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The Future of Public Relations

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I have been requested to speak to you today about the future of public relations and what I see forthcoming in the 21st century.

I am fortunate enough to have followed the field of public relations from its humble beginnings to the vital role it plays in today's society. I am very proud of this vocation and its vital contributions to our democratic society. Public relations embraces the "engineering of consent" based on Jefferson's principle that, "in a truly democratic society, everything depends upon the consent of the public". This fundamental truth is the basis of my life's work.

I should first state that I feel enormous pride and admiration for the development of public relations in this century, and have great faith in its future into the next. It is a vocation that I hope one day will be elevated to a profession. As of late, however, public relations has suffered from the public's distrust. It is a supreme irony that the vocation which has done so much to foster greater understanding between the private and public interest must now face its own tarnished reputation in the eyes of the public it attempts to serve.

LICENSING WILL BENEFIT PUBLIC RELATIONS

Because the words "public relations" are presently in the public domain, anyone, regardless of education, experience, character or conscience can call him or herself a public relations practitioner. This is the primary reason that PR currently suffers from an unfortunate number of charlatans and incompetents within its ranks. Not only does the status quo leave the public vulnerable to quacks, know-nothings and even anti-social individuals, but it also erodes

the legitimacy of qualified practitioners who have long labored to attain the high standards appropriate to this field of practice.

Today, a counsel for public relations does not enjoy the status and responsibility of esteemed professions such as law, medicine, architecture and engineering - professions which require licensing and registration. Because these are professions, there is an educational requirement beyond the rudimentary body of knowledge. There is a specific regimen of courses required to pass the Bar exam, the Medical boards, and other examinations which define the necessary expertise that uphold the high standards of these professions. Today, no such standards exist for the field of public relations. I believe that there should be. There is a need for public relations practitioners to fulfill certain educational requirements and be held accountable for ethical behavior. This can only be done through licensing.

Licensing will establish the guidelines of the practice and the requirements of a public relations education. That is why I am honored to speak to you, academicians and scholars, for it is you who will design the ethical codes and scholastic standards which will define the future of public relations.

LICENSING WILL BENEFIT SOCIETY

The needs of a vocation combined with the needs of society dictate the educational requirements for a field of study. But education, in turn, defines the development of a vocation. They go hand in hand. It is hard to imagine, in this day and age, hiring a lawyer who never went to college, or employing an architect that never learned the principles of building design. So, the needs of law and architecture define the educational requirements. Equally so, unlicensed engineers aren't allowed to construct bridges. So, the needs of the society dictate the educational requirements.

In the early 1800's doctors didn't need to become licensed to practice medicine. Society later recognized the danger of unlicensed, uneducated persons performing surgery on others and introduced licensing. So, in cases where the public could be at risk, or standards had to be maintained, licensing became a common practice.

Though it is unimaginable to allow doctors without licenses to practice, the same does not hold true for public relations counsels. Though the needs of the vocation and the needs of society should dictate the educational requirements of P.R., they don't. Anyone can hang up a shingle and become a legitimate public relations practitioner. No standards exist to secure the quality of the practice, nor the safety of the public.

In the case of medicine, the possible danger exposed to one life dictated that doctors had to become licensed. In the case of P.R., where millions of lives can be in jeopardy, no such requirement exists. While in the field of medicine, the body is vulnerable - in public relations, it is the mind.

PUBLIC RELATIONS MUST MOVE FORWARD

I believe that it is now time for PR to move forward. Public relations has now reached its rubicon. It has developed into a fully realized interdisciplinary field of study, and is ready to move toward becoming a profession. Progress, however, is being held up by a great deal of dead weight. Because public relations, as a vocation, is saddled with disagreement as to its identity and confusion regarding its direction, it cannot step boldly into the new century without first re-evaluating **what it is** and **where it is going to go**.

Language is the tool of the public relation counsel, and it is language which must define the path that will carry it forward. It is precise, specific and bold language which must save this honorable profession from floating aimlessly along, slowly stripping itself of legitimacy. The first step in revitalizing the power of language for public relations must be, I believe, in answering precisely these introspective questions.

PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRENTLY LACKS AN IDENTITY

Though many have offered definitions for the term "public relations", myself included, few can agree upon one to follow. Because the term has come to mean many things to many people, anything from corporate management consulting to passing around leaflets on the street corner has fallen under the public relations umbrella. Public Relations should not become a catch basin for failed lawyers, unemployed businessmen and inactive stockbrokers hoping for some additional income. The risks to the public and the value of the vocation are too great. I am afraid that without some seriously considered fundamental changes, it will suffer a continued erosion of public faith and structural obtuseness.

I believe that the term "public relations counsel" must be saved from meaninglessness. I believe that one of the primary functions of licensing public relations practitioners will be to define the term and outline the identity. For a public relations counsel to have any validity, he or she must be able to define what they do and how they do it. Though this doesn't benefit the many hostesses, salesmen and managers masquerading as "public relations people", it will benefit the practice, and it will benefit the public.

DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Since I am held responsible for coining the term "public relations", I will take the opportunity of giving you my definition of it.

A public relations counsel is an applied social scientist who advises a client on the social attitudes and actions he or she must take in order to appeal to the public on which it is dependent. The practitioner ascertains, through research, the adjustment or maladjustment of the client with the public, then advises what changes in attitude and action are demanded to reach the highest point of adjustment to meet social goals.

With this definition in mind, it becomes clear that PR also depends on the formation of a strict ethical code. Ethical behavior needn't be spelled out - there is no universal definition. Simply put, standard Judeo-Christian ethics, based on integrity and honesty are necessary for a public relations practitioner to properly practice his profession. Doctors must take a Hippocratic oath upon entering their profession, public relations practitioners should do the same.

RETURNING RESPONSIBILITY TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Appellate Division of the New York Supreme Court has defined the word profession in a manner illustrating the difference between what public relations is today and what it can be once elevated to a profession.

"A profession is not a business. It is distinguished by the requirements of formal training and learning, admission to practice by a qualifying licensure, a code of ethics imposing standards qualitatively and extensively beyond those that prevail or are tolerated in the marketplace, a system for discipline of its members for violation of the code of ethics, a duty to subordinate financial reward to social responsibility, and notably, an

obligation of its members, even in non-professional matters to conduct themselves of a learned discipline and honorable occupation."

OBJECTIONS TO LICENSING ARE LARGELY BASED ON IGNORANCE

The issue of licensing for public relations practitioners has brought about much discussion and controversy within the field itself. The candor of debate, however, has bordered on the hysteric. The opposition to licensing is based primarily on fear. I would like to assuage some of those fears.

Many fear a bureaucratization of what is, in its essence, a social science that is creative in application. This fear is unnecessary. Architects and certified public accountants don't presently wrestle with more bureaucracy than others because of their licensed status.

Others have claimed that licensing is a thinly veiled "witch hunt" to weed out politically undesirable practitioners or to limit the freedom of speech for PR counsels. This is utter rubbish. There are no political overtones to licensing procedures for doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professions. Equally so in this case, there would be none here.

Also leveled against licensing have been complaints that it would institute unfair competition which would hurt small start-up companies and that it would limit the diversity of experience of a public relations practitioner's schooling. First of all, no-one is required to license themselves. It is a voluntary act. Secondly, small companies would have no more or less to gain from licensing than anyone else. It is a decision as to what standards a public relations practitioner wants to uphold.

Regarding education, a defined scholastic requirement would not necessitate undergraduate and graduate work in public relations.

PR is a generalist's vocation. An undergraduate degree in English, Advertising, Journalism or other profession would probably suit a career as a public relations counsel perfectly. What is important is that there is **some** required exposure to Public Relations courses, most likely through pursuing a masters in PR. It is the total **lack** of experience in public relation education which is the heart of today's problem.

Indeed, licensing does not only protect the public from the misuse of public relations by knowing persons with ill intent. There is an equal danger of the unknowing misuse of public relations, both in name and in practice, by well-meaning, but uneducated ones. This is a field of great social impact. Those persons who heavily influence the channels of communication and action in a media-dominated society should be held accountable and responsible for their influence. Only the licensing and registration of public relations practitioners with the enforcement of a strict ethical code can achieve this aim.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Unfortunately, public relations organizations have added to the confusion. Those organizations which purport to represent public relations practitioners and their issues are the most wary of defining public relations, lest they lose significant numbers of their membership.

In addition, many have their own codes of ethics and behavior, though none are enforceable. To support the licensing of public relations practitioners would undermine their own importance. So, we can expect little support from these groups.

The need for the licensing of public relations professionals also stems from the fact that there is presently no distinction made between good public relations work and bad public relations work. What is considered unethical is not always avoided. What is considered foolhardy is not always dismissed. Clients cannot so

easily measure the financial rewards to hiring a public relations practitioner. It is even more difficult to assess whether the work was ethical in execution. If a client cannot differentiate between what is successful and not and what is ethical and not, it is the public relations practitioner's responsibility to. The fact that today these fundamental assessments cannot be made by either party indicates a severe problem.

In this time of increasing complexity and specialization, adopting registration and licensing legislation for public relations practitioners is not just a matter of practical urgency, it is of moral urgency as well.

PUBLIC RELATIONS WILL SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE

By licensing public relations practitioners through title registration, there will be no infringement of the First Amendment rights, which no-one would want to tamper with, and the title "public relations counsel", will come to represent a beacon of respect and stature in the communications industry. Title registration is voluntary, and will not effect persons in other fields which involve public relations activities. They will, in time, adopt similar practices not because of legislation tells them so, but just because it is good business.

I know from a rather long lifetime of experience that good ethics is good business, and that those practitioners who earn their license and uphold the ethical code will be rewarded with very prosperous and constructive careers in public relations.

All that will be secured is a validation of the public relations name, and the establishment of an example of professionalism, ethical business practices and responsible use of the mass communications industry that play such an enormous role in our daily lives.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

In conclusion, I believe that licensing and registration is mandatory if we are to aspire to transform public relations into a respected profession.

I see the purpose of legislation as simply to spark the future development of public relations. The real advances of the field will take place in the school rooms and lecture halls across the country - even the world. The licensed practitioner is not necessarily the competent practitioner. A licensing system is, however, a first step in establishing the direction in which public relations can move forward while held within the framework of its guiding principles. Without these principles and a strict ethical code, PR will be relegated to an increasingly diluted status and waning importance in our society.

We have seen what P.R. **can** do, and I look forward with great anticipation as to what it **will** do in the future. I believe that first, we must set the foundation, the springboard if you like, from where the public relations practitioner can move from. With this solid foundation, a new direction can be cleanly forged, and the 21st century will reap even greater rewards for public relations and the society it serves