



THE RED WAGON GROUP

More about Kathleen Mathieu

This essay, which I wrote about myself before I started The Red Wagon Group in 1999, still applies.

Check Your “Ordinary” at the Door

I’ll never forget the conversation. I was starting a new job the next morning. The position had struck me as a perfect fit, one of those it-has-my-name-on-it situations. I was excited and elated. Then those deadly words came out of his mouth...

The speaker was my husband, my best friend, confidant, business advisor and sweetheart. “Do you really know how to do this?” he blurted out. “This” was my new job, and “blurted out” was surely what he did as he rarely zaps me with cruel and potentially devastating questions.

Fortunately, not only was my confidence way up and the I-will-succeed-because-I-have-no-choice piece of my personality in full gear, I honestly believed I was qualified, and I found humor in his untypically tactless remark. The new position was perfect, and I spent six happy, productive years working in it.

The discussion often comes to mind when I view the fast-tracked twists and turns of my career, which has been personally and professionally rewarding. Although I have held claim to a variety of job descriptions, I have been fortunate to build a career rooted in my talents, life plan and personal interests. A skilled imaging and communications expert, I have proven myself in many arenas, especially benefitting from diversified work environments in my search for excellence and growth.

After one year as a teacher and four years as a customer service troubleshooter and credit investigator for a Wall Street brokerage firm, I became a stay-at-home mom. During that time, I did volunteer programming for my daughter’s elementary school and public relations for a parents’ support group. I didn’t realize then that I was launching a new career when I called an editor at The Record, my daily newspaper, and asked how to get my group in the paper.

Soon, I was back in the paid workforce, teaching on a substitute and permanent basis. Having my own class was a wonderful experience. I derived great satisfaction from overcoming the obstacles that were part and parcel of teaching a large class in an urban setting. Part of my success in that position resulted from the formation of a squad of seven volunteer helpers who spent many hours listening to my little ones read on a one-on-one basis. This was the first time I really appreciated the power and possibility of community involvement.

Although the work was tremendously rewarding and my students exceeded expectations in more than one way, financial demands and a desire to better meet my own needs motivated me to move on.

A lifelong desire to be a journalist was fulfilled through a stint with a regional newspaper. I started as a correspondent, and I was soon asked to go on staff when I began writing most of the paper's original copy. And write I did: news, features, advertising, even poems. Whatever they needed, I was willing to do. I even managed to make sense of an assignment to interview a dog that did nothing during the meeting but hold a toy rubber fire hydrant in his mouth and drool on me.

Being a reporter was fun and I loved the whole thing—the crazy hours, the people, researching and learning about new topics, the deadlines, having a creative outlet. It was this job that transformed me into a public relations professional. The subject of one of my stories asked me to apply for a position in her school district. Although she took me completely by surprise, I ultimately decided to take the job as director of public relations for a grant-funded career counseling and women's center.

The importance of the work and the intelligence and creativity of my co-workers made this a terrific environment for me. I had a good product, and, boy, did I sell it. It was here that I discovered that I had quite a knack for media relations. We went full circulation, and we did it often. I also was responsible for publications and event programming.

Moving into healthcare was easy. I went on staff as the assistant director of a public relations department for a community hospital. Media and special events were my main concerns at first, but I quickly took on other responsibilities, such as community relations, publications and advertising. Within my first two years with the department, I created and directed a 13-month-long centennial celebration that included everything from a festival in the park attracting thousands to coverage by the top three morning news shows. During my six-year tenure, the department evolved into an extremely busy and diverse marketing and communications department. It was an “if-you-can-dream-it-you-can-do-it” environment, and that suited me just fine.

In 1996, I was recruited to be a senior manager of an urban healthcare system desperately in need of a comprehensive communication plan. I not only jumpstarted the marketing and public relations for the organization, I revived a struggling fundraising calendar and participated in many special projects.

From time to time, people ask me, “What do you do, anyway?” Sometimes I tell them about one of my favorite success stories, and the one that probably describes my skill set best. When I worked at the community hospital, I was asked by the CEO for a favor. Would I, could I, please, get the poems written by the gentleman who ran the boiler room at night published? A negative response was not an option since The Boss had already promised the man it would be no problem for me to do that. The whole thing was complicated by the fact that this sweet, kindly boiler room man usually wrote about his feelings for his wife. Needless to say, the pressure was on and the mission seemed impossible.

But I wouldn't be beat. At that time, The Record had a regular short feature called “Love Story.” I was able to sell the story idea to a reporter, who promised to write about the couple even if she couldn't print the poems. When she arrived with the photographer, I escorted them down, down to the rarely

visited boiler room. A discussion ensued whereupon I informed her that the great American poet William Carlos Williams had practiced medicine in that very building. What started out a brief column ended up being a full-page story comparing Bart the Boiler Man to one of the most highly acclaimed poets of the twentieth century.

Somehow, I had managed to pull it all together. The reporter had a great story. The photo was particularly sweet. The hospital enjoyed some good publicity. Bart not only got some of his poems in print, he also was able to profess his love for his wife publically. And of course, the CEO received Bart's thanks and the lion's share of the credit for the story.

I had succeeded in doing my job by applying a little creativity and determination to what might have struck the faint-hearted as a hopeless situation. To this day, I still smile when I think of the many Barts I've met and all of the many supposedly ordinary people and situations that I've encountered that were really quite extraordinary after all.