



PHOTO: PHELPS MEDIA GROUP