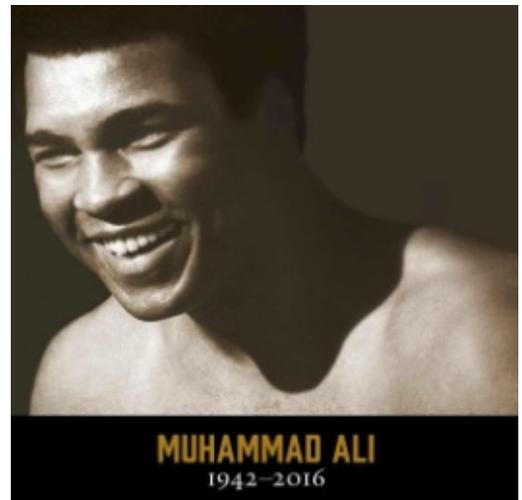


# PR Lessons from The Champ



*By Neil Foote, President & Founder,  
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(Image Source: Twitter)

Before Facebook, Twitter, SnapChat, Periscope, email, heck, even the Internet: There was [Muhammad Ali](#). He understood the power of messaging long before social media. He never missed a camera, but he wasn't trying to be a celebrity – like so many reality star today – he was a celebrity. He embraced the power of short, tight sound bites, long before this era of real-time information sharing. Even in the face of controversy, he stood tall – and took control of the message. He faced attacks from bigots, racists, and anti-Muslims. He never let them throw him off his game. He didn't wait for the media to frame his story. He quickly let media know that "I am the greatest." Even when he took his anti-Vietnam War stance, he clearly defined his convictions, his opposition and stood

by his beliefs – despite the harsh consequences. He didn't need social media to elevate his brand. He didn't need a hashtag to let people know “The Champ” arrived to town.

As communications professionals, we only wish we could have clients as colorful, charming, entertaining and gracious as Muhammad Ali. He never shied away from a controversy. He embraced it and confronted it in a way that never left any uncertainty. Whether it was a loss to Joe Frazier or his decision to become a Muslim or his various marriages, Ali rolled with the good and bad. His endearing relationship with the gruff Howell Cosell made for many memorable interviews that all led to promoting his message and crafting his brand. He didn't seek out publicity; reporters sought him out because they knew they were in for a treat, special moment that would “make news”.

The poignant moment when his hand, shaking from the effects of Parkinson's Disease, lighting the torch to kick off the Olympics in 1996 in Atlanta, is a symbolic image of his strength, his courage and his character. With that moment, he only reaffirmed his brand as “The Greatest” – not letting any illness slow him down from letting the world know that he could capture their attention – years after he had left the boxing ring.

Muhammad Ali has taught us that you must stay true to your [brand](#) – all the time.

*About the Author: Neil Foote is a principal lecturer at the Mayborn School of Journalism and president of Foote Communications, a public relations and branding company. He also is president of the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc.*