

View from New York: The poor, undervalued Israeli PR flak

The founder of a Manhattan PR firm compares the relationships between publicists and journalists in the U.S. and Israel

Haim Handwerker

Arik Puder is the owner and founder of an eponymous New York public relations agency. He says he receives phone calls and emails regularly from journalists and spokespeople in Israel asking him if his firm is hiring. Over the past year it has been happening about once every two weeks, which has taught him that the Israeli market is experiencing a tough time, both for journalists and PR people.

Puder has a rather unconventional viewpoint concerning the PR world and its connection to the media. He worked in the field in Israel and today his Manhattan firm has six employees and four freelancers.

"As a rule, it's possible to say there's a much greater appreciation of public relations in the United States compared to Israel," observes Puder, who has spent the past five years in New York. "In the United States – and New York in particular – PR firms are seen as advisory firms in every way, similar to law firms and advertising firms, including the level of importance they give to the benefits of public relations, too. In Israel, you could say that, generally, and unfairly, there is a lot of disrespect for PR people. The public relations business is seen mostly as inferior to that of advertising agencies or law firms, and with it the level of salaries," he says.

Puder says another huge difference is that a PR man in Israel has the ability to forge close relationships with journalists, unlike his U.S. counterpart. Indeed, he says, in Israel it's quite common for the professional relationship between spokespeople and journalists to spill over into the personal and social

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That almost never happens in New York. It is, of course, related to the cultural differences and mentality between the two countries, but also the higher sensitivity in the United States to professional ethics and the importance of separating the two realms," he notes.

In addition, Israel is a small country, the media is a small industry and journalists are far more accessible than in the United States. Most Israeli journalists are located in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and they are geographically closer to most of the public relations firms in Israel. In comparison, even if the reporter in the United States is in New Jersey, they might still be a few hours away from a PR person working in New York, explains Puder.

Puder has an MA in political science and communications from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In the 1990s, he worked for the "Popolitika" political talk

show on Channel 1. After that, he became spokesman for the Knesset House Committee and then moved onto the Prime Minister's Office as a senior media consultant. In 2002, he was appointed press secretary of the Immigrant Absorption Ministry. He also served as senior media adviser to ministers Yuli Edelstein, Salah Tarif and Tzipi Livni.

In 2005, Puder opened his own PR firm in Israel, which specialized in working with Jewish organizations and communities. In 2010, he emigrated to New York and reopened his office there – and business began to bloom.

The fees paid for PR work in the United States are higher, relatively, than in Israel – especially in light of the fact that most PR firms are located in New York, which is a very expensive city with the highest salaries in the United States, Puder says.

The fees range from \$200 an hour for the smallest PR firms up to \$900 for the giants in the field. An average retainer for a small client can be a few thousand dollars a month, medium-sized clients pay between \$10,000-\$20,000 a month, while huge corporations will pay a much higher retainer. The salary of a valued employee in a New York PR firm can reach \$500,000 a year, although Puder estimates that the average salary for most U.S. PR people is between \$80,000-\$150,000 a year.

"The huge advantage working in public relations in the United States compared to Israel is that there are infinite numbers of different media and media markets available to the PR people here. There are a spectrum of professional magazines in every possible field; large newspapers that also cover

international news, and other large newspapers that cover the news on a national level (and within specific states); and unlimited small and large local papers in various cities all over the United States," he says. There are thousands of radio stations and dozens upon dozens of morning pro-

grams on various television channels, and there is no limit to the range of media you can use and turn to with a story. The PR's job is mostly to decide who to approach out of the hundreds of thousands of possible reporters and editors, and whether it is on

a geographical basis or based on the content, says Puder.

In Israel, there is a limited number of media outlets and everyone knows them all very well. In America, no PR agency – no matter how big – can possibly know all the journalists and broadcasters, he adds.

"When you want to propose a story to the local press, you must always have a local angle on the story – otherwise, in most cases they simply will not report it. In comparison, the large newspapers in the United States – like The New York Times, Wall Street Jour-

nal, Washington Post or Los Angeles Times – handle national and international news too, and will be more open to general stories," says Puder.

I ask Puder what he sees as the main difference between how the U.S. and Israeli press handle politicians. As a rule, he says, the American media gives much greater respect to its elected representatives than the Israeli press, which is very biting and sometimes rude and impolite. "There are those who say Israeli politicians deserve this, and that the Israeli press learned to be much more skeptical and cynical. My general impression is that in the United States, politicians are respected by the press, while in Israel, 'politician' is often a subject for disrespect – and this is reflected in the press coverage."

The coverage of Donald Trump's Republican presidential campaign can teach us a lot about relations between the press and PR, Puder believes. Trump has become the best show in town, and everybody is concerned with what he does and what he says. Even though most of the U.S. press, including Fox, makes fun of his style and arrogance, they are not capable (or allowed) to ignore him and his lead in the polls, or forget that the American public loves him. "In the United States, public opinion is sacred. Because of that, all the news programs and newspapers, without exception, cover [Trump's] events and speeches almost every day,"

states Puder. And we are still only at the early stage of the campaign, before the primaries.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Puder says the average Israeli PR is far more likely to shoot from the hip than their U.S. peer. Also, often they will be quicker and more impulsive. In many cases, the American is more calculating in his actions than the Israeli, but also slower in responding. Israelis in general are more daring and willing to take greater risks in order to bring their customers exceptional results, says Puder, adding that the American will think 10 times before taking any risk. They will usually try to play it safe, even if it means that the results are less impressive.

Also, U.S. PR people don't like to bother reporters, since they feel that it's rude. The Israeli sees such disturbances as part of their daily routine, says Puder. In most cases, American journalists will not even agree to have PR people call them on their cell phones – and in any event they rarely volunteer the number. They feel – like many Americans, and very different than Israelis – that calling their cell phone is an invasion of their privacy. They prefer email and will answer when it is convenient. In comparison, Israeli journalists do most of their work with PR people and spokespeople on the phone and usually will answer or call back every time, he says.



An event in L.A. last year celebrating Israel's independence. Puder's firm works with many Jewish nonprofits.

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