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Is Paris burning?

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This past week demonstrated what good media relations and publicity can do for an organization, cause, or just about anything else that you want to be made well known.

Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris caught fire. The centuries old wooden roof burned hot and bright as old timbers tend to do when exposed to flame.

After it was all over, other than the roof, the damage wasn't quite as bad as might be expected. Since the main structure is mainly stone and doesn't burn, and fire fighters were actively working to preserve what they could and save relics, much of the interior was miraculously saved.

They've already started work on plans for restoration.

Yes, this was a tragic fire. Thankfully no one was hurt, but you just don't want to see a beautiful old building destroyed.

However, it was the hoopla surrounding the fire that caught my attention.

I learned about the fire during my drive home from work on a talk radio station where the host announced, rather dramatically, that Notre Dame was burning.

The host was emotional in that ?oh the humanity!' kind of way. Only the Hindenburg didn't explode, it was just a fire ? in a foreign country.

They brought on people giving live witness accounts of the fire. The radio show host described in detail how the spire had collapsed and the horror of watching it happen.

That evening, there was video of a group of French people suddenly breaking out in a song version of Hail Mary, or some other Catholic prayer as they watched the flames. This occurred in a country that is largely secular and doesn't even recognize church marriages as official. In France you have to be married in a civil ceremony for it to be legal.

But suddenly all these people who have probably never attended a church mass in their lives, were singing a prayer.

One of the ?most important' buildings in Paris has an interesting past.

During the French Revolution, the building and it's artifacts were desecrated.

In the late 18th century, the statues in the cathedral were destroyed.

By late in the century, the building was used as a warehouse.

In the early part of the 19th century, Notre Dame was in ruins due to neglect. That's hardly the fairy tale history we associate with the ?heart of Paris.'

The only reason it wasn't bombed into oblivion during the Second World War was because the French decided to surrender the city rather than have it destroyed.

This is where great marketing and promotion come into play.

As far as cathedrals go, Notre Dame is impressive. However, it is no more impressive than a lot of other really old cathedrals, basilica's, and churches both in Europe and around the world.

If the roof of the Duomo di Milano, or the Lincoln Cathedral caught fire you would barely hear anything about it other than a small news item and you certainly wouldn't have people calling in live reports, because most likely you haven't even heard of these places.

The difference is Notre Dame in Paris, had great publicity.

They can thank novelist Victor Hugo, for writing his gothic novel, Notre-Dame de Paris, in 1831, for making the cathedral a household name. When it was translated to English, the even more exciting title, The Hunchback of Notre Dame was introduced.

You've got a beautiful Gypsy girl, a couple of evil suitors, and a deformed hunchback swinging from a rope and ringing his bells all wrapped up in one great medieval story with the cathedral as the setting.

There have been at least seven movies based on the story and at least five animated versions including the full length Disney cartoon.

That's a lot of publicity.

My favourite version is the 1939 film starring Charles Laughton and Maureen O'Hara.

You've got to love Quasimodo clanging his bells and yelling ?sanctuary!' from the top of the bell tower.

Notre Dame became a huge tourist attraction thanks to the writing of a novelist and Hollywood latching on to a story. Otherwise it probably would just been another big church in a big city.

It does, however, show how great marketing, publicity, and creating a myth, can make some things bigger than they really are.