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PUBLIC RELATIONS:  
A Historical, Philosophical and Legal Framework

Public relations has been my life's work for more than half a century. To most of you, that may seem like a long time. But public relations, as a societal force, has been around much, much longer -- in fact, almost forever -- from the time people started interacting with other people. Like physics and chemistry and other natural and social sciences, public relations existed long before it was formally identified and purposefully applied.

At the outset of my career, public relations, as a professional business discipline, was not yet 50 years old. My friend, Scott W. Cutlip, the retired communications dean here at the University of Georgia and, earlier at the University of Wisconsin, and whose knowledge of the history of public relations is awesome, cites The Publicity Bureau as the first firm to offer a commercial public relations service. It opened for business in Boston in 1900.

An early client was Harvard University, whose president, Charles W. Eliot, personally signed the University's letter of agreement dated October 9, 1900 with The Publicity Bureau that stipulated:

".....you are to pay the Bureau \$200 a month for our professional services, and those of an artist where drawings seem to be required. ...this sum is to include everything except the payment of mechanical work, such as printings and the making of cuts, and the postage to send out the articles themselves to the various papers, which items are to be charged to the University."

Two observations about that agreement:

First: Scott Cutlip says it was the first fixed fee plus out-of-pocket expenses contract for public relations services. Such agreements continue in use to this day.

Second: In the contract with the Publicity Bureau, President Eliot reserved the right to terminate the firm's services at any time. That hasn't changed much either.

For the record, however, I should note that fees for public relations services have increased since President Eliot's day.

- pause -

At a time when the terms “public relations” and “PR” are often used pejoratively, I want to make the case that the professional practice of public relations fulfills a legitimate and necessary role in sustaining a democratic society. It is not at all surprising that public relations sprouted as a business in the Soviet Union and its central and east European satellite countries only after the fall of the Communist regimes. Nor is it any wonder that no public relations firm existed in China until the PRC moved toward a market economy.

Additionally, I would claim for public relations historical underpinnings that span centuries of civilized society. Public relations, consciously or unconsciously, has affected social interaction from the time Adam and Eve did their thing in the Garden of Eden.

When Martin Luther defiantly nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, he intensified the emotional content of his message. He didn't simply post his document on the bulletin board or read it from the pulpit. Rather, he nailed it to the door. Martin Luther had what we would describe today as “a good sense of public relations.”

When the Massachusetts colonists dumped boxes of precious tea into the waters of Boston Harbor, they knew inherently that this unusual spectacle would, at last, inflame their heavily-taxed fellow citizens to take action in their pursuit of liberty. Samuel Adams, the creative genius who also master-minded other action-provoking events that led to the American Revolution, possessed what we would describe today as “a good sense of public relations.”

When Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay realized that New York's ratification of the Constitution was in doubt, they published an extraordinary and impassioned series of essays. Their goal was to convince voters that ratifying the new Constitution was their final hope for establishing a new government founded on the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They used the by-line Publius, knowing that pseudonym would attract even greater interest than if they used their own names. They had what we would today describe as “a good sense of public relations.”

In fact, it is the Constitution itself which legitimatizes the practice of public relations in the United States and gives it a basis in law.

In the first of the ten amendments that comprise the Bill of Rights, we find the language:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Examine carefully the scope of this extraordinary and unprecedented mandate.

Freedom of speech.

Freedom of the press.

The right of the people peaceably to assemble, and

To petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The Framers of the Constitution, the Founding Fathers, provided for free expression and for a social and political environment that would not only tolerate but that would also encourage free public debate and the unfettered formation of public opinion. Even Magna Carta stopped short of the amalgam of individual freedoms which Abraham Lincoln later characterized as a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

Eleven years before the drafting of the Constitution, twelve years before its ratification, yet another remarkable document set into motion the political process that spurred the creation of the great country we are today. The opening paragraph of that remarkable document, the Declaration of Independence, is highly instructive relative to the importance attached by the Founding Fathers on the role of public opinion.

Thomas Jefferson began the Declaration of Independence with these words:

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which, the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitles them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

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Historically, philosophically and legally, these words from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution provide the underpinning of public relations as essential to nurturing the fuel of liberty and free expression.

We call that fuel, the product of public expression, public opinion. We as public relations practitioners have the role of helping create, shape and communicate public

opinion. We go about that task in a purposeful manner using time-tested and honorable and above-board methodologies. As students of public opinion formation, we know we can impact public opinion in one of three ways:

- ◆ We can create an opinion where none now exists.
- ◆ We can change a presently-held opinion.
- ◆ We can reinforce an existing opinion.

That, to me, is the essence of what we do as public relations practitioners. The strategies and the tactics we employ creating new opinion, changing presently-held opinion or reinforcing existing opinion vary. We have many options. These options are the tools and raw materials of the public relations methodology.

The goal of defining and shaping public opinion is to influence behavior and motivate a certain course of action. Public opinion is the leverage brought to bear to do that.

We apply that leverage by employing a multiplicity of tools and tactics that deliver strategic messages to targeted audiences.

Our success depends on our credibility and on the rationality of the case we present.

We do this, or should, with full transparency and with full identification of those for whom we, as public relations practitioners, speak and act.

All the while, I accept, as an act of faith, the dictum that a public relations initiative can be successful over the long-term only if it accords with the public interest. I believe a critical component of my job is to reconcile the needs and desires of my clients and employers with what, in both my professional and my personal judgement, is the public interest. From experience, I -- we all -- know that successful outcomes of public issues require public support. Public support over the long-term, per se, demands that an initiative serve the public interest. While we, of course, recognize there will be honest differences on what constitutes the public interest.

Whether or not I choose to represent and identify myself with a specific client or initiative is not necessarily or usually a matter of morality or ethics, although as a public relations practitioner, I believe I should conduct myself in accord with high moral and ethical standards. In the case of public relations consulting firms, I believe it is more frequently a matter of good business. Moral and ethical behavior, I fervently hold, equates with good business over the long-term.

No wonder my definition of good business coincides to a remarkable degree with moral and ethical behavior .

Good business is telling the truth.

Good business is delivering on promises.

Good business is producing quality products and selling them at fair prices.

Good business is paying decent wages and treating employees fairly.

Good business is caring for the environment, for supporting worthwhile community services.

Good business is being a good citizen.

I have great faith in the collective public weal in a democratic society. I believe in the ultimate will and the ultimate ability of the body politic to enforce ethical and moral patterns of behavior on those who would behave otherwise.

But a problem we public relations practitioners will always face is that the people whose attitudes comprise public opinion have different definitions for "the public interest." In a democratic society, this is as it should be. Dichotomy is a concomitant of honestly-held beliefs that may be in opposition to one another. The choice is seldom as simple as a choice between good, on the one hand, and evil, on the other. As our lives become more complex, as privacy gives way to greater public exposure, as technology reaches into our lives interactively and with more data than the human brain can possibly sort out, the shades of gray are increasing exponentially.

This state of affairs presents both challenges and opportunities to those of us in public relations. Our clients and our employers look to us to break through the clutter. They look to us to differentiate their messages from the thousands of others that can be overwhelming, even disorienting, to even those on the receiving end who are best educated and most discerning.

Despite the mega-statistics applied to the Internet and the World Wide Web, I am convinced that our use of these mind-boggling interactive communications systems are today at a stage comparable in sophistication to the discovery that an axle supporting two wheels was significantly superior to using a single wheel for transportation or cartage.

The opportunity exists for public relations professionals to play an important role in implanting this new technology into our individual psyches and making it a natural extension of the data-delivering technologies of earlier ages -- starting with movable type and the printed word and radio and television and, more recently, mobile wireless telephones and satellite cameras able to read an earth-bound license plate number.

As the practice of public relations increasingly influences the broad spectrum of the human experience, I am troubled by a number of concerns that threaten and demean what I do as a public relations practitioner.

The first and most damaging is the false notion that equates public relations with ulterior motives ranging from skewing facts and telling half-truths to whitewashes and cover-ups. I am not so naive that I believe public relations people never engage in these unacceptable practices. Public relations practitioners are as human as lawyers and doctors and accountants. We have our share of "bad apples", our share of opportunists no less than the legal and medical and accounting professions have theirs.

I am concerned that, more so than these other professional and business disciplines, public relations is being popularly defined in the currency of its most aberrational practitioners. Increasingly in recent years, the media, especially daily newspapers and television, have tended to characterize public relations as a studied effort to distort, to obfuscate, to misrepresent, to conceal. This is both untrue and unfair.

Journalists seem to possess the same attitudinal disposition toward public relations people as voters have toward their Congressional representatives. Surveys repeatedly show that most people have low regard for Congress as an institution; but they have high regard for the man or woman who represents their own Congressional district. Similarly, many, if not most, reporters and editors maintain and value their productive relationships with individual public relations people, but they have low regard for public relations people as a genre and public relations as a discipline.

For many years, we in public relations have suffered the demeaning descriptor, "flack," a term whose origin stems from the relationship of Hollywood and Broadway press agents and their journalist counterparts covering the entertainment industry.

The present epithet of scorn is "spin," a term that, to me, is even more degrading than "flack." "Spin" had its negative origin in Washington politics. Though I have not asked Bill Safire to enlighten me on its antecedents, my own recollection is that "spin" was first used as something other than a transitive verb to differentiate or personalize the way a winning pitcher threw a baseball or the way a top-seeded tennis player served a tennis ball. In each instance, athletes put his or her "spin" on the ball -- a special characteristic that added to their effectiveness.

Its popularity as a pejorative for public relations is relatively new. Just as Paul Holmes recently described public relations as "value neutral," I would also describe "spin" as value neutral. "Spin" can be positive and "spin" can be negative or even neutral. But in its application to public relations, "spin" is always negative. It connotes the imposition of a self-serving interpretation of a public statement or action. A priori, it implies dishonesty, a flight from truth, a lack of integrity. Moreover, it is gaining in usage as a synonym for public relations.

The fact is, reporters and editors are no less “spinmeisters” than those of us who practice public relations. Proving this comes easy. Simply examine the front page of twenty newspapers published the same morning. Chances are, there will be little agreement on the treatment accorded either the totality of the previous day’s news or the presentation of the so-called “facts” of a single important development. If you’re looking for an example of “spin,” what better place to find it than on the front page of your home town newspaper. Or from your favorite or most unfavorite columnist!

*(pause)*

As I enter that stage of my life that General Douglas MacArthur described as “the old soldier” who’s about “to fade away,” I am frustrated that so few leaders are speaking up in defense of public relations. As leaders -- whether in politics, in business, in academia or in the arts -- they have exercised their leadership by employing time-tested public relations methodologies. They have delivered the right messages to the right audiences; their missions have accorded with the public interest, whether defined narrowly or broadly. They have been able to succeed because they have gained the approval of those groups and individuals affected most by their mission.

Luckily for those of us with the good fortune to be born Americans, our Colonial forefathers to whom I referred earlier on had good public relations instincts. Most Americans nowadays have the notion that The Declaration of Independence reflected the unanimity of the Colonial body politic intent on severing the political bands with the mother country, England. Few today realize the division of the colonists on that issue. “No taxation without representation” played well in Boston, but it rang hollow in Philadelphia and even New York, both nesting grounds for well-to-do British royalists perfectly content with the status-quo.

How fortunate for us that a little-known cousin of a family that produced two U.S. Presidents in the new Republic’s first fifty years came forward with some notions about coalescing public opinion and motivating people to act. Samuel Adams was a customs collector by occupation – but what a sense of public relations!

Bear in mind that he set forth to achieve his noble objective some six years before the Declaration of Independence. But he had the vision to foresee the need for shaping public opinion and creating a coalition of like-minded people who would be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to achieve independence. He foresaw the need to “spread the word” -- to articulate the grievances that, in Jefferson’s words, would cause the colonists of British descent to “dissolve the political bands which have connected them with one another”. Almost 225 years ago, “spreading the word” was no easy task. Communications among the colonies, from New England to South Carolina and Georgia, was mainly by sailing ship. Delivering a message from one colony to another took a week or more. Within the colonies, communication was at the mercy of the

weather and the persistence of those who suffered the agonies of wagon trails and rutted dirt roadways.

Remember, at the start of the American Revolution, there was not a single bridge across a major stream in any of the original thirteen colonies.

Samuel Adams somehow came to realize his mission would have a need for "on the scene" representatives in each of the colonies. He foresaw their function as being the two-way dissemination of information -- on the one hand, those messages emanating from the leaders of the separation movement and, on the other, the playback from the colonists. Adams called this mechanism Committees of Correspondence. In today's parlance, some 225 years later, we call it a "grassroots" network.

Back then, there was no national newspaper, no nationally-circulated magazine. How, then, to spread the word? Each of the colonies had local newspapers, mostly weeklies usually differentiated by their political points of view. A custom of the time was for one newspaper to report as news what other newspapers had published. Adams saw to it that the pipeline was supplied with separatist messages. He also used "broadsides" -- political pamphlets -- that ended up dog-eared and crumpled after making their way through literally dozens of readers.

At a time when the reach of the human voice was barely more than a couple hundred feet, orators were also a popular vehicle for communicating messages. Attending lectures was much more of a pastime than it is today. Through the Committees of Correspondence, Adams saw to it that lecturers were overflowing with exhortations to separate from the mother country. And so it was with ministers for their Sunday sermons and Wednesday night prayer meetings.

This, all of this, I submit was what we would today recognize as a carefully orchestrated public relations program. Of course, no one at the time, not even Samuel Adams himself, had the vaguest notion that his carefully thought out strategy and methodology would, 150 years later, be packaged as a business discipline known as "public relations."

What greater legitimacy could we, today's public relations practitioners, ask for -- than to have had a role in the formation of what has indisputably, warts and all, become the world's model democracy? The symbol, the world over, of the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Historically and philosophically, what more could we ask as justification for what we do in the name of public relations?

And what firmer legal sanction could we ask for than those precious words in The First Amendment: "...no law respecting.... the free exercise.... or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."



What a great legacy!

What a great business to be in!

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