

Case Study



Sheer Networks

Short Fuse Press Conference Gets Technology Start-up Noticed With Help From Oracle Media Debacle

Background

Three weeks after being summarily ousted from his position as Oracle's president by CEO Larry Ellison, Ray Lane, well known for leading Oracle through a period of phenomenal sales growth and globalization of the software giant, decided to join the board of directors of Pacifico client and technology start-up Sheer Networks. While Lane's move to the Sheer board was an obvious windfall for the emerging start-up, the circumstances surrounding Lane's departure from Oracle were less than ideal. Lane had not commented on his departure much to the chagrin and dismay of the technology and business press. Lane's silence and the circumstances surrounding his ousting had caused much speculation and a pent-up demand for information throughout the technology press.

The Challenge

The primary challenge for Sheer was to fight through the Oracle media mess and then somehow translate Lane's position on its board into a clear message that demonstrated the validity of the start-up's technology and business model. Another challenge came with the timing of Lane's move to Sheer's board and his impending move to premier venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield

and Byers (KPCB). Sheer had about four days to maximize the initial benefit of Lane's move to its board before KPCB announced Lane taking a position with the VC firm. Pacifico had to move fast. The KPCB announcement would certainly overshadow the Sheer announcement, given KPCB's status in the industry. A plan was developed to address the two competing issues head-on. A press conference would be held announcing Lane joining the board of directors of Sheer Networks. The media would get its chance to grill Lane about his departure from Oracle and Sheer would get the much-needed exposure it required to demonstrate the credibility of its business model and technological prowess.

The Approach

To gain a multiplier effect from the announcement naming Lane to Sheer's board, Lane had to talk to the press. But, the press would demand a full accounting of his departure from Oracle and its interest in Sheer would be negligible. Sheer had been in business five months and Oracle was the number two software maker in the world. The plan had two clear objectives. First, allow the press to get Lane's side of the story regarding his departure from Oracle. Second, leverage the media's interest in Lane's

departure from Oracle to gain exposure for Sheer while positioning the tech start-up as a credible and viable technology play to the top-tier business and technology press.

The first objective would be easy to achieve. The press was primed to hear Lane's side of the Oracle story. The second objective would be difficult: having Lane answer the Oracle questions but at the same time talk about his position at Sheer and articulate Sheer's message to the press.

The Process

Pacifico conducted research to determine what media outlets had covered Lane's departure and an analysis of the content and context of the coverage was developed. This information would be used later to develop specific talking points to address questions from specific media outlets. Research determined that the media Sheer was targeting for its announcement was almost the same as the media that was covering Oracle and Lane's departure. Once the research was completed, Pacifico developed a target list of media and an initial set of Q&As and talking points. The talking points dealt primarily with bridging the question about Lane's departure to a message about Sheer's business model and technology. Once this exercise was completed, representatives from Sheer, Pacifico and Ray Lane reviewed and refined the talking points as well as Sheer's messaging. Concurrently, a news release announcing that Lane joined Sheer's board was drafted and approved. Once the target media list was approved, Pacifico contacted the media and the press conference opportunity was pitched.

The Sheer Networks-Ray Lane press conference attracted top-tier local and national business and technology media. Representatives from the following media outlets were in attendance:

- Red Herring
- Industry Standard
- Upside
- CNET
- The Wall Street Journal
- San Jose Mercury News
- The San Francisco Chronicle

Using the messaging and talking points crafted earlier, Lane was able to briefly discuss his departure from Oracle and talk in detail about Sheer's value proposition and how its technology addresses issues critical to the space.

The End Result

The press conference resulted in significant exposure for Sheer Networks. All of the attending media wrote significant stories about Lane and his move to Sheer's board as well as clearly articulating Sheer's positioning and value proposition. As a result of the press conference, Sheer's Web site experienced increased traffic on an order of magnitude of 40 times. The resulting bounce from the press conference resulted in additional interviews and placements for Sheer in a variety of business and technology publications. Pacifico was able to clearly achieve its stated objectives – leverage Oracle's media miscue to gain significant exposure for Sheer Networks. By exploiting the media's pent-up demand for information on Lane's ousting from Oracle, Pacifico was able to secure a captive audience of top-tier business and technology press and drive home Sheer's compelling value proposition.