

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Betsy Plank – 1997*

Every honored guest at this lecture platform has begun by paying tribute to the colleagues who have preceded him or her. And so do I.

Of those 18 men and women, eight have been honored by the Public Relations Society of America with its Gold Anvil—the highest accolade which the profession can bestow. All 18 have distinguished themselves in the practice. So I'm well aware that I am walking in the company of giants this evening.

The annual lectureship itself is a tribute to the life and work and vision of another giant—Vernon Schranz—and all of us in the community of public relations owe a debt to him for inspiring it, and to the Ball Corporation and Ball State University for establishing this forum which honors him. And I shall have more to say about the significance of that later.

As I was rereading the lectures, I was sadly aware that we have lost three of their authors this year—Phillip Lesly, Dr. Dorothy Gregg and David Ferguson. All three were friends as well as colleagues. I miss them and am grateful for their legacy—not only for me, but especially for those of you here who personify the next generation of public relations.

In January when I visited Dave Ferguson in the hospital, our last conversation was about this October evening. I told him that I would be following in his footsteps here. I also confessed some friendly frustration with him because, “Dave, you gave my speech!” And we laughed together about that.

And indeed he had. His topic was formal education for public relations—a mission which had claimed the enthusiasm and commitment of both of us for many years. So when I was invited to this platform, my immediate thought had been, “I'll talk about public relations education, of course!”

But I promptly discovered that Dave had been there first and covered the subject so wisely and well that there was little more to do except salute his views. However—fair warning!—you won't escape a post-script from me on the subject later.

Ever since Dr. Sharpe's invitation arrived last November, I've been thinking about you and making notes for this speech—in notebooks, in the margins of books, magazines and newspapers, on dog-eared folders for airline tickets, check deposit stubs, and yes, Mr. Lincoln, the back of old envelopes. Whatever was handy in transit or in the middle of the night.

Then, a couple of months ago, graduate assistant Michelle Tveten called, asking, “What's your speech title?” I didn't know. I hadn't even thought about a title yet. I looked at my unkempt collection of notes and early pages labeled “Ball State” and—since it was summer, which was punctuated for aboard a wonderful old wooden boat on Lake Michigan—the nautical vocabulary was very much with me. So out came—“Public Relations Fore and Aft: Some Sightings Under Way.” Most surely that could cover anything and everything—right?

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Well not quite. Because I've exerted some discipline and distilled those year-long thoughts to a mere nine. (I wouldn't presume to emulate Moses and reach for 10!)

The first "observation under way" is that public relations is a work in progress. Has been; is today; always will be.

With apologies to early pioneers such as Ivy Lee and Arthur W. Page, John Hill and Edward Bernays and others—all of whom still light our way—let's take a fifty-year timeline beginning with World War II. I know it best because I walked—or ran—almost every step of it.

The pent-up desire of consumer goods exploded on the American scene. Public relations wartime messages of "Buy Bonds" and "Loose lips sink ships" were replaced by peacetime urgings to buy cars, get a second phone, home-perm your hair with Toni, fight polio through the March of Dimes.

Those were halcyon days of product publicity—primarily through the mass media, which was being joined by a miracle called television.

There were only a handful of schools preparing students for the field, so it was logical that most of those entering came from mass media—usually newspapers. That's why you can still scratch practitioners of my vintage and hear many say, "Who needs education for public relations? Just tell those kids to study journalism, get a job on a newspaper first and then get into the business—like I did!"

In the late '40s and '50s, the economy was the primary propellant of public relations—and still is to a giant extent.

The entry of many people into the stock market soon sparked the need for financial public relations. So that string was added to the bow of the practice. Employee information and special events and speech writing were also on that agenda.

In the '60s, social trends began to exert a powerful influence on the evolution of public relations. The public was talking back to business, to government and the military and to all established institutions. Our society was becoming fragmented, unruly and vocal. Men and women began to question rudely and out loud, to march and protest, picket and boycott. To say and chant "No!"

Business felt that impact, of course. So did public relations. As a result, there was growing emphasis on consumer and community relations, for dealing with civil rights, environmental and advocacy groups and for new relationships and initiatives with the government, which was imposing more and more restrictions and regulations on how business operated.

In the social sector, more and more groups were being forged to address problems of poverty, disenfranchisement and health. Such non-profit groups also employed public relations tactics in the competitive struggle for public attention and support.

We've seen those trends escalate in the '70s, '80s and '90s. Affirmative action found its voice and day in court. Diversity became a goal that's still with us. And most surely the global marketplace became a reality—not simply for major corporate players, but for medium-sized and small

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enterprises as well, for farms, cities, states, for heartland communities such as this, and yes, for universities. For all of us.

All institutions and enterprises were—and are—being held to higher standards of performance, responsibility, and responsiveness—by government, owners, employees, and customers, by communities of special interests and society-at-large.

The besieged business sector began to look to public relations for identification of and research about issues and their potential impact. We were not longer simply the firefighters and purveyors of “good news”—new products and new services, expansions and acquisitions and growth. We were—*are*—expected to see new threats and opportunities on the horizon, to assess their potential for harm or advantage, to anticipate, strategize and plan ahead, and to evaluate. We became responsible for crisis planning and reputation management, for identifying out enterprise with the public interest.

That evolution in the public relations practice became apparent to me after jumping ship from agency to corporate life in the mid-seventies.

For 25 years before, I had dealt primarily with media relations, marketing public relations, writing speeches, producing print materials—annual reports, brochures, newsletters. At the Bell System, I inherited a department of more than a hundred people—most of them responsible for either research, community educational and consumer relations, economic development, urban affairs, planning corporate philanthropy, executive speeches and memberships, or yes, issues management. In my 17 years with the company, not one of those men and women ever initiated or produced a press release. Not one. That was the responsibility of a division called Media Relations—and indeed, a very important one. On the other hand, our responsibility was to interface with external constituencies—not through the middlemen of media—but mostly face-to-face.

It was a responsibility which reflected, in my view, the expanding reach of public relations practice. And you are part of that evolution, too, that continuum of change and growth.

That’s really the point which this litany seeks to make. Public relations is on a continuum of change and growth, subject to the needs and trends of the economy, government and society, to the problems and aspirations of society-at-large. And students such as you will help to shape the response of the profession to those ever-changing factors.

That broad umbrella of observation leads me to be second fore-and aft-sighting. Public relations people must be eternal students. The best among them already are. Graduation from such fine institutions as this—even with honors—is not a signal that one is prepared to practice for a career lifetime. It’s simply a license to hit the turf running and to keep learning.

In that sense, we are much like the contemporary medical field, where so much is being discovered and researched every day, so much is changing about the delivery of service and the expectations

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of patients, so much is being influenced by the miracles of technology, that the responsible physician must be a constant student of his or her science and art.

Let me cite two broad dimensions of our study.

First—knowing our clients. One of the Original Sins of many in the early practice was that we were not excellent students of our client organizations. We were not inherently business-wise in our craft. On the contrary, it is incumbent upon us to know that organization, where its culture is, how it operates, produces and delivers, serves its customers, to be disciplined by today's business plan and tomorrow's vision, to know and understand the motivations of multiple constituencies—employees, customers, owners, management and many external communities. And to make it even more complex, increasingly those group distinctions blur and overlap.

Beyond that, our continuing study calls for a second imperative—knowing the larger society in which that organization lives and seeks to survive and thrive. That's what, I trust, your liberal arts education was all about. Or rather, it has been a beginning in that lifetime process of insatiable reading, of continuing education, of insatiable reading, personal encounter with diverse groups and—insatiable reading! And I hope you bring to that responsibility a skill with the tools of research.

As many before me have said, public relations deals with the stuff of human behavior—manifested in individuals and in groups. We must understand their motivations if we presume to persuade, to reconcile, to effect change when warranted.

That's a curriculum of study for a lifetime.

The third and fourth observations concern opportunities. That Bible of modern management, *The Harvard Business Review*, noted its 75th year recently. In its August/September issue, it documented the thoughts of five experts—people who, like Peter Drucker, it characterized as powerful thinkers and observers of management. The Review wrote, "What is perhaps the most interesting about their comments is how each thinker has identified challenges that are not so technical or rational as they are cultural...The continuing challenge for executives (thus) is not technology, but the art of human—and humane—management."

Drucker, for example talks about the advent and importance of "knowledge workers"—a breed of employees that identifies itself by its knowledge, not by the company that pays them. Another expert speaks of companies as "communities of Leaders and Learners"—leaders defined not only as those in executive positions or with line responsibilities, but internal networkers, often people with no formal authority, but with significant influence.

Put that together with employee disenchantment fostered by the early '90s rash of reorganizing, restructuring, downsizing and rightsizing, and you can easily read the runes for public relations: a new approach to and imperative for employee relations, working hand-in-hand with human resources. No longer a dependence on one-way communication, but a more collaborative approach

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and two-way dialogue which respects the intelligence, value and dignity of employees and recognizes the importance of their performance and stake in the present and future of the enterprise.

That's a formidable challenge for public relations professionals and an unprecedented opportunity which elevates the world of employee relations, too long and often a taken-for-granted stepchild in our practice.

The other major opportunity I wanted to cite for public relations—and thus for you—is one I only recently discovered. (See—one never ceases learning!) It concerns the environment.

Now you and I know about the environment advocacy groups, of course. They're vocal, passionate, sometimes organized, sometimes not, frequently rough-and-tumble and righteous. No one of sound minds wants to tangle with them.

However—

What I wasn't aware of until recently is that by June 21, 1999—less than two years away—66,000 facilities in this country will be required by law to file a report of "worst case scenarios" of toxic disasters for which they could be responsible. That report must not only be made to the Environmental Protection Agency—the ubiquitous EPA—but also made available to the public—to local communities. (Editor's note: The EPA later confirmed this in a press announcement on April 6, 1998.) What kinds of 66,000 facilities are we talking about? Yes, the ones you'd expect—chemical and utilities—and also firms in lumber, food processing, textiles, electronic and electrical equipment, leather, glass, water treatment. Any firm—or government group—using a large amount of chemicals. And some are very unexpected—for example, in Wisconsin, nursing homes are required to have quantities of propane gas for emergency back-up power. They too are subject to worst-case-scenario reporting. And many are in local residential neighborhoods, some near schools.

Key to us is that the public will have access to these reports. Initially, they will probably go to local Emergency Planning Committees which exist in every county in the country. Speaking of the long arm of globalization—those committees were put in place following the 1993 disaster in Bhopal, India, where toxic emissions from a Union Carbide plant resulted in the death of more than 3,000 people. Up to now, most of the committees have been inactive, but by mid-1999, their plates will be very full indeed.

So will the plates of 66,000 facilities which must not only 1) file those worst-case scenarios, but then 2) face the inevitable and outspoken concerns, protests and demands of an aroused public.

Most of those facilities have never dealt with the public—much less environmental groups. Again, you can read the runes of public relations opportunity as well as I: an unparalleled need for a full panoply of community relations—advisory panels, fact sheets, brochures, videos, reader-friendly technical information, workshops, open houses. And lest we forget—media relations, crisis communications, issues analysis and management.

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Companies are beginning to scramble to meet the 1999 deadline. And in their scramble and search for answers, they just may tap some of you for community relations rescue. It's an unprecedented opportunity and challenge. Or as we public relations veterans are inclined to opine: Blessed be the problems, for we are the problem-solvers. They give us tenure!

Yes, Providence has given us a multiplicity of problems to address. And I bring just those two—a renewed approach to employee relations and new environmental challenge—to your table of opportunity.

My fifth observation: Watch and study vigilantly what's happening in communications media.

Once upon a time, mass media was the *sina qua non* of public relations. The placement of a favorable story was the bread-and-butter—the staff and staple of professional life. To some extent, it still is—and probably always will be. But its dominance is waning rapidly.

Traditional print media suffers from competition from new technology, from decline in readership of daily newspapers. There is a growing specialization in publications. The once mass audience is becoming a collection of special interests. Cable television is swamping the established networks. (Fiber optic cable systems will soon put 500 channels at a viewer's clicker command!) And most significantly and worrisome, research tells us that readers and viewers have increasing skepticism and distrust of the mass media.

(The loss of media credibility was the subject of a recent annual meeting of the Arthur W. Page Society, and organization of senior public relations executives. Its sessions about mass media had a very melancholy sound—as is one were listening to a report about the weakening of a once all-powerful player on the communications field.)

The real revolution today, however, is in private media. The world of modems and CD-ROMS, cyberspace and Internet is producing a whole generation that communicates via personal computer. Public relations people have been prompt to create Web pages to reach this remarkable new generation. What's really revolutionary, however, is a shift in control—the individual's power to talk instantly, to have easy access to information which media and out kinds have so long husbanded and screened.

In our effort to seize and embrace this new technology, let's keep in mind that what we are really experiencing is a cultural sea change and we don't yet know its full dimensions.

In the late '70s, during a lecture about the then-new technology, I raised some questions about its perils and promises. Primarily—will information overload paralyze our decision-making ability? Will such technology impair private and public discourse, the face-to-face encounters which have been glue of a democratic society? And what responsibilities do we, as public relations people, have in making that technology work for human advantage rather than for isolation and alienation?

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As part of the new computer generation, you students and educators are much more qualified than I to seek and find those answers. It's a challenge I bring and leave you with tonight. In your classrooms now and your practice tomorrow, I commend those changing behaviors for your attention, concern and study.

My sixth point is that irresistible postscript about public relations education—with apologies to you Up There, Dave Ferguson!

It begins with a personal message to those of you here who are studying public relations at Ball State: You don't yet realize how very lucky you are!

Perhaps you sense it. And if so, let me confirm that suspicion.

While there are countless schools of higher education whose catalogs assert that they teach public relations, I'm confident about only 200 or so. By requesting a charter from the Public Relations Society for one of its student chapters, those schools commit to offer at least five courses in public relations study. And God Bless them, I believe it when they say they do!

Some programs—but not all or enough—have adequate staff of highly qualified full-time faculty as you do at Ball State. Few are as well-equipped with the tools of modern technology. Not all or enough of an Advisory Council to provide outside perspectives. Not all have a master's degree program which you've claimed here for almost 30 years. That makes a profound, scholarly difference in both the undergraduate and graduate programs, believe me. And graduates from those programs continue to populate the profession superbly.

So you students have much to be proud of and you'll realize that even more when you set foot in the practice.

Today, most public relations programs are housed in speech communication or in journalism as yours is. Both homes bring advantages to the study. The former because it stresses organizational communication and persuasion—areas that have increasing importance to public relations. The latter because it stresses the value of writing. Not simply wordsmithing, but writing as it pertains to thought, research, analysis of the audience for which the message is intended, then accuracy and excellence in expressing that message.

Your program here seeks the best of both approaches—and it succeeds.

I share with you two visions on my Wish List for public relations education. One is that more programs follow Ball State's example. The other is that public relations finds its way eventually into an independent department—better yet, a college of its own. Yes, wishful thinking perhaps. But in this era of communications and its massive social impact, I feel sure that will happen somewhere. It would make a significant contribution to the university-at-large, helping students in all disciplines to sort out the avalanche of information and messages and to develop critical thinking and judgment.

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My seventh sighting under way follows logically. And it keeps my earlier promise to comment about this annual lecture platform. It honors, as you know, the first vice president of public relations of the Ball Corporation, Vernon Schranz. The corporation established this lecture 18 years ago and it is now recognized world-wide as a significant contribution to the field.

Then—before he died—Mr. Schranz endowed an undergraduate scholarship in public relations.

I met him only once—in 1982 on this campus. But he and I had much in common, I think. He had not studied formally for public relations. Neither had I. It simply wasn't readily available in our undergraduate years. But we soon fell in love with the career field—and most particularly, with its students and their education.

We also, I believe, shared conviction about support for public relations education. His was—and is—self-evident. In my case, let me give you some brief background.

Ten years ago, Dr. William Ehling and I chaired the Commission charged with developing guidelines for public relations education. It was the second such commission and this year, a third has been appointed for the same purpose. After extensive research and countless meetings with Commission colleagues, Bill Ehling and I sat down—he at Syracuse University and I at Illinois Bell—to draft the report. Since Bill was the scholar on our duet, he had the daunting task of outlining the recommended content of a public relations curriculum. I was responsible for writing the rest. My favorite section had to do with support of education by the professional community. It disguised—in polite, politic phrases—my passionate concern about the need for such support—and the widespread lack of it.

For example—too few practitioners or their companies contribute financially to programs of public relations education. Too few have endowed lectureships such as this—although I hasten to say that the first Schranz speaker, Ed Block, endowed through AT&T a lecture series at the University of Texas/Austin in the early '80s. I am aware of only one endowed Chair of Public Relations on any campus. I am not altogether confident that many professionals—even public relations alumni—yet make room in their wills for bequests to universities for their public relations programs.

The good news is that many professionals do contribute generously of their time and interest to such programs—as guest speakers in classrooms and seminars, as members of advisory groups to programs, to PRSSA, and student agencies, as PRSSA Professional Advisors. An increasing number, 45 this year—contribute to the national scholarship for outstanding PRSSA juniors and seniors. And 147 are members of the Friends of PRSSA, a group which sponsors those scholarships as well as chapter awards for excellence and supplements PRSA's commitment and support for its students.

So the cup is half full, half empty—that empty portion obviously in the area of financial support to public relations programs in colleges and universities.

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That brings me full circle to Vernon Schranz and the Ball Corporation. Their convictions and what they have done—through this lectureship and his scholarship—are examples for others. And yet another reason for you to be very proud of this program which commands and deserves so much respect.

My salute to them—and dismay that their leadership is so lonely—come with a request to you students that I trust you will tuck in your memory file for future action. It's a plea that--when you're successful in the business of public relations—you'll remember Vernon Schranz' example. And when you become vice president—or president—that you will see that your firm contributes to this program which has served you so well. Meantime, while you're still paying off those student loans and building a career, stay in touch with your university and become a role model for those who take your place in the classroom.

My sighting number eight is also about contributions. Curiously, it is often obscured from public view and appreciation. It is the enormous work which public relations people and their firms do—pro bono—for the public good-and-welfare.

In any community today, there is scarcely a worthy cause which does not claim the personal energy, time and expertise of the men and women of public relations. They are visible on boards and committees and on the line as well. They work and counsel countless volunteer hours. Their interests span the established organizations—Boy and Girl Scouts, United Way, civic, cultural and environmental groups, social agencies, schools, churches and hospitals, the Red Cross, YW and YMCA, organizations dedicated to fighting disease—cancer, Alzheimer's, AIDS, heart, MS, cerebral palsy, mental health. But they also reach to the less conspicuous—neighborhood associations, child care, food pantries, help for the homeless, tutoring programs for disadvantaged programs, groups concerned with civil right and abuse and other causes growing from the distemper of our times. In a list as endless as the needs themselves, you will always find the public relations volunteer. It's not a new phenomenon. Not long ago, I discovered that in its early years, PRSA periodically surveyed its members to ask what pro bono work they have done in the past year. The response was more than impressive. It was startling.

I don't know or understand why that effort at documentation was abandoned. I suspect it was swamped by other priorities. But I believe that time for such an annual inventory has come again.

Each year, PRSA does recognize and honor—through its Paul Lund Award—a member who has made most significant contributions to community service. But that one honored person represents legions of others. We should again ask all of them to stand up and be counted.

One can only guess what motivates this groundswell of community work by our fraternity. Is it because we are problem-solvers? Congenital activists? Is our psychic skin especially sensitive to human needs? Are we programmed by our practice in the business arena to apply those skills to resolving human problems as well? Or—to put a less benign face on it—is it because we love what we do? Or because such work connects us with constituencies which would otherwise be difficult to know? Or to work with them toward mutual objectives?

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Probably a little of all of the above.

Whatever the motivations, it appears to be part of the collective character of public relations men and women to be involved and contributing members of the community. It's a remarkable and influential attribute of our profession and one that deserves to be appreciated, recognized and respected.

That brings me to my ninth and final point. And it, too, calls for recognition and respect. It comes from the annals of history.

Some 30 years ago, the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education—now the Institute—established its own annual lecture. The first one was presented by the noted historian, Dr. Alan Nevins. It traced the roots of public relations to the founding of this republic.

I wasn't there to hear his address, but I came upon its published version some years later and on many a dreary and discouraging day, this aging history major has read it over and over again.

Dr. Nevins called his paper, "The Constitution Makers and the Public." On the first page, he quoted from a book by a distinguished colleague, Professor Broadus Mitchell, of Rutgers University. In a chapter called "The Art of Persuasion," he had discussed the Federalist Papers, which were mostly written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. Professor Mitchell wrote, "In parrying blows against and enlisting support for the Constitution, the authors of The Federalist did the best job of public relations in history."

That quote set the tone for Dr. Nevins' lecture about Hamilton and Madison and the struggle to establish the Constitution. Dr. Nevins concluded it by saying, "These labors may well be studied by all workers engaged in the varied, complex and difficult tasks of public relations. They teach certain clear lessons of methods; and they teach a still more important moral lesson, for they prove that to men of courage, determination, reason and tact, no sound public task, whatever the odds, is impossible."

I read that—as I always do—with chills and pride. I hope you will, too, when you read the copy here for each of you tonight.

This slender volume reminds us of our inheritance: that public relations is a product and practice rooted in the genius of a democratic society—one in which its citizens make choices—in the voting booth, in the marketplace and the workplace, in their everyday lives. Our mandate is to be a part of that precious process of choice—informing, persuading, contributing to honest, ethical debate and consensus.

Young men and women, take charge of that powerful responsibility. With skill and integrity, courage, determination, reason and tact, nurture it well. And promise to pass it on!

Godspeed and God bless.