APPROACHES TO

Public Relations

BY EARL NEWSOM

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EARL NEWSOM & COMPANY

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I

I HAVE BEEN asked to talk to you this afternoon on "Approaches to Public Relations."

I like that word "approaches," because it is synonymous with the word "roads." It implies that there are many "roads" which you and I as public relations men might take in our day-to-day work. It implies, also, that there is a right road and that there are wrong roads. Most important of all, there is in the phrase "approaches to public relations" an implication that we have a choice as to which approach, or road, we propose to take.

Of course the most important question about any road is this: "Is it the best way to get where we want to go?"

The Public Relations Goal

I hope that all of you will agree with me that our destination—our goal—is to develop, and maintain, in the public mind a favorable image of the companies for which we work.

Now if that is our goal—to develop and maintain in the public mind a favorable image of the companies for which we work—we must accept a fundamental truth: Companies cannot have good reputations without deserving them. I am sure that no one here has the slightest illusion on that point.

It is fallacious to think that, by "good publicity," we can make a company look substantially better than it is.

Thus far, then, this whole thing called "public relations" appears to be quite simple. A company will have a good reputation if it deserves one. People will look favorably upon a company if the actions of the company merit public favor.

But you and I know that it is not, in fact, quite so simple as that.

No Company Is Wholly Good or Bad

While it is basically true that a "bad" company cannot long sustain a reputation for being a "good" company, we know that there is no company which is wholly "good" and that there is no company wholly "bad." We know, also, that there are companies which are, on the whole, "good" companies, but which do not have good reputations. We know, furthermore, that there are thousands of "good" companies and thousands of "bad" companies which have no public reputation at all—either good or bad.

Similarly, we recognize the oversimplification in the statement that "people will look favorably upon a company if the actions of the company merit public favor."

Which actions do we mean? In any company of size there are hundreds—even thousands—of people taking thousands—even hundreds of thousands of actions every day. They are writing, talking, buying, shipping, manufacturing, selling, financing, making speeches, bargaining, traveling, making decisions—in short, helping to carry on the business of any company. All of these people go to make up "the company." And some of their actions will be very good, some will

be good, some will be not-so-good, and some are bound to be downright bad. Do we mean that if a company is to gain public favor all of these actions must be meritorious?

Obviously they cannot be.

Before we can settle upon what it is that we do mean by "meritorious company actions," we ought, perhaps, to examine more closely, too, this phrase "the public mind."

The Fallacy of "Educating the Public"

Many important decisions—especially the decisions of trained and responsible individuals—are made on the basis of evidence and a careful combing of the facts. But it is a fallacy to believe that large groups of individuals—occupational groups, men and women grouped by social status or by income classification, or national groups—can very often be brought to understanding by an impressive marshalling of facts and evidence, by what we like to call "educating the public."

People will simply not stand still to be educated. And if very many people *would* do so, how in the world would we cram into them all of the so-called "education" which various important social and business interests would like to inject into their intellectual blood streams?

Our Opinions Are a Merging of Impressions

Every bit of evidence seems to point to the conclusion that most people simply do not arrive at opinions in any such painfully intellectual and time-consuming way. People have opinions, and those opinions are emotional attitudes. Those attitudes are not the sum total of all of the facts in the situ-

ation, because nobody can ever know all of the facts about anything. Our opinions are the merging of impressions, and it is surprising to discover how few in number those impressions usually are. All of us in this room have very decided opinions about almost everything concerning which we are supposed to have an opinion. We have opinions about "Wall Street," about "The New Deal," about "General Motors," about "Education," about "Russia," about "Labor," about "Churchill," about "DeGaulle," about "Hirohito," and about "Truman." Those opinions are probably so firmly fixed in our minds that they may even have become what we call "convictions." People who share our opinions in these respects we are apt to consider "sound" and intelligent people. People who disagree with us we are apt to consider "prejudiced."

Actually, our body of knowledge on any one of these things is pitifully small. We are forced to confess that they are emotional attitudes and that we share them with groups of people with whom we want consciously or unconsciously to be identified.

Five Factors Influence Formation of Opinions

And if we look honestly into our minds we can find certain clues as to how we formed these opinions. Without trying to ferret out all of the clues, we should probably all agree that the formation of these "opinions" was influenced by at least five factors. And in these five factors we may find part of the answer to our question, "What kind of actions by a company lead toward a favorable public opinion?"

Let us consider briefly those five factors:

(1) We Have a Point of View

The first of these is our "point of view." The opinion we form concerning any phenomenon thrust upon our attention depends upon the point of view from which we observe it. The same thing looks different to two people. And as individual viewpoints differ, so do the viewpoints of groups.

Differences in points of view are often very complex, and these complexities are the subject of constant study and research by psychologists and sociologists. We do know that the individual's impressions and beliefs are shaped, for example, by an infinite variety of influences—early conditioning, adult experience, race, nationality, economic status.

And we know that as individuals we tend to "take sides," we tend to identify ourselves with groups of people who share our point of view. For example, the same set of circumstances will look different to Democrats and Republicans, to labor and management, to a broker in Boston and a farmer in Iowa.

And of course the same set of circumstances will look different to two nations. Not long ago the whole population of Great Britain was worked up by a film shown in British theatres which starred Errol Flynn and depicted in a most dramatic and romantic fashion the winning of the Burma war by Americans. The British resent deeply the implication that we won that particular war. They know perfectly well that *they* did.

In the same way, the Russians are convinced that they beat the Japs. They can prove it. The moment their armies swept into Manchuria, the Japs surrendered. Our point of view as Americans is somewhat different.

(2) Our Attention Has Been Seized

A second factor leading toward the formation of our opinions on any situation is that the situation *has seized* our *attention*. It has occupied—even though briefly—the spotlight of our momentary observation. In other words, the situation has become *noteworthy*.

I have had officials of some companies say to me: "If the American people knew the facts about the way we treat our dealer organization, public opinion toward us would be quite different." Of course the simple truth is that the way those companies treated their dealer organizations had never been a matter of very much interest to anybody except the dealers themselves.

Before passing on from this point, I want to remind us all that a company is sometimes thrust suddenly into the spotlight of public interest when it does not expect to be, and on an issue that it had not anticipated. And if its actions at that time are not meritorious, an unfavorable attitude in the public mind can be fixed so firmly that dislodging it becomes very difficult.

(3) An Incident Seems to Us Significant

A third factor about the formation of our opinions is that the situation which is brought under our observation must seem to us *significant*. Now by "significant," I mean not only "important." I mean "revealing." I mean, in short, an action or event which *signifies* something to us.

I am sure that all of you have measured the truth of this in your own personal lives. You have friends whose human weaknesses and petty foibles are quite clear to you. But you

feel that in their *significant* actions they have revealed themselves as deserving respect, admiration and manly affection.

This is true also, with public figures and industrial institutions. Years ago Henry Ford took what everybody at that time considered to be a most *significant* action. He announced that through mass production he was going to be able to pay a minimum wage of five dollars per day.

Now between that time and his retirement, Mr. Ford did a great many things which were not universally popular. But, for the most part, people have forgotten those things. They remember what they consider to be the *significant* thing—the minimum wage of five dollars per day. And public opinion polls show that Henry Ford is still today one of the two or three most popular industrial leaders in the U.S.A. His *reputation* is good.

(4) We Trust the Source

There is a fourth factor entering into the formation of our opinions. Over a period of time, people come to have confidence in the expressions of opinion of certain individuals or institutions—the Supreme Court, for example, or the President, or Barney Baruch, or the National Association of Manufacturers, or the President of the CIO, or John L. Lewis, or Eric Johnston, or the president of the local bank, or a favorite clergyman. Because we have confidence in such individuals, we lean toward the adoption of the opinions they have expressed. By the same token, there are also people who occupy an opposite kind of position. We tend to distrust almost any recommendation from such a source.

As you will have observed, this is the other side of the

coin we were discussing a moment ago. We admitted that our opinions depended upon our point of view, and that we tended to join groups which share our point of view. That is, if our point of view is substantially the same as that of most of the members of the National Association of Manufacturers, we consciously or unconsciously want to be identified with that group.

But this fourth factor is something different. As I say, it is the opposite side of the coin. If, over a period of time, the National Association of Manufacturers has won our confidence and respect, we tend to await the opinion of that group before forming our own opinion on a controversial issue. There are people who do not know what they think until they have read the editorials in The New York Times. And if the National Association of Manufacturers—or The New York Times—has our disapproval instead of our confidence, we are apt to distrust what the Association—or The New York Times—says.

This, on the whole, is not altogether a bad system. It is probably the only way that man in a free society can reach decisions in a very complicated world. We must often take our cue from others. We must accept guidance and leadership from those in whom we have confidence.

(5) The Situation Is Clear, Not Confusing

There is still a fifth factor we must consider. That is that the thing which we observe, the thing which we read, see or hear, the thing which produces our impressions, must be clear, not confusing, not subject to several interpretations.

What this means to us as public relations men is that

even when a company action takes into consideration the differing *points of view* of many groups of people, even when the action is *noteworthy*, even when the action is considered *significant*, the impression which the action leaves on the public mind will depend upon the simple clarity with which it is conceived and translated or expressed. The statement of a significant company action—no matter what the form of that statement—must leave no room for misinterpretation.

Summary

Perhaps we are now in a little better position to define more accurately our goal—the destination to which whatever road we choose must eventually lead us. Let me summarize:

Our goal is to develop, and maintain, in the public mind a favorable image of the companies for which we work.

A company will have a good reputation only if it deserves one. That is, people will look with favor upon a company if the actions of the company merit favor.

People cannot be educated into knowledge of *all* the actions of *all* companies, and it is folly to attempt such a project of "public education." Public impressions are, in fact, fixed by a comparatively few actions. These impressions merge to form an "opinion" toward the company.

We can identify at least five important facets of any such action: (1) It must take into consideration the differing points of view of different groups of people; (2) It must, in its nature and in its timing, be noteworthy; that is, it must be sufficiently interesting to the people before

whom the action is taken to catch their attention; (3) It must be considered *significant*; that is, revealing what appears to be the true nature or character of the company taking the action; (4) Its effect will depend upon the source and upon the reputation of those who publicly endorse the action. Finally, (5) it must be clearly conceived and so clearly interpreted that everybody understands it.

II

Now—about this destination we have just defined—this goal toward which we propose constantly to work our way:

That destination is not a fixed place, not a promised land which, once achieved, will enable us to relax and bask in the sunny atmosphere of everybody's approval and goodwill. On the contrary, it is a destination which moves as we move. It is dynamic, not static. It is really not a "destination" at all. It is a "direction" we propose to take.

We live in a world of conflict. The opinions of individuals and of human groups will constantly be colliding with one another. So long as there is life itself there will inevitably be differences of opinion, misunderstandings, prejudices, antagonisms—because these are the by-product, if not the very stuff, of life and vigor and movement.

It is, then, a Pollyanna fallacy to suppose that everybody will come to like the companies for which we work. Those companies cannot exist and move and achieve their ends without making trouble for themselves. Our job is to keep

that trouble to a minimum. We do not expect to soothe everybody into constant agreement with us. But we can hope to prevent unwarranted prejudice and misunderstanding toward our companies. We cannot please everyone, and we should not try. But we can learn to distinguish clearly those favorable and unfavorable attitudes which are vital and those which, while they make us unhappy, are inevitable and not vital.

We Must Know What People Are Thinking

Now what are our responsibilities as we travel in this direction? It seems to me that they are four in number:

Our first responsibility is to understand the points of view of those various groups of people whose opinions are important to our companies.

This calls for the discriminating use of every technique we can lay our hands on for finding out what people are thinking—including those techniques which Mr. Roper and Dr. Surface discussed this morning. It calls for expert appraisal of data. It often requires that we go ourselves to get first-hand impressions of a situation.

Above all, this responsibility demands from us a real and personal appreciation of the point of view of the other fellow, an instinctive willingness to grant the fact that convictions opposed to our own are just as sincerely held as our own—whether those convictions are held by labor unions, members of a government agency, or a politician who believes that we are up to no good.

In other words, it demands objectivity—that state most difficult of all for human beings to attain.

All of us who see companies from the inside tend to gain a high regard for them. We begin to resent criticisms which may come from outside. We fall into the state of believing that the public is wrong, and we grow impatient with the public. Nothing can destroy our effectiveness more quickly. No public relations director can be worth his salt who loses a feeling of friendship and respect for the American people, who loses his ability to get "outside" his company and look at it through the eyes of outsiders, who thus becomes unable to counsel his company fairly and dispassionately on what the public thinks.

What the public thinks is often not what we think, and to confuse the two can prove disastrous. It is our responsibility as public relations men to know what people think, not what we think people think or ought to think. And our efforts to find and use new techniques to help us in this must be ceaseless.

We Must Convey Our Understanding to Managements

Our second responsibility is to impart this understanding of outside points of view to the management of our companies.

As all of us have found, this is often most difficult. Management also has attitudes and sometimes finds it hard to disassociate itself from its own point of view and see situations as other people see them. It is sometimes more difficult to interpret the American people to a company's management than it is to interpret the company to the American people. But whatever the difficulties here, it is our responsibility to surmount them. We cannot be effective for

management unless we can earn the belief of management that they are accurately getting through us the facts on outside points of view.

Now against the background of the points of view which we are continuously appraising and passing on to the managements of our companies, these managements are constantly taking action. It is our business to know what these actions are—to be aware of what is going on in all of the departments of management. Most of this we are going to have to learn the hard way—that is, through the reporter's way of going and finding out. In some cases, management will—and should—call us in and tell us of actions which are contemplated. In still other cases, we ourselves will want to suggest actions which we think should be taken.

We Must Be Able to Gauge Public Reactions

This brings us to our third responsibility—*the responsibility to give our managements an accurate opinion on probable public reaction to current company actions or actions which are being planned.*

Every company is broken up into departments of special responsibility. This is a particular responsibility of ours—to estimate accurately the probable reaction to contemplated company actions of groups of people whose points of view and present attitudes it is our business to know. We must be as good at this job as an accountant is at figures or a salesman at selling.

There is a corollary to this responsibility. When our managements tell us that they do not like the reaction which we tell them will result from some contemplated action, we have

a responsibility to suggest revisions in the action, to propose alternative actions which will accomplish the original purpose but avoid the feared reaction.

We Must Be Sure Company Actions Are Understood

Our fourth responsibility is to see that the actions of our companies and the policies from which they spring are understood by all the groups of people whose opinions are important to the companies.

This is a job of communications—human communications—communication of facts, ideas, impressions, understanding. It is a job at which we as public relations men pretend to be specialists. And yet, it is a field so wide that none of us today can know all about it. And even as we work to know more, we find that the very media of human communication are changing in form and in significance.

A generation ago the farmer in Iowa who picked up the Burlington Hawkeye assumed that everything in it was the gospel truth. It was true because "he read it in the paper." Today he is apt to say "That's just propaganda!" And today the comic book is demonstrating the power of the graphic art in conveying ideas. Use of the film strip, the application of new and imaginative techniques to moving pictures, television—these and other developments are piling up on us, demanding our best thought so that they may be harnessed to their capacity for better human understanding.

Now we have "the approach," the direction toward which we as public relations men must travel; and, in terms of our responsibilities, we have noted some of the characteristics of the straight hard road that leads in that direction.

Summary

Those responsibilities, if I may summarize, are: (1) To understand the changing points of view of many different groups of people. (2) To impart constantly and clearly that understanding to the managements of the companies for which we work. (3) To estimate competently the public reaction to company actions and to be alert in suggesting desirable company actions. (4) To do an increasingly effective job in the field of human communications so that the truth about our companies—whatever that truth may be—will be reflected in the public mind.

III

Perhaps I should stop right here, but I want to take a few minutes more to point out some of the "approaches," roads that will be tempting us as we journey forward. No matter how smooth and wide and attractive they may be, we must not take them. None of them leads to our destination.

The Fallacy of "Publicity"

For example, there is the road that leads simply to "getting some publicity" for a company.

Nothing, in my opinion, could be a more unhappy conception of the public relations function. It continually leads to all sorts of frivolous and artificial activities designed to force public attention—to intrude on the public. It continually leads to desperate and unnatural activities for the sake of public attention. And time after time these acrobatics can

not help but have a bad public relations effect. After all, exhibitionism is not an attractive characteristic.

Arnold Bennett, the British novelist, once remarked that a young man trying to give a good impression gave the impression of a young man trying to give a good impression. That is a very profound truth. We so often appear to be doing exactly what we are in fact doing.

Understand that I do not rule out the intelligent use of publicity as a valuable means to an end. It is even sometimes necessary for a company to take certain actions with the clear intention of seizing public interest and attention—in order that some fact can be imprinted on the public mind or some misunderstanding erased. But public attention should not be an end in itself. Our goal is public confidence and public respect.

Public Relations Does Not Intend to Sell Goods

There is another highway which continually tempts a public relations department away from its true road and destroys its effectiveness. That highway is paved with the notion that it is the function of a public relations department to help sell products.

The public relations director—fighting for principles and ideas and points of view (which are not always subject to proof or easily argued)—may find the path into mere sales publicity the easiest way. Everyone is in favor of sales. Everyone can understand sales. It seems a nice retreat to turn into the road to sales and leave the more difficult road.

But it is not the function of the public relations department to sell goods. That is the function of the sales depart-

ment. If a certain amount of sales publicity will help the sales department, then the sales department should have some publicity help. But publicity is not a principal weapon for making sales. Sales are made by men and products and service and hard, continuous, driving, advertising and merchandising programs. Publicity at best is only incidental and, I think, rarely of first-rate importance to sales.

Too Many "Good Ideas" Spoil the Image

Another most dangerous bypath is the one which tempts us with beautiful signboards of too many good ideas.

If the fundamental problem of a corporation is to disclose to the American people that it is an enterprise with a heart—a good company—a good citizen—an institution to be trusted, then all public relations thinking must be directed toward bringing the American people to recognize *that* fact. *That* is the theme. *That* is the motif. *That* is the string on which all the beads must be strung.

It is inevitable that someone will have a good idea—a very good idea—which will intrigue everyone and will seem like a "good thing to do." Very likely it will be a good thing to do—but it may not bear on the point at issue. It may not contribute to the strategically vital result which must be achieved. If so, it will be a kind of "tactical boondoggling."

The Fallacy of Arguing

And I am sure that all of you have come to recognize the signpost that points to the highway of argument.

There is a temptation—one of the most difficult for all of us to resist—to get into public arguments. There is a notion—

to which we continually fall victim—that the reason why people have a bad opinion regarding you or me, or any institution we represent, is simply that "they haven't got the facts."

The trouble with arguments—in public or elsewhere—is that they are contests—battles—competitions. A man who has no very strong opinions on a subject will find himself very hotly arrayed in defense of his point of view if he gets into a debate. He acquires a vested interest in a position. It becomes a matter of "face" for him to maintain his position. It isn't so much that he believes what he proclaims as it is that he can't retract without seeming to be weak and mistaken.

For this reason I urge you to think twice before getting your company into arguments, with individuals or groups, especially publicly.

What we must realize, then, is that people haven't got time to make a living, raise a family and get some enjoyment out of life and at the same time listen to you and me extol the virtues of any company or other social organism. What we must realize is that it is not necessary for us to argue, but it is very desirable for us to have the confidence of the American people. They must trust us. They must have faith in us. If they haven't confidence in us, they will pay a great deal of attention to anyone who attacks us.

The Danger of Being Pompous

There is still another road which we must avoid—the road which leads to making a company look like a gigantic stuffed shirt.

This is a temptation most difficult to resist. It arises from the fact that we get to looking at our company as a kind of marble mausoleum on a mountain top—a great *institution.* We become awed in the presence of ourselves.

What we must remember, I think, is that a company can win friends and influence people if it will be quite natural, friendly, easygoing, frank, colloquial and unpretentious. It is this friendly and considerate *manner* perhaps more than any other single thing which, in the long run, will win public confidence.

IV

And now, in closing, let me say as forcefully as I can that we in the field of public relations have a very great responsibility and a very great opportunity. Public relations is not yet a profession. There is not at this time any large and organized body of knowledge which would permit us to say that we are scientists. To a much greater extent we are artists—using our instincts and feeling our way in the semidarkness.

It is, I suppose, rather gratifying to be a member of an established profession. But is far more exhilarating to enter a field when it is young, when all the inevitable discoveries have not been made, when there is pioneering to be done.