

Herring sets sights on consumer clients

Former Avalon PR boss James Herring branches out from entertainment PR

James Herring has arguably one of the best track records in celebrity PR. In his 11-year PR career, mostly at entertainment management company Avalon, he made his name handling a host of genuine next big things, ranging from the first series of *Big Brother* to Frank Skinner and David Baddiel.

So it comes as a slight shock to hear him confidently predict, through a cloud of cigarette smoke, that TV shows about ghosts are 'going to be huge'.

Is this assertion merely because Taylor Herring, the PR agency he now runs with his wife Cath Taylor, has just been signed up to promote a programme on the channel Living TV on the subject? 'Not at all. These type of shows are going to be big, they have a proven ratings track record in America. Just you watch,' he says.

It is now a year since Herring went into business with his wife following his departure from Avalon last year. After a rocky start, including a legal spat with Avalon and a launch date coinciding with the onset of a global media recession, Herring says the past three months have been 'much, much better,' claiming the company is now winning eight out of ten of its pitches.

Herring and Taylor are planning to expand. They want to branch out from entertainment PR into the broader consumer market. They even feel confident enough to launch a staff hiring spree to recruit consumer PR specialists. He believes that many of those who, in his words 'promote inanimate objects', could do with some pointers from the world of entertainment specialists.

'I think there is a lack of understanding in the FMCG sector of the fact that news is entertainment. It is what the public is actually talking about. Opportunities for getting press coverage, for example, are spread over all the pages,' he says.

Herring started in PR while a university student and serving as student union president at Plymouth University. He spent time as an activist on issues ranging from sewage to the poll tax and acted as a promoter of both comedy and music.

It was through the comedy nights he organised that he met staff at Avalon, which he joined as an entertainment agent after graduating from Plymouth.

From initial jobs including late-night fly-posting during the Edin-

burgh Festival, he was soon promoted to head of press and marketing. By 1996, his clients, aside from Baddiel and Skinner, also included entertainment legend Michael Barrymore, comedians Steve Coogan and Harry Enfield and the up-and-coming Davina McCall.

Two years later he was promoted again to head Avalon's newly launched standalone PR company, where perhaps the most famous project he worked on was *Big Brother*.

Herring left Avalon in March 2001. Following his departure Avalon took out a High Court injunction preventing him from working while still under contract to the company. An out-of-court settlement was reached with Herring paying his former bosses' costs and an undisclosed sum.

After what Herring clearly found an upsetting split, he is visibly pleased to be working with his wife. He points out that even though he and Taylor—who is expecting their first child in four months—sit side by side at work, office talk is banned at home.

The pair met at a photo-shoot for *The Sun* in 1996 involving a stand-off when they realised that both their clients had been promised a front-page picture slot. Following a nervy impasse, Taylor's client Zoe Ball eventually got the page-three slot, while Baddiel and Skinner, Herring's clients, gained the top billing.

Taylor, who worked on the second series of *Big Brother*, says of her husband as a business partner: 'He is the most optimistic person I know and I find that infectious. He is also very straight-forward, not complicated.'

This is a personality trait also highlighted by Charlie Gardner, head of corporate affairs and PR at TV production company Endemol, for which Herring helped promote some of its most famous shows including *Big Brother*, *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*.

'He's full of ideas and fun but is also straight-forward, prepares well and pays attention to strategy,' says Gardner.

Herring is modest when talking about his track record, even exclaiming 'thank God!' when he is told Gardner has been complimentary—as if he would have said anything else after a string of successes such as *Big Brother*.

Perhaps for this chain-smoking PR professional, this example of false modesty could also show a degree of trepidation about the future.

Joe Lepper

HIGHLIGHTS

1992

Entertainment agent,
Avalon

1996

Head of press and
marketing,
Avalon

1998

Managing director,
Avalon PR

2001

Joint MD,
*Taylor Herring
Communications*