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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Public relations is assumed to be a 20th Century phenomenon. To pinpoint it in time, a post-World War II creation. Nothing could be further from the truth!

While the first public relations consulting business – called the Publicity Bureau – was established in 1900, public relations as a societal force dates back to antiquity. Persuasion -- and that's what public relations is really all about -- has for all of recorded history been a driving force in the human experience. All manner of leaders have employed public relations techniques to achieve their goals.

Intuitively they have known how to gain the confidence and support of their contemporaries and turn them into followers.

Intuitively, they have known that changing attitudes or opinions is only the first stage of the process.

Intuitively, they have known that changing behavior is the real key to achieving objectives – political, social or commercial.

Any of us can recall from history examples of what we would today term “good” public relations.

As a starter, how about Moses descending the mountain, cradling in his arms ten messages that the Lord had chiseled into a tablet of stone -- a memorable scene in the mind's eye long before Charlton Heston played Moses in the movies.

Or the Apostle Paul traversing the rim of the Mediterranean preaching the new gospel to Roman pagans whom he wished to convert.

Or the majesty and the pageantry and the trappings that accompanied the emperor, Caesar, at the height of the Roman Empire.

My favorite example of public relations at its most effective is the American Revolution, in particular, the events leading to the separation of the thirteen colonies from the mother country, England. In the remarkable opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson bespoke one of the basic principles underlying public relations as we know it today -- the people's right to know.

“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 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.”

Reflect on that key phrase “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind” – “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

What better aspiration for public relations even in today's vastly more complex environment? And how distant and remote from public relations in its 21st Century context of “spin” and “whitewash” and “cover up.”

Though absent an Office of War Information and devoid of public information officers, our colonial forefathers were remarkably prescient in nurturing and retaining public support for what was widely considered a dubious and risky undertaking.

The Declaration of Independence itself was therefore as much a rallying point for the colonist body politic as a statement of intent directed to the Crown and to the world.

And through the efforts of men like Samuel Adams and John Hancock and Paul Revere and Thomas Paine the reasons for the breakaway were skillfully communicated in memorable ways.

There was the Boston massacre, where loss of American life was minimal, soon transformed as the “horrible” Boston massacre.

There were the dumping of the tea in Boston Harbor, Paul Revere’s famous ride and Thomas Paine’s inflaming pamphlets.

There was Samuel Adams who set up what likely was the first “grass roots” organization. He called it the Committees of Correspondence. Their purpose was to facilitate a two-way flow of information between the revolution leadership and the people of the widely dispersed thirteen colonies.

Possessed of historical antecedents as ancient as the drawings of the cave dwellers, public relations has legal and constitutional underpinnings that date from the earliest days of our Republic. The very first amendment to our Constitution said:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the practice thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or

the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Paraphrased, “Congress shall make no law..... abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

This First Amendment has antecedents in Magna Carta. It both legalizes and guarantees the freedom to undertake actions that are the essence of public relations. Not only in the United States, but also, by extension, in other nations that subscribe to basic human rights.

My point in citing this history is, simply, to reinforce my claim that there’s nothing new about the application of public relations principles and tactics. Nor is its legitimacy in question. What is relatively new, dating back only a century, is the identification of public relations as an organized professional discipline available on a commercial basis.

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The credit for codifying a public relations methodology belongs largely to the late Edward L. Bernays, who died less than ten years ago at the age of 103. In his landmark book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, he set forth in 1923 a well-reasoned rationale and *modus operandi* for public relations.

Bernays coined the term “public relations counsel.” He wrote, “A counsel on public relations directs, advises upon and supervises those activities of his client which affect or interest the public. He interprets the client to the public and the public to the client. In his

capacity as a crystallizer of public opinion, he is building public acceptance for an idea or product.”

In effect, Bernays was saying that the job of the public relations counsel was to help a client or an employer establish a good reputation, a good name.

The Bernays model of practicing public relations starts with behavior. Though it may sound presumptuous, Bernays believed that the public relations counsel was, in effect, “the corporate conscience.” Part of the job was counseling client executives on how the public expected corporations (and other societal entities) to behave. Thus, the early example of Arthur Page advising the chief executive officer of AT&T that its telephone monopoly would be allowed to exist only with public sufferance and public support of its actions.

But behavior alone cannot always be trusted to translate into a good reputation or a good name.

Therefore, step two in the public relations methodology is making people aware of the decisions and actions, the behavior, that accord with the public interest. This is accomplished by communicating information to the people – the publics, in today’s parlance, the stakeholders -- who are important to a client or an employer.

As Edward Bernays put it in 1923:

“The public relations counsel is the pleader to the public of a point of view. He acts in this capacity as a consultant both in interpreting the public to his client and in helping to interpret his client to the public. He helps to mould the action of his client as well as to mould public opinion.”

These two components that comprise public relations -- appropriate behavior and effective communications -- are summarized in one of the most elementary definitions of public relations -- “do good deeds and get credit for them.” It’s a definition that’s as applicable today as it was when Bernays wrote his seminal opus seeking to elevate public relations in both the business and the social hierarchy.

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The public relations business took hold in the United States and the United Kingdom after World War I. In both countries, entrepreneurial citizen soldiers who had been engaged in wartime media relations or propaganda turned to the commercial practice of public relations. In the United States, I can cite only a handful of survivors of post-World War I -- Edward Howard (a Cleveland based firm), and Ketchum (a Pittsburgh-based firm whose antecedents were fundraising). Hill and Knowlton, a firm, served as the model for today’s global public relations businesses, including Burson-Marsteller, started in 1927. Another once-highly regarded firm, Carl Byoir Associates, began business in the early 30s and now is a small subsidiary owned by Hill and Knowlton.

World War II was the second great catalyst for forming public relations firms. Scores of demobilized public information officers, many former newsmen, started their own firms. The 1947 New York Yellow Pages lists more than 500 under “public relations” and “publicity.” My name is among them. Harold Burson Public Relations opened for business in August 1946.

Of the firms started in the decade post-World War II, as in the case of World War I a generation earlier, only a handful remain: Edelman, Fleishman-Hillard, Ruder & Finn, Manning Selvage &

Lee, Golin Harris, Burson-Marsteller. There are a few others outside New York, a very few.

The situation is no different in the United Kingdom. The nucleus of the London office of the American-owned BSMG is the former Charles Barker firm. While Barker's roots as an advertising agency go back to 1812, its name as a public relations firm has disappeared. However, there are still approximately a dozen firms, most small consultancies, that have been around since the 1960s. Surprising to me, the London office of Burson-Marsteller, dating back to 1967, is now one of the longest surviving public relations firms in the UK operating under the same name.

One can conclude from that brief bit of history that public relations is a somewhat fragile business. For the better part of a century, the public relations business model was driven by a single entrepreneur. He (now more frequently she!) usually was a former journalist self-taught in the skills of public relations, who was content in assembling a small group of talented communicators to serve a few clients. Almost invariably, the financial goal of the business was to support a life-style better than that afforded by a journalist's salary.

The first major firm that perpetuated itself beyond the first generation of management was Hill and Knowlton. I spoke with John Hill about this in the mid-1970s and he candidly admitted that he never had a master plan for creating a business that would endure beyond his lifetime. In effect, the continuance of the business was an unintended consequence of its success. At the time, Burson-Marsteller was second in size to H&K. Bill Marsteller and I had already begun talking about management succession and the continuity of the business. I am almost certain that we were the only non-family-owned public relations business -

- among them Edelman and Ruder & Finn -- planning for future generations of management

Today, of course, the question is moot. Of the fifteen largest public relations firms, fourteen are owned by companies whose stock is publicly traded. It can be assumed, I think, that their stockholders will be best served by continuing the brand names of their public relations holdings. This, in a sense, brings greater stability to public relations as a business than was the case during its first one hundred years. At the least, the names of the principal firms are more likely to endure.

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So much for history.

Nowadays, I am asked a lot of questions about public relations. The one most frequently put to me pertains to the future of public relations. Also, I am often asked whether I am troubled by the media's pejorative depiction of public relations.

Another frequently asked question" concerns the differences in public relations today and how it was practiced earlier in my career.

I also get other questions – like how do I feel about the growing female presence in public relations.

And, a question from a student at the University of Tennessee that I still think about three years later: "Mr. Burson, given the opportunity to do it over again, would you start Burson-Marsteller?" (Those of you who are interested in the answer will have to wait until the end of my talk!)

What about the future of public relations?

That's easy. Public relations has been –and will continue to be – a growth industry. More people are now employed in public relations than ever before. Almost a dozen public relations firms have revenues exceeding a hundred million dollars. Literally, even during a recession more high level jobs are waiting to be filled than there are qualified people to fill them.

Our clients and employers, more than ever, recognize the importance of public relations to their success. One evidence of this is today's close working relationship between a CEO and his/her chief public relations officer. I can cite numerous instances where senior public relations officers have followed a CEO from one company to another.

Institutionally, public relations officers have climbed to new heights on the corporate ladder. When I entered this business a half century ago, most large corporations titled its senior public relations officer director of public relations. In the 60s, the title was vice president; in the 80s and 90s, senior vice president, even executive vice president.

More important, today's chief public relations officer usually sits at the management table. He/she participates in the policy and decision making process.

As for what we read about public relations in the media:

The fact is, we public relations people do a poor job explaining what we do. Contrary to how we counsel clients or employers, we have allowed ourselves to be defined by the media.

For a hundred years, public relations and journalism have had a love-hate relationship. Early in the 20th Century, the newspaper trade journal, "Editor and Publisher," warned editors against running news releases. It described "free mentions" as "a disguised form of advertising." In fact, the Associated Press once banned all brand names no matter how germane to the story. Newspaper columnists and reporters called Hollywood and Broadway press agents "flacks," and what they did "flackery." The popular gossip columnist Walter Winchell writing in the 30s and 40s, coined the term "mouthpiece." Those of us in the corporate world were later labeled "image doctors."

Reporters and editors complained that public relations people were a barrier between them and their news sources. When there were fewer reporters and fewer less intrusive media, they did have more access to public officials – if not generally to business tycoons. It's hard to imagine that Franklin D. Roosevelt's early press conferences took place in the Oval Office!

The Watergate scandal in the 1970s was a seminal event in the denigration of public relations. The well-publicized tapes of President Nixon's Oval Office conversations are dotted with "let's PR it" comments. To "PR it" was a political option to evading the truth and even outright lying. Those words from the lips of the President of the United States bolstered the negative impression of public relations. It is ironic, though not especially comforting, that not a single Nixon aide closely identified with Watergate ever worked in public relations.

Public relations has not yet recovered from Watergate. In more recent administrations, government press secretaries and public information or public affairs officers – the public sector equivalent of public relations practitioners -- took on the new descriptors of "spinmeisters, "spin doctors" and "hypesters." Their stereotypical

function is to exaggerate or diminish, to confuse or mislead both press and public. Sadly, to many in positions of responsibility in both the public and private sectors, public relations became a dirty word.

The result was a flight from the term “public relations” as a descriptor for what we practitioners do. In 1970, about seventy-five percent of the FORTUNE 500 companies listed a senior officer whose title included the words “public relations.” Two decades later, almost seventy-five per cent of the FORTUNE 500 companies had retitled the position, most frequently using the word “communications” instead of public relations.

But there’s a silver lining in that dark cloud. Our clients and employers continue to value sound public relations counsel and implementation. The presence of public relations in all human endeavor continues to expand. I believe what’s happening in the public’s opinion of public relation is akin to what we have observed for many years about the public’s opinion of Congress and its individual members. According to the polls, a minority of Americans have a high regard for Congress – for years it’s been in the twenty to thirty per cent range. Yet, up to eighty per cent of the same respondents have a favorable impression of their Senator or Congressman.

This tells me that those segments of the public most important to us differentiate the reality represented by public relations professionals from the obnoxious and conniving characters portrayed in a public relations context in TV serials and movies. Also, I believe they differentiate – in our favor -- between public relations professionals in the private sector (and this includes not-for-profit) and those who work in government and for politicians. This is my personal hypothesis, but I hope that someone will do a survey to determine whether it’s really true.

The net/net is that I am bullish on public relations.

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Question 2: the differences between public relations today and in the past.

About fifteen years ago, I made a speech I titled “The Maturation of Public Relations.” My thesis was that public relations had evolved through three stages.

The first was the “how do I say it?” stage. That was what public relations was mostly about for its first fifty or sixty years as a commercially-established function. The scenario was something like this: a CEO or a board made a decision – build a new plant, employ a new vice president, launch a new product. Someone would then say, “let’s put it in the right words and get some publicity on this.” The CEO called his public relations officer and said, “here’s the information – write it up and get it out to the press.” That then was the job of the chief public relations officer. I call it the “how do I say it?” stage.

The second was the “what do I say” stage -- an escalation upward from “how do I say it.” That evolved in the 1960s when, in the context of the CEO, all hell broke loose. While many of you regard the decade of the 90s as a transforming era for business, I believe the 60s brought about even more revolutionary changes for business. What we are currently redefining as corporate social responsibility took root in the 60s. That was the decade when environmentalism surfaced. And civil rights -- minority rights, feminism, discrimination on the basis of color, religious belief, age, marital status and sexual preference. And the consumer’s right to know – truthful labeling and understandable language in

loan agreements, insurance policies, mortgages, car financing. Much of what we take for granted in today's business behavior was a legislative and regulatory legacy of the 60s. Few CEOs were equipped to comment on these issues. That's when they turned to their chief public relations officer asking "what do I say?". Another escalation up the management ladder for public relations.

In the late 80s and continuing to this day, the role of public relations became even more central to running a business. Increasingly, the chief public relations officer is a member of the inner circle management team discussing the impact of corporate decisions on public attitudes. And, increasingly, they are responding to a new question from the CEO, "what do I do?" -- the third stage in the evolutionary process I have described.

That's what I call the maturation of public relations. Our function as part of management has become more strategic even as we fulfill our traditional tactical role in both external and internal communications.

Perhaps even more important is my belief that corporations are redefining public relations to embrace behavior and attitudes throughout the business, not only what happens in the public relations department.

This is not a new concept. Arthur Page, that remarkable man who headed public relations at AT&T whom I mentioned earlier, made speeches in the 1930s admonishing telephone operators that they were AT&T's public relations presence every time they said "number, please." He told the guys who strung wire from pole to pole and those who installed telephones in people's bedrooms that they were AT&T's public relations representatives to its most important audience, its customers. Page preached that public

relations must be something much bigger and more pervasive than a few dozen people or even a few hundred working in a department called “public relations.”

When organizations embrace this concept, the realm of the public relations person is without bounds. It starts with raw materials – at the source, in transport and in their processing. It involves waste disposal and even the disposition of the product when it has fulfilled its purpose. At each stage, the responsible corporate citizen assumes a responsibility to society – for health and for safety of the individual and the environment. Working with others in the organization, the public relations professional serves as both a corporate conscience and as a corporate monitor. He/she is one who represents the public interest in setting standards and in assuring compliance.

Even in those cases where such a person may have a title other than public relations, he/she is serving a public relations purpose no less than that individual who bears the public relations title.

That, I believe, is what the future public relations will be all about. Also, I believe we have a great challenge ahead of us in equipping ourselves to meet so awesome a responsibility.

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About women and public relations:

At Burson-Marsteller and other large public relations firms, about three of every four new employees is female. The ratio is no different at smaller public relations firms, at corporations, at not-for-profits. The ratio is no different on the U.S. east coast or the U.S. west coast or in western Europe or southeast Asia or Latin America. Nor are these females confined to middle management or lesser positions. Burson-Marsteller offices in London, Milan,

Madrid, Paris, Frankfurt, Warsaw, Budapest, Moscow, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Washington, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, San Diego, Miami, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Taipei, Singapore and Sydney are now or have in the past been headed by female general managers. Half of our U.S. practice leaders are women and at least half of our client leaders. Increasingly, the person to whom we in public relations report is a woman.

I am often asked to express a value judgment on this phenomenon. That's a question I always dodge! The reason is not because I do not choose to take sides on what, to some, seems to be a sensitive issue. Rather, I think the question is irrelevant. The fact is, the best available people are being hired to fill public relations jobs. For the present, three out of four happen to be women. And as I have already recited, our clients and employers believe public relations is more relevant today than ever before.

If you want more discussion on this subject, let's do it in the Q&A later on.

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Finally, let me come clean on public relations as a career.

Certainly, I have enjoyed and benefited from my career in public relations. From the time of my first exposure to public relations about sixty years ago, I have wanted to do nothing else. In fact, no one in the past forty-plus years has ever tempted me with a job offer!

I don't know of any other career where I would have been able to amass the variety of experiences I have been a party to in my lifetime.

I don't know of any other career that would have afforded me the opportunities to know and work with so many leaders in both the public and private sectors.

I don't know of any other career that would make me so proud of my associates and myself when one of our programs accomplished what it set out to do for a client.

I don't know of any other career that would have provided so many opportunities to work with people so smart, so caring and so sharing – people, male and female, of diverse nationalities, of different color, young and old, of diverse family and educational backgrounds, with so broad a range of skills.

So I must confess it was somewhat tongue-in-cheek when I told that young man at the University of Tennessee, when he asked if, given the opportunity to start over again, would I start Burson-Marsteller, I responded “no, I would start Goldman Sachs.”

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