

The Art of Managing the Unpredictable:  
Francis Beverly Kelley, the Circus' Agent

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Good public relations is not just about creating positive hype; it is also making sure that you deliver what you have promised the public and then receiving and responding to critiques. Imagine if you had to do that for seventeen years and you had “freaks”, foreigners, animals, and divas all in one collaborative show as the thing you were trying to sell. Not only that, but you work as a publicity man for a show that bears the name of one of the greatest publicity master minds of all time, P.T. Barnum. No, the job of Francis Beverly Kelley was not an easy one but he said it himself, “It was better than work!”

F. B. Kelley worked with the Ringling Brother’s Barnum and Bailey Circus (RBB&B) for seventeen years as the show’s lead press agent. Rather than riding on the train with the show, Kelley was always a couple of days ahead of it, promoting it before it got into town. He would appear on local radio stations and to schools to talk about it. Kelley was good at creating hype for the attractions to come, attractions that included strange and dangerous feats! The show was so strange and dangerous, in fact, that it was better for Kelley to always assume that something would go wrong or there would be some sort of a problem that he would have to serve as the clean up crew for. There were countless mishaps as expected in the circus, but some serve as great examples that anyone studying public relations can learn from.

One amusing emergency was the day that Kelley lost the giraffe-neck women. A popular attraction with RBB&B for some while was a group of African Ubangi women who had unusually long necks thanks to brass rings they had had welded around them. One of the women, Mu Kau, and her husband had been locked in their hotel room because Kelley’s publicity associate thought that since they were not as familiar with a

hotel setting they would not be able to handle the freedom. When the room was finally unlocked, they were missing! Kelley's men were running all round yelling for Mu Kau when finally the front desk told them to check the coffee shop. There they discovered the runaway couple, who had called the front desk to let them out of their room so that they could act as regular guests. Kelley had always been right on cue about how to treat the publics, but this was his first big wake-up call that it was also part of his job to make sure the performers of the show he was promoting were satisfied as well.

Kelley had to deal with tragedy when Maria Rasputin, a trainer, was attacked by Himmie the bear. One Maria was out of the hospital and moved into a hotel room, they received a phone call with a threat of her being kidnapped. Kelley made the most of the situation he had on hand; a Russian circus women who was recovering from an attack by a bear and who had a looming kidnapping threat. While the incidents were unfortunate, Kelley had a good, thick story on his hands nonetheless and a newspapers' headlines soon read "In the spring of a circus press agent's fancy lightly turns almost anything that might make the front page," with the headline of "Well, This Is Page One!" It was more than Kelley could ask for but he sure knew how to make bad situations work in his favor while staying by Maria's bedside.

One issue that Kelley was constantly working around was the "freaks" label. RBB&B not only had the giraffe-neck women, it also boasted a "living skeleton", "alligator boy", midgets, etc. It was a hard task trying to sell them as something so extravagant and freakish that you just had to come see, while still making those performers, who they actually called "human curiosities", feel human. One way to attract the masses without over talking the imperfections of these people was to offer something

else with the sideshow, such as “hoochy coochy dancers.” This was an extra boost to sell tickets without digging deeper into feelings and offending and it was very effective.

One of Kelley’s most important hours on the job was when the Big Top was burnt to the ground and five circus men had been arrested in relation. All sorts of critics predicted that this was the end of the Greatest Show on Earth. Kelley said “no way!” By the time the five officials were released, Kelley had already prepared a plan and started writing. His plan included having the top executive make a statement “expressing simply and sincerely our heart felt sympathy to the families of the victims.” He also thought it appropriate that RBB&B recognize and give congratulations to the fire and police departments, hospital personnel, and the American Red Cross. All parties concerned felt Kelley’s approach the most appropriate. The circus was prepared to pick up and head back to headquarters to rebuild. Because there was still much grieving over all of the deaths and criticism of RBB&B for trying to continue, they did their best to continue releasing updates on how they were brainstorming to prevent tragedy like that from hitting again such as having flame-retardant tops. It was a very trying time for Kelley but he persevered by keeping communication and ideas open and making sure that the circus never tried to belittle the damage done. He even set up a press event where Bob Ringling himself tested a new flame proofed canvas with a torch. It took a lot of time and sensitive planning, but Kelley played a large role in restoring the RBB&B’s good public standing.

F.B. Kelley serves as a fantastic historical example for how a good public relations professional can land gracefully from any sort of fall. A lot of people studying public relations have the false view that all you have to do is be good at selling ideas but

it really is more than that and you are put to so many more tests. Kelley went through it all from the amusing, minor mishaps, to one of the worst possible tragedies that could happen to the circus, and he overcame it all. When Kelley announced his retirement in 1947, there was a lengthy and endearing article paying him tribute as the “high priest of hyperbole” in *The New York Times*. Ending with such respect only comes from truly good public relations work and winning the hearts of not only the circus he worked for but also the public and the media. Now that I am studying public relations myself, I am proud to have such a talented great-grandfather to look up to.

## Bibliography

Kelley, F. Beverly (1982). *It Was Better Than Work*. Gerald: The Patrice Press.