



Bubbling to the Top Posted 07.18.06 —[Courtney Thompson](#)

Pamela Wittman's decision to shift Champagne brand Nicolas Feuillatte's advertising budget to events is proving to be a winning marketing tactic in the ever-competitive Champagne industry.

What She Plans: As founder of Millissime, a PR and marketing company that represents wine clients, Wittman works on roughly 100 events a year for Champagne Nicolas Feuillatte, ranging from poolside cocktail parties at the Delano in Miami to private V.I.P. dinners at *Food & Wine's* Classic in Aspen. Other events Wittman is producing in 2006 include three Champagne dinners; the launch of One Fo(u)r Minis in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles; and several tasting events in New York. The brand is also sponsoring Star Chefs, MoMA, and *Paper* magazine events, and aiding in a dozen gallery openings in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami.

Age: This mother of two (ages 6 and 2) turned 40 on July 4.

Staff: Wittman has five staff members.

Career Path: A self-described winemaker by trade, Wittman was born and raised in Paris, studied enology at the University of Reims in France, and even had an internship at Feuillatte. She went on to receive her MBA at Reims School of Management and then joined Seagram's for a seven-year stint, representing both Mumm and Perrier Jouët in a sales and marketing capacity. Next, Wittman headed to PR firm KB Network News for four years before launching her own company in 2001.

Clients: In addition to Feuillatte, Wittman represents Beaujolais, France—and the region's 5,000 winemakers.

Biggest Challenge: "Planning the Feuillatte winemaker tour easily takes eight months of preparation. We have to choose the dates with the winemaker, make sure the cities and market managers we need to work with are free, and then plan lunches, dinners, and tastings." Wittman also has to have the wine for the tour—24 cases in all—shipped all over the United States in advance, which has proved to be no easy feat. "I've had every possible problem happen, from having product stuck in customs to having a truck stolen."

How Often She Imbibes: "I drink more now than before, and I need it! Kidding aside, I still have a lot of social events to attend, and the first thing I reach for is a good glass of Champagne. But I also reach for it at home on occasion—either after a really bad day, or after a really good day."

Your firm oversees all U.S. marketing for French-based Champagne brand Nicolas

Feuillatte. Last year you transferred most of its advertising budget to events. Why?

The advertising budgets were just not significant enough to have an impact here, even if we chose selected cities. After several years of [spending the U.S. budget] on advertisements in a few bus shelters and phone booths, I came back to my client with a proposal to transfer the advertising funds into public relations—specifically more trade and consumer events—because I thought it would be more effective in building the brand.

Did the parent company have any objections?

No, so long as I was able to sell them on the specific events I had in mind. So far, after a year and a half, they seem pretty happy and impressed with [event results] compared to advertising results.

What are the results of the new strategy? Are the events you are working on boosting sales?

This past year the brand went from the number-four best-selling Champagne in the United States to the number-three brand, according to *Impact Databank* [an alcoholic beverage data report]. And considering that Feuillatte isn't likely to become the number one or two Champagne currently **Moët & Chandon** and **Veuve Clicquot**, respectively] in my lifetime, I think that is a pretty good jump. From the events I'm producing, brand awareness is getting out there through word of mouth. Consumers are discovering that Feuillatte isn't like all the other overpriced Champagnes out there. [Pricing for a bottle of Feuillatte begins at \$27, compared to Moët at \$35 and Veuve at \$40. The brand is also projecting an approximate 17 percent increase in sales in 2006.]

When planning an event, how do you attract sponsors? What incentives do you offer? And how do you profit from these partnerships?

The incentive for most sponsors is in the product itself—they love Feuillatte. Champagne in general puts everyone in a good mood, so sponsors love aligning themselves with a Champagne brand because it's image boosting and status boosting. Believe me, I don't have to beg, and it's usually the opposite. It's a question of finding the right partner, whom you can work well with. In other words, Feuillatte benefits from the sponsor, and the sponsor benefits from Feuillatte.

Our objective is to find sponsors who can help us diversify the crowd—we're mostly after their audience. *Paper* magazine, for example, has groupies that circulate around the magazine—people who are influencers, who talk, who get the new trends, and who are going to share these trends with others. It gives us the opportunity to mix with a group of people that we wouldn't reach otherwise.

How do your budgets affect your partnerships?

We are notoriously low budget, but if you love us, you keep us. Our competitors can

spend our annual budget in one evening. Given that, we have to be smart. For example, a company that we have been sponsoring for a few years came to me this year, saying that other Champagne brands were offering them serious money to be the new sponsor. I said, "Look, you're the one who came to us years ago. I know you like the brand. If you think another company can bring you cash that I can't give you, take it." Then I thought about the exposure we get from these events, which happen in four cities every year and reach both consumers and trade, and I thought, "Can I fit it in the budget?" So, I [played with the numbers a bit] and offered them a slightly sweetened deal. It was up to them to decide if they wanted a partner that was willing to pay 10 times more, or us. And they stayed with us.

You get solicited for nearly a dozen donations every week. How do you decide which events to sponsor?

We have to say no a lot, and after 15 years in the business, it is still hard to do. In France, Feuillatte sponsors sports events like rugby, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to start sponsoring baseball or football here in the U.S., because it just doesn't fit. I try to stay true to the marketing strategy of our brand, which is to be involved with contemporary artists and creators and innovators. It could be a full-time job to sort through these email and written requests, but after a while you develop an eye for opportunities and what truly aligns with the brand. And we only give out donations if someone from my company or my importer can be present. We need to have someone who intimately knows the brand on hand.

You have to be scrappy when it comes to managing your event budget. How do you get the most for your money?

It's a way of life, I think. I didn't grow up in a family with a ton of money, and I've always been one to look at the bottom line twice. It's really about negotiating skills and trying to make your budget work with all involved parties, so that it's a win-win situation. I'm usually pretty up front about the fact that we don't have large budgets, and it's easily justifiable when you look at the price tag of our brand. People in event planning know the basics of marketing and they typically know that it costs the same to produce a bottle of **Mumm**, **Perrier Jouët**, Veuve Cliquot, and Feuillatte. So, if one sells for \$27 and one for \$40, where does the difference go? It goes to marketing and to events.

When I was planning a lunch at **Geoffrey Zakarian's** [restaurant] **Country**, it was \$125 for four courses, and [the total bill] added up to roughly \$8,000. It just wasn't going to work, and it was difficult for me to negotiate because I was the one that came to them. Still, I said, "This is what I have in my budget and I can go a little over because your venue is worth it, but I just can't do \$8,000." And they said, "No problem, give us your budget and we'll work it out." That's just one example of how when negotiating, we try to squeeze out every dollar. If a restaurant says they can't shut down for the amount you're offering, then you go somewhere else. It's about finding the right partnership.