

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Philip Lesly – 1982*

Public relations has gone through continuous evolutions since it began- from the simple to the complex. It is now in a new stage of complexity. Consider the evolution:

Public relations began with getting favorable publicity for the client in the then available.

Then it became a two-way process – advising clients on how to look good to the public or get its support, as well as directing messages to the public.

As sophistication grew, public relations people became aware of various publics – employees, investors, communities and government. Separate communications skills were developed to deal with each of these.

We gradually became more sophisticated about what would and would not work in communication – the psychological factors of the audience’s self-interest, cognitive dissonance, third-party impact, credibility and so on.

Then the rapid changes in our society led to rapid segmenting of the audiences – mass education, powerful unions and activism. There developed a basic restiveness toward authority and power. People became assertive, demanding of entitlement, activist and arrogant.

THE HUMAN CLIMATE

Now we’re in a new phase that involves public relations with the very course the world is taking. The final segment of the Twentieth Century is being dominated by the human climate – the attitudes of people that determine how all segments of society will function.

The human climate is now a determining factor in the future of every organization, institution and nation. It is determining what happens in Poland and Russia; the massive shift toward meeting expectations of Latin America; what the shifts in balance will be in the Middle East – and what happens in every executive office in the world.

Emergence of the human climate as the dominant force creates both breathtaking opportunities and serious problems for the field of public relations. The opportunities are there if the people in the field are qualified, alert and unified enough to grasp them. But if they are not, the problems may sweep them aside.

First, let’s look at some of the major forces that have created the present human climate. They intertwine and affect each other.

Accelerated technology. It has vastly expanded the area in which people move, has multiplied the conveniences available to them, and has overcome many threats to health and life.

Availability of a higher living standard – activating those who attain it and building explosive frustration among those who do not.

Mass education, which has made millions feel that they are special, and therefore should have a say about everything. It also has expanded expectations greatly.

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Television, which has probably been the most influential single factor. It attunes everyone to visibility and action, rather than to thoughtfulness and contemplation. People now expect immediate information and immediate answers on every subject. Television plays on emotions rather than on facts and logic. Rural people get the same information as city people.

Glorification of democracy – conveying the sense that every individual can interfere with any process – demand, block, sue or harass.

Vast expansion of the social and economic structure.

The management revolution, which has placed in control of organizations and institutions people who are supremely practical minded and tend not to be attuned to the revolution of attitudes around them.

Buildup of a “New Class” of people who work with information and who seek to impose their standards on all segments of society – most of which they do not understand. A universal “sense of entitlement” – the feeling that “I’ll get mine” and that society owes everyone what he or she wants, thus justifying, grasping and cheating at all levels.

The sexual revolution helped by easy contraception and propelled by a sense that everyone is entitled to whatever makes him or her feel good.

Reversal of automatic progress. The drive toward entitlement and always getting more is running sharply into a shrinking reality. People’s psyches have been shocked and accommodations haven’t been made yet in their attitudes.

New dilemmas have been created by this array of simultaneous and interlocking forces that have transformed the frame of mind of the people.

We are now confronted by two tyrannies – opposed to each other but both attacking the heart of our social system. One is a growing tyranny of government. But a second tyranny can become even more devastating: the tyranny of the crowd. Many follow no leadership and respect no rules. They feel they can interfere with the working of any organization – that they can thwart government, business, education, the armed forces and law enforcement. Refusal to follow any rules is a rejection of all leadership, and without leadership there can only be disorder.

Our penchant for tabulating and classifying can create other errors. We hear about the extreme individualism and self-centeredness of people today – “the isolation of self” – but we have an explosion of cooperative groups concerned with nuclear power, energy, pollution, disarmament, and so on. We have antisocial individualism and a boom in new religions, accompanied by a startling readiness to submit to strange cults. Are people self-centered and pulling away from other, or are they suggestible and subject to being swept up in causes and cults? The answer is both, and we have to take that into consideration.

People now have a sense of instability that leads to frustration and fear. That leads to susceptibility to illogic and emotion – which can be fired up for causes or ideologies that happen to arise at the right time.

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This is a crisis of people's attitudes. Whatever the other problems – energy, inflation, global pressures – the consequences will be determined by how people perceive the situation and how they respond to it.

The preponderant importance of group attitudes is not just a phase we are passing through. The multiple pressures being brought on our system and institutions from many directions are now built in. The forces I've mentioned create activist pressures to force their type of change. And even when activists attain any of their objectives, they are not likely to fade away but will then seek new and more demanding causes. The pressures for change are now a force in themselves, not to be satisfied by the achievement of change.

Note that virtually all the problem areas I mentioned are concerned with the human climate. Every one is essentially a problem in human attitudes, rather than the material practicalities that are supposed to be the main province of the professional manager. Today the human climate is as important for the operation of all organizations as the natural climate is for the farmer.

The managerial revolution, which produces excellent professional managers who are disciplined to focus on facts and tangibles, has occurred at the same time as the revolution in public attitudes – all somewhat intangible and resistant to cataloging. Increasingly complex organizations require more sophisticated masters of facts; but as forces among the populace have become more complex they have become less susceptible to measurement and organization.

In dealing with mass psychology – with the human climate – I believe the biggest mistakes are made by extrapolating. Attitudes are so changeable and so susceptible to hundreds of factors that it's often more certain a trend won't continue than that it will.

PUBLIC RELATIONS' ROLE

Now that we've reviewed the nature and challenges of the new human climate, let us look at the problems and needs of the leaders of our organizations and the role public relations must play.

First, this is an age of action and visibility, requiring at the same time that we deal with problems in depth and yet immediately.

Second, managers who are accustomed to determining events are now faced most of the time with coping with events. Many of them are not prepared for such a diametrical shift. They want to impose their disciplined methods on the human climate. They expect public relations people to predict, to fulfill, to measure and to justify – just as they do their financial people, their production people and others.

Third, people have seen massive advances in those aspects of our system where technology is the key. Automation, using the new electronic techniques, has multiplied the output of industry and agriculture. Computers handle great masses of information and records that would inundate human

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capacities. But people expect the same multiplications of capabilities where human capacities are still the key, such as teaching and health care.

Fourth, there are two electronic revolutions going on – and they're in direct opposition to each other. One is the electronic revolution of television – instant emotion and involvement, putting emphasis on “human feelings” and quick solutions, opposing the “inhumanity” of slow-moving mechanisms and institutions. The other is the electronic revolution in the management of information ad systems – exemplified by the computer. It stresses facts, organization, hard reality, and elimination of he nuisance variables.

Our institutions are based on rules and standards, like computers; TV is based on emotion. Our institutions are based on history and tradition; TV on immediacy and novelty. Thus the conflict between institutions and individuals is heightened.

Fifth, public relations people are now visible pivoted between the institutions we represent and the critics of our society. So we face the antagonism of many elements – government, educators, intellectuals, many media people, and even many of the “practical” people in our own organizations. In fact, it is our position “in the middle,” where no one is ever completely loved by either side, that largely accounts for the unfavorable treatment public relations sometimes receives.

What are some of the most-pressing needs of managers in coping with the new complex demands on them?

THE PRACTITIONER'S FUNCTION

Among the functions that the public relations person should be expected to perform today are these: Input to management about the attitudes, concern, misunderstandings and needs for information among all publics that affect the organization

Input to management on the overall trends and general pattern of the human climate: What are the general concerns on people's minds, where are the trends of mass psychology and social intercourse headed, where will the target of “public opinion” be that we will expect to hit a couple of years from now?

Providing insight into where the various wheels of our social and economic structure mesh and how the organization can accommodate to them.

Help in developing policies by providing sensitive judgment about human reactions, weighing the probable effects of various alternatives and expressing those policies for best effect.

Monitoring various plans and activities of the organization and providing judgment about their likely immediate and long-term effects on the publics involved.

Utilizing communication in all facets – including personal involvement – to bring the organization into confluence with the attitudes of the public rather than into the conflict with them. That involves many skills, but the most vital one is skillful use of language. Recent permissiveness has pretended that if a message approaches what is meant, it's okay. But communications that are “almost right” can be as disastrous as an “almost right” 23-foot leap over a 25-foot abyss. The importance of excellent

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writing cannot be overemphasized. Most people use language like underwear, merely to cover the subject; a few use it like lingerie, to show it at its best. They're the ones who beguile their audiences.

Dealing with misunderstandings and conflicts that arise between the organization and any of its publics by acting as a catalyst and intermediary, and then by directing communications to create the best mutual adjustments possible.

Planning, preparing and conducting all communications functions – usually arising out of these previous considerations – between the organization and all of its publics. Specific techniques of communication may be assigned elsewhere – such as product advertising – but their role in the total impact of the organization should be considered as part of the whole.

Tuning in to the feedback resulting from all actions and communications of the organization, to assess what is happening to the human climate, to convey judgment on these developments to management and to help modify the process accordingly.

Those are the needs public relations people will have to meet. They culminate in communicating effectively. Now let's look at the psychology of communication – how people can be reached and how to avoid turning them off or being ignored.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

It has long been assumed that if people are out there, we can reach them with messages. That's always been too simplistic – and it's getting less accurate all the time. It is being complicated by the growing sophistication of the audience, the great increase in the number of messages and media aimed at people, their reduced tendency to read and to pay attention.

We're learning that it's almost impossible to reverse a trend of public opinion through communications efforts alone. However, once a trend had begun to swing around, we can greatly accelerate it by focusing public opinion on it.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

There are some guidelines that make effective communication possible:

- - - Approaching everything from the viewpoint of the audience's interest – what's on their minds, what's in it for them.
- - - Giving the audience a sense of involvement in the communication process and in what's going on. Get them involved and you get their interest.
- - - Making the subject matter part of the atmosphere the audience lives with – what they talk about, what they hear from others. That means getting the material adopted in their channels of communication.
- - - Communicating with people, not at them. Communication that approaches the audience as a target makes people put their defenses up against it.
- - - Localizing – getting the message conveyed as closing to the individual's own milieu as possible. Using a number of channels of communications, not just one or two. The impact is far greater when it reaches people in a number of different forms.

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- - -Maintaining consistency – so what’s said on the subject is the same no matter which audience it’s directed to or what the context is.
- - -Still, tailor-making each message for the specific audience as much as possible.
- - -Not propagandizing but making sure that you make your point. When a communicator draws conclusions in his summation of information, it’s more effective than depending on the audience to draw its own conclusions.
- - -Maintaining credibility – which is essential for all of these points to be effective.

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND PR’S FUTURE

An important determinant of the future of public relations, of course, will be the rush of new technology that affects communication.

There is an apparent contradiction: The new electronic communications will simultaneously be a force for segmenting people into more and more separate groups.

For example, satellite transmission of radio and television signals makes it possible to reach directly millions of people almost everywhere in the world with the same messages. That will get many distant people to understand the same viewpoint. It will accelerate the understanding of the languages used in those transmissions – speeding the process by which one or another language becomes a worldwide standard. It will also eliminate control over those messages by intermediate editors and governments.

At the same time, the electronic revolution will lead to a vast increase in the number of voices. We already see a multiplying of special-interest publications and narrowcast broadcasts. That will be augmented by even more periodicals and broadcast voices, plus availability of audio cassettes and video recordings that can be inexpensively circulated like library books.

Almost anyone with access to a computer will be able to tap reference material almost anywhere. Knowledge that used to be confined to a few affluent organizations, usually in metropolitan centers, will be available to millions of people. That may have the expansive effect that printing had after Gutenberg’s invention of movable type.

The transmission of messages by computers and facsimile makes it possible to get exactly the same message to many places at exactly the same time and virtually immediately.

Direct reproduction of manuscripts with word processors and direct setting of type with cathode tube reproducers will by pass stenographers and typesetters, greatly reducing costs and increasing speed.

Cable television not only permits breaking up audiences into many narrow segments; it makes it possible to get responses from the audience – making mass communication for the first time truly two-way communication. Cable creates participation by people not only by broadening the number of channels, so many people can be heard, but by giving people a voice and a share in the communication process.

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The combination of satellites, cable, word processors, facsimile and computer transmission greatly reduces the importance of location and distance. Two people in London and Chicago can deal with each other almost as well as if they were on two floors of the same office building.

The use of satellites to conduct meetings at distant points – called teleconferencing – will also have various effects. People in far apart places will get to understand each other better because they will have direct exchanges of sight and sound. Much travel will be made unnecessary. Vast volumes of paper and the costs of mail and courier services will be reduced, while costs of electronic transmissions will be low.

We know what the transistor radio did to transform many isolated areas. We can only guess at what this new, much more extensive and powerful extension of electronic communication will do. Many people in the Second and Third Worlds will have their knowledge and skills greatly accelerated through the easy availability of what the advanced world has to offer. They will also have a chance to inject their interests into the flow of communication. In the process they will adopt the language or languages in which the communications are conducted. Thus the new electronic revolution may be the greatest force for unifying the world around one or a few major centers since the rush toward colonization in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries.

One of the greatest decisions to be made in many advanced countries in the next five year may be how to foster their language and culture by taking the lead in this process. Will English become even more a unifying cord? Decisions about technology and licensing being made for other reasons may well have tremendous effects on where future centers of influence will be located.

All of this, of course, has monumental importance for public relations. The nature of the publics we must deal with, the extent of the influences affecting the human climate, the number and nature of the channels we can use, the principles of communication and persuasion, the relationships with governments, clients, media, all of these are being transformed rapidly. Only by being alert to developments and even more important, by analyzing the currents and implications of what is happening can a public relations professional keep abreast of the new needs.

DETERMINING FACTORS OF THE FUTURE

We've seen some of the factors that will determine what public relations can do about the future. We've seen what can be accomplished with the right skills. It's apparent that the need for top-caliber expertness in public relations is paramount and growing. There is increasing need for broad-gauged understanding of the human climate, for input of fresh thinking, for knowing what can and what cannot be communicated, for skill in directing the public relations functions.

Accordingly, here are some factors that will determine the future of public relations:

Our top professional managers, as we've seen, are specialists in tangibles and measurability. That's what it takes to run a big and complex organizations today are in the outside world of intangibles and public attitudes. We must be management oriented so we can gain the confidence of top

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management and understand its needs, while at the same time helping management people deal with human-climate areas.

We have to satisfy management's demands for measurability but not settle for it.

Public relations, like other fields, is being segmented as it grows. There are people specializing in government, health care, educational institutions, associations, politics, minority groups and others, as well as business.

Public relations people are being confined to pigeon-holes. More and more spending all their time in one-function – speech writing, government affairs, media relations, community relations and so on.

Public relations is now an international force. What happens in dozens of nations affects how public relations develops and how it's utilized.

New dimensions are being added to the responsibilities and opportunities of public relations people. Two-way relationships between the client or employer and the publics deal only with what is apparent and immediate. More and more, we are recognizing that we can't deal with the problems unless we go well below the surface and understand what forces create the attitudes, suspicions, antagonisms and apathy we must deal with. We must understand the social, political and psychological forces all over the world that will determine the conditions faced by our clients and employers when decisions of today are taking effect. And we must develop awareness of what the consequences can be.

Whatever courses is followed, the challenges for people in this field seem to be clear:

They must be exceptionally broad-gauged – the perspective, interests, intelligence, judgment and skills.

They must be multi-dimensional. Being the best of any one type will not be enough – whether manager, writer or politician.

They must combine both types of brain – the practical and the intuitive.

They must be masters of the full spectrum of communicating – all types, in all directions – and especially writing.

These requirements call for a lifetime education process, for reading the best thought in this field, on the social patterns, on the psychology of people. The need is increasingly for broader-gauged public relations people.

Increasingly, there is a premium on the best brains, the broadest experience, the soundest judgment, the best skills. At the same time, there is a downgrading of the more pedestrian technical abilities unless they fit into the broadly challenging context that managements face. Depth, judgment, professionalism are the context in which the value of one's skills will be measured.

Where management finds that it can turn with confidence to public relations people in coping with the real problems of our era – those that make up the serious and perplexing people factor – those public relations people will move up in the councils of management.

The challenges that confront public relations seem formidable and confounding. But at a time when the great majority of people are being pigeonholed – when the proportion of our contemporaries who

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live lives of quiet boredom and desperation is constantly increasing – we can expect to find excitement, new challenges, variety and a role at the center of where the decisions on the future will be reached. The Chinese considered it a curse to live in interesting times, but we can be thankful for the blessing of being in an interesting craft during an interesting era.