

HB
Berlin Speech
November 26, 2008

**A PR Professional's View of Election Campaigning
or
Politicians and Pineapples**

**Ladies, Gentlemen, Friends of and Adherents to the Democratic
Process:**

Thank you for inviting me to address you at so important a conference and for giving me a reason to make my fifth visit to Berlin. My first was in December 1945; then in 1963, 1978 and 1979 when Burson-Marsteller was chosen to publicize the 700th anniversary of the founding of Berlin. I am happy to be in Berlin again and experience a unified and rebuilt capital city that is equal to any in the world. To tell the truth, at my age I am happy to be anywhere!

When I first visited Berlin as an American soldier in the mid-forties, it was in ruins – despair permeated the entire population; food and shelter were in desperately short supply; I am told the winter of 1945-46 was the coldest in Berlin's history. But by 1963, there were strong signs the German “economic miracle” – the “Wirtschaftswunder” –was working; despite the Wall and other obstacles imposed by the Soviet Union, much of Berlin was free, the rubble had largely disappeared and fewer bombed out buildings remained. By 1978 and 1979, many nations had rallied to make Berlin a vital, dynamic and sparkling symbol of democracy amidst a sea of political darkness. The western zones had begun to prosper – in sharp contrast to the drab emptiness on the Soviet side of the Wall.

Today, of course, with the Wall no longer the oppressive gash that once imposed a division and isolation that defied all norms of humanity, Berlin is once again one of Europe's and the world's thriving capital cities.

Let me begin my talk by telling you what I am not going to do.

I am not going to tell you how to do winning political campaigns. The fact is that I have never worked on a political campaign – not in America and certainly not in Germany. The closest I came to a major campaign was when Al Gore ran for president against George W. Bush. My cousin was Gore’s chief of staff and, from time to time, I sent him suggestions on campaign strategy. You know what happened to Al Gore before he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

In fact, when I was invited to speak to this audience, I actually questioned my relevancy addressing such a well-informed, goal oriented assemblage. But I was told that, as one whose long life had been devoted to the practice of public relations, my observation on the political campaign process would be interesting to this audience. Regardless of what is printed in your program, I have titled my talk “Pineapples and Politicians: The Common Denominator is Public Relations.” If you listen closely, you likely will figure out why I chose this title.

I start with the premise that managing political campaigns is a subset of public relations. In my view, any endeavor that employs persuasion to motivate a person or a group to a specified behavior falls within the rubric of public relations. In the public relations I practice, my objective, in principle, is the same as yours: it is to persuade a particular audience to act in a manner which conforms to the objectives of my client. Whether to buy a certain brand of toothpaste, whether to take a vacation at a certain locale, whether to invest in a particular company’s stock, whether to ask my physician about a certain medicine, whether to select pineapples over mangoes or passion fruit. You, in your work, are seeking to persuade a voter to cast a ballot for the candidate you represent just as I am trying to persuade a customer to purchase the product or service I represent.

We both employ the same tactics and the same communications channels to reach our audience. We both seek to mold public opinion in a manner that causes the holder of that opinion to adopt our point of view. There are only three ways we can affect public opinion:

- we can seek to create an opinion where none now exists;**
- we can seek to change a presently held opinion;**
- and we can seek to reinforce a presently-held opinion.**

That applies as much in your work as it does in mine. It is the basis of what we do as political campaign managers and public relations practitioners working for corporations or not-for-profits or candidates seeking public office.

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The public-at-large regards public relations as a 20th Century development; in most countries – even the United States – professional campaign management is also regarded as a latter day development. We both have our share of detractors who regard public relations people as amoral and lying spin meisters who pervert the news channels and campaign managers as scheming smear agents who pervert the electoral process.

We both know that public relations and campaign management have been around a long time. I like to date these practices from the time of the world’s first democracies. But the truth is that both public relations and campaign management – of course, never described in those terms – have existed from the time that tribes and clans began to take form and their constituents realized they had a voice in choosing their leadership.

An example of an ancient application of public relations I often use when addressing public relations audiences pertains to the Roman Empire. I say that Rome’s wide boulevards were not built to accommodate traffic jams; nor did Rome’s legions parade on those wide boulevards because they needed the exercise. For several centuries, those wide boulevards represented to the then-known world the grandeur of Rome; those marching legions represented to the then-known world the power of Rome.

It is logical to believe – and experience proves it so – that both public relations and political campaign management thrive where democracy is the form of government. Both disciplines require freedom of expression and, in the words of the First Amendment of the American Constitution, “freedom to peaceably assemble.” It is, I believe, no coincidence, that the practice of both public relations and political campaign management is generally to be considered more mature in the United States than in any other country. The reason is simply that the United States is not only the

world's longest surviving democracy but also has strong guarantees of freedom of expression.

Political campaign management in the United States therefore has deep historical roots. It dates back at least as long ago as our first three presidents, George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson starting in the last decade of the 18th Century. Washington, our first president, was chosen without opposition after leading the colonial army in the American Revolutionary war against Britain. The political rivalry between Adams and Jefferson was intense. Washington and Adams were Federalists and supported a strong central government. Jefferson, Republican who supported states' rights created our two-party political system which exists to this day after more than two centuries. In this, he had the professional support of a man named John Beckley, whom historians now call "The First Campaign Specialist."

Here's how one American historian described him:

"Beckley has gone down in history as a mysterious person who carried tales and worked behind the scenes; actually he merits less attention as a political informant than as one of the leading party organizers of the 1790s. At ease in the realm of politics and skillful organizer, he could manage an election campaign with the mechanical competence with which he performed his duties of the clerkship of the House. John Beckley was a man who knew how to win elections and advance a party cause."

In his first test as a campaign manager representing Jefferson running against Adams, Beckley's candidate came in second. But it was not a total loss for Jefferson and Beckley. In those days, before the American election process was changed by Constitutional amendment, the runner-up was vice-president, a position Jefferson held for four years before defeating Adams in his run for a second term. Summing up that period, one historian wrote "George Washington and John Adams were the leading disdainers of journalists; and Thomas Jefferson the leading manipulator of journalists." I am sure many of you could apply those same descriptors to politicians whom you have represented or opposed.

Like today's campaign managers, those of post-colonial vintage depended heavily on the media of the day to reach voters. They used op-eds, staged

events that made news and fed bits of gossip, scurrilous and otherwise, to reporters. They also created their own media – pamphleteers played a major role in disseminating information and single sheet handbills were distributed by the thousands. And there was no limits as to the content – as to a candidate’s privacy, for example, today’s elections are benign compared to those in the early days of my native land.

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In my country, and I suspect in Germany and elsewhere, the internet has had a profound effect on both political campaigning and public relations. My own view of the internet is that it is that it is the latest (perhaps the most revolutionary) in a continuum of communications vehicles that facilitate the delivery of messages to larger and larger audiences with ever increasing speed and impact. The continuum I speak of started many years ago – actually with the invention of the printing press in the late 15th Century. It was followed by the telegraph about 1840, the telephone about 1875, the typewriter in 1867 and the mimeograph machine about the same time, motion pictures at the start of the 20th Century, radio in the early 1920s, television and Xerox copiers in the 50s, FAX and cable TV a few years later. We should all know that the internet itself – like its communications vehicle predecessors – is message neutral. It can be used for the public good; and it can just as easily be used for evil intent.

The full capability of the internet, I believe, is still a work in progress. None of its predecessor communication facilitators have grown so rapidly or have so transformed the manner by which so large a percentage of the world’s population communicates. For us in public relations and for you managing political campaigns, the potential of the internet is almost beyond imagination. It has the potential to reach mass audiences with a great deal of specificity -- and at minimal cost. Like the telephone, it facilitates two-way communications and, married to a credit card, it facilitates financial transactions widely distanced and involving huge sums of money. In fact, it has been a principal fund-raising tool for numerous candidates for public office in the U.S. by making it easy for voters with limited means to make, has small contributions totaling many millions of dollars.

One unintended consequence of the internet in the campaign world is that it has forced candidates to be more consistent in their promises to constituents. No longer is it possible to make one promise to an audience of physicians and another in a different city to an audience of patients. What appears in most newspapers nowadays is available on the internet and it's ever so easy to gather together a candidate's views on any subject he/she discusses.

Another consequence is that the internet has forced campaign operatives to be more responsive to comments of opposing candidates and critics, adverse and otherwise. The internet has made every computer owner a publisher (actually, a publisher without accountability). One can establish his/her own blog; one can also make his/ her views known on another person's blog. Monitoring the internet has become a matter of great urgency. The morning and evening news cycles have been overtaken by the 24-hour news cycle.

Like you in campaign management, we in public relations who represent large globally-dispersed corporations have a comparable problem. Protecting our clients' reputations requires that we know immediately when adverse information appears in print, on electronic media or on internet sites. Our objective is to respond in what we at Burson-Marsteller call "real time" – in the same news cycle. As you know, this is said than done. News media transmit news at the speed of light; so does the internet. But as of now, few corporations – even governments – are equipped technologically and organizationally to do this even though many recognize the need and are equipping themselves to do so.

Many states in the U.S. and many other countries have turned to computer-based voting machines to facilitate the counting of ballots. But it's in the realm of possibility that the polling booth as we know it will one day be superseded by voting at home using a computer programmed to assure all the safeguards as to the voter's eligibility as well as preserve secrecy as to how he/she voted.

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One area where we in public relations can learn from you in the political sector is in the use of research. In the past several years, our firm has come a long way in using research to help define a client's problem and

test messages. In the past we have depended on instinct and on what the client's definition of the problem we have been called on to help solve. . The problem can range from how to sell more pineapples or convincing a community that locating a large store in the city center is in their best interest.

I recall a situation when the CEO of a large steel producer hired us to address what he described as "a morale problem" in a big midwestern steel mill. It was in the middle of a cold winter and my CEO friend described his 9000 employees as being "down in the dumps" and needing some pep-talk cheering up. He had in mind blanketing the mill with banners, flags and posters and staging a gala weekend family picnic. I suggested that we do some research to more specifically identify the problem. At first, he said research would not be necessary since he knew his employees and how they think. Finally, he agreed to two focus groups which we hastily put together.

It turned out that the employees had two well-defined areas of discontent. The first was that they wanted the company to designate parking areas adjacent to employee check-in points so they wouldn't have to slog through a quarter mile or more of snow and slush getting from their cars to their work station. For years, parking had been on a first come-first served basis and all the desirable parking spots filled up fast. But this was an unusually cold winter – cold enough for them to seek a correction.

The second problem was that they wanted traffic lights installed at parking lot exits since the mill was located on a heavy traffic state highway. Entering the plant was no problem, but leaving at rush hour often entailed 30- to 45-minute waits. It was a reasonable request, and one wondered why this problem had not been addressed years before.

The result was a weekend family picnic celebrating the assignment of designated parking areas by work location and the new traffic lights at exits emptying onto the state highway. Without research, I am certain we would have developed an elegant solution to the wrong problem.

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My impression is that message testing for a private sector public relations client is a somewhat different process than message testing for campaign

purposes. At the risk of over-simplifying, the way it looks to me is that campaigns test to develop messages and programs that prospective voters favor. And it seems not to matter very much whether the candidate will be able to deliver on the promise communicated by the message. The objective is short term: to obtain favorable polling results that can be widely disseminated and, at almost any cost, to influence the voter to go to the polls and cast a ballot for the candidate. My experience is that once elected and in office, campaign promises are soon forgotten and give way to the opportunism of the moment. This happens more frequently than not in my native country, and, based on extensive reading of political news from around the world, I find it's not much different in other countries. I will admit, however, that politicians in democratic countries with a parliamentary system of government as opposed to our fixed terms for elected officials, are under greater restraint than in the U.S.

Other institutions in a market economy, especially corporations, are held to a higher standard. They must be able to deliver on the promise made in their message – whether it be the quality of a product or in living up to a social responsibility it embraces. When the performance of a product fails to live up to the claims made for it, the customer can retaliate immediately. He/she won't buy the product again and, even worse, may relate their bad experience to other potential users. There's no mystery that so many new products that enter the marketplace fail; almost invariably the reason is that they do not live up to the promises made in advertising or in other promotional materials.

A subject that distresses me greatly in both the business and the political worlds is the intrusion on privacy by the media. To some considerable extent, privacy norms in political life vary from country to country. Our country was 204 years old before it elected its first president who had been divorced. Less than a decade ago, a popular sitting president was tried for impeachment because of a sexual transgression (he was acquitted). In Europe – on the Continent, in particular, the