

The Ability To Tell Stories

An Interview with Robert Zito, Founder, Zito Partners and Managing Partner, IPZ

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Zito has more than 35 years' experience as a brand communications, advertising and public relations executive in the sports, financial, pharmaceutical, and entertainment industries. Best known for bringing television to the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, creating the excitement of the opening and closing bells, and building the NYSE brand into one of the best known in the world, Zito's management committee experience spanning three decades helps clients develop marketing and communications strategies, build their brands, and manage crises with targeted and creative solutions. Zito serves as Vice Chairman of the FDNY Foundation, Chairman of Cento Amici, and serves on the board of the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. He was also responsible for the New York Stock Exchange and Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundations. In 1998, he started the NYSE Fallen Heroes Fund, and in 1991, the Zito Family Scholarships at St. Peter's Prep. He is a 1998 recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. Zito earned a BS degree in English from Fairfield University and attended the Advanced Management Program in International Studies at Harvard University.



Robert Zito

through an issue. Thus, Zito Partners was born.

Our mission is simple – help our clients both build their brands against a targeted demographic and help clients when issues impact their businesses. I love developing those strategies, and our team has done an excellent job assisting me and executing.

What have been the keys to Zito Partners' strength in the industry?

Experience and understanding. And the ability to tell stories.

At Sony, the NYSE and BMS, our consultants and agencies did an excellent job supporting us, but none had people who had been in our shoes. None had sat on a corporate management committee and understood the issues like we on those committees did. And none understood the impact an issue could have on the individuals on that management team.

I believe that gives us an ability to help clients develop their strategies, with an understanding of “more than” the black and white issue. It also helps us shape the stories our clients need to tell their target audiences. We bring that understanding to our clients and we have a team of people, with media, advertising, corporate communications, and IR experience who can execute to support and build client brands.

What was your vision for launching IPZ and how has the firm evolved?

Marketing and brand building. To help clients build their brands, we often need to think outside the box. Understanding how sports and

entertainment – two of the most visible industries in the world – can impact a brand is vital. When Akio Morita at Sony decided to buy CBS Records and Columbia Pictures, which we rebranded as Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures Entertainment, it was thought to be a necessary acquisition of content. But what it did was eventually change the perception of the company from a Japanese electronics company to a global entertainment company.

At the NYSE, athletes and sports teams were an important part of our marketing, and when we created the Partnership Program, enabling our listed companies to take advantage of the media coverage we provided, many used celebrities in their efforts to garner brand exposure.

At BMS, athletes and celebrities were at the heart of our Prevail campaign. So IPZ helps provide that access for our clients when it becomes part of a marketing strategy.

How has the role of a leading communications company evolved?

Content development and targeting. Knowing who you need to reach, how often, and using what tools is imperative. That starts internally. Every employee at every company should know exactly what his or her company stands for and the benefit it provides. And every employee needs to be able to tell “stories” about their companies – about the people they work with, the lives they impact, and the difference they make. Emotion is key.

At the NYSE, Dick Grasso understood that. For more than 200 years, the NYSE was a “closed door.” He joked that when you saw the façade, it looked like an amalgamation of the

FIRM BRIEFS Zito Partners (zitopartners.com) is a public relations and marketing communications firm that builds strategies targeting clients' most important audiences.

IPZ (ipzusa.com) is a family-focused management, representation, and consulting firm, built on the integrity of its professionals, and developing whole life solutions for its clients.

What led you to create Zito Partners and how do you define its mission?

Necessity and opportunity. Having spent 25 years in the C-suites of three great companies – Sony, New York Stock Exchange, and Bristol-Myers Squibb – and 17 of those on the Management Committees of the NYSE and BMS, you realize that every CEO wants his or her own team. I reported to seven different CEO's during those 25 years. Each had his own personal style and personality, and each had his own priorities. When the last corporate chapter ended, a senior executive at a leading financial company asked if I would help them

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Vatican and the Pentagon. You knew something important happened there, but you had no idea what it was. He let us change that, by not only approving, but championing our strategy to allow television networks to broadcast from inside our building. That enabled investors to see and learn about what was happening on that trading floor and helped make the NYSE one of the best-known brands in the world.

Seeing those opportunities, suggesting them strategically, and delivering is vital. Obviously, social media has become more important than ever. The content companies push through their channels – to employees, constituents, or media – needs consistency and relevancy. It also needs to be engaging and – yes – at times fun.

What do you feel are the keys to staying relevant and continuing to lead as you look to the future of communications?

Flexibility and personality. Change happens so quickly today. Companies need to adapt at the drop of a hat. Remember hearing stories about a company being “too old and set in their ways” and thus couldn’t adapt and adjust quickly to a changing market or environment? That can’t happen today.

And creativity will take on additional importance. It always has been, but the ability to adapt, to understand, to listen to constituents and employees, and to react quickly to issues and opportunities will only increase in the future.

How have clients’ expectations evolved and what are clients looking for in a communications firm today?

Understanding and commitment. I truly believe our client management teams want us to understand their issues and goals just

as much as they want their own teams to. I believe they value our experience of having been through difficult situations, and helping their teams understand what we did in those instances. And they want to believe that we are as committed as their management teams are to helping – whether that’s a strategy to build a brand, launch a product, or handle a crisis.

What do you tell young people about the type of career the communications industry offers?

Agony and ecstasy. The industry can offer excitement – it can offer tremendous opportunities – but it can also offer tremendous frustration.

I had an assignment at Sony that came directly from our founder, CEO and Chairman – Akio Morita, a true visionary. Over a six-month period, I got that assignment to the goal line, but never scored the touchdown. I remember sitting in Morita-san’s office and telling him what I had done and why it couldn’t be completed. Instead of being stern and disappointed, he smiled and said, “Zito-san, if you don’t understand failure, you will never relish victory.” He commended me on what we had done even without the “touchdown.”

Athletes – or those who understand team athletics – have great opportunities in this profession, as they did on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Understanding how to work as part of a team and, equally importantly, understanding how the different pieces that make up a brand – from employees, to regulators, to media, to advertising, to investors, to customers, to vendors – all fit as part of the strategy is vital.

One of my daughters was a successful high school and college soccer player who studied mechanical engineering in college. In one of her first classes, a professor called on her and said, “I understand you’re on our soccer team, and that you’re a striker. Why? If you want to be an engineer, you should be a defender. Because you need to see the entire field.” That struck me as being a comment about this profession as well. It’s so important to see the “whole” picture. When you can do that, this profession presents tremendous opportunities.

I also counsel people looking at a communications profession that they need a great spouse and partner. This is not a “9-to-5” job. It involves late nights, travel, and early mornings. It involves tremendous “ups” and debilitating “downs.” At Sony, it was not uncommon to get phone calls from Japan at 3:00 AM. I always tell them to be prepared for everything and anything.

With all that Zito Partners has accomplished, are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins?

When a client celebrates, we celebrate. Back to the agony and ecstasy conversation, we live and die with our clients’ successes and failures. That’s a benefit of being a smaller firm where every one of our partners can know and understand our clients.

Does anything stand out over the years as being the “biggest” success?

We have been fortunate to work with some clients on some amazingly exciting things, where we helped with both strategy and execution. In a couple of cases, clients have asked me to join their Boards, which was extremely rewarding for me personally and for our firm.

Over the years, helping with the re-brand of Sony, building the NYSE’s brand into one of the most dynamic in the world, bringing television to the trading floor, helping manage the reopening of the markets after 9/11, and helping with the transformation of Bristol-Myers Squibb into a pure biopharma has all been rewarding.

But the most important thing to me has been helping the FDNY Foundation post 9/11, and helping build Cento Amici into an important organization that funds need-based scholarships in New Jersey. My wife, daughters, and sons-in-law have all helped with that, and for that I am extremely grateful. ●

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