

Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Patrick Jackson – 1984

Like our distinguished colleague in whose honor this lecture series is given, I am a public relations practitioner. Therefore, I am a student—a student of public relationships. How they are formed. How they can fall apart. How they affect our behavior.

The study of public relations in reality is the study of human nature. And, of course, the basic unit of human interaction is perception. Sadly, I find this understanding of perception an uncommon approach today. Many of our colleagues want to believe that humans are purely rational, logical beings. That they make decisions based totally or mainly on facts, not on their nature.

The goal is not communication; the goal is behavior.

Others of our colleagues seem to feel that “going along, just getting the assignment and pleasing the boss” are the essentials. They’re concerned with the process of public relations. I’m convinced we must be concerned with the outcomes of our work. My objective tonight is to share some of the realities as I see them – and to attempt to persuade you to think about them.

Any process exists only to bring about certain outcomes. Yet, I believe public relations has gotten itself so mired in process that many practitioners have lost sight of the outcomes we can deliver to our clients and employees, to our society and to mankind.

My plea to colleagues and to students preparing to enter public relations is – let’s lift our eyes above the process and start thinking about the outcomes.

Let’s stop being the carpenters and start becoming the architects. It’s one thing to know how to play the piano, it’s something else to be able to move an audience with a Beethoven sonata. Therefore, we have to think carefully about what the goals of public relations practice are, about what the goals of each of our client’s activities are.

The goal is not communication; communication is process. The goal is not influencing opinion; opinion is process. It isn’t even changing attitudes. Although we may have to do all of those things, they are a process.

The goal is behavior. The outcome we’re seeking is to influence the hearts and minds of men and women so they behave in certain ways. So they prove by their actions that we have achieved positive public relationships, not just gone through the process of public relations.

The Six Types of Campaigns

There are a number of public relations campaigns, in fact, about six. First, we have the skills to put on a public awareness campaign, to make people aware of something: School is starting again, so please don’t run over first graders on their way. Simple awareness.

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Second, we have the skills to mount public information campaigns, to offer information along with awareness. Totally different than a simple awareness campaign.

Third, we have the skills to do a public education campaign; using the word education in the pedagogical way, meaning that a person has encompassed the material sufficiently, and is emotionally and attitudinally comfortable enough with it that he or she can actually apply it to daily behavior. We have the skills to run those campaigns.

But there are other kinds of campaigns that we must also prepare. Fourth, sometimes we must reinforce the attitudes and behavior of those who are in agreement with our position. All they may need is a reminder of shared values.

Ah, and sometimes, fifth, we have to change or attempt to change the attitudes of those who do not agree with our position. This requires creation of cognitive dissonance and is much tougher.

Sixth, and finally, we have the skills today to carry out behavior modification campaigns. To convince people, for instance, that they ought to wear their seatbelts or that drunk driving is neither in their or society's best interest. These are light years different from awareness or information campaigns.

These six types of public relations activity—and this is my list, of course; you should make your own and it may have five or eight types—are the process of our field. But note that each type attempts to motivate different levels of behavior. That's the reason we mount the campaigns. It's a little hard for us to deny, therefore, that behavior is the outcome we seek – not the thinking or feeling or even social interaction that precedes behavior. They are the means to an end.

Expect Unexpected Outcomes

Every communication or course of action is probably going to be countered in society. That's the nature of the democratic society. People will be skeptical even if they are not overtly doubting. We need to know that. And we need to know how to get through the skepticism in order to stimulate behavior. If we are only concerned with communications, for example, we may play right into that whirlwind of skepticism. People will feed back to us that they have received our message, but the real question is, have they acted on it?

We need to know how to get through the skepticism in order to stimulate behavior.

Here is an illustrated story about countered messages, which I'm told is true. It's from the field of religion. In the last twenty years, religious organizations have vigorously adopted public relations techniques. That makes me feel good. I figure if they have God on their side, but still need public relations, it says something pretty important about our profession. Well, the story is told by Lutherans that as they began teaching public relations to their individual churches, ministers got excited about using these techniques to fill the pews. Apparently one minister thought and thought

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about how he might use the techniques, and finally decided that the best public relations campaign available on his budget, which was nothing, was to use the bulletin board in front of this church. You know, those lighted, glass-covered signs that churches have in front of them. He decided he would use that, and he would create such a powerful message that it would bring people to church on Sunday. So he ruminated and cogitated about just what the right message might be.

Finally, one day in his study in the church about four o'clock, he came up with what he was sure was the right message. So he went out and put it up on the board, and went home for supper. What the message said was, "If you're tired of sin, come in." To show that every message, no matter who places it, will in fact be countered, when he came back from supper for prayer meeting that evening, there on the glass of the bulletin board was this message written in lipstick, "And if you're not, phone 753-6267."

Strategy Applies Process to Outcomes

The process of public relations doesn't deal with such an eventuality, but practitioners have to deal with it every day. This means if we're going to look beyond process toward outcomes, hopefully even predictable outcomes, we have to be strategic thinkers.

Let me give an example of how profound public relations activities are in terms of strategy. There are actually five things that happen anytime any public relations message or activity is undertaken. Five things are happening out there, and we have to keep our eye on all of them.

First, there is a direct impact of the message or action on the public at whom it is targeted.

Secondly, there are ramifications of that same message, or action, on other publics who are indirectly involved. For example, an employer may send a message to the employees that has to do with vacation time, health benefits, or what have you. The employees get the direct message and think it sounds pretty fair. Ah, but the indirect ramifications are that the reaction of the employees' spouses and families may be entirely different. So, we have to keep both of those audience levels in mind.

Third, there are perceptions of this action by other publics that are neither directly nor indirectly involved. Just the general public, if you will, looking interestedly at what is happening.

Fourth, there is a reputational effect. Is this action or message in keeping with what we always thought about that particular organization?

Fifth, there is always symbolic impact. Something we do that seems perfectly reasonable to us turns out to be a negative sign to an important public, and that public rebels.

It's sophisticated considerations like this that lead me to believe public relations can make a case for being the most difficult field. Someone did a study and concluded brain surgery was the hardest

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profession. Perhaps, but when the brain surgeon cuts through each person's cranium, at least the pieces are always in the same place. Have you ever heard of public relations situations that were predictive and orderly?

Writing Process

Another area where we get carried away with process is one that all of us in this room are deeply involved with. That is the very basic subject of writing. The reason I think we get carried away with the process of writing and forget the outcome of it is because good writing is so excruciatingly difficult.

But there is more to it than that. If you think about writing strategically, you recognize that writing is a thought recovery act. That's all writing is. Notice the implication: thought comes first. Yet, how many of us say, "I can't think without a typewriter in front of me," or "Let's get right to it. Let's write it down?" In public relations that can be fatal, because we all know that once we get words down, we aren't exactly our own best editors. Most of us do have at least a mild love affair with the words we put down. And so even this basic act of writing, at which we must all be expert, can become a process that diverts us from looking at the outcomes.

Ah, and now we have computer based electronic technology. It seems certain to focus us on the process, on the screen, on punching it in, not on recognizing that the computer is only the typewriter of our century. Just a tool. Human judgment and the application of human nature are still essential, even to computer users.

Media is Process

Probably the most difficult part of public relations practice today, when it comes to applying strategy to process, is the relationship practitioners have with the media. Lawyers are sometimes called ambulance chasers. In my view, too many public relations practitioners are media chasers. The news media themselves have a very difficult time analyzing and determining their role in setting public opinion and contributing to public debate, yet many public relations practitioners have elected the media to an absolutely God-like seat, as if all public opinion were set once and for all by what appears in the media. Of course we know better than that.

James Grunig, at the University of Maryland has been doing a series of bellwether studies on the actual impact of information through the news media or through other media on people's behavior. What he finds ought to be disconcerting to media chasers. I think it offers an excellent reason why we have to keep our eyes on the outcomes and not get caught up in the process.

Communication is Process

Information alone does not influence people. This has been proven by many studies previously. Jim's study, probably the most complete one that we have, involved drunk driving and is absolutely

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devastating to anyone who thinks information or communication has, in itself, the power to motivate. In his controlled sample of people who received information from a number of media on drunk driving, 67 percent didn't use it at all! Seventeen percent read it and threw it away. Only 6 percent read it and talked about it. And only 1 percent exhibited any behavior supporting, or even opposing, the drunk driving measures that were before the state legislature at the time Grunig was doing the study.

You may say, "But my organization wants me to concentrate on the media or other aspects of process." If so, then you have a professional responsibility to sell your organization on the realities of public relations, because I guarantee you that when the outcomes your management colleagues want are not there, guess who they will blame? And they will not be interested in the excuse that, "I was busy worrying about the media," or "I was busy using my computer." We have to look far beyond such processes in public relations practice today.

Short-Term Thinking Ties Us to Process

There are three ancillary points I would like to make before I close. The first is how easily we get caught up in short-term thinking instead of long-range thinking—a manifestation of our failure to concentrate on outcomes. A number of practitioners, for example, express the feeling that somehow it's who you know that makes you good in a field like public relations. This, it seems to me, is shirking the tough job of constantly meeting with and getting to understand the opposition groups, the selected officials, the opinion leaders—perpetual panoply of changing faces, not a pre-established "old boy or old general" network. I don't think you have to know people, I think you have to know how to work with people. Another short-term line of thinking, it seems to me, is failure to be aware of the linkages between our jobs, our specific responsibilities, and the outcomes, the ultimate objectives the organization is pursuing.

For example, if I am involved in internal communications, and those who are handling external communications do things that make it difficult for me, should I say, "Well, you know, it's not my area of concern, it's not my responsibility?" Or is that just ducking a sense of professionalism? Look at football for an example. What would the running back say if the lineman and the blocking backs didn't do a good job of taking out the opposition tacklers? Would he go back to the huddle and say, "Well, you know, that's not really my area of concern?" You know what he would do! He would knock heads in the huddle, and if that didn't work, he would go to the coach and say "Let's get somebody in here who can do this job."

Obviously, in our field, one has to do this with tact and diplomacy and respect for other people. But have we fallen into the bad habit of saying, "It's not my responsibility – and I don't want to criticize anyone?" If we do that, we have taken our eyes off the outcomes, off the results the organization wanted.

Ethics Help Us Seek Outcomes

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A second concern is that we must be pragmatic and, therefore, all this talk about ethics is really pretty important. There is a great irony about ethics, and it is that ethical behavior turns out to be far more pragmatic than hard-nosed, blinders-on pragmatism. Consider social responsibility programs, for which some see as “soft” or “giveaways.”

I have a hunch that social responsibility is the key not only to our professional philosophy, but to the survival of any organization in the American court of public opinion. Without socially responsible organizations, we cannot have, literally, a society. Without an organization like Ball Corporation that senses the need for exchange of views sponsoring a lecture series like this, and the many other things they, and so many other organizations, do beyond their normal work—without that, indeed, we could not have a civilized society. I suggest to you that it is this sense of social responsibility, which constitutes ethical behavior.

Priorities Lead Us To Outcomes

What are the loyalties of public relations practitioners? Our loyalties it seems to me are first to the democratic system. Without a system in which the public has a right to participate and to make the ultimate decisions we might not need public relations practitioners. Furthermore, we would not be the most successful nation the world has ever known. I think that is beyond dispute.

If our first loyalty is to the democratic system, then it follow pretty sensibly that our second loyalty is to ourselves. We are going to be true to our principles, which is only another way of saying that our second loyalty is to ourselves. We are going to be true to our principles. Thirdly, then, our loyalty is to our clients. Now that’s ironic. That people who pay us come third on the list.

But compare an example from public relations practice. It’s generally agreed, in corporate life, that the order of priority among the public’s companies deal with is customers first. Without them, we really don’t need the company.

Second is employees, because without them you can’t serve your customers. Third is the community, the society in which one does business. Fourth, or last, come the stockholders who own the business. Now that’s ironic too. Yet it’s only by paying attention to customers, employees and communities that stockholders can receive dividends, and participate in the success of a company that thrives and grows. We have years of experience to prove these ironies true.

Finally, there is a third manifestation from how we have pulled away from looking for outcomes and got tied up in process. It’s what I call practicing micro public relations, instead of practicing macro public relations. We get so busy representing our clients and employers, so busy worrying about things happening in narrow spheres, that we tend to forget the role of our organization in society, and more importantly the impact we can have in society.

Look at the world for illustration. Another national leader was assassinated yesterday, this time in India. We live in a period where priests are drowned in Poland, where prime ministers are bombed in

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England, where presidents are shot in our own country, and popes, abroad. In Ireland, we have a perpetual war that has been going on for hundreds of years; in the Middle East one that's been going on for thousands of years.

How safely, in this kind of world, can organizations seeking long-range outcomes overlook society? And how macro can our view of public relations skills be? I think our view can be almost total.

When I pick up a paper in the morning and I read about all the dire things, I am reminded of what Kerryn King said when he retired as the most highly placed public relations professional in our country. At that time, three years ago, he said, "Most elements of present day society are in hateful confrontation. Public relations professionals are peacemakers." I agree with Kerryn King. I think we can take a macro view of what we can do without skills by learning process but keeping our eyes on outcomes. I believe that if you look at all the professions available you will find there isn't another profession as well equipped as public relations to deal with the turmoil of today's world. I mean, are lawyers going to settle the situation?

They would have us all in court and it would go on interminably. The medical profession can't solve it. Certainly our religious leaders can't. Most of the wars going on are religious wars. Who is going to solve it? Educators? I hope so, but it takes us years and years to educate social solutions.

But public relations has the skills. By keeping its eye on the outcome, our field has the ability to do what Edward L. Bernays calls, "Bringing about accommodations in the court of public opinion, getting people to build relationships with one another." Out of those relationships comes respect, pretty soon cooperation, and then eventually loyalty. I am firmly convinced that the public relations profession has both the ability and the responsibility to start bringing about these outcomes.

Consider the alternative, like that provocative bumper sticker, "If you've seen one nuclear war you've seen them all." We have diplomatic programs in this country, and in most countries. We have military programs. We have information and propaganda programs. We have foreign aids programs. But have no true relationship building program, no people-to-people approach.

Take a few billion out of the pentagon budget—they would hardly miss it—and put it into a major public relations campaign between the people in our nation and the people of the world. I believe it will make a difference, but it won't happen until public relations professionals, those of us now in practice and those of you preparing for practice, begin to believe that public relations has the ability to motivate our outcomes as measured by human behavior.

Public relations is the art and science of dealing with perception. Therefore, we have a responsibility for subjects even as big as world peace.

All this blind hatred in our world is based on one people's perception of another people. Yet public relations is the art and science of dealing with perception. Therefore, we have a responsibility for subjects even as big as world peace. Certainly, we, as all humankind, have great self-interest in

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ending turmoil. Let's give it a try. We may discover that our ability to build relationships between people is so powerful that, indeed, we can bring about outcomes that benefit all mankind.