

THE ARTS & USES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

AMONG many Polynesian tribes, the chief never utters a word in public: the speaking is done for him by a "talking chief" who is expert in the history of the tribe. The U.S. has adopted a similar custom on a grand scale. Here the talking chiefs are called public relations men.

They may not do the actual talking, but they advise and prompt and often write the script. They are employed by the President and his Cabinet, corporation executives and union bosses, university heads and foundation directors. They help banks seem less coldly businesslike, charity organizations seem more businesslike, churches garner more souls. By no means do only the big chiefs use p.r. men: hardly anything is done without them these days, whether one is starting a barbershop, publishing a book, launching a girl in society, arranging a wedding or organizing a funeral.

No one knows exactly how many public relations men there are at the moment; the Public Relations Society of America estimates that there are 100,000, not counting the bulk of Government p.r.s. About 60% of them are on the staffs of business firms, 10% work for nonprofit organizations, and 30% work for independent p.r. companies. Among other indicators of growth, the New York City Classified Directory listed ten public relations consultants in 1935; today there are 735. A decade ago, 136 colleges and universities offered at least one course in the subject; today there are about 280, and 20 of them offer a degree in p.r.

One result of this expansion is that the public relations business itself is badly in need of better public relations. Feelings about it range from occasional admiration to exaggerated alarm. "Public relations is the curse of our times," says Columbia Professor Emeritus Mark Van Doren. "It could be a sign of very deep disease." Most critics would probably diagnose only a nagging headache. Still, to the extent that they are aware of p.r.'s largely invisible operations, growing numbers of people suspect that they are being manipulated by hidden "image merchants." Sometimes the p.r. man is regarded as merely an inventor of gimmicks, the old-fashioned pitchman or pressagent with pretensions. Sometimes he is regarded as a new creature with Big Brotherly skills in brainwashing. In fact, the good public relations man is more than a pressagent—though not even the best is ever wholly free of flackery—and considerably less than Big Brother. His calling contains more than its share of what the *Nation* long ago called "higher hokum." But it is also a legitimate and essential trade, necessitated by the complexity of modern life and the workings of an open society. It is growing today, says Harvard Government Professor Seymour Martin Lipset, because "there is ever more direct communication between power and people."

Dale Carnegie Writ Large

In one sense, p.r. is an old and simple human and political instinct. A warrior king leading an army, a cardinal campaigning for the papacy, a politician running for election, a merchant preparing a deal, a woman looking for a husband—all are involved in public relations. Yet only lately, and only in America, has p.r. grown into a distinct, elaborate skill.

There is still much uncertainty about its nature. Once the *Public Relations News* asked readers for definitions and received approximately 2,000 replies calling it a science, system, art, business, process, profession, relationship, program, pattern, moral force and humanizing influence. Edward L. Bernays, one of the alltime pajandrums of p.r., solemnly describes the public relations counsel as a "societal technician who is fitted by training and experience to evaluate the maladjustments and adjustments between his client and the publics upon whom the client is dependent for his socially sound activity." More simply, Author Robert Heil-

broner observes: "Public relations is Dale Carnegie writ large."

The good p.r. man is, above all, a specialist in communications. He tries to write or edit messages so that they will carry a certain meaning; he tries to report and sometimes stage-manage situations so that the public will see his client in a certain light. He must be able to handle words and—equally—he must know when to keep silent. Naturally, his art is fallible, and it can be used for improper ends. But it is needed in a society where countless institutions and groups want to talk to one another and to the public. In autocratic societies, the state has a monopoly on public relations. Even in many democracies, p.r. is virtually unknown; French businessmen still refuse information to reporters.

In the U.S., modern public relations grew out of business' need to talk to the press and through it to the public. The first modern public relations man was the legendary Ivy Lee, a financial reporter on the *New York Journal*, who decided that U.S. capitalism should have help against the muckrakers, who were attacking the callous business practices prevailing around the turn of the century. He taught the railroads not to try to suppress news of accidents, as they had always done, but to win over the press by supplying full and frank detail. By ghostwriting speeches and commissioning biographies, by suggesting foundations and philanthropies, he converted the Rockefellers from the most loathed family in America to one of the most admired.

The Role of the Sensors

Lee was succeeded by a remarkable trio of ex-reporters who established a highly personal, flamboyant p.r. style. One was Bernays, now 75 and retired, who thought like a eugenic Machiavelli and talked like a psychology professor (his uncle, as he has never forgotten, was Sigmund Freud). The second was Benjamin Sonnenberg, now 65 and semi-retired, a connoisseur both of power and pleasure who established himself in an antique-crammed house on Manhattan's Gramercy Park, where he could play his favorite game: making his clients feel they were doing well just to be seen with him. The third was Carl Byoir, who died ten years ago at 68, an operative not above such methods as setting up phony front organizations, which sounded like disinterested citizens' groups, to push a client's cause. The firm he founded thrives today, including among its many clients a Philadelphia-based order of nuns, the Sisters of Mercy.

In 1967, the p.r. field is harder than ever to delineate, for a p.r. man may be anyone from a \$100,000-a-year vice president to an operative with a mimeograph machine and a credit card. But certain trends stand out. The virtuoso has given way to committees, with a memo-writing style involving such terms as "idea transference," "posture of receptivity," and the "multiple-channel approach." Specialization is on the rise: there are firms for proxy fights, firms for staying out of trouble on civil rights, firms to get the New Rich into society, firms oriented toward culture or sports.

The newest specialty is represented by the rising political public relations firms. Spencer-Roberts of Los Angeles is the best known because of its highly successful labors on behalf of Governor Ronald Reagan—labors that include speechwriting, committee building, primary programming, and electronic data-processing to determine the hottest issues and project voter reactions.

The largest p.r. companies offer whole teams of specialties within their walls, not unlike systems engineering or medical group practice. A case in point is Hill and Knowlton, today's biggest p.r. firm, with a client roster that includes the Iron and Steel Institute, Procter & Gamble, and Svetlana Alliluyeva. Explains H. & K. President Bert Goss: "Suppose a client walks in with an antitrust suit on his hands. One of our financial men can draft a memo to stockholders immediately; a

writer will do a speech for the company president; another will huddle with a law professor and prepare a backgrounder on the legal aspects."

Growing specialization is also characteristic of the p.r. setups inside big companies. Today, many top executives are looking for men who have had a solid grounding in business administration or finance. Of the 750 largest U.S. companies, 84% now have a public relations department, half of them headed by a vice president. How much influence they have still varies widely among firms. In a survey two years ago, Professor Robert Miller of American University's School of Business Administration found that only 31% of top corporation heads consulted their p.r. men on major policy matters. That situation, Miller finds, has slightly improved as the quality of p.r. personnel has been upgraded.

There are ill-defined border areas where p.r. blurs into other activities, notably promotion, as in the creation, out of thin air, of a thin ephemeral wonder named Twigg. Or else p.r. may be used as a label for image cosmetics, as when a p.r. firm is trying to make Frank Sinatra seem more civic-minded and Bobby Kennedy's press secretary is trying to make him seem less ruthless. Thus it is never easy to tell exactly what p.r. practitioners do. One of their most important functions is the least publicized; it lies not in interpreting the client to the world, but the world to the client. A recent utopian short story in the *Atlantic* envisioned a community supervised not by censors but "sensors"—men who sense what the public is thinking. The best p.r. men are sensors.

Businessmen & Gypsies

This does not mean that executives must slavishly follow public taste. But an awareness of outside trends and sentiments is essential. Public relations men cite the example of the automotive industry, which refused to heed warnings that the customers were growing concerned about automobile safety, hence was caught off guard by Ralph Nader's crusade. Similarly, the insurance companies and the American Medical Association should have been far better briefed on the public's favorable attitude toward the Medicare program, which they tried in vain to stop. Intelligent response to p.r. advice, on the other hand, helped Du Pont start an anti-pollution program long before the public outcry. "Good public relations," writes Heilbroner, "has come to be something very much like the corporate conscience—a commercial conscience, no doubt, but a conscience nonetheless."

Facing in the other direction, p.r.'s more obvious role is to influence the public and frequently politicians. Hill and Knowlton is currently engaged in what President Bert Goss calls "the public relations case of the decade": the tobacco industry's rearguard action against unfavorable medical evidence on cigarette smoking. H. & K. unflinchingly seeks to refute such evidence the minute it is published. The firm lobbied skillfully in Washington with the result that a proposed warning on cigarette packages that "Habitual Smoking Is Injurious to Your Health" was toned down to "Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health."

The p.r. man's third major function is to work with (and on) the press. Many top businessmen are bewildered when faced by the vast modern communications machine, with its peculiar language and mores; in Sonnenberg's words, they regard reporters as "gypsies with tambourines." On the other hand, the gypsies are often bewildered by the intricacies of the modern industrial organizations they are supposed to cover. They need a guide through the labyrinth. The aerospace industry leads in this respect; many of its p.r. men have engineering experience, and they enable reporters to do a complicated job amid the computers.

Finally, most p.r. firms are engaged in publicizing products, with variations of fairly familiar devices. Daniel Edelman & Associates is helping to educate American palates to drink more wine by persuading business conventions to have wine-tasting sessions instead of cocktail parties, is also spreading the word that wine "is the safest and best tranquilizer." Instead of simply pressuring or glad-handing, p.r. men now try to create "situations of reality." A few years ago, coffee consumption was going down, partly because teenagers and 20s

were not taking to it. On behalf of the National Coffee Association, Harshe-Rotman & Druck retained a young minister, urged such organizations as the Y.W.C.A., the Salvation Army and the Campfire Girls to run coffeehouses for young people—started off with free coffee and coffee pots contributed by the industry. Another way of creating "situations of reality" is to stage conferences on current topics, often in conjunction with universities and foundations.

The bigger advertising agencies have their own p.r. departments, notably J. Walter Thompson. Among its recent campaigns: to publicize a marine motor firm, it arranged underwater tests to see whether outboard motors frighten fish (they don't, at least in J. Walter Thompson's view); to push a mouthwash, the agency sent a Negro model into ghetto high schools to lecture on grooming and personal hygiene.

Paging Talleyrand

One can hardly miss in some of these doings a certain surrealistic quality: there is no other way to describe those tranquil fish swimming around the churning blades, those pretty-grooming lectures to kids in smoldering ghettos. Public relations men can reach into the real world and play: arrange a conference here, a clambake there, strike now a religious chord, then a sexy blue note. This p.r. playfulness can offend, annoy and infuriate. Despite the excellence at the top of the profession, far too many p.r. men still think their chief function is to stage lunches, cocktail parties, junkets, cruises, screenings, no-news press conferences, and other non-events. Releases are fired off without regard for destination or deadline. Throughout the entire 16 weeks that the New York Herald Tribune was struck in 1963, releases continued pouring into its offices—some of them by special messenger. This kind of p.r. work is not only wasteful, but it clogs communications where it is supposed to free them.

The main case against p.r. is not that it brainwashes people—it is not really powerful enough to do that. As New School Sociologist Ernest van den Haag says, "Public relations can seduce, but it cannot rape." What is often most troubling is that p.r. can place a kind of shield between the public and reality. It creates the feeling that smiles are not quite real, laughter not quite spontaneous, wit not quite unrehearsed, praise or blame not quite from the heart, elegance not quite instinctive, courage not quite brave and virtue not quite clean. The best p.r. men know the danger. They also know how and when to get out of the way and just let life happen. More p.r. men should learn that difficult art and adopt as their own Talleyrand's celebrated advice to diplomats: "Above all, not too much zeal."

The p.r. world is trying hard to improve not only the image but also the quality of its profession. The Public Relations Society of America is conducting a drive for state accreditation and has drawn up a Code of Professional Standards, pledging its 5,600 members to uphold "generally accepted standards of accuracy, truth and good taste." Everyone knows that such codes are virtually impossible to enforce. A stronger guarantee of good conduct lies in prosperity and self-interest. Large, thriving p.r. firms with top industrial clients hardly find it worthwhile to run shoddy, vulgar campaigns. They certainly do not underestimate the public's readiness to be gulled; but they know that in the long run, fakery does not pay off. Truth may be considerably embellished in successful p.r., but there has to be a base of truth somewhere. Even the Hollywood pressagent is beginning to learn that, though more slowly than anyone else.

The "talking chiefs" have proved not only that they are necessary in the vast free market of ideas that is the U.S., but also that they are getting more responsible as their influence increases. That process of improvement can only be furthered if the rest of the U.S. observes their work a little warily, but with understanding. Princeton Professor Eric Goldman believes that p.r. can be an indispensable asset to U.S. society in reconciling the profit motive with the public interest. To the extent that p.r. men respect the intelligence of the public, the public will respect them, as helpers in the increasingly difficult struggle to unravel the complex situations and cryptic messages of modern life.