The Practice of Public Relations

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Milton Fairman

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America today is a badly shaken society; there are few indications of a return to stability. Tremors that now unsettle the political structure will eventually undermine the foundations of all institutions. These shock waves, already felt in business and education, originate in the ideas, beliefs, enthusiasms and biases of people and can be countered only by reestablishing in the public mind the worth of each institution. And this counter-activity evokes public relations, which must do its work in an ambience of mounting skepticism of all information, whatever its source.

The larger problems of society are not, however, my theme; neither is public relations itself. I intend to limit myself to the little-explored territory of public relations practice—the ways in which we exercise or pursue our calling—and what I believe this practice to be and what it must eventually be to play a significant role in the future.

At the outset, I should identify myself as a product of an era that honored the work ethic and beamed on the individualist. Kids of that time wanted to be men, not "transadults," and working speeded our approach to manhood. Ambition was not boxed in by working papers, wage and hour restrictions, academic requirements, licensing and the other trappings of regimentation. Sympathetic employers, products of an even freer period, encouraged bright kids and entrusted them with adult responsibilities.

Having been prematurely accepted as a peer by my elders, I was never without an instructive job. Before abandoning my teens I had kept books, read proof, handled a college registrar's job, and been in charge of two academic libraries. Compared with such high-interest jobs, education seemed so dull and irrelevant that I became a college jumpout in my sophomore year.

At the age of 20 I turned newspaperman, a term then applied to journalists. Promoted suddenly to a rewrite desk, I hastily read a textbook chapter outlining the five ways to write a news lead and thus completed my professional education in a brief hour. Nevertheless, I survived for the next eight years as a writer and editor in the competitive, rowdy, cynical Chicago newspaper world put to paper by Hecht and MacArthur in "The Front Page."

These random autobiographical data are pertinent as a frank disclosure of my professional training for a career more challenging than journalism. Admittedly haphazard, this training served as input to the personal computer we call intuition, whose feedback to public relations practice, however valued in the past, will play in the future a role of diminishing importance.

However, when I hung out my shingle in 1937 at Borden's (where it was to swing for thirty years) I knew nothing about public relations. I had long been a publicity moonlighter, as many reporters then were, but I didn't hold the craft in esteem because of the low quality of the releases that passed the city desk en route to oblivion. As for the broader aspects of public relations, I was as ignorant of them as is the average reporter—now and then as well.

In taking a public relations job today most of us succeed to a function, program and tradition already established by others. Such was rarely the case in the thirties. The function was new in most companies, its dimensions to be fixed by management expectations and the background and ability of the newly-employed specialist. Thus, when I opened a Borden regional office in Columbus, Ohio, I was in a sense pioneering, and most of my contemporaries were doing the same.

Groping for direction, I researched the literature, which was meager indeed, and came across an article in *Business Week* that by describing some "new" public relations activities provided a road map. Blending this information with my limited knowledge of the company and some personal input, I developed a program based

on the concept of good corporate citizenship—a company developing and maintaining a reputation based on sound corporate policy and action. The idea stirred the imagination, even awakened a missionary zeal. His discovery of the wheel always excites the inventor who has never seen one!

Retrieval from the personal computer supplied an antecedent for this program. In my childhood, as members of a Roman Catholic minority we were taught to be particularly helpful and polite to our Protestant neighbors, to avoid religious arguments with them, to keep off their property, to shun fights with their kids—all on the theory that this was the way to win their respect. It seemed a good approach for any minority—particularly the corporation.

The expansion of the job beyond its original straight publicity nature won the skeptical approval of my boss and the head of the division I was serving. They pointed out, however, that under the company's decentralization policy every move would have to be approved by the plant manager whose community might be affected by it. There were 38 principal plant managers.

To really flourish, public relations practice demands a benign climate, like orchids and shade tobacco. The sun rarely shone on the first attempts to introduce the program; there were more often the hailstorms or snowdrifts that most of us encounter. My managers were small-town businessmen, mostly of a middle management type. Few had even heard of public relations. All were skilled in manning defenses against a home office. They received me politely, skeptically, non-cooperatively.

The problem was partly of my own making: a tendency to deal in abstracts—with managers accustomed to concrete facts and figures; a radical idea to an industry rooted in conservatism; an *auslander*, suspect because of a newspaper and New Deal background, who had yet to learn that a public relations man must win acceptance of himself as well as his gospel before the converts crowd the glory train.

Nevertheless I continued evangelizing by launching a *PR Memo* that monthly stressed the importance of company contributions to social and economic welfare, setting an objective of impressing the public with the company's "standing, integrity and efficiency." It set forth what should be done—and what avoided—to establish, maintain and enhance a corporate reputation, and buttressed the advice with examples, background materials, and offers of aid when needed.

The climate gradually improved. One day there was a significant visit from a major stockholder and director of the company and also, to my surprise, a reader of the *PR Memo*. He believed public relations the most important activity in the company. Without such programs the business system would, in his opinion, be finished. He cautioned me, however, that businessmen are short-sighted, and that in a recession the program would have rough going. To avoid this, he urged me to hit harder and assured me of his support. His convictions were similar to those of many other business leaders of the time—the men who gave public relations its first big thrust.

My practice flourished for another reason—the managerial grapevine was reporting that the program worked. It was, in fact, building its own good will, which the Supreme Court once defined as "the inclination of a satisfied customer to return to the place where he has received satisfaction."

A public relations man sets his own horizons—they can be broad or narrow. My colleagues at Borden's limited theirs to publicity; I opted for the other course. In explaining the scope of the work I brashly stated that it included everything involving people *en masse*. As a consequence, our shop was drawn into a fascinating mix of publics—customers, farmer-suppliers, competitors, legislators, educators. And understanding the various publics and their leadership, knowing their beliefs, attitudes, aspirations and influence is, of course, at the heart of practice.

An early decision was to act on every call for help even if it did not concern public relations. I assumed, with the easy arrogance cultivated in the city room, that my managers were less experienced in general matters than I, and as a onetime librarian I was committed to the definition that knowledge is knowing where to find it. This open door policy paved the way for major involvement in operating matters.

Once the door was open, "handholding" became an adjunct of practice. Handholding consists of giving aid and comfort when none is specifically requested; it calls for sympathetic listening, asking the right questions, making soothing noises, and guarding confidences. Men want to talk on a confidential basis about plans, problems, and job dissatisfactions. Serving as a hybrid father confessor/family doctor helps establish a program and contributes to organizational morale.

Many complain that they cannot interest middle management in public relations although they have little difficulty with top management. They fail, I believe, because they do not address themselves to the specific interests of middle management. The best way to convert this group is to help achieve the objectives *they* consider important. In the division I originally served, each manager was judged by some 20 criteria set by divisional management, which recognized it would itself succeed only to the extent that these criteria were met. Thus when public relations proved helpful in achieving any operating objective it built support at both managerial levels.

Publicity, although the greatest common factor in public relations practice, played a subordinate role in our program. Our specific assignment was to explain dairy industry economics; this was not worth much effort because neither editors nor the public were interested in the subject. Moreover, other types of communication affording a controlled message were more effective in reaching many of our publics. And, finally, not much effort was required —publicity came easy after a million or so words of pedestrian newspaper prose and, for the Sunday pages, some hundreds of what have been called "pseudo-events."

Newspaper experience was helpful also in framing a policy for whatever publicity was done. The policy provided that no publicity would be attempted unless it was useful—i.e., it carried out the program objectives. No release would go out unless it had a reasonable chance of acceptance by a reasonable editor. All copy would be so professionally written that rewrites would be discouraged. Releases would carry a distinctive identification that, hopefully, would come to be recognized as a hallmark of quality. And, finally, there would be no personal follow-up on publicity and no one would ever be asked to run it as a favor.

To me, the most challenging and rewarding part of practice was working on a crisis—the sudden, unanticipated and menacing incident that occurs with increasing frequency in even the best-ordered institutions. Many people protest the crisis role, complaining that public relations is being used as "a fire department." To the contrary, I loved sliding down the brass pole and sharing the action. In crises the stake may be large; men who are quite competent in routine business are demoralized by the abnormal. If public relations help is ever welcomed this is the time. Most of my personal friendships at Borden's grew out of shared crises. I like to remember the comment of one highly-placed colleague at the close of a ten-hour emergency in my office: "I don't know what the hell you're paid but I've seen you earn a year's salary in a day."

From the very beginning of my association with Borden's I considered myself a part of management, although I had no title and my status was undefined. No one invited me to the management table, nor did anyone challenge me when I drew up a chair to it. This seemed the proper place. No function equals public relations in its sharing of top management objectives. In three decades I worked with four chief executives and one all-powerful satrap and had at all times direct contact with the top man, despite the gyrations of the organization chart. Without having his ear and his having yours—without benefit of intermediaries—effective public relations is impossible.

Research is an essential element of practice, and it is surprising that so few rely on it in planning and evaluating their work. My interest in research stemmed from a need to know for my own purposes and to supply acceptable data to an organization accustomed to basing its judgements on figures. I can recall some 30 research projects, the first of which might well have been my last: a test of the directing board's ability to gauge public opinion, resulting in the finding that we knew even less about it than a control group of laborers.

While my associates flunked the opinion test, they rated summa cum laude in operating efficiency. They evaluated every proposal by figuring how many quarts of milk had to be sold to meet its cost; the per quart profit averaged less than a cent. This operating wisdom applied to my projects as well as all others and explains an early interest in the arcane subject of public relations economics. Substituting imagination for dollars is a wholesome exercise, but its results can fall short of perfection.

The perfect public relations practice is about as common as the unicorn. My own practice was, over the years, a source of vast satisfaction—far more, I am sure, than most other occupations would yield. It was sufficient for the needs and expectations of the times, but fell considerably short of what the future will require of practitioners. It was not, however, idyllic; it was marked by cloudy days and a few stormy hours as well.

For example, the spotty acceptance of public relations in a large organization is troublesome. In ours, the acceptance seemed fair: of 150 or so decision-makers with whom I worked over the years less than a dozen were obdurate and only one impossible. But why did the rate of cooperation, depending on the individual and the situation, range from a very high figure to near zero? Why not a better score? Was the fault with the idea? with the decision-maker? or with the practitioner?

There are those times when public relations considerations should prevail and do not. Every realist recognizes that management decisions usually involve several factors and yields when his is outweighed by the others. To me it was disturbing—and often disheartening—when decisions did not reflect the weight of evidence, but were based on illogic or insensitivity.

Encounters with the entrenched professions could be occasions of defeat. The engineers and research men usually won a debate hands down. The financial experts with their rules of accounting were formidable opponents. The lawyers were usually allies but, on the opposite side of a question and supported by Blackstone, the common law and the Supreme Court, were virtually invincible. Professionals respect other professionals and their know-how, but few are willing to take public relations people into the lodge without a battle.

There is also the question of "what price advancement?" Going up the executive ladder takes its toll; it fattens a paycheck but not job satisfactions. It is no accident that the ideas I have been discussing developed in the field, where I spent six years, and not in my 24 years as a big company's public relations executive. The stimulating action is in the field, where situations are urgent, decisions quick, and policies clear-cut. Practice there is personal and not delegated, quality standards are easier to maintain, results are highly visible, and administrative drudgery held to a minimum.

Offers of promotion or of other jobs, even when rejected, are good for a career. Each opportunity put forward demands a decision, which in turn forces a re-examination of objectives, of organizational relationships, of net satisfactions and of whether public relations itself is worth pursuing as a career. And the process develops—in my case, at least—one's beliefs about public relations and its practice.

The elements of public relations practice are still elusive. What does a practitioner do, what can he do, what should he do to

make his distinctive contribution? Examining the subject over the years I found a continuum of a sort in which today's practice becomes tomorrow's theory and vice versa, a process resulting in a description which does not fully satisfy me but is a reflection of what I was doing or should have been doing.

Practice appears to have three phases: analysis, prescription and action. In analysis, you proceed from a clear definition of the objective to assembling and evaluating all data pertinent to it. A fact-finding exercise, it calls for interviews, for review of available source material, for the use of research techniques. It embraces both the organization and the public involved, and results in a solid factual basis for subsequent steps.

In prescription, you recommend a decision, policy or action based on the analysis. Before taking this step you consider alternate courses, costs vs. anticipated values, prospects of success or failure, and risks—should any be indicated. And the prescription may be for no action. (There is an adage in surgery that wisdom is knowing when not to cut.)

If, however, the prescription calls for action and is accepted, you take the final step, mustering the necessary resources and carrying out the action yourself or by coordinating the efforts of others.

Formulating this definition in 1952, I was dismayed by its shortcomings. It assumes that a client wants full and effective practice, and that conditions permit it. Further, it fails to indicate that common sense must apply—that there are reasonable short cuts and adaptations. Finally, it merely implies the not-inconsiderable judgement, experience, knowledge and skill needed for the completion of any or all of these steps.

To a seasoned public relations man this definition of practice may appear obvious. I submit, however, that it is not faithfully followed in most efforts carrying the public relations label today.

Public relations is currently suffering an identity crisis. The qualifications, functions and responsibilities of its practitioners are so variegated that a common interest—except for publicity—is hard to come by. Some are officers of big companies or big universities, and some are newcomers to the field. Some believe they are members of a profession, others see themselves as skilled craftsmen. Contributing to confusion (in the public mind, at least) is a fringe of camp followers using the term as a convenience or subterfuge and belonging in no legitimate category.

In our search for identity we stress the differences between crafts and professions when, for guidance, we should be concentrating on their common characteristics. Both have a clearly-defined area of competence and a common body of knowledge, the latter derived from a prescribed curriculum or on-the-job training. Both recognize varying degrees of proficiency.

"Instant" crafts or professons are rare; most evolve gradually, raising standards of newcomers without imposing undue hardships on established members. In some cases evolution has been explosive: the Flexner report, financed by a Carnegie grant in 1910, was an earthquake in medical education, but resulted in the world's best medical practice. Originating in self-protection, self-interest and self-advancement, the development of these older callings recognized that ease of entry into a field means also ease of exit. Whatever the motives behind it, their evolution assured the public of uniform minimum standards and a better performance.

To achieve identity and self-realization public relations must look to the experience of older callings. Our practice in the past is aptly described in a critic's words about a famous artist, "He did not learn the trade, but rather discovered he had always known it." This will not suffice in the future. Much more is demanded in an increasingly complex world dominated by systems, specialties, regimentation and restive publics threatening to its institutions.

What public relations must have is a research and development program on a scale never before contemplated. Such a program should assess the current elements of public relations practice, explore its possibilities, and develop a solid body of information from which would evolve a unique and important profession based more on knowledge of people than on communication with them. Properly planned, financed and executed it would prepare us for the future.

Planning such a program demands the best wisdom from the fields of public relations and education. Let me pose some questions to illustrate what a program of this kind might embrace:

1. What is the scope of present public relations practice? What are its specific functions and responsibilities? Why are they not the same for all? (A management consultant, Harry Simmons, has compiled a [1]"Checklist of Functions of Modern Public Relations Departments;" it identifies 13 operating sectors, 49 major functions and several hundred subdivisions.)

2. What should practice be in the future? Do current trends suggest new functions and responsibilities or expansion into related areas? What do employers expect in the future? What do people in the field hope to be doing? What should be the area of common practice?

3. What specific knowledge and skills assure proficiency in the common practice? What is their relative importance? From what disciplines would they be drawn? What are the dimensions of an ideal body of common knowledge? (To illustrate, there are three recent works that appear vital to a body of common knowledge: Berelson and Steiner's[2] *Human Behavior*, Henry M. Boettinger's *Moving Mountains*, and Morton Simon's *Public Relations Law*. How widely are they read? Where are the students of mass psychology, or the art of persuasion, or the growing field of public relations law?)

4. How is a body of common knowledge to be inculcated? What should the academic curriculum be? How can those already in the field improve their practice? What are the avenues of continuing education—correspondence courses? seminars? night courses? Can special texts bridge the gap to related fields?

5. Is there a "public relations temper?" Can the eagerly sought "X" quality—the intellectual/personality combination—be identified? Can a professional profile indicating proficiency be developed.

6. And such miscellaneous questions as: To what extent can public relations research be standardized to build a body of comparable data? Can case reporting be improved to give maximum value to both students and practitioners? How should management students be familiarized with public relations philosophy and activities? etc.

A research and development study of this sweep calls for gifted direction, the skills of staff specialists, and substantial sums. It demands resources beyond what any of the professional groups—or all in combination—can readily muster. It summons the sympathetic backing of the scores of thousands of men and women whose career is public relations. And it merits the support of the foundations now dedicated to education, or to communication or to fostering harmonious relationships within this turbulent society.

The proposed study would carry us far beyond the rudimentary practice pictured in my opening comments to one of greater breadth and depth, better-structured and more productive of economic and social good. Drawing its strength from many disciplines, yet differing from all others, a singular profession would emerge fully equipped to cope with whatever the future puts on its doorstep.

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1. Harry Simmons, "Checklist of Functions of Modern Public Relations Departments," Printers Ink Publishing Co., New York, 1957.

2. Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1964; Henry M. Boettinger, *Moving Mountains: The Art and Craft of Letting Others See Things Your Way*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1969; Morton J. Simon, *Public Relations Law*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1969.

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