A recipe for success: Food Network & Cooking Channel's Irika Slavin on the right communications mix

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NEW YORK (RPRN) 07/09/12 — "I have always enjoyed pretending I was a good cook," jokes Irika Slavin.

The vice president of communications and public relations for the Food Network and the Cooking Channel at Scripps Networks Interactive reflects on planning "girls' dinners" in junior high with her friends as an attempt to host adult-like dinner parties when her parents were out for the evening.

"Those memories make us laugh whenever we get together to catch up, but we were kitchen-clueless and I am certain we would never share our youth-inspired recipes with my current colleagues," she says today.

After attending Rutgers and the State University of New Jersey-New Brunswick, Slavin moved to California and worked in the marketing department at DreamWorks, followed by more than 10 years in various roles at Warner Brothers Entertainment.

Several years ago, she relocated back home to the East Coast to be closer to her family and worked in communications strategy for the Film Society of Lincoln Center before settling into her current role at Scripps.

How did you get your start in public relations?

Like many before me, I was a little bit naïve, a little bit lucky and super eager to jump into whatever I could get my hands on — internships or jobs. Fortunately, that combination proved to be a successful cocktail for landing in the right place at the right time.

Shortly after graduation, I moved to Los Angeles, wanting to break into entertainment, and ultimately, I landed at DreamWorks. When I started as a temp, I had a three-month assignment in national publicity and DreamWorks was still relatively new — yet such an amazing place to work at.

DreamWorks culture was such that it allowed for trying things, working on or leading projects, and affording opportunities to gain invaluable experience. I am well aware that my DreamWorks time was priceless — a first exposure to so much within an industry I wanted to be part of. It armed me with an amazing foundation to continue to learn and grow from, as well as [to form] lifelong relationships.

How has the media landscape changed in terms of coverage recently?

Evolution always has pros and cons and that is definitely the case for media. Some outlets have condensed their coverage or gone away completely and

others have expanded, while new mediums have exploded onto the scene.

Ultimately, crafting the most interesting, relevant and succinct message remains the key to breaking through the noise and reaching any desired audience.

How does Scripps keep its brands exciting and inventive for audiences who are oversaturated with content?

That's an ongoing challenge for most communications/PR teams. Often, brand strength and recognition adds a layer of expectation where people assume we are poised to get it right all the time.

We try to meet the challenge by listening to feedback from our fans and our media partners, paying attention to the landscape around us and current trends, and tossing in old-fashioned instinct to balance out the equation.

It seems like your audience has grown from stay-at-home moms to include every demographic. How have the Cooking Channel and Food Network audiences evolved through the years?

Food has grown into a means of expression for many people and Food Network has helped foster this relationship. Beyond pure sustenance, food represents a way to connect with family, friends — even strangers. Food allows people to try, explore and experience other cultures.

As food media has swelled, Food Network has led the charge for our fans. Growth [led to a partnership with the] Cooking Channel, and both networks strive to address the tastes, desires and interests of our audience.

The Food Network brand includes a magazine, TV shows, a product line, online communities, festivals and events, and on-air talent. How do you integrate all of these facets? What is your role in that process?

It's always a challenge to craft a stellar strategy that drives priorities and also engages your desired audience, but our Food Network and Cooking Channel team is comprised of true fans with a shared passion for what our brands represent and for what our audience expects from us. We have team meetings to discuss how to best leverage and maximize both brands, discussing each show or priority project, and whatever might be going on or coming up.

We have found that our audience wants what they want when they want it, so [we have to be] ready with stellar programming, exciting digital offerings, a beautifully executed mouth-watering magazine, quality products or experiential live events — they each have a place in our formula for success. Organizing the moving pieces takes coordination and oversight beyond what might be typical, but plotting and planning can be a lot of fun.

Food Network Magazine launched successfully (and then HGTV Magazine) when people believed that print was waning. What do you attribute this success to?

Strong brand recognition and affinity along with ongoing interest from our audience — who wanted more — as well as a great relationship with our partners at Hearst.

What do social sharing platforms like Pinterest, Foodspotting and Instagram mean for food culture?

If our audience is spending time within these platforms, then our responsibility is to figure out how to engage in a relevant and organic way for Food Network & Cooking Channel.

Exploring the digital space will continue to be a priority — as the space evolves and as fans look for access points to Food Network or Cooking Channel, we will continue to build our presence in the best possible way for

our brands.

Recent *New York Times* articles discussed the artisanal and farm-to-table food movements. Do people see food as art — or something to collect or conquer? Are chefs now similar to rock stars?

What a unique and creative approach to viewing food as a means of expression. It's likely that some people always have viewed food in this light.

Whether getting dressed up to go out to a new restaurant or spending quality time cooking at home with family and friends, food is a means to connection and expression, and collecting and/or conquering can be an approach to personalizing the food experience.

Some chefs definitely have strong followings and rabid fans. It's always fun to see people when they meet one of the chefs they have a vested interest in or who they enjoy watching on TV.

What role does public relations play in building the Scripps brands and raising the profile of the Food Network and Cooking Channel?

Public relations is a slice of the pie (no pun intended) for how any brand communicates with their consumers or audience. Public relations is needed to maintain — as well as grow — profiles, awareness and overall continued interest. Food Network and Cooking Channel each strive to create and implement smart, creative communications strategies in all that we put out for our audience to consume.

What's the best part of your job?

I was a fan first — long before I relocated back to New York City — so the best part of this job is having this job. Not everyone gets to see work and fun blend together, and I try not to take that for granted. Plus, food tends to make people happy and that makes work that much more enjoyable.

News Editor Amy Jacques interviewed Irika Slavin for this month's member profile.

Getting to know Irika Slavin

What's your favorite meal?
Random cravings aside, a simple grilled-cheese sandwich has always been a favorite.

If you could have any three dinner guests, past or present, who would they be?
My mother passed away a few years ago, so I'd absolutely want to include her in any dinner party and we can rotate additional guests as needed.

What's your favorite place to travel?
As clichéd as it may sound, Paris really is one of the most amazing cities, though California's wine country also ranks high up on my favorite list.

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