

Without reservation

The
publicist

Ellen Malloy's innovative and influential model of restaurant PR hits a sweet spot with many clients—but leaves some in the industry sour. By **Michael Nagrant**

Ellen Malloy can persuade people to kill for her. Last August, Malloy, one of Chicago's top restaurant publicists and founder of the Restaurant Intelligence Agency, started chicken farming in her Albany Park backyard. But in October, she discovered one of her chickens, Kung Pao, was a rooster. She'd heard there was a city law against keeping roosters (not so, but she still worried neighbors might complain about the noise), so she made plans to off him.

Malloy decided her henchman would be *Chicago Reader* food writer Mike Sula, after she learned he wanted to feel what it was like to kill his dinner. Sula says he was uptight about killing the animal, yet he cut off Kung Pao's head with a cleaver while Malloy held its squirming body. As the rooster's neck sprayed blood and the torso flapped in the publicist's arms, Sula and Malloy realized they didn't know how to prep it. So she called chef Paul Kahan of Blackbird for instructions while, as Sula puts it, "I had my hand up [the bird's] ass for a half hour trying to get the organs out." After Kung Pao was cleaned, Malloy poached the meat and ate it.

"I don't know if I'd ever do this with any other publicist," Sula says. "She has a lot of charisma and intelligence."

Malloy's regarded as a great matchmaker—hooking up reporters with stories, chefs with new gigs and even restaurants with new concepts—in part because, as a former London *PR Week* writer and cook (Marché, Carlos), she understands the people she works with.

While some publicists exaggerate their clients' virtues in public and stroke their egos in private, Malloy is known for her blunt assessments of industry issues and players, as well as

passionate advocacy for restaurants she loves.

The latter helped her score her big break in 1997. A national journalist had asked which restaurants he should be eating at; she told him to check out Blackbird, which wasn't her client. This impressed the owners and she landed the account. She then put that passion to work. Once, when she couldn't get a member of the Blackbird staff to send a recipe to a journalist, she immediately drove seven miles from her house to the restaurant to make sure it went out.

Donnie Madia, partner at Blackbird and an investor in RIA, says, "It's tough being the man behind the man [Kahan]. I used to complain to Ellen that I wanted some coverage. She kept telling me, '[Journalists] don't really care about you.' It took me many years of therapy to be okay with that," Madia says, laughing, "but she was right." (Madia has gotten play recently with profiles in *GQ* and *Playboy*, presaging his nom for a James Beard award as Outstanding Restaurateur.)

Malloy is so embedded in the chef-driven restaurant scene that she often helps match chefs with new jobs—a practice that can potentially leave owners feeling burned as their talent heads to new kitchens. Cary Taylor of the Southern, an RIA client, is one chef who landed a new gig thanks to Malloy: "I was working at Trotter's To Go. This woman [Malloy] walks in wearing a Blackbird hat, and in five minutes she convinced me I had to eat there. ... It paved the way for me."

Similarly, when Mark Steuer wanted to move on from his job as chef at HotChocolate, he reached out to the publicist, hoping she would have a job in mind. As it turns out, she did, and Steuer put in his notice, though the new gig is still under negotiation. (Chef



Mindy Segal declined to comment on the record about his departure.) "I still hook tons of people up for jobs, set people up on dates, try and convince people to read certain books I think they'll like," Malloy says. "Sharing ideas is what I do as a human."

As a publicist, she can influence a restaurant concept's survival, too. The Southern used to be Chaise Lounge, but when the restaurant struggled, Malloy pushed for a rebrand and for Taylor to cook food closer to his heart, the chef says.

Malloy's been a player in the restaurant world for a while, but her influence really took off in 2007. Though her traditional PR business was profitable, Malloy felt something was wrong. She'd gotten the Buddhist mantra OM MANI PADME HUM tattooed on her

right wrist, which loosely translates as "generosity, ethics, patience, diligence, renunciation and wisdom." But she didn't feel she was living those ideals: "You're accountable for the actions of two groups of people for which you have no authority—chefs and journalists. I knew the traditional PR model was broken. ... So much was based on media placement, not getting butts in seats," she says.

So Malloy launched Restaurant Intelligence Agency, with restaurantintelligenceagency.com as the firm's centerpiece. She hired a writer and an editor to post profiles, menus and photos of client restaurants (site staffers range from a recent J-school grad to a local sommelier). Food writers and curious diners could follow client restaurants directly on RIA, and



Ellen Malloy
RIA

they could get early word of openings by following her on Twitter @EllenMalloy.

Malloy gave restaurants media exposure at a big discount from her old full-service price (RIA membership costs \$750 a month) with the trade-off that she wouldn't be their "geisha" anymore. This was a big deal for independent restaurants.

And though it seemed like a smart, even easy choice for Malloy, "I bootstrapped the whole thing," she says. "I've gained, like, 40 pounds [from stress]." While many entrepreneurs rely heavily on investors, Malloy owns 90 percent of her business. "I'd show up for the [free] family meals at restaurants I was so broke," she recalls.

She used to carry six to eight clients on average. She now boasts

38, including some of the city's trendiest restaurants (the Bristol, Longman & Eagle), losing only a handful in the two years she has operated RIA. I spoke with almost all of those former clients, and most said they left because they needed a full-service PR person. Malloy stresses that her concept only works if clients do the heavy lifting on the marketing front; she provides them with the tools they need and they create their own events and media opportunities.

But occasionally, Malloy's blunt assessments have led to her firing. She said LOKaL 86'd her after she complained the chef/co-owner was putting out confusing food. (The chef/co-owner in question, Gosia Pieniazek, says the conversation never happened and that the restaurant simply decided to forgo

PR.) Similarly, Malloy believes LM Le Restaurant let her go after she dubbed its "neighborhood fine dining" concept "murky" and predicted closure within 18 months if it wasn't refined. "We needed a more customized, full-service public-relations strategy and someone to assist us in executing it," says LM co-owner Stephan Outrequin Quaisser of the parting.

But the LOKaL co-owner did step down as chef. Meanwhile, LM remains open, though it hasn't been 18 months yet.

Dale Levitski, who briefly employed Malloy's services at Sprout, says, "She challenges you and dares you to prove her wrong." In fact, Malloy suggested a new crowd-sourcing concept for the restaurant and broke the news that the *Top Chef* alum was in the kitchen there, but Sprout's no longer a client. "I am 100 percent responsible for the idea of the crowd-source, but they are 100 percent responsible for not doing

pull it off, and the manager at the time did make the whole project kind of impossible on both sides."

Levitski, who likens a client-PR rep relationship to a marriage, contends that "Ellen was never truly on board with our concept. She did have a few other openings around the same time with more organized and more important clients. She did seemingly check out mentally, and it showed." The chef calls the parting "a tough decision, but why pay someone who doesn't believe in what you are doing? Especially if that person's job is to help sell it."

All that said, Levitski says there are no hard feelings. "Look, we [chefs] are all egomaniacal assholes to some extent. But, some of us need a kick in the ass. I can't see Ellen and Charlie Trotter working together. But I love her, and I'll probably find my way back."

As influential as Malloy is on Chicago's restaurant scene, her clout may yet grow when she

"If RIA were adopted on a broader scale, it would put conventional retail publicity out of business."

the work to make it happen," Malloy says. "They took weeks to even comment on the website, wrote one blog, were available for one video, wouldn't record the stuff we asked them to record so we could promote the changes (they just bought plates and wanted to fake it, that sort of thing)," she recalls via e-mail. "The old manager was heady with the idea that he 'had people' and somehow confused all of us on the team with servants or something. So, they just thought it would magically happen."

Although Levitski credits Malloy with "great ideas," he says "there was definite confusion as to responsibilities. . . . One thing to keep in mind is that during opening as chef, my responsibilities are in the kitchen. I understand the value of PR and different types of promotion. But the amount of attention required for this pitch would take away from my kitchen time. I had to stick with my priorities in the moment, and it is always the food first. The idea was extremely ambitious and would take a lot of work. We discovered we did not have the support staff that could

launches RIA's second wave, SpoonFeed, in the near future. It's an all-in-one platform that teaches chefs how to market themselves and provides them digital tools to spread information into the social-media sphere.

Of the current RIA, Grub Street Chicago editor Helen Rosner says, "I think it's my third-most-visited website. . . . For what I do, it's a dream come true." Several other local journalists speak highly of the site as well, but not all share Rosner's enthusiasm. 312 Dining Diva blogger Audarshia Townsend says, "At first I was excited about getting all this information fast. Sometimes my deadlines are so tight, I need people to jump or they don't get covered." However, Townsend adds, "I've asked her for photos and info that I can't find on RIA, and she tells me to fill out a request form. . . . As a publicist, you're supposed to be kissing my ass. She doesn't disseminate information fast enough."

Malloy counters: "We're a value-oriented, process-driven solution like McDonald's. If you go into McDonald's expecting Charlie Trotter's, you're going to be

disappointed. If I start personally helping people out with every little detail, this model fails.”

Getting a read on her influence with journalists and restaurants is one thing, but when I contacted several of Malloy’s local PR peers, few wished to speak about her or RIA on the record. Those who spoke on background seemed more interested in pumping me for gossip or wondering why I wasn’t covering them. Those on the record were generally supportive.

Dave Andrews of Good Life PR sought out Malloy as a mentor before launching his publicity business. Admiring how easy her site makes it for journalists to find useful information about clients, the former editor of Thrillist Chicago says, “Coming from an editorial background, I like that you don’t have to wait for some manager to take a photo of a dish or some chef to wake up before noon to get info.”

But because Malloy produces direct-to-consumer content, some critics (including Townsend and *TOC* food editor David Tamarkin) suggest her model blurs the line between journalism and PR.

Malloy insists that RIA doesn’t aim to be seen as a traditional media outlet, and did recently change her Twitter bio to identify her as the “founder of Restaurant Intelligence Agency—a content marketing platform for restaurants.”

Despite the title, Malloy isn’t drawing a salary from RIA this year because she’s investing in a site upgrade (while making a living off consulting gigs). Still, the RIA model is working. Bridget Quinlan, PR director for the restaurants Balsan and Ria in the Elysian Hotel, estimates that RIA is saving her an estimated 250 e-mails or phone calls per year. A typical client gets 900-plus journalist pageviews annually on RIA, Malloy says.

“The restaurant publicity engine is slow and resistant to change,” says Grub Street’s Rosner. “What she does is so effective for journalists and restaurant clients that if [RIA] were adopted on a broader scale, it would put conventional retail publicity out of business.”

Can Malloy really slay the restaurant industry’s old PR model? Before you question her clout, you might want to ask that rooster.

Critical mass



Steve Prokopy
Ain't It Cool News

Steve Prokopy—better known as the film writer “Capone”—is the Chicago king of film nerds. And it’s the movie studios that crowned him.

By David Tamarkin

Steve Prokopy is a film writer who for the first half of his career was known only as “Capone.” He claims to have put almost no thought into the name—while traveling abroad, people would often meet the news of his hometown with a mob reference—but the pseudonym wasn’t without subtext. Like Al Capone, Prokopy had a reputation for operating against the system. He relished writing and publishing reviews of movies on the fanboy website Ain’t

It Cool News before they were released, something old-school film journalists would seldom dare to do. And like Capone in his heyday, Prokopy was untouchable. He had a knack for knowing when movies were going to get early screenings, for getting passes or getting on the list. The studio publicists tried to keep him out of screenings, but though they knew of him, they didn’t know him. And so they couldn’t stop him.

“They hated me,” Prokopy says. “Not just locally, but nationally. They couldn’t control me.”

One day in 2005, after an early screening of a film at the Landmark, Prokopy was on the Broadway bus heading home. He noticed a film publicist sitting nearby. Prokopy had been writing anonymously for six years at this point, and his reviews had

garnered fans internationally. Even the studios had become fans—when he had nice things to say. (When he had bad things to say, he would get angry feedback, sometimes from the filmmakers themselves.) But he was tiring of just writing reviews. He wanted access to actors and directors. So he approached the publicist and revealed his identity.

“I said: Look, this is who I am. Who do I contact in your organization to get invited to press screenings and to get to these interviews?”

The publicist put him in touch with his boss. “[The boss] said, ‘We can do this for you. No stress is going to say no. But you can’t write these reviews early,’” Prokopy recounts. “She was offering me the key to the kingdom for one concession, which I was happy to give.”