



## A Working Concept of Public Relations

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FOR MANY WHO, TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, considered "propaganda" to be a naughty word, "public relations" today has a similar sinister connotation.

They, and their younger contemporaries, say that the propagandist, as well as the press agent and publicity director, has merely changed his title to that of public relations counsel. These "wonder children of the age" are called hidden persuaders, pressure boys, masters of the Invisible Sell, space grabbers, ballyhoo boys, hucksters, cunning manipulators of the mind, malicious engineers of public consent, masters of the art or science of getting one's own way—in short, generally, socially undesirable characters.

By contrast, the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of persons who perform public relations functions today contend that their activities are of great social benefit. They take credit for having converted business and industry completely away from the "public be damned" attitude and say that they have humanized business, helped give it good manners and, most important, a conscience; and that they have taught it that he profits most who serves best. They define public relations as simply doing the right thing and letting people know about it, applying the Golden Rule in everyday activities while not letting one's light shine un-noticed under a basket. To them, sound public relations means the daily application of common sense, common courtesy, and common decency in accordance with a continuous program of enlightened self interest through good works which not only earn one a good reputation but cause him to deserve it as a good neighbor.

Curse or blessing, organized public relations is a product of the times. It is an inevitable consequence of large population growth, urbanization, impersonalization, and complexity in all social, eco-

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conomic, political, and other aspects of modern life. No scientific means have yet been devised to determine accurately the extent to which public relations may have contributed to the confusion of our times, or how much, on the other hand, it constructively assists the frustrated victim of complexity to grope his way toward an understanding of contemporary social forces. Whether, as its adverse critics assert, public relations has provided a dangerous weapon for "sharpies" and others out for "a fast buck," or, as its defenders assert, it has applied appreciable restraints to the "dog eat dog" economic system, it, nevertheless, is true that much of the discussion regarding public relations really pertains to the system of which it is a part rather than to the tool itself. Perhaps public relations should be considered as a symptom or symbol of a highly complex and impersonal social order.

Certain it is that to be heard today one must shout. Newspapers no longer have sufficient space in which to tell all the news that's fit to print and wouldn't have it even if they discontinued all their comic strips and other features. Community newspapers, news magazines, news letters, and other media of communication have filled the gap only partially. The voice which wants to be heard must speak up for itself; it no longer is possible to rely on others to find you out and present your point of view for you.

Modern public relations, however, involves much more than devising ways and means of obtaining widespread and continuous publicity. In fact, the best advice a public relations counsel might give a client could be assiduously to avoid the limelight. *Webster's New International Dictionary* succinctly defines the scope of modern public relations thus: "The activities of an industry, union, corporation, profession, government or other organization in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics such as customers, employes or stockholders and with the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society."

By contrast, press agency is merely attracting attention to yourself, usually with only immediate or short range results in mind. The term was first applied, a couple of generations ago, to agents employed by circuses, theaters, dramatic companies, and the like to attract audiences. They did so by such advertising methods as billboards, handbills, news releases, parades, barkers, free sideshows, and passes to influential customers who would help start the trek toward the big tent, museum, or arena. These show business press agents engaged in extravagant claims and a considerable amount of fakery which was

### *A Working Concept of Public Relations*

expected, received with good humor, and enjoyed as part of the fun. The Prince of Fakers, of course, was P. T. Barnum, many of whose methods were emulated by Harry Reichenbach for the benefit of the fledgling motion picture industry.

Some press agency, of course, exists today, but it usually is not upon the advice of a scientific-minded public relations counsel. Instead, as in the past, it is by someone seeking a quick specific return as the lovesick swain who chained himself to a radiator in the attempt to help his girl friend get a singing engagement. Public relations counsel-inspired publicity stunts are more far reaching in purpose and are a part of a long range program. Anniversary banquets, public exhibits, lecture series, and educational programs are within this category. Most organizations with well developed departments of public relations engage in a considerable amount of public service. They provide material—much of it excellent audio-visual educational aids—to schools, study clubs, civic organizations, and the public at large. This material contains a minimum of “puffery” or none at all. Some of it contains information which, it is hoped, will help build attitudes which ultimately, usually indirectly, will redound to the advantage of those who finance it. Much of it merely is intended to help create good will toward the disseminating agency.

There is no attempt to disguise or deny the fact that the Department of Public Relations of a business corporation is expected to contribute to the ultimate prosperity of the organization, or that a public relations agency employed by a motion picture star or politician tries to win fame and/or fortune for its client. Labor unions have gone in for public relations to try to win public support for themselves as well as to influence legislators and other public officials. Government sells itself on a big scale to the voting public by providing and publicizing services. Crude methods of press agency or publicity-seeking, however, have generally been abandoned by the experts in the field as the broader concept of public relations has evolved. Publicity today is just one department within any public relations outfit, whether it be an agency serving many clients or a part of a large industrial organization. Individuals who depend upon keeping their names known still expect their publicity man to obtain frequent mention for them in the gossip columns and public prints generally, and particular industries, businesses, and trade associations still “plant” or try to inspire articles in magazines and other publications. Much of the cynicism which exists in some places regarding public relations is

due to the increasing difficulty of determining what is and is not primarily publicity inspired. When a candidate for public office shows up at a clam bake, it is taken for granted that he is seeking votes as well as nourishment. It is not so easy to detect motives when public figures show up at public functions, visit hospitals, autograph baseballs and programs, make charitable and philanthropic contributions, lend support to this or that cause, make public statements, etc.

As students of public opinion formation and other aspects of human behavior, however, public relations counsel do not rely solely on incessant publicity, through advertising or the media of communication. They are much more scientific than that in their appraisal of what makes for enduring success. Thus, they consider not just the mass public but also the special publics with which their clients deal, on which they rely. Such publics include a company's employees, its stockholders, suppliers, neighbors, and customers. Public relations counsel, it is obvious, did not create these or other public relationships. No individual or institution can avoid having public relationships, and it is trite to point out that everyone with whom one has contact forms an opinion of him, which can be either beneficial or harmful. In the long run, it is a satisfied employee or customer who does the most for a business. If your employees say, "It's a good place to work," or your customers declare, "They give you a square deal," you are immune to the effect of any press agency or publicity stunts in which your competitor can engage.

It is good public relations activity when:

- A department store provides adequate rest rooms;
- A filling station attendant cleans your windshield and puts air in your tires;
- A congressman answers his crank mail courteously;
- A mayor presides at a cornerstone laying;
- A music store loans instruments for a public school concert;
- A college publicly recognizes the work of a scholar;
- A newspaper provides a speaker for a men's club;
- The management of a factory sends a letter congratulating an employee on a wedding anniversary;
- A large corporation sends easy-to-read annual reports and personal letters to minority stockholders;
- A chain store manager participates in community affairs; or
- A fire department welcomes school children on a field trip.

## *A Working Concept of Public Relations*

Hart, Michigan, businessmen and farmers annually sponsor a Mexican Homecoming Fiesta for the entertainment of migratory cherry pickers.

Such activities are open and above board. Their purpose, to build good will, is obvious but not resented. What *is* resented is any attempt to disguise the nature of an activity as through a "front" organization, ostensibly operating objectively in the public interest but actually supported, often secretly, by those who expect to benefit by its operations. In 1929, one of the most extravagant public relations stunts of all times occurred when the president of the United States and many other notables went to Dearborn, Michigan to help celebrate Light's Golden Jubilee. Ostensibly, it was to honor the aging Thomas A. Edison, which it did. It was, however, the brainchild of the electric light industry's public relations director. He was Edward L. Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and, next to Ivy Ledbetter Lee, the leading pioneer in this field. His *Crystallizing Public Opinion*,<sup>1</sup> published by Boni, Liveright in 1923, was the first full-length book defining this new way of "engineering consent" by means of "public relations counsel," a term Bernays invented.

Today, these public relations counsel work closely with personnel managers who may be under them. Public relations can take a great deal of the credit for making workers happier on their jobs. Enlightened P.R. men are not strikebreakers or union busters and they do not resort to "gimmicks" to keep labor pacified so as to prevent unrest, for such methods do not have lasting effect. It is certainly true that a large segment of the business and industrial world has learned this lesson the hard way after many decades of bitter conflict, and that some elements have not learned it yet. Public relations men with broad perspectives, however, have supplanted strong labor unions and protective governmental agencies as the principal influence upon management, into whose planning sessions they now are being admitted in increasing numbers, to go to the roots of discontent on the part of either employees or customers rather than to devise ways of circumventing situations needing reformation.

Similarly, in its policies toward the general public, the public relations-minded organization is today generally open-handed. For example, in their early days both the railroads and the airlines did their best to make difficult the work of newspaper reporters attempting to obtain information regarding accidents. Today, they realize that the good will they thereby would lose makes the effort dangerous. Full

cooperation in the handling of such news has replaced concerted efforts to suppress or cover-up the facts. Greatest credit for effecting this change generally is accorded the late Ivy Ledbetter Lee, who was employed by the Rockefeller interests early in the century after a series of public investigations and exposes by the so-called muck-rakers in several widely circulated magazines had caused widespread distrust of big business. Lee recognized that the "public be damned" attitude no longer was workable, if it ever had been, and he persuaded his clients to end the policy of secrecy which previously had been orthodox. Some who call themselves public relations counsel today still may act occasionally, or even frequently, as censors or "cover-up" artists, attempting to prevent or counteract an unfavorable response to some incident without going to the roots of its cause. Such practitioners, however, are decidedly not up to date or in tune with the times. The most effective public relations, may it be repeated, is now pretty generally recognized as that which takes "the long view" and which recognizes that the effects on sales or reputation are indirect and difficult to measure. There is rapidly increasing recognition that you can "phony it up" just so long but that the day of reckoning comes inevitably. The only sound first step in any effective public relations program is to "put the house in order."

The informational and propaganda efforts of the federal government during both world wars provided great impetus to commercial public relations. Not only were thousands of persons given training in public relations techniques, but also great strides were made in the development of scientific methods of studying public attitudes and opinions. This work has been continued by private agencies and by an increasing number of colleges and universities. Communications is now recognized as a so-called discipline within the social sciences. Market analysis, public opinion polling, and content analysis are among the subjects studied quantitatively by these new scholarly experts on communications. Motivational research is the name given to efforts to determine the potential receptivity by particular audiences of advertising and other appeals. Bernays defines the function of the public relations counsel as to "interpret the client to the public and the public to the client."

Since most communications research to date has been primarily to benefit the person who has something—a commodity or an idea—to sell, the need for greater public understanding of what is happening is beginning to be felt. Since the short-lived (1937-41) Institute for

## *A Working Concept of Public Relations*

Propaganda Analysis, there has been no large-scale organized effort to educate the general public to the purposes and/or methods of the special pleader.

Today, the only effective antidote to any public relations efforts which are "bad" is counter-efforts which are "good," just as it long has been known that the best defense against propaganda is counter-propaganda. Minority groups, especially those with small bankrolls—a characteristic of minority groups—are learning to use this new weapon in self-defense in order not to lose whatever is at stake by default. Granted that the large and powerful have the advantage; they would have it, public relations or no public relations. More and more, social agencies and professional groups have been getting off their supercilious high horses as regards public relations and are festooning their public facades. Voices that make no attempt to be heard are ineffective. Even a death rattle may have some influence on posterity.

If public relations is motivated behavior, good manners, smart actions to make people like you, then certainly it can be practiced by ethical individuals and institutions for good and socially useful ends as well as for strictly monetary purposes. If this sounds like, "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em," that's exactly as it is supposed to sound. A few more cheery "good mornings" and smiling "good byes" in freshly painted and well lighted highbrow dens would make life decidedly more pleasant. It is not possible to consider public relations as a fad or a bogie which will pass or go away if you wait long enough. As has been said, it is impossible to exist in any society without public relationships, anyway. A policy to have no conscious public relations is a public relations policy itself. Few persons or institutions can achieve much without being liked, at least by the right people. Liking often grows out of understanding and understanding is based on information. The "inner glow" which comes from anonymous do-gooding may be great compensation, but to be content with it is vouchsafed only to those who already have established themselves.

The best public relations is that which has an altruistic motive, which takes a broad view of the place of the practitioner in the social order and has a sense of social responsibility or at least enlightened self interest. The greatest potential danger of a thoroughly public relations-conscious public is the artificiality in the behavior of persons toward each other which it might entail. Today, it already is difficult

to know what is a publicity stunt and what isn't, and that goes for a great deal of charity and philanthropy as well as for banquets, mass meetings, and other newsworthy affairs. Even when the motivations of the sponsors of such events do not seem to be ulterior, publicity seekers may take advantage of such occasions to grab the limelight they provide. It is to conjecture whether anyone who relies upon public favor for a livelihood today can fail to be conscious of his public relations in everything that he does. If this means that his behavior will always be circumspect, good. It is to shudder, however, to contemplate a world in which nobody ever joined anything, never went anywhere, never said anything or did anything without a careful weighing of the possible effect upon his economic well being. Quite a few persons active in public affairs, who have virtually reached this stage of behavior already, have complained bitterly over the fact that they must struggle to retain the small amount of privacy which they want for themselves. If nothing is ever "on the level"—meaning done without conscious purpose to improve the status of the perpetrator—the spontaneity and nonconformity which have been responsible in the past for so much of what is today considered good shall have disappeared. More important, those who learn to act like conforming robots will come to think only as robots. If they learn to like such an existence, a new Dark Ages may be imminent without the aid of nuclear warfare. It could come sooner than 1984.

Encouraging evidence that man is not so easily converted into a mental automaton has been provided by numerous political elections in which the public relations effort was overwhelmingly in behalf of one candidate or party but the people voted the other way. This indicates that basic attitudes and opinions are not so easily manipulated as the would-be manipulator would like to have it. Kermit Eby recalls that in 1944, when he was educational director for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, he was instrumental in the distribution of forty million pieces of literature on behalf of the candidacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Surveys showed that F.D.R. got 71 per cent of the CIO vote. He also got 68 per cent of the AFL vote although that organization distributed virtually no literature in his behalf. In *Harper's* for June 1957, R. L. Heilbronner<sup>2</sup> revealed that an expensive campaign to make Cincinnati "United Nations conscious" was "a gigantic frost" because "most people don't give a damn about most things, unless those things are part and parcel of their concrete lives."

Maybe skillful public relations conducted by groups without axes

## *A Working Concept of Public Relations*

to grind could make people "give a damn" about the United Nations and many other things. The public relations profession (if that is what it is) cannot be blamed for all of the ignorance and indifference—the anti-intellectualism—of our times. Even if it were not scapegoating to declare the opposite, the alternative is not to allow victory by default. Just as the automobile, nuclear power, etc., can be used for good or bad purposes, so can public relations. It may be true that your good public relations is my bad public relations. That, however, is merely tantamount to acceptance of the fact that modern life in this democracy is characterized by competing, conflicting interests all wanting to be heard.

What is the alternative to becoming public relations-conscious today? Ideally, it would be to work for a smaller, simpler society. Historians and anthropologists tell us, however, that such societies are not without their hates and fears and tensions, albeit on a smaller scale and at a slower pace.

Like it or not, public relations is a development of our contemporary culture. It's the way those who depend on wide-spread favorable acceptance by others operate in an age when face-to-face relationships are minimized. The public relations-conscious organization has to study itself constantly to ask, "Am I doing the right thing?" Good ethics may be a natural consequence of such inquiry. A professional attitude may become predominant to the delight of the socially-minded pragmatist.

## *References*

1. Bernays, E. L.: *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. New York, Boni, Liveright, 1923.
2. Heilbronner, R. L.: Public Relations—The Invisible Sell. *Harper's*, 214:23-31, June 1957.