

Competitors more friendly than fierce

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Sara Katz and Jan Percival

Public Relations: Longtime P.R. Rivals Share Common Bond: By [Brad Graves](#) (a feature in the [San Diego Business Journal](#))

The empty dirt fields of University City turned out to be pay dirt for Sara Katz and Jan Percival Lipscomb.

It was the middle of the 1980s, and the two had set out individually to start their own public relations firms.

They joined forces to compete for a contract to promote what boosters were calling the Golden Triangle. And they won the business, beating out several big, established agencies in town.

“It was a wonderful way to cut our teeth in our own companies,” said Katz.

Twenty-five years after they started their businesses, Katz and Lipscomb remain friends. They are also competitors — to an extent. They say that their different specialties keep them from competing head to head.

Katz runs Katz and Associates, a 40-person firm which focuses on government clients. Lipscomb runs Scribe Communications, a three-person firm focusing on traditional public relations. Both maintain offices in the Golden Triangle, the patch of land hemmed in by state Route 52, Interstate 5 and I-805.

A Tale of Two Agencies

In the days before she decided to take the leap into business ownership, Katz worked for political figures such as Pete Wilson as he was ending his term as San Diego mayor. Wilson went on to become state governor and U.S. senator.

Lipscomb had several years of agency work under her belt, and had been taking a long break — she was traveling around the world — when she decided to start her own San Diego P.R. firm.

“Sara and I were the perfect team,” Lipscomb said, recalling the Golden Triangle assignment. “I handled media relations and publicity, and she handled public affairs, which at the time was a critical element of the campaign. Most elected officials and their staffs didn’t know much about the Triangle, so Sara organized briefing sessions, roundtable discussions, bus tours and lunches for a wide range of influentials.”

Both were attempting to show the San Diego community that the neighborhood was to be a high-density, master-planned community. Selling it took some imagination. In 1986, the Golden Triangle was mostly dirt,

broken up by the new University Towne Center mall and UC San Diego. Most of the area's high-rises had yet to be built.

The Golden Triangle marketing effort ended up being a \$3,000 per month deal, recalled Ted Owen, who at the time was with the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. Owen — who went on to become publisher of the San Diego Business Journal before becoming CEO with the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce — had been stationed in the developing area to sell chamber memberships.

When it came time to choose publicists, Owen said he picked Katz and Lipscomb over the bigger players because he knew they would actually end up doing the fieldwork. Other firms that made sales pitches to the chamber would have merely sent junior associates to take care of whatever work their firm won, he said.

Worldly-Wise Background

When the Golden Triangle work was done, Katz went on to work political campaigns, including a Nevada Senate race. She has also found long-term work with water agencies. Katz said a lot of her work remains behind the scenes.

Katz said that as her agency has grown, she has pursued work out of town. Indeed, work for the federal government has been out of the country, in places such as Iraq.

But the adage that all politics is local seems to apply, particularly during a recession. Nowadays, certain government agencies are reluctant to hire firms that are not "local," Katz said.

Lipscomb went on to work extensively in San Diego real estate, helping to sell housing in the former Black Mountain Ranch.

Business has slowed, she said, but she added that she has used the time to get a better handle on the phenomenon of social media, spending roughly \$20,000 to familiarize herself and her staff with services such as Twitter.

Lipscomb said that by being her own boss, and by keeping her company small, she can turn down publicity jobs she doesn't feel right about. And that ties into reputation, which Lipscomb says is paramount. Once you lose your reputation with the media, she said, you're finished.

Demanding Times

Even if they don't compete head to head, don't Katz and Lipscomb compete against other public relations professionals for scarce work? After all, this is a recession, which has boosted the supply of publicists and has reduced the demand for them.

Gayle Falkenthal can't buy that argument. Falkenthal, a public relations solo practitioner, will even argue it's a good market for public relations people.

While it's not the best place for novices, Falkenthal said, it's a seller's market for P.R. folk who are well-established in their markets — Katz and Lipscomb included.

She argued a publicist's work is broadening as traditional media establishments shrink and as organizations take their message public — particularly in new venues such as Twitter and Facebook.

And there is business out there. "I turned down an offer this morning," Falkenthal said.