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Howell has her own brand of branding

By Victor Tine

Staff writer

It was an offer Marian McGovern couldn't refuse.

In 2002, McGovern had recently been appointed to head the five-member Massachusetts State Police public information unit. She was confident about some aspects of her new job, but also knew she lacked experience in other areas.

While attending a press conference in Boston, McGovern was introduced to Maria Farrah Howell, an independent public relations consultant.

"She offered to guide and mentor me," recalled McGovern, a state police major with 25 years' experience. "She put on a daylong training at no cost that gave us great insights. She was phenomenal. She went out of her way and she didn't have to do it."

Maria Farrah Howell is a 42-year-old Methuen native who is making her mark in the crowded field of Boston public relations.

She helped launch the cable television giant Comcast in New England and recently developed a public education program for Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of OxyContin, a pain medication that has been the object of a number of robberies across the country.

As part of her work for Purdue Pharma, she created a campaign built around the slogan "Painfully Obvious," including a Web site www.painfullyobvious.com, which is aimed at educating teens about the a danger of abusing prescription medication.

Whatever the account, Howell's goal is to help clients achieve and maintain credibility.

"Most companies now understand that advertising is not enough. You need third-party credibility," Howell said. "A good story in a local or national newspaper lends credibility to what they do."

Howell said she maintains "excellent" relationships with newspaper and TV editors and reporters, at least partly because she maintains her own credibility with them and won't indulge in unnecessary hype.

"We're honest with our clients," she said. "We'll tell them whether something is newsworthy or not."

After spending her early years in Methuen, Howell moved with her family to Lawrence when she started high school at St. Mary's. Her grandfather founded the Farrah Funeral Home in Lawrence, which her brother still operates.

She attended Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill and has a degree from UMass Boston.

She worked for a few months after her college graduation in the advertising department of The Eagle-Tribune and then at local radio stations WCCM and WCGY as a copywriter.

She ran the "Saving Lives" traffic safety program for then- Haverhill Mayor Theodore Pelosi from 1988 to 1990 and then was recruited to be press secretary for the Governor's Highway Safety Bureau. She worked in public and media relations for several Massachusetts state government agencies until she left to start her own firm.

The president of The Farrah Consulting Group, which she started in 1999, Howell specializes in training organizations and individuals to deal with the media, in general PR and "crisis management," when a company needs to limit bad publicity, usually in a hurry.

Her media training clients have included AstraZeneca Pharmaceutical, the federal Transportation and Labor departments, and the Massachusetts Mayors Conference.

Farrah Consulting operates out of a suite of offices on the 11th floor of 28 State St., the office building right next to Boston City Hall. Howell has 10 employees.

Her clients say that she listens to what they say, that she is honest with them and willing to go the extra mile on their behalf.

"She goes out of her way to understand her clients," said Ken Barnes, a real estate manager with the 7-Eleven convenience store chain. Howell is doing public relations for the company, which is seeking to expand its presence in the Greater Boston market, and Barnes said she was "instrumental" in obtaining press coverage of 7-Eleven's plans.

Howell "helps us communicate our vision," said Jennifer Khoury, vice president of public relations for Comcast. Khoury said Howell has trained Comcast executives, who are often strong on engineering and technology, but who are not media savvy.

Khoury said Howell helped launch the Comcast brand in New England when the company bought out AT&T's cable operations.

"We don't trust just anyone with our brand, but we trust her," Khoury said.

Howell is married to Ray Howell, former Gov. William F. Weld's press secretary, and they live in Newton. Ray Howell also operates his own public relations firm, but one that specializes more in political and public policy issues.

"We haven't competed for clients yet," she said with a smile, "But I'm sure I'd win hands down if we did."