

PRWEEK

PROFILE

Nike comms keeps running smoothly under Manager

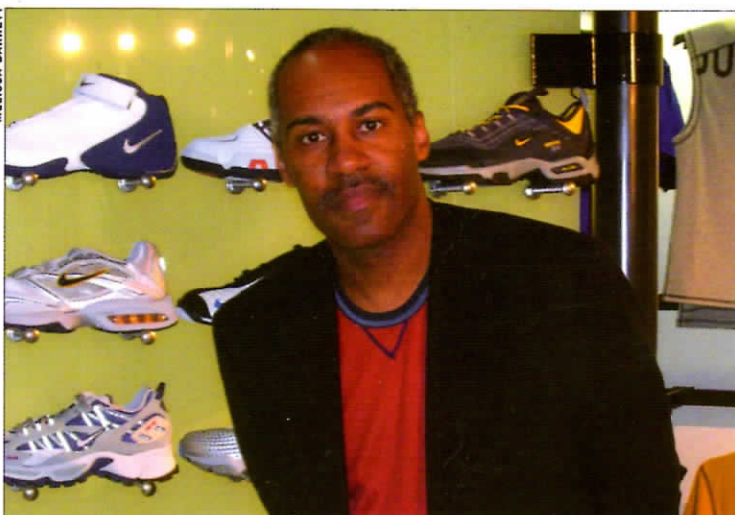
With his political PR background including stints in the Arizona governor's office and South Africa, Vada Manager directs Nike's global issues management team with a true universal outlook. By Andrew Gordon

Some people might not consider director of global issues management at Nike to be a plum job right now. During the past couple of years, Nike has been under a global magnifying glass after the company's comments in a letter to the editor defending its labor practices against activists' accusations was found to be commercial speech in a 2002 California Supreme Court decision. Nike appealed that ruling to the US Supreme Court, which declined to rule on the case. Many PR pros said that inaction, and Nike's subsequent decision to settle the case, would have a chilling effect on all companies' ability to speak out.

But the man who holds the job would not trade it for anything in the world. "That was a very challenging time," admits Vada Manager, who has held that job since 1998. "It was a significant watershed moment in public affairs. It made us all more disciplined. It forced us to focus on what's important. It enforced the discipline required for this job. It forced us to be more stringent. And it has renewed our commitment to transparency. But it was a tough time."

If Manager subscribes to any kind of philosophy, it's that he's not interested in defending a system he can't define. Having a seat at the table is a must, and he has to be involved in pushing the dialogue forward. Today's corporate environment is much more diverse, he says. It's no longer just about the shoe you're trying to sell. It's about shaping public policy, corporate governance, and issues management, as well as responding to stakeholders. That requires a drive and energy that Manager says he picked up during his formative years in politics.

"I recall vigorous discussions in my early days," says Manager. "Members of my family were precinct leaders for candidates. That ethic of getting involved



Manager... "smooth and solid in the middle of a crisis," says Mike McCurry

flowed through my family. We were always participating in civic involvement. And Model UN [an annual conference that educates students about the United Nations and other global issues] opened my eyes to the world and the possibilities of different cultures."

Manager became a special assistant to Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt (D) in 1987, and went on to work with Babbitt during his 1988 Democratic Presidential campaign. That was when he met Mike McCurry, who went on to become President Bill Clinton's press secretary.

"[Manager] was a young pup, just out of [Arizona State University]," recalls McCurry. "He was assigned to be my deputy press secretary, although it was not quite clear what experience he had dealing with the press. None, as it turned out, but we shared a cramped little office in a shopping mall on Camelback Road and became fast friends."

"Vada has a combination of corporate presence and a human touch," adds McCurry. "He can speak like a senior manager in business, but he also knows what makes people tick. He's also incredibly smooth and solid in the middle

of a crisis. I've never seen anyone handle mid-air turbulence better."

While that's helped Manager handle some tumultuous months at Nike, it isn't what he considers his finest moment. In the mid-1990s, Manager worked as a VP at Powell Tate, a Washington, DC public affairs firm, where he helped run the sports practice. He'd worked mostly on the local level and was attracted to the prospect of learning more about the private sector and the global community. And while working with the likes of Major League Soccer and Major League Baseball was fun, his greatest moments were half a world away.

Manager was asked to travel to South Africa to help the newly elected African National Congress transition power to President Nelson Mandela.

"That was one of the proudest moments of my career," says Manager. "I had the opportunity to help them with media strategy, which wasn't always easy, as the media was still majority-owned and had apartheid leanings."

After playing a key role during those historic days in South Africa, Manager headed to the West Coast to become

Vada Manager	
1998	Director, global issues management, Nike
1997	Senior manager of US comms, Nike
1996	Senior manager, global comms, Levi Strauss
1994	VP, Powell Tate
1992	Press secretary/advisor, office of Washington, DC Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly
1988	Press secretary, AZ Gov. Rose Mofford
1988	VP, public finance, Young, Smith & Peacock
1987	Special assistant, AZ Gov. Bruce Babbitt

senior manager of global communication at Levi Strauss. But he only stayed two years, departing for Nike in 1997. He was attracted by one of the world's most recognizable brands and the opportunity to bring some best-practices to global issues management.

"Smart companies must incorporate the ability to predict what it means to go into new countries," asserts Manager. "We try to work on a no-surprises basis. We try to anticipate everything that can come up. We want to know what the key stakeholders think the key issues are. I've pushed to have greater engagement with those stakeholders and the outside world. Our team has to have authenticity and follow-through. We just can't talk about things we want to do."

That ability to follow through is what makes Manager so valuable, says Jim Carter, Nike's general counsel. Carter says he trusts Manager's judgment and his willingness to consider the perspectives of others when making decisions. "Vada's thoughtfulness and insight always impress me. Even without formal legal training, he recognizes and analyzes issues that have legal implications,

and he puts them into useful context.”

Manager splits his time between Nike’s headquarters in Beaverton, OR and his home in Phoenix. And he hasn’t totally gotten politics out of his blood. He served on the communications teams for the Democratic National

Conventions in 1992 and 1996, and serves on the host committee for the Presidential debate in Arizona in October. He also remains active in several organizations, including the American Council on Germany, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition’s task force on sports,

and the US Military Academy at West Point’s civilian public affairs committee.

Despite the adversity Manager faced during Nike’s recent legal battles – along with many other commitments – he’s more dedicated to his job than ever.

“We never say we’re done,” Manager

says. “This job is evergreen. It’s never-ending and always changing. We live in a much more complicated world. And while we must stay true to our core mission of sports, we can also be innovators and honest brokers of social change.”