

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Chester Burger – 1983*

You have honored me by choosing me to recall the leadership of Vern Schranz. Mr. Schranz and Ball Corporation early recognized the impact of public opinion on corporations and in over 25 years with Ball, he helped management earn the understanding and support of public opinion.

Your invitation has caused me to recall some of my own experiences trying to understand public opinion during the last 40 years. Today, I want to try to identify some of the lessons I have learned about how to influence public opinion. Allow me first to set the scene, so that you'll know the period in which my own outlook was developed.

I entered college in 1938. It was a difficult time. Not only was my family poor, but most everyone's family was poor. Unemployment was everywhere. Within two years, we would be evicted from our home because my father couldn't meet the monthly payments on a small mortgage.

War was on the horizon. Nazi Germany was rearming. Spain was aflame from Nazi bombings. In my own city, American citizens in Nazi uniforms and storm troop boots were spending their Saturday morning beating up Jewish shopkeepers on East 86th Street in Manhattan. In this setting I had absolutely no idea of what career path I should follow. Perhaps your problem in choosing a life direction is no easier in 1983 than it was for me in 1938.

At that time, there were virtually no jobs. There was the earliest beginning of a national defense program. I had a friend who worked in a machine shop. To prepare me for a job interview, he helped me to memorize some of the terms a machinist should know. I tried to bluff my way into a job. Unsuccessfully. If you have looked in vain for an appropriate job, you may be able to imagine my desperation and that of others in similar straits.

And when I finally got my first job, as an office boy, it was with a predominantly Jewish law firm. Most companies in those days wouldn't hire Catholics. Utilities wouldn't hire Italians. And practically nobody would hire Blacks, or Negroes, as they were known in those days.

Recalling my own experiences, I believe that all the pro-employer communications in the world couldn't have overcome the reality of racism and religious bias in hiring. It was wrong. It was offensive to ethics and morality. Yet America, not only business, but also labor unions, the churches and colleges, lived with it, if not happily, certainly willingly accepting it with passivity. As Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Many good men did nothing. Public relations closed its eyes. Probably it was just as well. Public relations activity or communications can't overcome what is inherently wrong. It shouldn't try.

Today, when I see organizations permitting sexist bias, or racial and religious discrimination out of indifference or outright bias, I believe that although it may be a long time in coming, there will indeed be a day of reckoning for those responsible.

This includes public relations itself. Since we are one of the last almost lily white professions in America, I believe that our day of judgment will come when our employers no longer accept our

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claim that we can help them to communicate effectively with employees and people in our plant communities. In most corporations, the body of employees represents a more accurate cross-section of the America of 1983 in its racial and ethnic diversity than we do in public relations.

Back in my college days, we asked ourselves who and what was the cause of unemployment, racism and religious hatred? One group asserted that it had the answer, with a certainty that now seems frightening in its intensity and its vehemence. This group said the cause was capitalism and the capitalists. The solution was communism, communism as it was being developed in the Soviet Union under Comrade Stalin. Only communism could eliminate poverty, racism and unemployment, and indeed that was, we were told, exactly what was being done in the USSR.

I believed much of this propaganda, as did, to some degree, many of my fellow students and many other Americans. Hard to believe in 1983, but nonetheless true. In the convoluted logic of the Left, it was not Hitler who threatened war; it was Franklin Roosevelt. It was not capitalism that offered a future for us; it was socialism Soviet style. It was not American democracy that offered the possibility of ending racism, but Soviet democracy.

Endlessly, over the years, my mind has relived those years and my own naivete, and wondered what lessons could be drawn from them that might have relevance to today.

The conclusion I've drawn is that the most critical period of our intellectual, political and social development is the college years when we first emerge from the confines of our home environment and become aware of the larger world around us. This is the period when we leave home for the first time, when we become more conscious of our future lives and our careers and wonder what they will and should be, and what we can do about them. Of course, our attitudes at this point are strongly influenced by our home environment, by our families.

“As the twig is bent, so the tree inclines.”

But college is the time and place when our attitudes form and our thoughts break out to larger horizons. The attitudes we develop in college years remain with us for the rest of our lives, to be changed only by the most powerful experiences, whether real or psychological.

Yet the college years are precisely the period when young people lack first-hand contact with the corporate America in which many will spend much of their productive years. Understandably, they are preoccupied with the demands of their academic work. They are being introduced to the culture and the history of the world. They are learning the physical sciences. Unless they happen to be studying engineering, they probably aren't studying economics. And unless they are seeking an M.B.A., they probably are learning little or nothing about the functioning of our economy. Outside of the graduate schools of business, their instructors may know little more than they of the factors that cause our society to function as it does, for better or worse. All that the professors know, for the most part, is, as Will Rogers put it, what they read in the newspapers.

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In those distant years neither I, nor my fellow students, nor my professors knew anything at all about the reality of business. We, too, only knew what we read in newspapers. It was one thing to read about it. But we had never been in a factory. We knew no one who had. Nor had the professors. Accordingly, we were perfectly willing to believe all the propaganda of the Left that businessmen were greedy and bigoted, uncaring Philistines. It was quite inconceivable to me that circumstances and the accidents of fate would someday place me near the center of the business community, to discover for myself how wrong those beliefs were. So ever since, it has seemed to me highly desirable that the business community exposes itself personally to young people and to college students, especially. Not to propagandize about free enterprise or the so-called “glories of capitalism,” but simply to answer their questions, to stimulate their interest, and to present reality. Junior Achievement (aimed at secondary schools) is one modest version of the type of activity I have in mind.

This segment of our national population, the young people, deserves more attention than it is receiving from professional communicators. Whether we want to discourage people from smoking, or to encourage them to take up careers in science and technology, or to prefer Wheaties over Corn Flakes, or to understand the advantages or disadvantages of labor unions, we should be considering and strategizing how we can open an honest dialogue with young people. The return on investment will be slow in coming, but I believe it will be enduring.

It is strange that so little activity of this type exists. I understand why. Businessmen have lives of their own, activities of their own, pressures of their own. Either they lack the time to seek out opportunities for dialogue, or they have higher priorities. I believe companies should pay more attention to this problem.

I am a great believer in reality and substance, more than in image and presentation. Like many people who grew up in the years after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, when the powerful industrial unions were taking form, I believed in the nobility of Labor’s cause, and its claim to be fighting for social justice.

I believed, for instance the union horror stories about “speedup” on the assembly lines. From Walter Reuther’s era to the General Motors strikes a Lordstown, Ohio, plant in the 70s, my image of an automotive assembly line had been formed by union propaganda. It was reinforced by that hilarious sequence showing Charlie Chaplin in a frenzy on the assembly line in “Modern Times.” I had never been in an automotive factory. How could I have known reality differed?

Then one day a few years ago, I visited the River Rouge plant of Ford, and saw it for myself. What a surprise! It wasn’t what I expected. Some workers were lounging with cigarettes and coffee. Along the conveyor came a car. The power tools were hanging in front of each worker at exactly the right height. A little push and in went the screws. Then back to coffee. One man went back to reading his magazine. Right in front of my eyes there was no “speedup.” Boredom, yes. But not “speedup.” If the UAW had succeeded in slowing the production line, there would have been still more boredom.

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It wasn't at all as the UAW described. And I thought to myself that if I had got into a bargaining fight with the unions, I'd invite the public to see for itself what working conditions really were like. Most of the union claims could be collapsed in the face of reality.

To generalize from this specific experience, I've observed that seeing for yourself is most persuasive. Much more so than words. Photos or videotapes aren't as good as first hand viewing. But they are more persuasive than words.

Reality is a powerful teacher. Companies ought to let those whose opinions are important to it see for themselves. Every company, of course, flies security analysts out to see the new factory. But I believe much more should be done with other groups of the general public to let them see for themselves what American industry is like and how it meets the needs of the nation.

Too often, we accuse the media, especially television, of unfairness and abuse of power. All through the years, I've heard charges and seen evidence of unfairness. But I've come to believe that very often, we get what we deserve in life, and that to a considerable degree, the business community deserves what criticism it receives. When Kuhn Loeb, the investment Wall Street banking firm, merged some years ago with Lehman Brothers, the president was asked about layoffs.

"When you have redundancies," he said, "you get rid of the redundancies." They're not human beings; they're "redundancies." That expression reveals the indifference to human considerations and brings deserved criticism to all businesses.

So I've learned not to blame the media for unfairness unless they have really been unfair. If business hasn't divulged the facts, or if business has acted or spoken insensitively, then it had better listen to its public relations professionals and change its ways instead of complaining about media bias.

I don't want to give you the impression that my public relations philosophy is based primarily on the experiences of my youth. Over the years, both as the head of the largest public relations firms, and for 19 years as head of a management communications consulting firm, I've studied hundreds perhaps thousands public relations programs. Most of them have seemed to me a waste of time, money and effort. Most of them have been trivial or inconsequential or irrelevant to reality, to the problems of the corporation or society.

From this exposure, I've observed a distinguishing characteristic of those that seemed to me most effective. The best public relations programs harmonize corporate self-interest with the public's interest. The Alliance of American Insurers, for example, has consistently used creative programs to promote public safety in the interest of the insurance industry.

What saves lives and avoids automotive accidents, for example, serves the public interest and also cuts costs for the insurers. By the way of example, the Alliance is urging drivers who have CB radios to report to the highway patrol when they see a car being driven in an erratic and possibly unsafe manner. That is sound public relations – serving the public interest as it serves the industry's self interest.

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Another lesson I've learned is that while service in the public interest makes more friends for a company than does simple corporate self-interest, it's nevertheless desirable for a corporation to specify its corporate self-interest to establish credibility. In one recent case, a company seeking a tax benefit for a local plant emphasized that it would increase corporate profits and thus enable the company to expand the factory and create additional jobs. The admission of increased profits has the ring of credibility to the promise of more jobs. The public interest concerns the public more than does corporate self-interest. But emphasizing the private self-interest of the audience seems even more powerful still. That lesson is important.

Few people act to advance the public interest, or the common good, whatever that may be. They work to advance their self-interest. Or at least, their self-interest as they perceive it, or as their leaders present it to them.

Altruism exists, yes indeed, but I wouldn't want to base a major campaign on the hope that it will show itself. The more frequently used technique is to present people's self-interest as the public interest. For example, some organizations of the aged have done this. They conducted a public relations program on the basis that any attempt to cut back on Social Security benefits is an attempt to cut back on benefits they themselves have already paid for. The reality is somewhat different. Their public relations materials don't state that people who retire at age 65, who have paid maximum social security taxes right along with a spouse who doesn't work outside the home, will receive benefits equal to his or her total contributions over the years they worked, in just 11 months after retirement.

This isn't to discuss the real needs of the aged. It's to discuss the manipulation and perceptions of an important public issue. It's to question whether broad public opinion has been formed on the basis of distorted information.

There are winners and losers in the set of facts about Social Security, as the public understands it. The winners are those drawing benefits many times what they paid in, for more years than anyone at the time the law was passed thought they would live. The winners are the public officials who were elected on the promise they'd preserve those benefits.

The losers are those who are paying for those benefits through salary taxes. The losers are those that will never collect the hoped-for benefits because the money won't be there.

Now you haven't heard the issue presented quite that way. On, no! It is presented as a matter of fairness and respect for the contributions of our fathers and mothers. In other words, in our interest. The senior citizens have proven their mastery of the techniques of persuasion in our democratic society. Self-interest has been masked with talk of fairness, moral responsibility and the like.

Self-interest is not always evident. The skilled persuader presents his or her self-interest in terms of how it serves your interest.

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But people keep trying and keep hiring public relations people to present their case. Good for the counselors; bad for the advocates that accomplish nothing with their money.

Another lesson I've learned is that it's so difficult to communicate anything at all, that if you don't express yourself with simplicity, you're wasting your time. I saw one management memo that read, "In response to inquires regarding the equipment, it is felt that there would be no detrimental effect on the components comprising the terminals and/or station arrangement due to daily and weekend powering off."

That can be translated, "It's safe to turn off the equipment at night or over the weekend." How many communicators haven't learned that lesson? The problem seems to me has worsened today compared to 1938, when I first wrote about it. When people say that their home computer is "user friendly," I rather think they are "communications-confused," and probably "digitally-delirious" as well.

Other experiences have taught me that you can't communicate persuasively about an abstract principle, like the blessings of competition or free enterprise or dangers of unionism. You need specific examples. For example, the environmentalists weren't getting very far until an oil slick. That changed abstraction into reality. Wall Street didn't fully appreciate IBM's marketing skill until brokerage houses saw their employees buying IBM personal computers for themselves, at their own expense.

I have also learned that it takes a very long time to implant a new idea. Indeed, the old saying is true, "Just when the client is beginning to tire of the advertising message is about the time the public is just beginning to notice it." Look how many years it's taken for the proven association between cigarette smoking and cancer to penetrate mass consciousness and to influence our individual behavior. When you want to influence public opinion or individual behavior, you can't hurry things along.

To everything there is a season, and time to every purpose under the heaven. Some good ideas fail for the reason that public opinion isn't yet ready to accept them. On the other hand, when there is an idea whose time has come, no power on earth can halt it. Take for example, the breakup of the Bell Telephone System. For 107 years, it epitomized all of the best qualities of the nation's life. It provided a high quality of telephone service, the finest in the world. The boast was – and it was true – that 993 out of 1000 times, when you picked up your telephone to make a call, you'd receive a dial tone – meaning that a path was open to connect your call – within three seconds; in other words, by the time the phone reached your ear. Bell provided a very low-cost service. On the average, a factory worker would need to work one hour and 20 minutes to pay his monthly telephone service. The lowest cost in the world. And Bell displayed a high degree of social responsibility. It achieved its goal, what Theodore Vail, the founder, called universal telephone service. That meant a service so inexpensive that everyone could afford it.

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But Bell's success became its failure. Politicians slowly recognized that the public didn't like big companies, and especially they didn't like monopolies. Never mind that the service has been good. People don't like to be forced to do anything. And if you didn't like dealing with Bell, who else could you go to? Politicians—I don't use the word in a pejorative sense—are turned to public opinion more closely than are businessmen. Politicians are always campaigning for re-election. They don't have the long-term perspective of businessmen who must worry about survival in the long pull.

Gradually, over the years, public figures in the legislative, executive and judicial departments of governments at all levels came to believe that the Bell System must be smashed. It hardly makes sense to suggest that the political leaders misjudged public opinion, because the voters re-elected them instead of turning against them in fury.

The Bell System had built what I believe was the most professional, the finest, and certainly the largest public relations organization in the United States. It planned skillfully; it communicated honestly and openly. Its effectiveness was close to optimum. And yet it failed, and 51 days from today, the Bell System will finally be torn apart and be no more.

I have had the honor of working closely as a consultant to AT&T for more than 28 years, and I have pondered long and hard as to what lessons could be derived from its failures to survive. And all I can see is that in our democratic society, public opinion simply fears organizations that are too large. Americans want independence, not dependence. Alas, the "sin" of Bell was that one in 82 working Americans were provided with good jobs in the Bell System; one and one-half percent of the gross national product of the United States was being spent on telephone and telecommunications service through the Bell System, and that was just too much. Of course, benefits, as well as damages, will emerge from its destruction and only time will record whether the benefits outweigh the damages.

Professional communicators must sense the basic trends of public opinion and ride with them, not against them. Unless you're in harmony with the basic currents of the times, your public relations efforts won't get very far.

In a democratic society like ours, every man may speak his piece, both wise men and fools. Thomas Jefferson believes that a free people could withstand the errors and the fools better than our country could withstand the suppression of wrong or dangerous ideas. E.W. Scripps said, "Give light and the people will find their own way."

So we must accept the presence of demagogues in our society, those who agitate and inflame public discourse, to preclude thoughtful discussion. And we must hope that calmer judgments and more thoughtful analysis will offset them. Look at the Love Canal experience, how Hooker Chemical – now Occidental Chemical – was pilloried by a group of "Love Canal Mothers" long after state and scientific bodies had determined there was no evidence whatever that illnesses had resulted from the storage of chemical wastes there. The press reported in some detail how the "Love Canal Mothers" had reshaped their daily routines to meet the requirements of the television crews.

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It was years later before The New York Times, on May 18, 1983, told the story: “U.S. Study Finds No Links Between Love Canal and Disease.” If you didn’t know that, it might be worthwhile for you to investigate the whole story of the Love Canal especially the EPA study that will go on until 1988. This is a study that will decide how to reseal the contaminated area that had been broken open by the municipal authorities in 1953, despite public warnings of danger by the Hooker Chemical Company. In this new study, EPA will also determine whether it’s safe to live in the area. But there’s still no evidence of any link to disease.

Public relations professionals familiar with the events believe that the entire Love Canal disaster probably wouldn’t have happened if the true facts had been disclosed right at the beginning, and the public had been given proof that Hooker had acted properly, responsibly and safely. It was not an unfair press that caused the problem but an ill advised corporate management that remained silent in the hope that they would be vindicated in the courts of the law. The lesson that I extract from this is that in today’s America, public opinion will always believe the worst about you unless you tell your side honestly, completely and speedily.

Professional public relations as opposed to amateurish publicity seeking, must communicate to management as well as for management. Public relations professionals must have the wisdom, the tact, and the integrity to persuade management that when unfairness or injustice exists in corporate policy or practice, it should be eliminated. Public relations professionals neither are or should they be “the corporate conscience.” But I believe we have the responsibility to seek change, where appropriate, the realities of corporate life, not merely to communicate existing corporate policies persuasively. This responsibility is inescapable for public relations professionals.

America is one of the few nations where public relations thrive, because America is one of the few nations where public opinion strongly influences government and corporate policy. As I recall my own lifetime experiences as a communicator, I am convinced that the public relations counsel, when informative and honest, stimulates the vigor of dialogue in our society. And as irritating as the cacophony of conflicting voices can sometimes be, our country is stronger for the dialogue that public relations helps provoke.