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ANALYSIS

CORPORATE CASE STUDY

POM plants seeds in media to grow US market share

POM Wonderful, grower of pomegranates and maker of a popular drink made from the fruit, has grabbed an estimated 60% share of the US market with aggressive PR and education efforts. By Anita Chabria

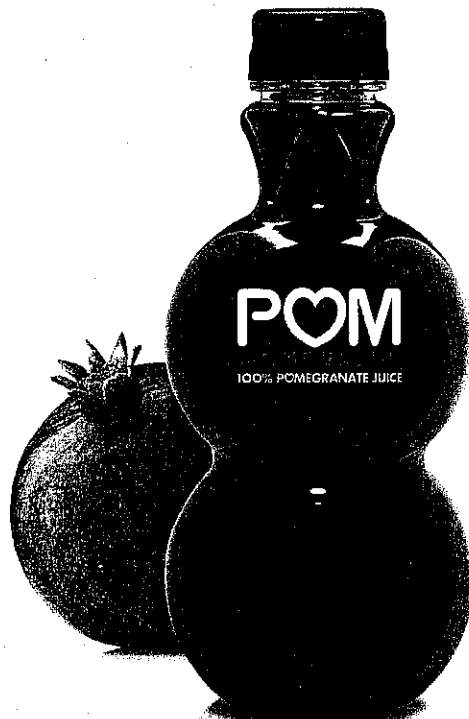
By the time pomegranates earned a mention in the Bible (rumor has it Eve's apple might really have been one of these juicy fruits), the luscious red treat already had been a culinary favorite for thousands of years. But from their recent popularity with media, celebrities, and consumers, you'd think pomegranates were a new discovery. Once little known in the US, they have become a favorite ingredient in everything from juices to body scrubs, thanks in large part to the marketing efforts of POM Wonderful, the largest producer of California Wonderful-variety pomegranates in the country.

"There was a time there when pomegranates were everywhere," says *Forbes* journalist David Armstrong, who has written about POM Wonderful, referring to POM's aggressive marketing over the past year. "It was amazing that you could be reading your food-and-wine magazine, and finding recipes needing pomegranates while drinking POM Wonderful, and you could go to the supermarket and see these big bins of pomegranates."

Despite the current high profile of the fruit, POM began growing them only four years ago, when the company acquired land in Southern California that happened to have pomegranates growing on it. Company owners Lynda and Stewart Resnick (who also own flower-delivery company Teleflora, The Franklin Mint, and nut-and-citrus-farming company Paramount Farms) quickly saw the pomegranate's potential and began growing them in larger quantities. But the newly formed company didn't get serious about marketing until two years into the business.

"The first two years, we were really just a sales organization and didn't have any marketing or PR," says Fiona Posell, POM Wonderful's head of communications. "As the company took on its more current life, a head of marketing was hired, and I was hired to head up communications."

Posell is largely responsible for the aggressive PR and consumer-education strategy that has helped POM Wonderful win placements in everything from *Vogue* to *The Wall Street Journal*. But despite her achievements,



POM Wonderful... company plays up the health benefits of pomegranates, while also promoting the juice to the media as a great cocktail mixer

POM's PR department is made up of a scant two people, who serve both the company's new juice-making business, as well as its core fresh fruit division. "The marketing department is split into juice marketing and fresh marketing," explains Posell, "so they are two distinct teams. Communications spans both sides of that business."

Forbes' Armstrong wrote in February that the Resnicks have planted 6,000 acres of pomegranate trees, doubling the number of such trees in the US. Through Paramount Farms, POM Wonderful sold an estimated \$20 million of pomegranates last year, giving it a 60% share of the US market. POM, a private company, declined to comment on Armstrong's statistics.

Educating consumers

While Posell liaisons closely with marketing, she says company owner Lynda

consumers about pomegranates, from their uses to their health benefits. Armed with peer-reviewed research showing that pomegranates contain a high amount of antioxidants, Posell began peppering the press with an "aggressive media campaign" to position the fruit as a positive lifestyle choice.

Part of that effort included creating two beautiful press kits that look more like coffee-table books than marketing materials, with high-quality art, recipes, and historical and health facts. While media loved the kits (one national magazine even wrote a piece about them), creating and maintaining them has cost Posell more than one employee.

"The associates were frustrated that there was too much putting together of kits and not enough glamour," says Posell, explaining that during her two-year tenure, she has had more than one assistant quit. "When you are a department of two, it's really hard to find a person who can step up and step down, and be comfortable with it."

Despite her love of time-intensive press kits, Posell is an experienced PR professional who is known for her ability to craft long-term strategies for new businesses.

"She is the most strategic PR person I've ever met," says Kevin Nakao, who hired Posell in 1996 to head PR when he founded dot-com music company Launch Media. He is now an executive with a wireless company.

"It doesn't matter if it's a press release or an entire program, it all has to tie back into the strategy," he explains of Posell's approach.

A boost in media coverage

In addition to highlighting the health benefits of pomegranates, Posell also oversaw the launch of POM Wonderful juices, which have been on the market for two years. While still using the lifestyle angle, Posell also widened her outlook by crafting a cocktail-orientated program, based on "the wicked side of the pomegranate," she says.

"That was what gave us the broader appeal with a lot of the media," she says. "People would come to us and tell us that it makes a really good mixer."

That extra angle has resulted in hundreds of broadcast, print, and radio hits, all of which Posell has had a personal hand in managing. Posell says that kind of oversight is key to POM's success.

"She was just very receptive to my needs and went out of her way to make

sure I had everything I wanted and needed. Everyone doesn't have time to do that," says Good Housekeeping Institute nutritional director Delia Hammock, who wrote about the fruit for her magazine, *Good Housekeeping*.

Armstrong agrees that Posell is skilled with handling the media.

"She had kind of a stickier task with us because we were less interested in the new drink trend and more interested in the business people behind it," he says, adding that the Resnicks are notoriously press shy and refuse to do interviews for any of their privately held ventures.

"They are really difficult to pin down," says Armstrong. "[Posell] had kind of a tricky task of countering my repeated efforts to get them on the phone while at the same time giving us enough information. She pointed us in the directions of some other people to call, and she did confirm some things we had heard elsewhere. I think she handled it pretty deftly."

In addition to media outreach, POM also has an events program that started last year and concentrates on both health and celebrity "influencers."

"We have had a huge amount of success with that whole program," says Posell. "We actually started off working with the premiere of *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*."

Last year, she says, the program landed the coveted spot as "the official drink of the Oscars" and this year also had products at the Emmys. Posell also managed to land a product placement on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

"By being associated with all these celebrity events, we've been sort of elevated in peoples' minds to being something that is sexy, and I think that is a good thing," she says.

For the future, she is in the process of planning a regional PR effort to increase the product's profile beyond the LA and New York scenes. She also is planning on hiring another person in the department to handle this, and says she would consider an agency to help in the Chicago area (the rest of the PR has been done without outside help).

Posell, who also heads customer service for POM in her spare time, is readying for the launch of juices in the UK (where she will probably hire an agency, as well), and other markets, including Japan, Australia, and Canada.

"We have a lot of work to do," she says.

PR contacts

Senior director of corporate communications Fiona Posell

Resnick is hands on when it comes to overseeing communications and to making sure Posell has the necessary knowledge to do her job well.

"The key person is the owner of the business," she says. "[Lynda Resnick] is really the key to enabling me to do a good job. She understands what it takes to do this, and she understands the broader aspects of what I do and the need to understand the business fully, and she's very supportive. Myself and her are the only two spokespeople for the company."

Since coming on board in September 2002, Posell has focused on educating