

Harold Burson Speech
Alan Campbell-Johnson Award
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“Let’s Lift a Glass to ‘Global Public Relations’”

Were our dear friend Alan to awaken at this hour, I suspect he wouldn’t know what to make of the world – on this fifth anniversary of the World Trade Center horror and for the past two months a prohibition on overseas flights on tooth paste and, for those who need it, hair spray.

But given an hour or so to think about the turn of events since his demise, he would soon deliver both a comprehensive situation analysis and a realistic workable action plan. That is the Alan Campbell-Johnson I remember; the Alan Campbell-Johnson for whom I, with respect, deference and admiration, gladly traveled to London to receive the high honor bearing his name. For, truly, he was a role model whose memory merits perpetuation and emulation by future generations of public relations practitioners – made all the more notable by his long-time marital mate, Faye.

As Alan’s career came to a climax, public relations had already begun evolving from a discipline developed and practiced mainly in the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon countries to Western Europe and Japan. In a real sense, public relations took on an international patina. While the basic methodology remained relatively constant, each country had its own idiosyncratic culture, its own idiosyncratic media, its own idiosyncratic management style, its own idiosyncratic way of distributing and marketing products and services.

But since those days, the way business operates has changed. Large corporations and financial institutions no longer see the world country-by-country or even region-by-region. Instead, they see the world as a global market where events in one country can affect sales and reputation in another half-a-world away.

As much as any other factor, communications technology has caused this to happen. I -- and my life-long colleague, Bob Leaf, who was the first to be honored with the medal memorializing Alan Campbell-Johnson – can remember when a news story breaking in Belgium would likely not appear in French, German or Dutch media. News services forty or fifty years ago were organized country-by-country. Only the most significant political news, weather catastrophes or assassinations made it to the London or Paris regional press syndicate bureau for dissemination throughout Europe, America or the rest of the world.

News took on a global aspect when CNN International took to the air in 1980, just a quarter century ago. BBC followed with World Service Television eleven years later in

1991. Nowadays NBC Evening News is in hotels around the world in real time. And I regularly watch BBC News at my home in Scarsdale, New York. Nor is television alone in globalization of the news. Two additional leaps in communications technology further enhanced the world's "connectivity" – one continent to another, one country to another, one person to another -- no matter how distant or remote.

Interestingly, they developed in overlapping time frames – the wireless cell phone and the world wide web.

The cell phone has made it easier to initiate and receive calls. But its far more subtle affect on business has been to bring about greater and more rapid implementation and accountability. Distance no longer prevents the boss from knowing the bad news minutes or even seconds after its discovery at the source. It has hastened the dissemination of news no among business colleagues no matter how remote from one another.

If anything, the internet has had even greater impact on business, ranging from how products are ordered to how quickly and economically information can be disseminated. Its economies cannot be overstated, especially to organizations with limited resources like start-up businesses and NGO's. Such organizations that once operated within a tightly defined geographic area can now build large and effective national and international constituencies at little cost for communications. Simply pushing a "send" button has eliminated the cost of paper, printing, postal and FAX charges. And the message moves to audiences numbering in the tens of thousands in nanoseconds.

The question of the day is how this relates to public relations – or in the language of the award I am so pleased to receive, "international public relations." As a prelude to responding to that question, allow me to digress momentarily to what may seem to be a trivial and/or contrarian point of view vis a vis the "international" descriptor. Let me venture that Alan Campbell Johnson would not now be using "international" as an adjective to describe what he and I and most of you in this rooms have committed our lives to. Instead, I feel strongly that Alan would be using the word "global."

The descriptor "international" seems germane to that era when countries and corporations had defined and discrete bilateral relationships – country-to-country, as with Britain and India, or country-to-region as with France and West Africa. Nowadays, larger business enterprises operate differently: a typical global corporation domiciled in one country may manufacture components in four countries on two different continents, assemble in still another country, and then ship to markets around the world. Business is now global in its operations and its outlook. Even cottage industries use the internet to create a global market for their output. Which causes me to believe that "global public relations" more precisely describes those of us who once identified ourselves as practitioners of international public relations.

On a more serious note, I have some misgivings about the present state of readiness of large global institutions to provide for their global public relations/communications needs. Many, if not most, are simply not organized to fulfill their mission. This, I

believe, is more a matter of structure than of staffing, even though few CEO's would contest the need for a global corporation to speak with a single voice everywhere in the world. The reason is plainly that news can emanate from any point on the globe and that it travels at the speed of sound. A story that breaks in Belgium has the potential of popping up not only in Holland, France and Germany but in Japan, the U.S. and India. When the story is of sufficient impact – say it has the potential of affecting the company's stock price – the need for a consistent message becomes all the more critical.

Accordingly, I have long advocated that the executive at corporate headquarters responsible for public relations/communications be given worldwide functional responsibility. In the corporate world functional global responsibility is not a new concept. The chief financial officers of large businesses have always had global functional responsibility. And there are few large companies I know where its general counsel does not have global functional responsibility. With all due respect to the importance of finance and law, neither has the vulnerability to destroy so quickly a company's reputation with the reporting of an insensitive action or an offensive comment.

Presently, too few corporations now formally include global functional responsibility in the job description of their most senior public relations/communications officers. I would be less than candid, however, if I failed to acknowledge that in many, if not most, common sense brings about informal agreements leading to effective coordination between geographical and business units and their counterparts at corporate headquarters.

Let me take a few moments to tell you what I think global functional responsibility entails. An overriding requirement is what I call "a state of mind." That means that every person in the corporation's public relations/communications function – regardless of geography or business unit – should regard himself/ herself as a member of its public relations/ communications staff whose career path has central oversight by the function's corporate management. While those staff members at the local geography or business unit may be a direct line report to onsite management, he/she should have a strong dotted line to the chief public relations officer or his designated representative. To be effective, that strong dotted line should translate into corporate review for salary increases, bonuses, promotions and transfers. Only with such central oversight can a corporation maximize its public relations/communications resources. To me it seems like a win/win situation: the corporation in its totality will maximize utilization of its human resources devoted to the public relations/communications function; the more achieving individual professional will have enlarged career opportunities – he or she will be considered for a greater variety of positions and will most likely move up the corporate ladder more quickly.

Having articulated what I regard should be fundamental operating philosophy and policy in a growing global business environment, I am in no manner, suggesting that local culture and local customs should not be taken fully into account vis a vis communications to all local audiences. – but always with on site recognition of the greater corporate goals and the need to disseminate consistent messages. As I have

indicated earlier, it is no longer possible for a corporation to say one thing in Country A and another in Country B, no matter how geographically remote.

Truly, it's a different but not necessarily a better world than that which Alan Campbell-Johnson experienced throughout his long career. With the passage of time, I find one element in particular that is missing. Time seems to have become so valuable that there's now no longer the camaraderie that Alan and I shared with so many contemporaries and peers. We worked at a time when the senior public relations position was the most institutionalized in the corporate hierarchy. Today, just as with the chief executive officer, it's one with the shortest tenure. While many of us continue to attend meetings of organizations such as IPRA and, in the United States, the Public Relations Seminar, the turnover of members is ever increasing and my current colleagues are not forming the lifelong friendships that made this business so very rewarding in terms of personal relationships.

In closing, let me again express my heartfelt appreciation to those who have selected me for this award. I am grateful indeed to The Coca-Cola Company, which I am proud to have served in a consulting capacity for just short of twenty-five years, dating from the time my late dear friend Roberto Goizueta was elected chief executive officer. And there can be no higher public relations accolade for me than having my name associated with Alan Campbell-Johnson.

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