

Volkswagen's #PinkBeetle Signals Change in Communications

By Dana Phelps Hughes

Her name was Stella. She seemed like a wise, trusted companion who had traveled the world. It was hard for me to imagine life without her.

Then my job put me on the road sometimes six hours a day, and I needed to talk with clients from the car. That's when Stella, a 1968 Volkswagen Beetle, could no longer be my everyday ride. She was replaced by a newer vehicle with Bluetooth and a quiet engine. Eventually, Stella allowed me to start Clairemont Communications with the \$5,000 I received from her sale.

That's correct. I started a PR agency on just \$5,000. That allowed for a couple of laptops, business cards and basic supplies. I sparingly sprinkled in my favorite color in these purchases.

Over time, I realized the traditionally feminine hue is a brand differentiator. Handing someone a pink business card is a conversation starter, for example. As Clairemont approaches its seventh anniversary in January, I've dropped my fear that pink is not a "business" color.

Imagine my excitement over Volkswagen's new pink Beetle, equipped with everything I need to easily make hands-free calls! But getting behind the steering wheel was not as simple.

Blending old and new

Volkswagen carefully devised a strategy to address a segment of its audience while ensuring a successful new product launch. As a consumer, some of the tactics were frustrating. But as a PR professional, I'm still in awe of the seamless blending of old-school, basic communications considerations and creative components that might break some traditional PR 101 rules.

It isn't surprising that social media played a significant role in product development and introduction — that should be a given in 2016. VW lovers' social posts asking for a pink Beetle led to manufacturing the 2017 Special Edition Volkswagen #PinkBeetle. Where the campaign falls off the page of a traditional PR strategy is in execution of proactive communications tactics. Or is it?

Driving demand with exclusivity

I'll admit it. The fact there was so little information available about how to purchase the #PinkBeetle made me want



it even more. Dealership calls confirmed a limited supply — only 1,500 were made. This seemed to be the only known fact. Do you have any? Do you know when you'll get one? Can I order one? No.

I believe this is the first time a hashtag has been part of an automobile's official name. That fueled additional discussion among VW enthusiasts. While I didn't find hashtag searches helpful in how to purchase my dream car, it dramatically accelerated my purchasing decision.

Thanks to Gene at Leith Volkswagen of Raleigh, N.C., I am now one of the 1,500 owners of the special edition #PinkBeetle. Gene didn't know if he would get another

one after the first quickly sold, but he promised to call if so. He acted quickly to notify me upon its arrival. I dropped everything to drive to the dealership right then.

As my team builds client strategies in 2017, we'll ask the following questions with Volkswagen's launch of the #PinkBeetle as an inspirational case study:

- ▶ How do we fulfill customer requests while making a profit?
- ▶ Can less be more in communicating about a product or service?
- ▶ How can we drive demand?
- ▶ How can we engage brand advocates through imaginative concepts such as creative product naming?

▶ How do we best leverage the overlay of public relations, product marketing, social media and customer service for our clients?

In the meantime, I'll be buzzing around town in my #PinkBeetle. If you see me, throw me a peace sign. 🕊



Dana Phelps Hughes is CEO of Clairemont Communications based in Raleigh, N.C. She serves as an assembly delegate for the North Carolina chapter of PRSA and on the board of Counselors Academy. Dana is known as @blach2wvlla on Instagram and Twitter. She's a proud #PinkBeetle driver.