

THE MYTHOLOGY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

by

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Not long ago, I had the good fortune to be in Milan, Italy, and to spend some time in the famous Duomo. I had visited the cathedral several times before and been awed by the stained glass windows which are among the most beautiful in the world. This time I noticed that it was possible to climb up to the maze of roof tops crowning the cathedral -- a fact of which I'm sure every official tour takes advantage, but which I never realized. And so I mounted what turned out to be a series of levels around the roof which ascended to the equivalent of ten stories over the piazza and a view of one of the most incredible treasure houses of art I have ever seen.

For there, like a man-made forest of sculpture carved through the centuries, are hundreds of beautiful figures interlaced in a mass of intricate latticework, framed in arches of all sizes and shapes and mounted on scores of stately spires. From the street all this looks like an incredible icing on a gorgeous cake, but from close-up, one has the feeling that all of life is fixed in a permanent monument on top of the cathedral. It seems to be the whole tale of our culture cut into stone.

While wandering through the great forest, I began to understand why critics of Renaissance religion would see here evidence of a new idolatry. They would condemn the representations as the epitome of evil. What I saw as a magnificent artistic achievement,

they would attack as a mass of graven images invested with supernatural powers dominating in an unhealthy and unreal way the lives of the people who believed in them.

The phrase "graven image" leads one to the more modern phrase "corporate image" and, of course, the field of public relations. And the conflicting opinions about the cultural and esthetic values of the crown of the Duomo lead one to ask why public relations images are considered idolatrous (using the word in its broadest sense) by some critics in our time and admired by others as constructive contributions to society. Exploring the question carefully, it seems to me, can clarify basic ethical dilemmas involved in the practice of public relations.

Such an approach probes deeper than inquiring whether public relations people tell the truth or not, or whether they try to use undue influence, or whether they try to keep things from the public that the public ought to know. I must confess that I used to think these were the key ethical questions and over the past few years I have participated in many conversations about them. But in retrospect I find that this is a quagmire. The more you talk about it, the deeper you get stuck. People think they hear you making claims to a special kind of purity and resent the pretension. Here, for instance, is a nice piece of publicity about our firm which was published recently in a PR newsletter which took pot shots at what some consider our exaggerated interest in ethics:

"Another (double-talk sales pitch) in our files is from one of the rooten-tootenest PR firms. In an 'action plan' prepared for an account, they somehow managed to lump together wire service placements and mat services, editorials in major newspapers with an

excellent country weekly paid editorial distribution service, and finally, syndicated feature placements with another form of paid distribution for feature stories. All parts of a program -- but there is a difference. Since the PR firm is one of the loudest of drum beaters for professional standards, pays much lip service to the field's need for ethics, and surrounds itself with an aura of holier-than-thous, one would not expect such double-talk to be in its presentations -- or in its work."

This is the first time that I have ever seen the failure to identify a mat service as being paid for labeled as an unethical practice. And I'm sure there are scores of other things you or I do which we never considered unethical but someone else does. There is no end to that kind of analysis. I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that each of us does the best he can in relation to other people -- both in our work and in our private lives, and that there is a limit as to how much time we should spend talking about it with each other. A certain amount of discussion is helpful; too much leads to breastbeating on the one hand and antagonism on the other.

There are, however, some fundamental ethical questions about the broad practice of public relations -- questions which concern all of us. This involves not so much being honest with others as being honest with ourselves. And these are the questions that I would like to consider now.

First, there is the question as to whether what we call "the public" is a living thing with feelings of its own and with a mind and soul that we PR practitioners have a way of discerning, catering to, and influencing on behalf of those for whom we work.

I believe there is no such being but that often we act as if there were, thereby creating the number one myth of our practice. I believe that many of our notions about the public are as animistic as any supernatural idea that ever entered men's minds. Our experience tells us that there is a multitude of individuals which make up society and that there are many ideas and attitudes concerning our enterprise which are shared by many individuals. On occasion we can anticipate what ideas will be shared by whom, but most often what we call the public is unpredictable. In the past when man has been faced with such mysteries, he has often invented a god whose peculiar sentiments and inclinations explain the baffling course of events and this is what we have tended to do with our notion that the public is a specific entity that likes certain things and dislikes certain others. And before you know it, institutions begin going through mystical rituals to gain public approval and render votive offerings to appease the god. This is tempting to us for it makes us seers of divine wishes. But I think we have to resist the temptation if we are to be responsible members of the community, and direct our study instead towards the acquisition of reliable knowledge about the complex social relationships surrounding our enterprise. We must become analysts not diviners, experts on human affairs rather than priests of a new religion.

Secondly, there is the question as to how real are the images we have begun talking about lately which are supposed to be projected by institutions or corporations into the public mind. Perhaps these images are as mythical as the public being who is supposed to see them. Think of all the thousands -- perhaps

hundreds of thousands -- of decisions being made today because they are supposed to improve somebody's image, and then think realistically about the evidence on which these images were imagined to exist in the first place! The basis for the image idea is a mixture of psychology, poetry and perhaps a dash of other-directedness, and yet we talk about it as a fact. I can't help seeing a vision of a new Duomo with hundreds of corporate and institutional images embodied in sculptured forms, all living under the supreme wisdom of the deity which is the public. A beautiful sight, but not convincing as a picture of reality worthy of contemporary thinking. It is incredible to see how firm a grasp this image business already has on our minds. More and more executives tell me they know it is nonsense, a Madison Avenue cliché, and we mustn't use it lest we get tricked by our own glibness; then before you know it, it creeps unseen and inescapably into the conversation as if without images there can be no public relations. And yet, as image makers, or "image merchants" as we have more recently been called, we are no more responsible members of the community than rainmakers of old. We can't help institutions achieve specific goals by indulging in fantasies. If some people have a wrong impression about an institution and we can help correct it, by all means let's do it. But let's not inflate the importance of this by promoting the belief that what people think of an institution is carved into the rock of ages, and that nothing is more important to an institution than to make that into a pretty picture. This is a throwback to ancient mythology and we should be able to progress beyond this level of primitive thinking.

Thirdly, there is the question as to whether what we call "public approval" is as potent a force in the destiny of institutions as we tend to believe it is. We know that in an election, popularity wins votes. And to the extent that institutions need votes, good impressions are valuable. But sometimes we go beyond this and seek public goodwill as an end in itself as if we thereby gained a blessing from a sacred source for the health of our enterprise. To accomplish this we invent a dream world where institutions only do good things for the world, and all the bad things are hidden lest they bring forth a curse. This leads to what has come to be known as the "public relations view of the world," which means an unrealistic, sugar-coated view aimed at getting everybody to like you. But friends gained on this basis are not very enduring. The glow of satisfaction from a compliment is not the deepest form of human happiness -- particularly when the compliment has been secured through the help of a public relations professional. And there are many times when vigorous criticism may be far more productive than a pat on the back. History is filled with successful people who trace their rise in the world from some moment in their lives when somebody told them they would never succeed. And I know at least one case in which a company president was so upset by an adverse editorial in a national magazine that he took a drastic step which a year later proved to be the major factor in saving his company. When the editorial appeared, the company PR director was called on the carpet; but if he had succeeded in squelching the editorial, the company would probably have been doomed. Productive relationships with others develops

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from a free interplay of honest opinion, not a steady flow of kind words.

Which brings me to the fourth question, namely, is it as we often seem to maintain morally wrong to have a personal opinion unless one "has all the facts?" Outsiders often seem not to know what they are talking about, especially when they are being critical of something we are working for, and which we only see in a positive light. The trouble is that we become imbued with a sense of righteousness about our cause and tend to believe that "getting all the facts" means getting the particular assortment of facts that will prove our point. When we talk about creating an "informed public," we mean getting our point of view accepted. This is dangerous because we lose our perspective in the larger search for truth, and begin to believe that truth is whatever the people who pay our wages happen to believe. The only protection against this is to recognize that every individual has a right -- perhaps an obligation as John Stuart Mill suggested -- to speak his mind about public issues regardless of the number of facts he has in his mind. It is, of course, our job to provide information and understanding to others about the causes we represent, but it is also our job to respect independent opinion when we see it and get our employers to do the same. Furthermore, it is our job to have our own opinions about the causes we work for and to make these opinions felt honestly and frankly. We should not, as some contend, keep our private feelings to ourselves or permit our brains to become a rubber stamp for ideas we are hired to promote. This, I confess, is not easy, but unless we fight the battle of opinion in our own

minds, we can't expect it to be won in the minds of others.

These four tendencies of public relations -- creating a major god out of the public, and minor ones out of corporate images, seeking blessings from the former to feed the soul of the latter, and developing a new kind of faith in the righteousness of institutional causes -- these do not lead to ethical violations in the traditional sense. Religious teachers would not have any special trouble with them, at least not in relation to the basic commandments of human behavior. But religious and cultural thinkers interested in freeing our minds from superstition and illusion, interested in teaching us to establish sounder bases for value judgments -- they would and have warned us to guard against these tendencies, for they can lead to major violations of a social ethic by hindering, rather than helping, human progress.

Lest anyone believe that I am attacking the fundamentals of public relations, I want to make very clear that I believe its practice can make a major contribution towards a better society in the years ahead. It can do this because its own goals are constructive. The purpose of public relations is to further the ends of institutional enterprises through steadily improving relationships between the individuals responsible for and concerned with those ends. As such, it can become a vital instrument for social progress. It can become the means by which knowledge about the workings of society, learned through the study of social scientists, can be used for the purpose of improving society. This is a form of engineering, not of consent as once was thought, but of social relationships, a function with which no one can take