

Cincy BUSINESS

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In the Nick of Time

AFTER A POLITICAL AND CIVIC CAREER,
NICK VEHR MAKES HIS COMEBACK,
THIS TIME IN COMMUNICATIONS

By Gretchen Keen

Nick Vehr doesn't believe in public relations — at least not at his company.

The president of Vehr Communications LLC says public relations is a misunderstood term. Instead, his company seeks to manage communication within the various relationships of Cincinnati organizations.

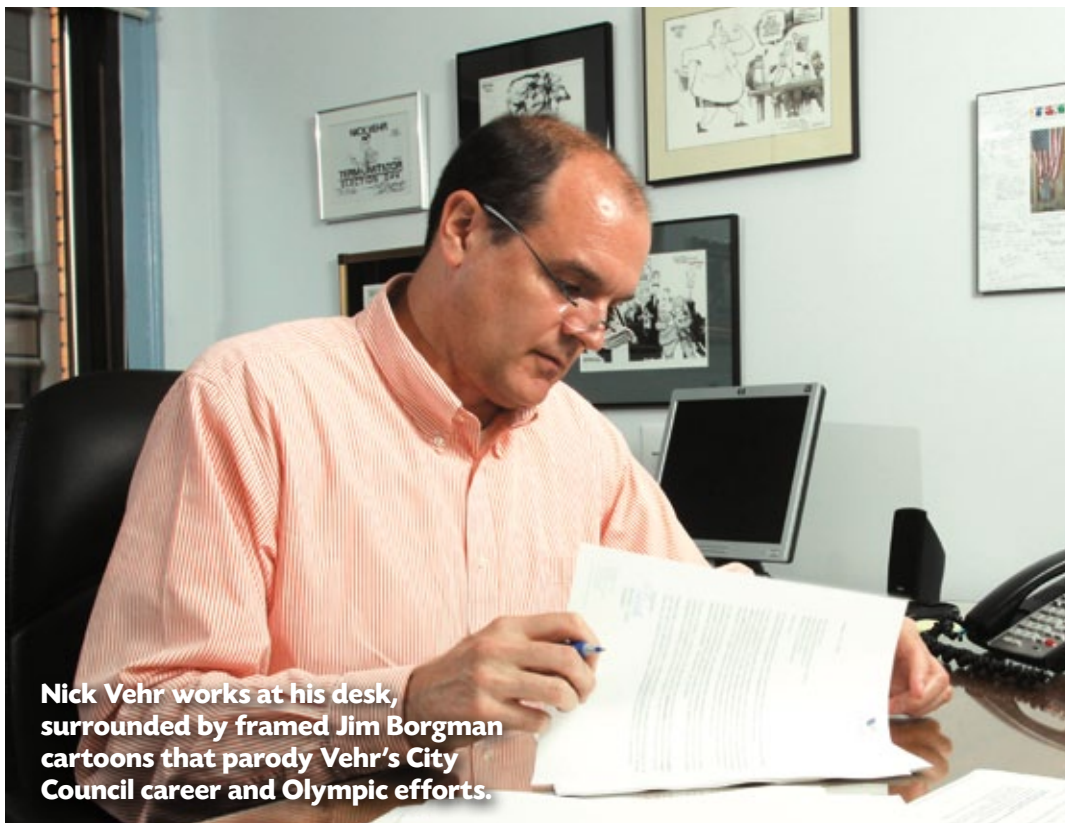
Vehr knows a thing or two about Cincinnati's complex relationships. The lifelong Westwood resident and father of three served on the Cincinnati City Council and the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. He has seen many community ties that could use some mending.

From his array of experiences, Vehr can offer suggestions on useful means of communication, as well as how to become a successful entrepreneur.

"I've always been fascinated by entrepreneurs and their ability to take risks and turn that into companies and businesses," he says.

Vehr Communications, founded in 2007, implements strategic communications for its clients. Vehr's diverse background is steeped in Cincinnati flavor, and lends itself well to helping local organizations communicate. Vehr has always had an interest in entrepreneurship, but for him it materialized after a significant amount of other life experiences.

Before joining the ranks of entrepreneurs, Vehr worked in several other fields. He received English and communications degrees from the University of



Nick Vehr works at his desk, surrounded by framed Jim Borgman cartoons that parody Vehr's City Council career and Olympic efforts.

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Notre Dame, where he also played on the university's football team for four years. During his football career, the team played in several bowl games and even captured a national championship.

Upon graduation, Vehr took his first job working for U.S. Rep. Willis (Bill) Gradison (R-Ohio). He immediately recognized the need for clear, succinct communications while writing memos for the congressman and his constituents.

While Vehr would later return to the political arena, he decided at that point to move on to advertising agency Hogan Nolan & Stites. Immediately, he found

himself gravitating toward the marketing, public relations and strategic planning aspects of the job. After identifying these communication strong points, Vehr took on the role of vice president and executive counselor at Dan Pinger Public Relations.

While working there, Vehr was simultaneously serving as a member of the Cincin-

nati City Council. He worked on several committees, including the Internal Audit Division. He describes it as an exciting, and sometimes frustrating, experience. Vehr also learned that politics is the art of persuasion, and discovered more about how to persuade through communication.

"It has given me not only a deep dive into how this community makes a decision, but a very broad view of all the decisions that are made in the community," he says.

Vehr resigned from City Council to head "Cincinnati 2012" — an effort to host the 2012 Olympics in Cincinnati. Though it was ultimately unsuccessful, Vehr is proud of the accomplishments of the organization. It raised about \$6 million, drew thousands of volunteers, and qualified Cincinnati as a finalist in the city search. Vehr says it also helped Cincinnati to imagine bigger, better things for their city.

"As negatively as we sometimes view our city, there is a latent pride in almost every Cincinnati citizen," he observes.

Then, from 2002 to 2006, Vehr served as the vice president of economic development and marketing at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. He was afforded a good deal of knowledge about Cincinnati businesses and organizations, and witnessed yet another side of the communications field.

"I kind of used it as a timeout and a 'reboot the computer' time," Vehr explains.



Nick Vehr (back row, second from left) helped lead a chamber-sponsored business mission to China in 2005.

The newfound connections, in addition to his previous communications experience, led Vehr to take his first steps as an entrepreneur.

“That’s when I decided it was time for me just to start from scratch — at a dead stop at the beginning of the worst recession in the history of any of our lifetimes,” Vehr recalls.

Despite the worsening economy, Vehr Communications was formed in late 2007. Instead of opening a company that focused on one aspect of communications, such as marketing or media relations, Vehr decided to do something more encompassing.

“I felt like there was an opening in this marketplace for a strategic communications firm that could really partner with the C-suite executives of mid-size and large companies, public and private, and nonprofit organizations in this community,” Vehr says.

A core belief at Vehr Communications is that if a business is feeling some sort of pain or problem, it’s probably from a strained relationship, whether it’s with employees, the community, vendors, suppliers, investors or others. Communication

is at the core of these relationships, which Vehr seeks to restore.

Vehr has worked with many big-name clients, such as The Cincinnati Zoo, Procter & Gamble, the Miller Valentine Group and the Cincinnati Museum Center, among others.

Vehr says the company has also helped prevent media crises. Smart business leaders come to him when trouble is brewing, rather than waiting for the situation to worsen.

“The key is, you need a plan up front,” Vehr cautions. “You need to think through ahead of time what might happen that can disrupt your business, damage your

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corporate reputation, or strain important relationships that you have.”

Vehr explains crisis communications as an insurance plan. Clients have to pay for the services, but hope to never use them. No matter what, companies will always encounter these issues, but good leaders acknowledge this and plan ahead.

“Basically, averting a crisis, that’s some of the best strategic communications work that we can do,” he says. “It’s the story that’s never written, the conflict that never occurs, the blowup that never happens.”

Another crucial tool that Vehr uses for clients is social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. He views them as important communication channels to consider, though they aren’t suited to all clients. Since social media is rapidly changing, Vehr says companies should consider implementing some without overdoing it.

“Too much of anything is bad,” Vehr believes. “Just because the boss hears his or her kids talking about [social media] and then they come in to work say, ‘Well, I don’t know what the Google is, but we need it,’ then that’s probably not the right way to go about it.”

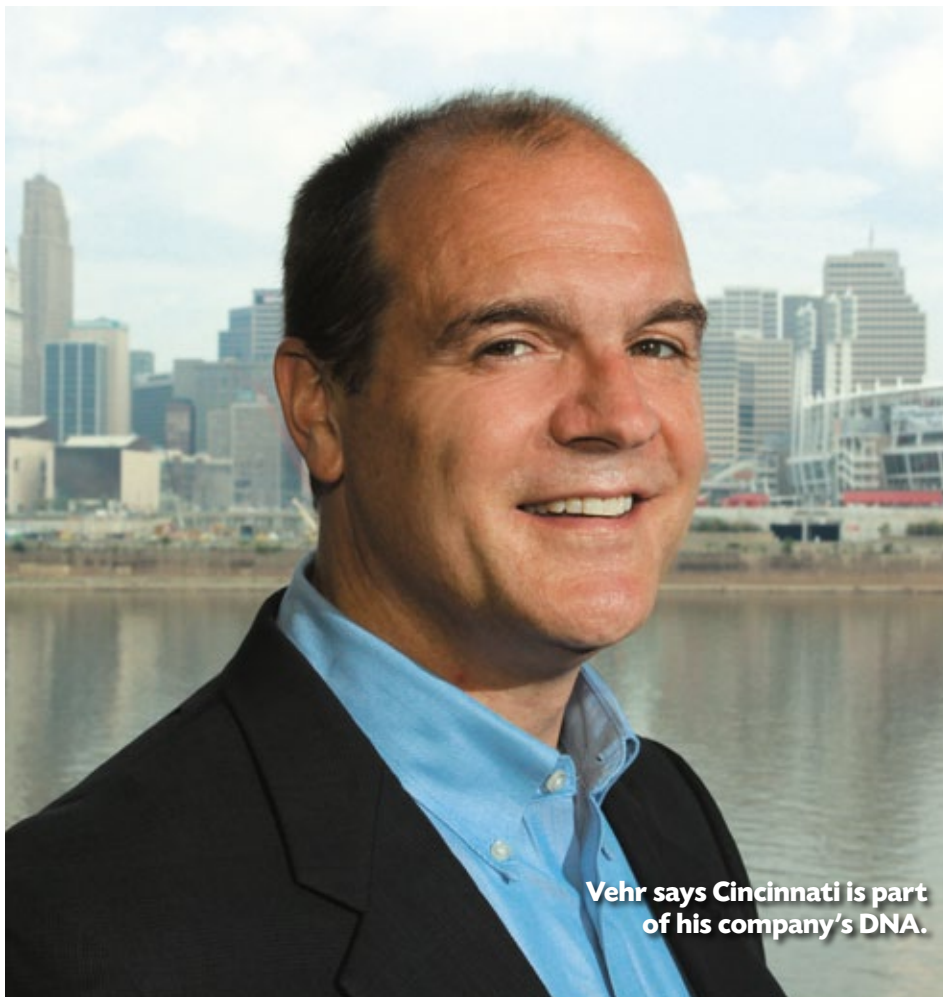
Vehr finds that no matter what strategies a company needs to employ, it’s essential for his team to be immersed in the culture of Cincinnati in order to help them.

“It’s like Cincinnati’s part of our DNA, so we know it and can provide better counsel,” he continues.

Since starting the downtown company less than two years ago without a single client, Vehr now has more than 20 clients and seven full-time employees. He still isn’t sure how big he wants his team to be; he just wants to make sure they can sufficiently serve the company’s clients.

So far, it’s been a whirlwind.

“We’re having a blast every single day, but that doesn’t mean it’s always fun,” Vehr says. “The cumulative experience has just been unbelievable, gratifying and exciting.” ■



Vehr says Cincinnati is part of his company’s DNA.

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