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## **PUBLIC RELATIONS** Coming of Age

This is a good time in the evolution of public relations to be addressing you in St. Petersburg on the fifth anniversary of the Baltic PR Weekend, Russia's premier public relations event. It's an auspicious occasion worthy of special note.

I dare say there would have been no such opportunity for me to address a group of professional public relations practitioners during my first visit to Russia – Moscow – in 1973.

Things change – nowadays with accelerating speed. But I think it is no coincidence that you are practicing public relations in Russia today because of changes in the political sector – changes leading to democracy and free markets.

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Today, I want to discuss three ideas.

First, the fundamental role of public relations. It has always played a part in free societies and the democratic process and still does.

Second, how we have allowed public perceptions to lose track of that role even as public relations has become more central in business and in fulfilling our

role as citizens. That misunderstanding is all too persistent, and we public relations practitioners bear some of the blame.

Third, I want to talk about the future. There's an opportunity, even an imperative, for us to move beyond the "PR" of the past, to expand, even redefine the role of public relations itself. Whether we can succeed in doing that is a good question. But I welcome the challenge and I am optimistic about the future.

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Your tenth anniversary is an appropriate occasion for me to talk about the relevance and legitimacy of public relations. I believe public relations is a concomitant of a democratic society and a free market. Without public relations (applied professionally or intuitively), societies would remain neither democratic nor free. Public relations has historical roots. And philosophically, it serves to improve how we live, how we govern ourselves, how we enrich our lives both spiritually and materially. This is what I think even though some -- the media in particular -- consider public relations a façade, the practice of form over substance.

Let me begin with some background. When I say "public relations" I am referring to the function, not the business. The public relations function is present in every organization, whether clearly defined or not, whether implemented internally or by a consulting firm. Even in institutions where it is not formally recognized as a management function, public relations exists and is being practiced, often unknowingly.

Public relations is defined by behavior and public opinion. In a word, public relations is about persuasion and motivation. It depends on the leverage of public opinion to motivate individuals or groups to a desired behavior or course of action.

Ultimately, there are only three possible ways to leverage opinion.

We can seek to create an opinion or attitude where there is none.

We can seek to reinforce an opinion that already exists.

We can seek to change an existing opinion.

That's the length and breadth of what we public relations professionals do. The methodology is called public relations. Affecting behavior is the goal; the part that determines how public opinion will be affected is the strategy; the various communications techniques are the tools. The objective is to leverage public opinion so as to motivate people to a specific behavior.

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Many otherwise informed people believe public relations is a relatively recent phenomenon – a by-product of the information age and the age of hype. Certainly, the new information technology has equipped public relations with a broader information dissemination platform and more efficient communication tools. It has proliferated the number and kinds of media; it has intensified both the volume and the clutter; it has accelerated the speed and ubiquity of communications. But the fact is that public relations pre-dated satellite and wireless communications not by decades, but by millennia.

Actually, public relations has been central to the human experience from the time people and tribes and clans and ethnic groups began interacting with one another. Consider this: the ultimate purpose of public relations has always been persuasion. An elementary definition of public relations could well be the disciplined use of persuasion. When in the history of mankind have people not engaged in persuading one another?

One early example, some two thousand years ago, the grandeur that was Rome – at the time, perhaps the world's most civilized city. Its bridges across the Tiber, its aqueducts that transported water over long distances, its spacious plazas and wide boulevards, its marble-clad buildings -- all served to communicate and reinforce the power of the Roman legions. In many cases, the battle was won before the fighting started.

Did the Romans engage in a campaign to promote the glories of Rome? Most certainly, the answer is no. Rather, word of Rome's marvels spread by word of mouth, from one village to the next, across borders, even across continents. Did the Romans know about public relations? Again, most certainly, no. But

public relations was at work. The news spread; opinions were formed; the result was a course of behavior that worked well for the Romans.

In my own country, many centuries later, another historical event, the American Revolution (1775-1783) gave us what would today be regarded as a best practice case history in public relations. One third of the colonists favored independence. Another third, largely well-educated and wealthy, supported the status quo -- they wanted to stay with England. The remaining third were neutral. Agitation for independence, leading to actual warfare, continued for several years.

An early undertaking which would today fall under the public relations umbrella was establishing Committees of Correspondence in each of the thirteen colonies. Samuel Adams was the man in charge and he wanted to spread information from a central source to leaders in the colonies. And he expected them to keep him informed on what was happening in their colony. Today, we would call the Committees of Correspondence a “grass roots” organization. Without knowing it, he had invented a mechanism that is now widely used in any democratic election.

Samuel Adams also had a hand in what we today call “special events.” For example, the Boston Tea Party, a historical event known to every American school child. Adams wanted the protest to be seen as a spontaneous popular uprising protesting a tax on tea. He had some fifty or sixty “ordinary citizens” board a ship loaded with tea and dump the tea in Boston harbor. It is still remembered as a precursor to American independence.

Another example of public relations in action: In 1774, armed British soldiers broke up a gathering of colonists in Boston. Five colonists were killed. Adams, in dispatches to the Committees of Correspondence, called it the “horrible” Boston massacre, implying a much greater death toll. To this day, it’s still known as the “horrible” Boston massacre and was one of the sparks that set off the American Revolution.

I go into this detail not to give you a lesson in American history. Rather, to point out that public relations was practiced long before it was defined as a discipline that has application in business and other walks of life. Your own country, with its long and rich heritage, can offer many parallels where images of long ago were created and remain very vivid centuries later: Catherine the Great; Ivan the Terrible; Stalingrad and its defenders.

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It's ironic that we who spend so much time relating to the public have such a problem with our own public perception. Public relations simply does a terrible job with its own public relations. For some, it's a "black art" whose purpose is to obfuscate, mislead, cover-up or prevent access to corporate executives and public officials. And, when necessary, even to lie. A popular term of derision for what we do is "spin" – and we who do the "spinning" are called "spinmeisters."

Sadly, it is mainly our media colleagues who portray us public relations professionals in this manner. For a long while we have had somewhat of a love-hate relationship with the media despite our interdependence one upon the other. Press people know they need us to help them do their jobs, a situation that brings about a certain resentment. But let's face it, at times we can be an obstacle, just as at other times we offer valuable assistance. It's rather ironic that, until recently, most public relations professionals were once reporters or editors.

As one of those former journalists, I have thought a lot about how we must balance our obligations to clients, to the media, to the public and, most important of all, to ourselves. We've worked for years at Burson-Marsteller to develop and embrace policies and guidelines that are both ethical and pragmatic. It's been successful and it's been satisfying, so let me share a few principles.

First, we represent the interests of our employers and our clients and must recognize our advocacy role. For those of us managing public relations firms, selecting the clients we choose to represent has a special sensitivity. While I believe all institutions in a free society have a right to public relations counsel, I also believe that a public relations firm has the right to choose the clients it represents. When we become advocates for an unpopular cause, we are not responsible for that cause – but we are responsible for having placed ourselves at its service.

Second, we have an obligation to the media because they are the distribution channel for many, if not most, of our messages. More important, they are the principal source of information for most people and we should exert every effort to maintain their credibility. Our obligation to the media entails acting

with integrity in the release of information. While it must be truthful and in context, our employers/clients retain the right to specify what information we release on their behalf.

Third, we must be sensitive to the somewhat amorphous and indefinable “public interest” – realizing that our client’s or employer’s objectives will be served only by serving the “public interest.” This is a universal truism; no action that is not in the public interest and that fails to meet public expectations will, in the long-term, succeed. Our role as public relations professionals, as stated earlier, is to reconcile the objectives of our clients/employers with what we perceive to be the public interest.

Fourth, we have an obligation to ourselves – to our own conscience and to the values by which we live. As advocates, we must be comfortable with the positions we are asked to advocate. This, in no way, means we should avoid causes and issues with which we do not agree or which may be unpopular. Rather, we should not compromise ourselves when we question the ethics, the morality and the legality of what we are asked to do. Public relations professionals are not guns- for-hire.

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Over the years I have been interested in the legal basis -- the right, so to speak - to practice public relations. In the United States, that comes easy. Specific guarantees for the practice of public relations may be found in the two documents that are most sacred to the American people and to the cause of democracy the world over -- the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

From the pen of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, came these words:

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one nation to dissolve the political bonds 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.”

Listen carefully to Jefferson’s artfully-crafted language:

***“.....a decent respect to the opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”***

There are two messages:

One is that decency requires that a people declaring its independence is obliged to inform the world of the reasons for its behavior.

The other is that the peoples of the world (Mankind) are entitled to have this information.

A rather solid justification for what we do under the rubric of public relations!

An even more specific set of words that underpin the right to practice public relations in the United States is the First Amendment to the Constitution.

“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.”

I truly believe in the notion that public relations is a necessary concomitant of the democratic process. We know that information, including opinions, presented clearly to the public, is a powerful force. And we know that public relations facilitates the spread of information and thereby contributes to informed debate and discussion.

We should also recognize that the proliferation and increasing technical complexity of the channels of communication increase the need for professional counsel to make the new technology available to those who have a need or a desire to be heard. In effect, the more overwhelming and far-reaching the communications media, the greater the need for public relations expertise.

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My third topic is about the role of public relations as we move forward in a new century.

On past occasions I have spoken and written about three stages in the maturation of public relations.

The first was defined by the question: “How do I say it?” Our bosses made a decision. Then they turned to us public relations types for help on “how to say it.” Public relations got the message out. We wrote press releases and staged publicity campaigns. In substance, we crafted messages that were handed down. Essentially that was what was expected of us until the early 1960s.

I am generalizing, of course. Even in its early days public relations was not totally a press release-driven discipline. There were always some few who expanded their role as counselors operating at levels more sophisticated than the general run of fellow practitioners.

In the second phase, the question changed. CEOs no longer asked “How do I say it?” Instead, they asked “What shall I say?” That’s because the business environment took a turn somewhat foreign to most executives. Suddenly, more was expected of business than delivering a healthy profit. The rules of the corporate game changed. The new rules mandated equal opportunity in hiring and promotion, occupational and product safety, environmental protection, the consumers’ right-to-know – all new issues that confronted executives who had spent their lives designing, manufacturing, marketing or keeping the books. Corporate CEO’s were under the gun.

These newly raised issues brought forth new laws and regulations carrying severe penalties for violations. They had the effect of changing the role of public relations. We who bore the title, public relations, were now involved in drafting responses to irate protesters, individually and in groups now known as NGO’s, or inquiring lawmakers. Truly, our bosses were, in the main, at a loss for words when dealing with social issues. They turned to us with the questions “How shall I respond?”. “What shall I say?” Our place in the management hierarchy ratcheted up a notch. The 1960s, when corporate social responsibility came to the fore, was, I believe, the most decisive decade in the history of public relations.

We are now into the third stage – at a peak, so to speak, in the maturity of public relations as a business discipline. In stage three, we public relations people are asked not how to say it, or merely what to say, but what to do. Yes, “what to do?” – a major escalation from “how to say it” or “what do I say.” I

call it a major escalation because it recognizes the totality of what we do. As I said earlier, public relations is about both behavior and communications. In the two earlier stages, CEO's saw us mainly as communicators. Now we, at their invitation, are players in policy-making. More often than not, the chief public relations officer of a Fortune 100 company is on its management committee --one of the few senior executives who meet regularly to make policy and participate in decision-making. His or her title is invariably senior vice president and, increasingly, executive vice president.

How did this come to pass?

In just a few words: the power of public scrutiny – the unrelenting demand for increased transparency in the wake of a dozen or so highly publicized corporate governance disasters. Enough to cause our bosses to realize that public opinion is more responsive and powerful than ever before. A realization that the new communications technology produces instant reaction from impatient stakeholders. The near-elimination of the time lag between an action and reaction for an ill-advised action to be judged, and for that judgment to have its effect – on employee productivity, on sales, on stock price, even on legislation and regulation, not to speak of a telephone call from the attorney-general. Nowadays, the loop between message and behavior closes quickly. An organization's behavior – and how it explains that behavior – is critical to its well-being. Its public perception can be quickly converted into a valued asset or a depressing liability.

With that scenario – and, make no mistake, it's a totally realistic scenario – public relations assumes new importance. The full maturation of this third stage – “What do I do?” – is our great opportunity for the future. With it, public relations becomes strategic. With it, public relations gains a permanent seat at the management table.

We are not starting from scratch. But we do need to shift the balance between strategy and execution, the two principal components of public relations methodology. Our greater value, our unique and vital contribution to our clients and employers is the knowing advice we bring to the decision-making process.

After that, executing the strategy remains. Execution equates, in many instances, to communication. And that will always be important. It has become increasingly challenging, too, as the media multiply and expand. But

the growing importance is in the strategic component, in providing input that results in the most effective decision – first about what to do, then about what to say and how to say it.

Are we qualified for this upscale responsibility? In some cases, we may be lacking. That's why it's so critical for us to recognize the role, its responsibilities and its requirements. We need to understand the total environment in which our employers and clients operate. To provide strategic advice, we must understand and identify with the business we're in – not only the public relations part, but the underlying business itself. We will need to understand its history, its customers, its competitors, its products and all the forces that affect it.

Otherwise, we are merely pretenders. If we are going to step forward and offer valuable strategic input – and there's a real need for it, believe me – then we must equip ourselves with qualifications. And that means commitment. Commitment, I once said in a speech a long time ago, is when my client gets stabbed, I bleed!

Are we up to it? Time will tell. But I believe the opportunity is there, waiting for us. Business – and this applies equally to other institutions in our society, for profit and not-for-profit – needs us more than ever before. If we seize control of our current role, we can shape its future. That is why public relations is as exciting to me today as it was in 1953, the year Bill Marsteller and I founded Burson-Marsteller.

And that is why I am optimistic about the future – yours and, even at my age, mine.

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