

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Terrie Williams – 1996*

I have built a successful public relations business on the basic fact that human beings want and need to work with those who treat them well; who treat them with “The Personal Touch.” I believe in this philosophy so strongly that I wrote a book with that title. That simple concept, a personal approach to business, is becoming more and more rare. I know that for me it’s the only way to do business. It’s the simple things in life that count.

When I started my company nine years ago, the public relations industry had not completely caught up with the information revolution. Today, the Internet has changed the way we do business. The public relations business is getting further and further away from personal relations. Voice mail, faxes and Internet capability all have the effect of making public relations professionals feel like cogs in a wheel, or like computers themselves, rather than like people relating to people. Recently, I noticed that five out of 10 outlets listed in PR Newswire wanted no other contact but e-mail. As technology increases so does the distance between people. As we get deeper into computers, faxes, e-mail and virtual space, we tend to get farther away from each other as people. We lose the personal touch. So, it becomes more and more important to reach out and be human. You will stand out if you do so.

I believe that public relations business on the whole is moving away from being a relationship-based business. We think about placements, clips, sound bytes, canned stories. We forget about people. But the basis of the very words “public relations” is connections between people. As a former social worker and a student of psychology, I feel that I have a good basis for understanding the dynamics between people that make for successful business. The main point I have seen in action over and over again is: people want to do business with those they feel good about. The way to connect with folks so that they will feel good about doing business with you is through human connections.

Let’s start with the basic tools of public relations business: phone call, letters and personal contact. Now if you make calls, send letters and network with the undiluted purpose of making placements, doing business, etc., your success will be short-term and short-lived. If, on the other hand, you create a relationship based on common humanity, you cannot fail to create something positive, no matter what the initial outcome. Maybe you will not get your placement now. The next time that reporter, editor or producer is working on a story to which he or she thinks you could contribute, they will call you. Listen to your gut about people. If you think someone is off his or her game, ask why. Offer a shoulder to cry on. Be understanding.

To illustrate how this works: a reporter has been recommended to me by a co-worker as a good contact at a major newspaper. In my initial phone call (and I have to be sensitive to his tone of voice—is it a good time to talk?), I learn that he writes about travel, art and culture, that he is married with one child and that he has worked at the paper for 10 years.

I send him my pitch and include a copy of an article I’ve clipped recently on some new aspect of child rearing. I phone him to touch base. He can’t use my story right now but he loved the article—it addressed a problem he was having with his own child and was really useful.

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One month later I called him on another story. He has a choice between using my idea and the idea of an unknown publicist is offering. Guess who gets the placement?

After he picks up my story, I send him a thank you note. Do you know how shocked some people are to get a thank you note? Many people have the attitude, “Why should I thank him? He’s just doing his job,” while they move on to the next placement. This is self-defeating and anti-relationship building. Imagine how you stand out when you recognize the fact that, although your contact was just doing his or her job, you appreciate what they have done for you.

This kind of personal feedback once got me a complimentary membership to an elite club in New York and London, so I know whereof I speak. People are starved for recognition. It is one of the basic human needs, right after food, air and water. For example: a) My agency had the fortunate experience of working with film maker Matty Rich in 1992. This very talented young man wrote, produced, directed and starred in the critically acclaimed film *Straight Out of Brooklyn*—at the age of 19. A columnist for New York Newsday devoted an entire column—unsolicited—to the importance of Matty and his stunning debut film. I mentioned to Matty that it would be really nice to acknowledge this effort and suggested we send a thank you note on a *Straight Out of Brooklyn* postcard. The result: this very busy columnist, who rarely takes time out for lunch—let alone press conferences and other events—came to a press conference set up to announce Matty’s latest project, directing a feature on a boxing event for HBO. He said he’d come just to meet Matty because of that thank you note. Not that he expected them, but in his 15 years of business he had received only three thank you notes for columns—and Matty’s was one of them! b) Call a contact without an ulterior motive, just to say, “Hi, how are you?” You’ll be surprised at the reaction. Don’t be just one of those who calls only when you need something.

Abraham Maslow, the great humanistic psychologist and writer identified love and belonging as the center of the process of self-actualization. He knew that without acknowledgement from our fellows, we cannot move forward in our lives. And what is so powerful is that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant acknowledgement of another person’s value can change lives. It can change your life. Be quick to praise and slow to complain.

What I’m talking about here is not a cynical, self-interested networking, but a real concern and care for people beneath their “work” persona. This type of care should extend to your co-workers and should be based on a foundation of care and respect for the self. The phenomenal success of Judith Manners is testament to the need for agreed-upon code of ethics and standards by which we all live.

When you approach your clients, contacts and potential contacts as people first and business people afterwards, you’ll be surprised at how wide your supporter net becomes. Step outside your comfort zone! When creating business relationships, keep your humanity at the fore. Think person first and contact second. Everyone is keeping something inside. Everyone wears a mask. Folks go to work carrying all kinds of chaos, pathology, emotional baggage—they are living in houses they can’t afford, living from one paycheck to the next, have sick parents, abusive partners, difficult children. Everyone. The biggest celebrities who seem to have everything are carrying some kind of sorrow—

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witness recently Margot Kidder and Greg Louganis. Kidder was flying high with Superman and simultaneously battling manic depression; Louganis had to smile and carry on (when he was winning all those gold medals) as if nothing was wrong when he was being abused by his lover and was carrying the knowledge that he was HIV positive.

Keep in mind that underneath this image, this face we put before the public, we are all identical—fragile, scared, insecure human beings. We are all bound by our childhood experiences. It affects who we are today. We have the same wants and needs. We do not, however, see ourselves as others see us. Just because one appears to have it all and is getting over—doesn't mean it is so. What are they sacrificing to have that appearance? You have no idea. Assume that new business prospect or professor is as screwed up as you—trying to deal on a day-to-day basis with early childhood baggage. It will make the journey easier—I promise.

One of my favorite uplifting messages is “Footprints.”

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes of his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. “Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.” The Lord replied, “My son, My precious child, I love you, and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

This small message of hope is printed on little wallet-sized cards. Just try sending one of these—without regard to race, creed or religion—to a contact who seem troubled when you call and needs a lift for any reason. Send it with a little note saying, “Thinking of you.” Imagine how you would feel if you got one of these from a business associate when you were feeling down. All of a sudden both of you are human together. It's really a wonderful bonding experience and can totally change your point of view about the dynamics of doing business. And you may not always be aware that you have touched a chord—don't let that stop you!

Can we take this dynamic into our increasingly cyberfied society? We had better. Because if we begin relying on technology to the exclusion of human warmth, we'll all freeze together.

Pick up the phone and make voice-to-voice contact. (Call when you know they are not in and leave a message). Don't solely rely on e-mail to convey your personality and your “personal touch” to someone. Better yet, send them a handwritten note. Thank of how rare that is becoming! Your handwriting is part of you—much more than the impersonal typeface of your computer font, it expresses a part of you that is totally unique. Like a snow-flake or fingerprint, no two are alike. If you have illegible handwriting, print your name.

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Now if you think what I'm talking about is Pollyannaish, think again. What I'm describing works both ways. When you start thinking about others as people first, you begin to respect yourself and demand nothing less from those you work with. If you feel you are being treated badly or if someone is being rude, speak on it!

Often folks don't know they are crossing your boundaries or being demeaning. I once had the opportunity to work on a project with a famous super model. There was a tone in her voice when she talked with me and my staff which said, "I am the queen of the universe and you all are just peons." Now I know she may have developed that as a shield during her modeling days or she may have created a persona to get over in that world.

But that did not mean I or my staff had to deal with it. You do people a disservice if you don't address it. I very tactfully told her that she had the tendency to speak with an attitude in her voice and that wasn't conducive to our working together. Often times, people don't really know they are coming off a certain way or don't see themselves the way others do.

Speaking of not being aware of how you come across, if you are not sure, find out. It may be a painful lesson, but it is worth enduring.

You'll be a better person for it. About five or six years ago, I took a human awareness course called LifeSpring. At one point during the intense five-day program we were asked to pair off with another person. One exercise we did involved having the other person act out what they thought about their partner. So my partner takes my pocketbook, flings it over his shoulder and walks around the room—the three hundred people in class witnessed this—with his nose up in the air. His observation was that I was arrogant, distant and aloof. I said, "Whoa, wait a minute." I always considered myself a pretty friendly, down-to-earth person. Where was this coming from? I asked a few other people in the class what they thought about his impression—and they agreed with my partner's assessment. They pointed out that when we took breaks I would go off by myself and not mingle. Truth of the matter is, I'm very shy, and I was afraid to walk up to people and introduce myself. Had it been a business situation, I would have had no qualms about "working" the room. But this wasn't work, and my inhibitions implied to the others that I was "distant." Sure, my feelings were hurt by the experience. But it was enlightening and important to me to know how people perceived me. Perception is reality! It didn't matter what I thought. What an invaluable lesson! Success and achievement mean nothing if you get there and don't bring someone else along. And from a purely selfish point of view, if you do it and put that kind of energy into the universe, it comes back to you 100 fold—in ways you could never begin to imagine.

If you only live for yourself, it only matters to you when you're gone. Stand up for more than your own personal career and ambition. Deny yourself something so that others may benefit. Have your life mean something.

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What it is all said and done, history will not be impressed with your degree nor your scholarship. No one is in the book for being bright. We're in the book for using our brightness to light up other people's lives and for lifting as we climb.

Wherever you are in life, you can give something to someone—you can make a difference. Remember that all that is required for the triumph of evil is for good men to remain silent and do nothing. It's in our hands, and I challenge you to make a commitment to pass it on. Each one must teach on; the Bible says, "To whom much is given, much is required." If I get there before you do, I'm obligated to bore a hole and pull you through; and remember the best and the blessed must take care of the rest of us.

Now I know that after stressing the importance of being human and people-oriented, you're not going to go out and cancel your e-mail number and fax lines, turn in your pagers and throw your cell phones into the ocean. But I think that we, as public relations professionals, must maintain our connection to people in a very tangible way.

Remember, people don't call on us because of our technology. They communicate with us because of relationships. Think about it. The only reason we talk to half of the people in our families is because of relationships.

More than anything, I think that these successful relationships develop through a mindful attitude. If you approach your contacts, sources, clients as people first and keep that viewpoint in the front of your consciousness, you will begin to behave accordingly.

No one is too insignificant or unimportant. Offer your humanity to all without regard to position, pay-back potential or celebrity status. We are all the same. A person's position in life should have absolutely nothing to do with how you treat them. What goes around comes around. The janitor that keeps the building clean is every bit as important as the CEO or client you are pursuing. And people are always watching. You never know who is in position to help you, refer you for work or who is related to whom. If the truth be told, a lot of times it is the janitor (or the person you think is unimportant) who can give you the inside scoop on what's going on!

In ancient Rome, when conquering generals entered the city, they became instant celebrities.

Huge parades and banquets were given for them. During their triumphant marches through the city, a man was chosen to hold the symbol of victory, laurel leaves, over their head. He had another job too. He was there to say over and over in the hero's ear, "Remember, you are only a man and you will just die like the rest of us." In this way, the hero was constantly reminded that he was no different from anyone else—just a human being.

Do not ignore the ability of a well-placed kind word to shine through the veneer of a business and make connections which go beyond the work day world. People are placed in your life for a reason. Not everyone will end up getting you a placement, a new client or a terrific marketing connection.

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But the people who ultimately gravitate to you will be the conduit through which your success will flow.

Dare to be human. Dare to be kind. Be vulnerable. Risk using your heart and soul as well as your mind at work. Because the only thing we truly have is our own is the humanity which we share with all people.