

Counsel on Public Relations— Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

By Edward L. Bernays

Address at the annual meeting of the
Counselors Section, Public Relations
Society of America, at the Harvard Club
at the World Public Relations Congress,
Boston, August 12, 1976.

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I shall discuss my favorite subject public relations—its origins, its present, strengths and weaknesses, and its future.

Definition is a starting point for effective communication and understanding. Public relations deals with relations between a unit, organization or individual and the publics on which it depends for viability. Professional counsel on public relations advises the principal on attitudes and actions to gain social objectives. The public relations counsel first ascertains adjustments or maladjustments between the principal and publics. He gives the principal advice to modify indicated attitudes and actions. He then advises on how to inform and persuade relevant publics on services, products or ideas. Counseling covers adjustment, information and persuasion.

By definition ours is a profession, an art applied to a science, social science. Public interest rather than pecuniary motivation is the primary consideration of a profession. Public relations counseling has all the characteristics of a profession, voluntary associations, a literature, educational facilities. It lacks only one, state registration and licensing.

Only government sanctions can protect the identification and integrity of our profession. To call yourself a medical doctor or lawyer demands state qualifying examinations. State disbarment carries economic and other punitive sanctions, if practitioners' conduct warrants.

Today anyone with or without qualification can hang out a shingle and call himself or herself a counsel on public relations. Accreditation by a voluntary association has no power to protect the profession or public against abuses of malpractice. It carries no economic or other punitive sanctions.

Recently Watergate and Nixon's henchmen, misnamed public relations men, gave the words public relations perjorative meaning in some quarters. Meanings of words, fragile as lace, are often distorted by events, unless protected.

Some counselors have adopted other nomenclature. This provides no safeguard to public or profession for new nomenclature may also be misappropriated by the unqualified. The only safeguard is state registration and licensing, as prevails in other professions.

ORIGINS

To discuss the present and future of our profession, we first look at the past. Patrick Henry said, "I know of no way of judging the future but by the past." Origins of our disciplines are many:

- 1) the concept of individual freedom—desires, rights and privileges of the individual;
- 2) the rise of literacy and education with increased public participation in public affairs;
- 3) speeded up transportation and communication with greater interdependence of people;
- 4) dependence by business and other institutions on mass publics;
- 5) the spreading concept of social responsibility;
- 6) application of social sciences to human affairs;
- 7) recognition of the power of public opinion, a result of World War I and II.

In this Bicentennial year, we should not forget the Revolution's public relations heroes, Sam Adams, John Dickinson, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. They used public relations strategies and tactics to enlist their fellow colonists in the fight for freedom from England. In agricultural USA, with its limited communication and transportation and farm and plantation self-sufficiency, there was little room for public relations. Railroads in the 1830's, telegraph in 1832, penny press, machinery and technology prepared for the post Civil War period.

Three periods between 1865 and today cover U.S. public relations counseling. First is the "public be damned" period, 1865 to 1906. Rapid industrial expansion took place. Development of steel, electricity and the internal combustion engine revolutionized the country. Business took its cue from the secrecy of the Medieval Guilds. Robber barons were in the saddle. Laissez faire ruled. Trusts and monopolies grew. "The public be damned," said railroad magnate Vanderbilt.

In the late nineteenth century, Populists, agrarians and unionists protested abuses of Big Business and unscrupulous politicians.

Muckrakers battled corruption and monopoly. President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the Square Deal and brandished The Big Stick.

Public utilities, street car and railways, the trusts counter-attacked with a barrage of words. Newspapermen, hired by these industries, carried out whitewashing termed public relations.

Actually the words "public relations" were first used by lawyer Dorman Eaton, addressing the 1882 Yale Law School graduating class, meaning activities for the common good. The words dropped out of sight until century's end.

Ivy Lee, a young publicity man initiated the "public be informed" period 1906 to 1923. In a memorable coal strike in 1903, George Baer, coal mine operator had announced that "God in his infinite wisdom had given control of the property interests of the Country" to the George Baers. This aroused widespread antagonism. In a subsequent coal strike in 1906, Lee was retained by the operators and issued his Declaration of Principles to the press. He would supply news to the public on behalf of clients. He opened a new era of public information. Others followed in Lee's footsteps. Emphasis was on words, not deeds.

The next period, 1923 to today, we term "mutual understanding and interaction with the public." Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom in 1913 had brought government regulation of certain industries. World War I accelerated recognition of people power. In wartime, Wilson's appeals to make this a war to end all wars, to make the world safe for democracy found immediate public response. People power was reemphasized when the Russian Czar and the German Kaiser were tumbled by the people.

A staff member of the U.S. Committee on Public Information, I returned from the Paris Peace Conference to New York in 1919 and decided to apply my wartime experience to peacetime pursuits.

I opened a small office in publicity direction with seven co-workers and a weekly payroll of \$142.80. I now did the best thing I have ever done. I induced a young friend, Doris E. Fleischman, to leave her job of assistant Sunday editor on the New York Tribune to work with me. We married in 1922. She is still my twenty-four-hour-a-day partner.

We soon recognized that publicity direction was a misnomer. Positive public visibility of an action of a client might be negated by other action of the client. All public attitudes and actions needed counsel.

We named our activity counsel on public relations. The word "counsel" was in general use to describe advice. We added "on public relations."

Eric Goldman, Princeton University history professor, in his *Two-Way Street* wrote that this marked the third step in evolution of public relations, characterized "by an expert with technical equipment, ethics and a social view, associated with doctor, lawyer, teacher."

We carried on activities to gain public acceptance for the activity. In 1923, Horace Liveright published my *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, the first book to outline the scope, function and ethics of our profession. That year, New York University invited me to give the first university course on public relations. It gave impetus to academic interest in the field.

Many still thought counsel on public relations a euphemism for press agent or publicity man. The *New York Times*, commenting on the book, wrote, "If with the change of name there is a change in ethics and manners of the press agent, people will be delighted to call him a public relations counsel or sweet little buttercup or anything he wishes." The publication *Books and Reviews* described the profession as a "potent and hitherto unsuspected force in public life, a creator of public conscience."

Previous to the 1929 depression, public relations was mainly confined to larger corporations and trade associations. The depression accelerated recognition of the vital role of the Common Man. The New Deal made American business recognize public opinion power. With depression ending, business, which had been in the doghouse, expanded its public relations activities.

World War II in 1941 helped reestablish business, whose war efforts changed negative into affirmative public attitudes. President Franklin Roosevelt's reliance on public opinion became an object lesson to business and other institutions.

In the 1950's and 60's the bigness of corporate mergers and conglomerates worried the public. Expansion of radio and TV brought quicker public responses on all issues.

In the late 60's and 70's events brought about mistrust in our institutions. Vietnam, Watergate, problems of crime, drugs, inflation and the recession have played their role.

Today the public wants better quality of life. New demands are made on all institutions for greater social responsibility by law or voluntary action. Wise counsel on public relations is needed in many fields to resolve or solve these problems. Here

are some of these areas—education, economic growth, employment and training, civil rights and equal opportunity, urban renewal and development, pollution abatement, conservation and recreation, culture and the arts, medical care and government.

Over the last half century, the profession has established itself an integral part of our system, acknowledged as potent in profit and non-profit activities.

And now some requested comment on weak and strong points of present day practise in dealing with these problems.

1. Too little effort by the profession in both public and prospective client education on public relations counseling. Prospective clients and public alike are often ignorant or prejudiced about what good public relations is or can do.

2. Too little use by practitioners in applying the findings of social science in solving problems of human interrelationships. Social science provides today much understanding of why we behave as we do. Public opinion measurement is only one such area. Too much hunch and insight, so called, is used when a literature of 10,000 items could help.

3. Often too little is charged for services performed. Unless fair value is placed on services, clients in a finance capitalist society are less likely to take good advice, more likely to underestimate its value.

We believe public relations counseling should be reimbursed like lawyers. Fees are based on time and effort required, related to anticipated earning power annually, plus the principle of *quantum meruit*, what the client's problem merits.

PR Reporter of Exeter, N.H. 1975 figures indicate that despite tight money, inflation and recession, median salaries of public relations firm presidents in the United States were up sharply from a median of \$30,000 in 1973 and 1974 to \$35,000 in 1975. Salaries of presidents varied from \$14,000 to \$100,000.

4. Too little of the right kind of education for the oncoming practitioners. Public relations education is now an adjunct of college and university schools of communication, journalism or business administration. It deserves treatment by itself, with strong emphasis on the social sciences—history, psychology, social psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, economics, semantics, linguistics and ethics. Adjustment of people to each other is at the very basis of a democratic society.

5. Too little attention is paid to adherence to the highest standards of ethical conduct. Staying within the law is not enough. The public relations counsel satisfies public interest and his conscience simultaneously. We have turned down as clients patent medicine companies permitted by law and dictatorships recognized by the United States. Only by adherence to the highest standards, can the profession build its reputation.

As to your strengths, the growth and present success of public relations counseling are indications of strength in the future.

Now as to the future. James Russell Lowell decried prophecy. He said "Don't never prophecy unless you know." Prophecy is a serious business today. Unexpected revolutions, social earthquakes, may bring sudden extreme changes. But usually logical sequences may be projected.

In my judgment, public relations counsel will last as long as democracy, as the people rule, as competition in the marketplace of goods, services and ideas prevails. In left and right regimes, censorship, threat and intimidation enforce regimentation. In our society, freedom of expression and choice rules. Competition makes viability of institutions dependent on the people's will. Consent of the public is essential to the life of an organization, idea, product or service.

In an increasingly more complex society, public relations counseling should become more and more important. Generalists will also be specialists, specialists generalists. Already there are tendencies towards greater specialization, covering many fields of public relations. As in law and medicine, practitioners will function inside and outside their principal's establishment.

To safeguard the profession and public alike from unscrupulous individuals who designate themselves public relations counsel, without qualifications of character, experience or knowledge, I urge you to bring about the salutary step of state registration and licensing. This valuable profession deserves to grow and prosper in the public interest.