

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Fraser P. Seitel – 1992*

The year 2000, as incredible as it sounds, is but seven years away. That's all. Some occurrences in the Year 2000 already are eminently predictable.

The more difficult question is – what will happen in the Year 2000 to our field, to public relations? On the one hand, the practice of public relations has never been stronger. The term “public relations” no longer provokes the cynicism, skepticism and disdain that it did 25 years ago when I started in this field.

Today, thanks as much as anything else to quality education programs like this one at Ball State, the practice of public relations is admired and respected by many, and even its critics have grown grudgingly to acknowledge and accept the power and pervasiveness of public relations work. As a consequence, this field today is a popular one – practiced by hundreds of thousands of individuals around the world, many of whom occupy important executive positions within their organizations, and an increasing number of whom earn salaries in the six figure range.

It has been an amazing transformation in 25 years.

On the other hand, public relations has never been under such intense pressure as it is today. The proliferation of mergers and consolidations, takeovers and downsizings that have ripped through America and that have triggered major repercussions overseas and that probably pose the primary reason why we will have a new president in 80 days, also have taken a tremendous toll on the public relations business.

Jobs have been lost. Survivors have been demoted. New positions have been cancelled. And the openings that are available are besieged by hundreds of eager applicants, many of whom are well qualified but only a handful of whom will win the job.

This, regrettably, is the reality – the uncertainty – that rips the public relations business today. And it's true in companies as well as agencies. And it's not indigenous only to our business but reflects the state of the market in a broad cross-section of the American economy.

But that's the bad news today. What about tomorrow and the Year 2000?

The answer to that question, I believe, is much more hopeful – much more optimistic. Because with uncertainty, as Confucius or Bobby Knight or somebody once said – also comes opportunity. And the escalating, irrefutable importance in our society of communications – to companies, governments, associations, schools, hospitals, everyone – will continue to lead to enormous opportunities for professional communicators, that is, for professionals trained and experienced in the practice of public relations.

Indeed, I am convinced that, based on the expanding communications needs of society, coupled with the higher caliber of the people who populate our profession, the best years for public relations practice are yet to come.

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Clearly, to take advantage of the new opportunities will require a new breed of public relations professional – one different, more decisive and frankly better than his or her predecessors. I see this new professional possessing a half dozen distinct characteristics that will be critical in the year 2000. These qualities not only will sustain us individually in the next century, but will lift our profession to greater acceptance and respectability than it enjoys today.

Tonight, I'd like to share this list of six qualities with you. Since we are in a university setting, and since when I attended a university I rarely got A's, I shall call this collection of qualities, "the B list."

Be Professional

My first "B" is – be professional.

By this I mean, know what the practice of public relations is all about, what it stands for and what triggered its emergence. We who practice public relations should understand that understanding is the key to our profession. And that we aren't in the business of confusing or distorting or obfuscating or lying.

We must also recognize that every time someone in public relations is accused of bending the truth – all of us in this practice suffer. Our cardinal rule must always be "to tell the truth."

Being professional also means standing for something. We are, at base, professional communicators. Our communications standards, therefore must remain high, and we must take pride in the communications products for which we are responsible.

And today, in a society where communications standards are defined by the likes of Geraldo and Arsenio, Hard Copy, A Current Affair and the National Star, keeping standards high is no easy task. (If it's any consolation, I think we've finally touched bottom. On the way to the airport today, I heard a radio debate between Jessica Hahn and Gennifer Flowers in which the former accused the latter of giving "sleaze" a bad name!)

My point is that we in public relations – particularly young people in this field – should affix ourselves to a higher standard. We should resist succumbing to the pandemic popularity of pandering, and of gossip, and of sleaze, that dominate today's communications business.

We should, as Schranz lecturer Denny Griswold has preached, "be proud of what we write and what we recommend and what we represent." And we should never accept second-class status to the lawyers or the marketers or the personnel people or anyone else.

We, ourselves, must believe that ours is an essential profession. And we must conduct ourselves accordingly.

Be Generalized Specialists

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Second, we must be generalized specialists.

By that I mean that the old notions that people in public relations must be generalists, rather than specialists, simply won't cut it in the years ahead.

The competition is just too ferocious today. You must have a "leg up" to differentiate yourself from the others. Now don't get me wrong. Every public relations person, as I just noted, must have a clear understanding of the general base of communications knowledge that is obligatory for public relations – how attitudes are formed, what constitutes public opinion, how the media operate, what are the elements of communications research and all the rest.

But at the same time, it has become more urgent today to master a specialty – to become particularly conversant in and knowledgeable either of a specific aspect of public relations work – investor relations or government relations or speech-writing, etc. – or of a particular industry – computers or health care or sports or the arts or, as in my own case, banking and finance, or whatever.

You see today, public relations opportunities, like pictures of Madonna, are everywhere – in all sectors of society. But increasingly in the future, specific public relations jobs will be awarded to the practitioner who demonstrates specialized expertise in the particular area at issue.

So I say we must become generalized specialist. (Or if you won't accept that, become specialized generalists!)

Be Gutsy

Third, be gutsy.

In the immortal words of Rush Limbaugh, "Life is too short to be a wimp." The fact is you only go around once in life – unless, of course, you're Shirley Maclaine! So don't be reluctant to stand up for what you stand for. Too many public relations managers today are more posturers than practitioners, more politicians than professionals, more corporate lap dogs than leaders. Such faint-hearted communications counsel won't be sufficient in the years ahead. Top management itself is getting better, and it's already beginning to expect more of the public relations function. So the days of the public relations director who tells management only what it wants to hear are numbered. Such individuals are bears of consistently good tidings but frequently terrible advice.

Companies today can't afford weak-kneed, defensive public relations. Consider the sorry spectacle that culminated three weeks ago at General Motors – a company that once stood as the bellwether for American ingenuity and guts. That, of course, was before the Corvair and Ralph Nader...and the humiliating movie *Roger and Me*...and quiet white collar bonuses in the wake of noisy blue-collar firings...and finally new chairman is quite right when he says General Motors must improve its

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performance. But almost as imperative, it desperately requires a massive public relations transplant to fortifying its sagging and hurtful public profile.

What, in fact, could GM do to shore up its image?

Well, look at what the Mattel company did last month when the American Association of University Women attacked – of all things – the talking Barbie doll for uttering the phrase, “Math class is tough.” Mattel immediately acknowledged that it made a mistake, that it didn’t intend to disparage the ability of women to master mathematics and that it would offer a swap of a new Barbie for anyone who bought the offending doll. (Which at this point is probably already a collector’s item and worth about 100 times its original value! So think twice before you swap!)

The point is we in public relations must, as Schranz lecturer Carole Howard has said, “be eager to offer candid counsel to our managements.” Too often top executives, surrounded by a sea of sycophants, are guilty of, as Don Henley used to say, “driving with their eyes closed.”

And if we in public relations want real respect from management in the years ahead, we will renounce timidity, disregard the Bud Dry commercial...and always ask the question, “Why?”

Be Ethical

Fourth, we must be ethical in all that we do. This is what Schranz lecturer Bob Dilenschneider talked about in the 1991 Vernon C. Schranz Lecture. Public relations must be the conscience of the corporation. We must be the standard bearer for honor, ethics and integrity. And we should never compromise our values.

In every single situation with which our organization is faced, we must be the one in the room who asks the chairman, “Are we doing the right thing?” I assure you few others will ever pose the question.

It’s been my experience that too many people today seem to agree with the sentiment expressed once by the radical philosopher Saul Alinsky that “in America, people concerned about the morality of means and ends always end up on their ends without any means!”

We can’t afford to think like that in public relations.

Our field, frankly, is already suspect on the question of ethics. There are already too many slippery characters in the profession. A couple of weeks ago, the New Yorker carried a cartoon of four fellows in white hoods and robes, sitting around a table drinking beer. One says, “Ethnic cleansing. Its got a nice ring to it. Let’s find out who’s doing their PR.”

Unfortunately, somebody probably is “doing their PR.” And if the trend continues of public relations people becoming “image mercenaries” – accepting any client regardless of character or conscience,

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as long as he pays the freight – then all of us will lose. As Dan Rather has pointed out, “There is a big difference between doing well and doing right.”

In public relations, we must do what’s right. Period.

Make no mistake, the essence of this practice – with management, with journalists, with our colleagues – comes down to one word, integrity. Once you’ve lost that quality, you’ve lost the game.

Be Leaders

Fifth, public relations professionals must be leaders.

It is no secret that the state of leadership in our society today, if you’ll pardon the expression, stinks! How else can you explain the election of a United States president, who most people candidly admitted they didn’t particularly trust!

Some people said Ross Perot was “nuts.” He wasn’t nuts. Wacky maybe – but not nuts! Ross Perot came across as a leader. And that’s why millions of Americans supported him, and had he not dropped from the race, he probably would have been elected president.

Leadership is in that short supply. Consider the U.S. Congress that will welcome 110 new representatives and 11 new senators. It’s in even worse repute than the presidency. No less an authority than Col. Oliver North (who has had his own problems!) has characterized our Congress as a collections of “check-kitting, pay-raising, self-promoting, tax-raising, free-spending, permanent political potentates of pork.” And those are the good ones!

The caliber of leadership throughout our society is dreadful. When venerable organizations like GM, Exxon, Sears and Dow Corning – and the United Way – become the subject of scorn and ridicule, one has to question the capacity and competence of their leaders. Indeed, the leadership exhibited by Johnson & Johnson in its Tylenol crisis rarely has been replicated by many others.

The public relations profession today also suffers from a lack of leadership. The reputation of our young field was buoyed by leaders like Ed Bernay, John Hill, Dan Edelman and Harold Burson on the counseling side, and people like Arthur Page, Paul Garrett, Joe Nolan and Vern Schranz on the corporate side. But today in public relations, while the money is good and the pronouncements are plentiful – few among us have distinguished themselves as leaders.

I’m of the view that the real leaders in our profession are the people in this audience and in audiences like this throughout the nation, and in offices around the country, where young people have studied this field and believe in what they do.

You are the ones who must fill the vacuum of leadership in public relations. I assure you the path is wide open. Our profession, like our nation, sorely needs leaders with vision, courage and character to lead it into the twenty-first century.

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Be Positive

And that brings me to my last “B” – be positive.

I’m well aware we’re living in the midst of a rip-roaring recession, where jobs are few and life is grim. But that doesn’t mean you have to be miserable about it!

The last thing the world needs is another sad sack. It’s a sad fact today that many people – including a few in our own field – are either too worried or too scared or too insecure even to have the courtesy of answering your letter or responding to your phone call. I say don’t worry about it. Just understand that God invented the grade “C” for a reason. Most people are mediocre.

You should strive, however, to be better than that. Be decent to other people. Be upbeat. Be positive. And most of all, enjoy yourself. Have the courage, as Schranz lecturer John Budd put to, “to live life creatively.”

I’ve learned in the 11 months since I left the world’s greatest bank that there is more to life than endless meetings that never reach conclusions. I’ve learned, too, that what we do for a living – the practice of public relations – is eminently more interesting and exciting than most other pursuits. I’ve also learned that if you believe in what you are doing and you are willing to work at it, you don’t have to flim flam anybody to convince them you’re worth the fee.

I said earlier that the best years for this profession are yet to come. That will certainly be true if we who practice public relations hold fast to our professionalism and our values, add to our general communications knowledge and special expertise...and demonstrate the bravery and the self-assurance to become leaders.

Theodore Roosevelt, who really was a good president, summed it all up this way:

The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

That is what we in public relations should be about as we head into our next century. To have the courage and the confidence to take risks...to stick our necks out...and to do what we know is right.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, keep the faith, keep smiling...and go for it!