

IN DEPTH

Spin Cycles: a century of spin

**Reporter's interview transcript: Fraser Seitel**

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*IB: I want to go back to the beginnings of public relations 100 years ago. Tell me about who Ivy Lee was and why he was important.*

FS: Ivy Lee really was the father of public relations and he was a former newspaper man, a very devout religious person, very straight-laced and Ivy Lee really came to prominence-started in 1906, as you said-it was 8 years later when he was hired by the Rockefellers, by John D. Rockefeller Jr., and JD Rockefeller Sr. was of course the richest man in the world and very private. Didn't believe much in talking to the press but Ivy Lee was hired by JD junior when JD junior faced a very serious and awful strike at a coal mine-a mine he owned in Colorado, Colorado Fuel and Iron Company-where the miners rebelled and people were killed, mine workers were killed and their families were killed-about 15 or so deaths. Terrible, awful publicity. John D Jr. was reviled in the country and so he had to do something and one of the people he brought in was this fellow Ivy Lee who had two principles really and the one principle was, Mr. Rockefeller, if your policies are wrong, you've got to change them. In other words, if things you are doing at the mine are unfair to the workers, you've got to change them, number one. And number two: you've got to communicate what you do and what you feel and the reasons why, not only to the miners but to the public in general who are generally against you and it was those two principles that formed the basis of the practice of PR, really for the first time and that have continued through practice today.

*IB: Rockefellers were a PR man's nightmare. They had a very bad reputation, one of the most hated families in America. How did Ivy Lee turn things around for them?*

FS: Well, first, John D Rockefeller Sr., who founded the standard oil and was the founder of the oil industry as we know it, was a man who was not particularly prone to going public with his activities and he employed people and he started this industry and really he was a creative genius in that sense but he wasn't public. And over time, there developed people who wrote and talked about him in a disparaging way-Ida Tarbel was one-and the whole generation of muckrakers of the early 1900s were against any person of wealth-Vanderbilt and Frick and Carnegie and Rockefeller-all were lumped into the group of what were called the robber barons and the Rockefellers, at the time-and of course, I wasn't around but if you believe the generations that have succeeded JDR Sr.-they say he was misunderstood, that he was a kindly man, a loving grandfather and so on but he was misunderstood and never bothered to explain what he was doing and why. And what Ivy Lee did for the son, John D Rockefeller Jr., but really for the family in general was he introduced them in effect to the public and tried to humanize them in the public eye and to a great degree was successful so that today, the current generation of Rockefellers, for whom I'm privileged to work, so I'm not unbiased, have been regarded generally as very philanthropic people because, first of all, they are and secondly, because it's well known.

*IB: So how did he do this? What were some of his techniques?*

FS: The first thing he did, which is fundamental to the practice of PR if it's practiced correctly, and which is misunderstood by most people in society, is he told the Rockefellers that PR, positive PR, starts with action, with performance. And if the performance is lousy, you can't say that you're doing everything properly. In other words, you can't pour perfume on a skunk. So you have to change the performance and once the performance is changed, what Ivy Lee said, is that you have to communicate and what that means is you have to speak to the public and the most direct way of doing that in those days-in the 1910s and 1906s and 1914s, when the strike and massacre and Ludlow (?) at the fuel company happened-the most direct way was to go to the media and allow the media then to interpret to the public what you're doing and why and he was the one that introduced the Rockefellers then, opened up the Rockefellers, to communicating to the public through the media.

*IB: In what ways?*

FS: In the ways of bringing, in the case of Mr. Rockefeller junior, bringing him to the scene of the mining disaster, Ludlow, inviting the media to come out to observe him with the miners, allowing photographs to be taken of him with the miners, interviewing him at Ludlow. Having those days, mini press conferences with the media. In other words generally opening up, what we used to say in business, opening up the kimono, letting people see what you're doing and explaining to them why. That really is as fundamental an explanation of this strange, mysterious, misunderstood art form of PR as any.

*IB: He really pioneered many of the techniques we now associate with public relations.*

FS: He pioneered the techniques, which translate into communicating directly to the public, through the media primarily, and what that means is news releases and advisories and press conferences and press tours and all of these things that are still done to this day. And also, most important, he pioneered the philosophy that you can't have publicity without performance.

*IB: He's not the guy who convinced John D Rockefeller Sr. to start handing out dimes was it?*

FS: No, and in fact, there's conjecture about who did that but many people feel that this was John D Rockefeller Sr.'s way of getting closer to the public and so that whoever suggested it to him, he used to do it with relish, and so that if a little child approached him he would hand him a shiny dime in order to start a conversation. If you talked to John D Sr.'s grandson, David, whom I have the privilege of working for, he'll tell you his grandfather's nature was one of a kindly, older man when David knew him, and that he was prone to do these kinds of things himself. So it's unclear.

*IB: But of course nobody knew that because he wasn't interested in communicating his philanthropy.*

FS: Nobody knew it because he wasn't interested in communicating, period. He didn't think this was something important and what the Rockefellers have grown up-as a result, you could argue, of Ivy Lee's influence with John D Jr.-is the Rockefellers have grown up now to the current generation, which says that with every opportunity there's a responsibility and part of that responsibility is communicating, because they are public, to the public, what it is you're doing.

*IB: It seems Lee's relationship with press was ambiguous: some saw him as a paid liar. And then towards the end of his career he was accused of working with the Nazis. . His relationship with press sort of mirrors story of relationship between PR and press. On the one hand there is a recognition of the need, but on the other hand, a resentment that that need exists.*

FS: Ivy Lee wound up working of the German dye trust, which was associated with Hitler, and so alas for him, he wound up in some question in terms of repute. The relationship that he had with the press is similar to today's relationship that PR people have with the press to the degree that there is an adversarial relationship that is common. In other words if I work for a company or an individual, I am biased, I'm an advocate for that person-I'm paid by them, I work for them, and therefore, what I say is I must believe in what they're doing. Because, if they're lying, cheating, obfuscating, confusing, distorting, then that's my reputation on the line; and where the press is, where the press's job is to divulge the truth in the way they read it, as objectively as they can and so they're not going to believe, ipso facto, everything I'm telling them. The proof is, what's the performance? And good PR, what Ivy Lee preached was that good PR starts with proper action and no matter what the skepticism of the relationship might be with a journalist, if your action is appropriate and proper, then in the final analysis, it will be communicated that way to the public.

*IB: You mention journalists are seeking the truth, and we like to think we are independent seekers of truth. Yet the image of PR people is that they don't tell the truth. Is the word truth maybe the wrong one to use?*

FS: The fact of the matter is that there are some in PR who don't tell the truth. There are some, just like in any other field, who are unethical and there are others who don't understand-probably more than there should be-that don't understand that the field's got to begin and end with action. And if my company is doing something that has to result in the firing of employees or the dispossessing of residents or whatever it is, the company has to explain why they're doing what they're doing. You may not agree with it, you may say that's wrong and they shouldn't do it, but from the company's point of view, they're telling the truth; so truth is truth. And my point of view may differ from yours on the goodness of the action. The point I think is this: If I say to you I did not have sex with that woman and I did, there's a truth there that I'm not 'fessing up to. If I say to you I didn't have an insider trading stock tip and I did, then no amount of publicity and suggestion publicly that I didn't is truthful. So there is a basic truth; the adversarial nature between a journalist and a PR person is absolutely appropriate and should be there. And the essence of determining whether I'm lying or telling the truth is the journalists own investigation and that should tell the tale... if the journalist himself or herself is being truthful.

*IB: One famous PR person said, 'truth is not a solid, it's a liquid.' For a lot of people, that sums up the relationship between PR and the truth. Is that a fair statement?*

FS: I think that's a fair statement. I think that's a fair statement. On the other hand, the bias that PR people are deceptive, are obfuscatory, are confusers, are distorters or, are liars, is a very dangerous and awful bias. And PR



people who are that way-If I worked for my company, there are some things that I won't tell you, it's not in the company's interest to say it, I don't have to say it and we will hold the line and not say it. You, as journalist, may object to that and say 'We have a right to know'... therein lies the dilemma but when a PR person lies-if you lie to me once and I'm a journalist, that's the end of it. All you have to trade on in PR, just as in life, is your reputation and if you lie, you lose it.

*IB: When you say it's dangerous, do you mean to the PR industry or to a democratic society?*

FS: It's dangerous to the person because you lose your reputation; it's dangerous to the PR profession because people judge the profession by the actions of its practitioners, and it's dangerous to the society if I can't trust the GM company or the United Way or the prime minister of Canada or the president of the United States because his associates are lying to me-that's dangerous to everybody.

*IB: The word spin. You recently wrote a piece called "The Sin of Spin." What's your definition of spin? If you could begin by asking the rhetorical question, "How do I define spin?"*

FS: How do I define spin? I would define spin as this: whatever my boss says, whether it's right or wrong, whether it's honest or dis [sic], whether it's truthful or un [sic], he tells me to do it and I do it. That, to me, is spin and it should be antithetical to people who care about the practice of PR, to engage in spin. That's not what this field is all about, what this field is all about is acknowledging that you're an advocate for somebody but explaining what they're doing and why in as truthful a way as you can. The essence of PR should be the very opposite of spin.

*IB: You're saying spin is saying whatever needs to be said to accomplish an objective?*

FS: Exactly. Saying whatever needs to be said in order to accomplish an objective without any basis in fact or truth or what we believe. That's spin and that's bad.