

The Cruise missile is out of control

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The forthcoming "War of the Worlds" might have found an even greater enemy than space aliens with death rays - namely, bad buzz.

The film's star, Tom Cruise, seems bent on using his airtime for every purpose other than promoting the \$130-million epic. So we are seeing how state-of-the-art public relations campaigns can melt down in this media environment.

As "everybody" knows by now, Cruise is out to prove two points. First, that he is an ardent heterosexual; hence his publicly passionate romance with actress Katie Holmes. And second, that Scientology, the religion started by sci-fi writer L. Ron Hubbard, is beneficial to all. And for Cruise, making that case requires him to criticize rival approaches to mental therapy, including psychiatry and psychotropic medicines.

The peak - or, if one prefers, the nadir - of Cruise's campaign came last Friday, when the star appeared on "Today." Instead of focusing on the movie, which opens Wednesday, Cruise blurted out to Matt Lauer, "You don't know the history of psychiatry. I do." Turning to the subject of pills, he told his host, "You don't even know what Ritalin is." To put it mildly, such off-message outbursts are an unproven technique for getting people to buy movie tickets.

The headline in Sunday's Chicago Sun-Times was typically scathing: "Tom Cruise: Movie star or pod person?" And the public seems to be following the media lead; an Entertainment Weekly survey found that 61 percent of Cruise's fans like him less, while just 3 percent like him more, as a result of his recent doings.

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So what lessons might we draw? The obvious point is the importance of sticking to the script, even after the film is finished. Cruise's longtime PR adviser, Pat Kingsley, was notorious for instilling discipline in her clients; she also used her clout in the industry to intimidate reporters into not asking tough questions - such as, in Cruise's case, whether he was gay and whether Scientology is a cult.

This approach works well as long as it can be sustained. But it's unclear how long that can be. While some publications, such as People, seem willing to go along with any deal in pursuit of a good celebrity "get," other media outfits, such as Us, seem to be going the opposite way - toward rougher coverage.

And, of course, the new media are changing the equation further; no PR maven can stop, for example, www.freekatie.net, which mocks the "TomKat" relationship.

Moreover, the psychic toll on the stars themselves - the need always to be buttoned up - might also prove unsustainable. In the words of one New York-based communications expert, Marc Babej, "Celebrity PR is like getting Elvis into a corset. Something will come popping out."

In Cruise's case, what popped first was his business relationship with Kingsley. The actor fired Kingsley and replaced her with his own sister, also a Scientologist. And now Cruise seems more interested in attracting converts to his faith than in attracting moviegoers.

And there's the larger lesson. The media today - all 500 channels, all 500 million Web sites - are too diverse and too intrusive to be wrangled by even the best of PR pros. So why try? Why not just go with the flow of whatever's said about you? Babej cites Paris Hilton as a better model of media management. The heiress-actress has had everything thrown at her, including home-porn movies leaked onto the Web. Yet, she simply shrugs off the criticism and moves on.

And what of Cruise? He is now, to borrow a famous movie phrase, "Mad as hell and not going to take it anymore" - or maybe happy as hell. And what if the studios no longer trust him with big-budget movies? Well, there are other things for him to do with himself and his message. He is 42 now, which means he is more than a decade younger than fellow fading movie stars Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger when they first ran for governor of California.

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