

Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
James L. Tolley – 1988

Some heavy hitters have preceded me in the Vern C. Schranz Distinguished lectureship in Public Relations series. I know and admire them all. They've each added to my bank of professional knowledge. If you have not reviewed the lectures, you have missed an opportunity to learn from some of this country's most respected and effective public relations people.

Today I'm going to talk about a missed opportunity of a different kind. The number of public relations practitioners in the U.S. has ballooned into the hundreds of thousands. But for the most part, the top jobs in public relations are still up for grabs!

You may find that hard to believe—not much consolation if you're one of thousands of people looking for your first job in the business this year. If you're angling for an entry-level job, you know how much competition you have. For every public relations job, there are at least two candidates.

But at the advanced level of practice, the jobs actually outnumber the people qualified to move into them. In fact, our track record for advancing into senior management can be summed up in three words: lousy, rotten and awful, but not necessarily in that order. As individuals, we're missing out on some great opportunities. Worse yet, we're not really doing our jobs as long as we're bunched on the lower and middle rungs of the ladder.

We don't even know for sure how many people are practicing public relations in this country today, but the guesses start at 150,000 and go to 500,000 (how's that for precision?).

Only about 100 of those people hold truly top jobs as policy-making members of senior management. That's a miniscule proportion—at most, only one in every 1,500 public relations practitioners is practicing at the executive level! And it's not for lack of opportunity. Some executive searchers tell me they would give their right arms for more people qualified to fill high-level executive positions.

It's ironic. We're supposed to be great persuaders, but we haven't convinced the captains of the industry that we belong at the helm with them. Most of us are still down in the galley, rustling up short-order meals based at best on hearsay about what the captain might like or via orders relayed to us by a lieutenant (who may or may not have direct access to the captain).

Why is this? What barriers stand between us and the decision-making level? Several possibilities come to mind. An obvious barrier is the fractured image of public relations. The world still associates us with beauty queens, ex-jocks, receptionists and snake-oil salespeople.

We've discussed this problem to death, but we still haven't killed the myth that everyone who deals with the public is "in" public relations.

That comes as no surprise, considering a second barrier, which is confusion: inside the profession itself about our mission and role. Ask 10 of your colleagues to define public relations, and I'll bet you

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get 10 different-though, I hope, reasonable answers. How can we expect the world to know what we do when we can't agree on a precise answer ourselves?

Add to that the prolusion of legitimate jobs within the profession. We specialize all over the waterfront: investor relations, special events, publications, media relations, corporate identity and lobbying, to name a few. Our audiences include news media, shareholders, employees, governments, communities, customers, suppliers or some combination. According to Ed Bernays, we go by 62 different titles. No wonder the world is confused! No wonder we're confused!

The time-honored practices of medicine, law and accounting are pretty well defined and understood. In contrast, public relations has formal roots dating back only to the early 1900s. as a result, our profession is struggling mightily to decide what it wants to be when it grows up. That alone is a tall order, but to complicate matters, this identity crisis is going on during one of the most intense periods of change in the history of the world.

It doesn't help that public relations lacks a single guiding or coalescing organization. Public Relations Society of America is the predominant body representing our profession, but only 14,000 of us are PRSA members. By any measure that's less than 10 percent-hardly a quorum!

More than a dozen other groups-some narrow, some general-also serve public relations. Among them are the International Association of Business communicators, the International Public Relations Association and the National School of Public Relations Association. This loose collection of splintered organizations is very much at odds with the structures of the more established professions, which have primary governing bodies such as the American bar association, the American Medical Association and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants.

Another important distinction: AMA, ABA and AICPA actually govern their respective professions. In contrast PRSA has no authority over the practice of public relations. The closest thing we have to the Hippocratic Oath is the PRSA Code of Professional Standards. Among other things, the code commits PRSA members to uphold First Amendment freedoms, as well as certain rules and standards of good taste and common sense. But, if we can violate that code, all PRSA can do is boot us from its membership rolls. There's nothing to prevent us from hanging a shingle and practicing.

PRSA's leadership is concerned--and rightly so--about the absence of cohesion within the profession. A task force is studying the future of public relations and grappling with some knotty fundamental issues. They're considering a single governing organization (presumably that would be PRSA), tougher membership criteria, tighter interpretation and enforcement of accreditation, re-accreditation, continuing education and advanced standing.

These may sound like simple issues with clear cut solutions, but each one has complex underpinnings. Take licensing, for example. Its proponents say licensing would weed out the lightweights and the charlatans. But opponents point to creditable efforts that wouldn't have been

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allowed outside the profession in a licensed environment. An example is the grassroots formation of Mothers Against Drunk Driving by Candy Lightner, a private citizen without a portfolio in public relations.

It would be tempting to say we haven't made it to the top because the public doesn't understand us and the profession has no guiding structure. Without question, those are real problems that cry for solutions. But in and of themselves, they are not the real barriers between us and the executive suite.

Yes, PRSA is taking steps to smooth out the organizational wrinkles, but it's too much to expect PRSA to be a panacea for our individual shortcomings. When all is said and done, there's only one way to unlock the door at the top. We have to do it ourselves. We've been unsuccessful in the past because, like everyone else, we're confused about what public relations is. But in contrast to the rest of the world-which views us through a wide angle lens-we suffer from a bad case of tunnel vision.

Some of us have been cloistered for so long perfecting our techniques that our processes have become a product. We're grinding out press releases that are technically correct but otherwise miss the mark. With too little thought about the purpose and desired effect of the messages and no plan to track how they play in Poughkeepsie we busy ourselves crossing the "t's" and dotting the "i's" and sending them to too many people who have no interest in them. Polished as it is, this communication has a fundamental flaw: it only goes one way.

Now, I don't want you students running back to class and proclaiming that Tolley says it's OK to split your infinitives. Writing is probably the most critical skill of your trade. What I would ask you to do is recognize that someone who writes press releases in isolation is no more practicing public relations than a retired line backer who puts on a Superman cape and hawks used cars in 30-second TV spots.

Keep honing your technical skills. But at the same time, develop your own working definition of public relations-and then go make it work! If you're already practicing, dust off your definition and see if it has stood the test of time. What are you really doing out there? There are all kinds of solid, workable definitions-possibly as many as there are practitioners. Whatever yours is, make sure it puts function over form, substance over style, product over process.

Nothing floats the boss like results. As James Arnold recently pointed out in *Public Relations Quarterly*, "...few CEOs are interested in seeing how the communication machinery works (any more than they are interested in watching the numbers being crunched). They are interested in getting the right numbers to the right audience in them to influence behavior and actions."

To illustrate the fixation of CEO's on function over form, I've cribbed from a CEO who also happens to be one of the greatest communicators I've ever met. Lee Iacocca spoke at the American Bar

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Association convention last year. Their meetings marked two centuries since the signing of the U.S. Constitution. Lee challenged the lawyers to important words in the preamble to the Constitution.

I will refresh your memory, and remember you're looking for the three words that get to the meat of the message:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and to our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Did you pick them out-those three words?

There are no right or wrong answers, but you can infer a lot about the way Lee Iacocca runs Chrysler-and maybe even about how CEOs think-by his solution to this exercise.

He didn't latch onto the obvious and famous "we the people," even though people do come first in his organization. There's no noun or verb in his phrase of choice.

As far as Lee is concerned, the essence of the entire preamble to the Constitution comes down to a simple prepositional phrase: "In order to." He gave a whole speech to the American Bar Association on just those three words.

What's so special about "in order to"? They're just function words-and that, of course, is exactly the point! The Constitution is a functional document. Those three words spell out the "what?"—and leave us to figure out the "how." When you think of it, that was pretty clever of our Founding Fathers. Given the changes over the last two centuries, a document that tried to prescribe a solution for every circumstance would have been obsolete five minutes after the ink dried.

You won't find the answers to public relations problems laid out in your textbooks any more than you can find out how to "form a more perfect union" in the preamble to the constitution. Learning public relations isn't like learning grammar. A book can tell you how to get rid of a dangling participle, but not how to deter a crowd of angry demonstrators. (Even if you could and a case study of a similar situation in a text, the circumstances won't be identical. Besides, it probably wouldn't be good form to have your nose in a book while the protesters are breaking down the doors of the administration building.)

My own definition of public relations is short on form, but it has served me well. For me, public relations boils down to getting people to do what you want them to do. If your focus is shareholder relations, you try to get people to invest in or hold onto your company's stock. In sales and marketing public relations, your task is to persuade people to try your product. If you're in employee communications, your job is to convince the work force to be more productive.

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“Getting people to do what you want them to do” is the “what” of public relations. The “how” distinguishes the true public relations practitioners from the hucksters. In public relations, we get people to do what we want them to do by ethical and legal means through systematic two-way communication between our enterprise and our audience. That communication starts and ends with planning and research. It includes measuring public opinion before and after the communication program.

Our senior executives must be part of that two-way communication system. We’ve got to be intimately familiar with their objectives and strategies, and they have to be receptive to our counsel about public opinion and how to alter it.

Every public relations practitioner also needs a set of “running rules” that mesh organizational goals and personal principles.

My own rules are pretty simple, but they’ve seen me through 35 years of practice in the public sector, corporate public relations and, now, consulting.

My first rule is to gain the public trust—both for business and for our profession—by delivering on our promises. Telling the truth is paramount. Without credibility, everything else we do crumbles; gaining public trust also means working tirelessly to get side of the story. This we do by planning as much a time permits. And when there’s no time, we trust our instincts.

My second rule: identify the goal of our enterprise and then get to work helping to achieve that goal. See why we have to know management’s strategic plan?

My third rule: focus on the essentials. If it doesn’t relate to your goals, don’t do it. About the 400th time we’re asked whether Iacocca is running for president, it’s mighty tempting to cave in and put Lee on Issues and Answers to lay the rumor to rest once and for all. But good sense should tell us his time is more productively spent explaining to analysts why Chrysler stock is a sound investment, or urging legislators to take action on the trade deficit.

Which leads me to my fourth rule; speak out on public issues that affect your business. No going concern operates in a vacuum. External forces profoundly affect our ability to operate successfully—for example, the balance of trade, the national debt, the tax code, public education policies—and on and on. Businesses have both a right and a responsibility to speak out on these and other issues.

Now here is my most important message of the evening. Technical proficiency isn’t enough to get your foot in the door upstairs. You earn your stripes by applying that proficiency to produce measurable results. If we’re going to convince our leaders that we can help them solve the problems they face, we’ve got to do it on their terms. In their language, and using their thought processes. They, after all, have the home-court advantage.

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Your communication plan must tie in with your organization's strategic plan as well as with the business objectives for marketing, manufacturing, sales, or whatever the key areas are in your organization.

Chief executives have a way of being picky about things like profitability. (You'd be picky, too, if you had to answer to shareholders, employees, creditors, customers and lots of other people with vested interests.) That explains why they'll judge the merits of your plan on its potential benefit to the organization. Ideally, they'll be able to measure that benefit in dollars. In other words, you can expect your feet to be held to the fire just like the people in the operating segments of the business.

If you're going to get to the top in your organization in a policy-making role, you need an insatiable thirst for information. For starters, that means reading everything you can get your hands on. My love of reading has made me a great purveyor of nickel knowledge, but it has also come into play in my career. You can be useful to the boss only if you're on top of relevant developments-not just in your industry, but all over the world.

Writing is the universal currency of public relations professionals, whether they're rookies or seasoned. Make sure yours is clear and concise. But above all, write in a manner that gets the boss' attention. A five-page proposal might be literary work of art, but it's a functional flop if it doesn't get read. Your job is not to write essays; your job is to persuade. So cut right to the chase. A half page of bullet points may not be nearly as eloquent as your five-page memo, but it's much more likely to get results.

You must be equipped to defend your proposal in person, too. You'll have very little time to elaborate and answer any follow-up questions, you'd better be articulate, cover your "must-airs" and be able to think on your feet. (If that sounds familiar, you're now calling into practice the media and speech presentation training you've been providing for others in the organization.) The brilliant proposal that took weeks to put together could get scuttled in 30 seconds if you're not prepared to sell your idea.

Simply regurgitating information you've absorbed is not enough to make you indispensable to management. You've got to make that information relevant for your organization. This is where your analytical skills come in. your boss expects you to interpret the facts and offer an enlightened opinion on what to do with them.

So, what education is best for a career in public relations? There really isn't one answer. Ideally your academic preparation would balance the critical technical skills of the profession with a broad grounding in the liberal arts.

I strongly recommend an advanced degree for anyone who is serious about going after the brass ring. If your undergraduate major is journalism, communication, public relations or advertising, consider combining your technical background with a master's in another discipline. It could be

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business administration, marketing or liberal arts, depending on what you're doing and what you plan to do.

You ought to know something about the law too. Look at the Watergate debacle. Oddly enough, the members of the Nixon administration who went to jail en masse were all lawyers. If there had been a strong, "real" public relations practitioner in the White House during the Watergate era, Nixon might have served out term. The controversy might have withered on the vine if Nixon had come forward right away, admitted his mistake, apologized and laid out a plan to make things right. (It worked with Iacocca on the odometer controversy.) Whatever your personal feelings about Nixon, we lost a master of foreign affairs when his term was cut short by bungled public relations.

If you know a second (or even a third) language, you'll have a leg up in our global business environment and a stronger command of English.

Eventually, public relations can stand with other professions-recognized and respected.

Today's top expert corporate public relations practitioners are highly principled individuals who have the courage of their convictions. They know why they are doing what they are doing.

You too must know why you are doing what you are doing.

The doctor knows why.

The lawyer knows why.

The accountant knows why.

The engineer knows why

Do you?