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# LET'S LIFT OUR EYES ABOVE PROCESS AND CONCENTRATE ON OUTCOMES

Patrick Jackson

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## **stop being the carpenters and start becoming the architects**

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I am a public relations practitioner. Therefore, I am a student — a student of public relationships. How they are formed. How they can fall apart. How they affect our behaviour.

The study of public relations in reality is the study of human nature. And of course the basic unit of human interaction is our perception. Sadly, I find this understanding of perception an uncommon approach today. Many of our colleagues want to believe that humans are purely rational, logical beings. That they make decisions based totally or mainly on facts, not on their human nature.

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## **the goal is not communication; the goal is behaviour**

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Others of our colleagues seem to feel that 'going along just getting through the assignment and pleasing the boss' are the essentials. They are concerned with the process of public relations. I am convinced we must be concerned with the outcomes of our work.

Any process exists only to bring about certain outcomes. Yet I believe public relations has gotten itself so mired in process that many practitioners have lost sight of the outcomes we can deliver to our clients and employees, to our society and to mankind. My plea to colleagues and to students preparing to enter public relations is — let's lift our eyes above the process, and start thinking about outcomes.

Let's stop being the carpenters and start becoming the architects. It is one thing to know how to play the piano, it is something else to be able to move an audience with a Beethoven sonata. Therefore, we have to think carefully about what the goals of public relations practice are — about what the goals of each of our client's activities are.

The goal is not communication; communication is process. The goal is not influencing opinion; opinion is process. It is not even

changing attitudes. Although we may have to do all of those things, they are process.

The goal is behaviour. The outcome we are seeking is to influence the hearts and minds of men and women so they behave in certain ways. So they prove by their actions that we have achieved positive public relationships, not just gone through the process of public relations.

## **The six types of campaigns**

There are a number of public relations campaigns, in fact about six. First we have the skills to put on a public awareness campaign, to make people aware of something: School is starting again so please don't run over first graders on their way. Simple awareness.

Second, we have the skills to mount public information campaigns, to offer information along with awareness. Totally different from a simple awareness campaign.

Third, we have the skills to do a public education campaign, using the word education in the pedagogical way, meaning that a person has encompassed the material sufficiently, and is emotionally and attitudinally comfortable enough with it that he or she can actually apply it to daily behaviour. We have the skills to run those campaigns.

But there are other kinds of campaigns that we must also prepare. Fourth, sometimes we must reinforce the attitudes and behaviour of those who are in agreement with our position. All they may need is a reminder of shared values.

Sometimes, fifth, we have to change or attempt to change the attitudes of those who do not agree with our position. This requires creation of cognitive dissonance and is much tougher.

Sixth, and finally, we have the skills today to carry out behaviour modification campaigns. To convince people, for instance, that they ought to wear their seatbelts or that drunk driving is neither in their or society's best interest. These are light years different from awareness or information campaigns.

These six types of public relations activity — and this is my list, of course; you should make your own and it may have five or eight

types —are the process of our field. But note that each type attempts to motivate different levels of behaviour. That is the reason we mount the campaigns. It is a little hard for us to deny, therefore, that behaviour is the outcome we seek—not the thinking or feeling or even social interaction that precedes behaviour. They are the means to an end.

### **Expect unexpected outcomes**

Every communication or course of action is probably going to be countered in our society. That is the nature of the democratic system. People will be sceptical even if they are not overtly doubting. We need to know that. And we need to know how to get through the scepticism in order to stimulate behaviour. If we are only concerned with communications, for example, we may play right into that whirlwind of scepticism. People will feed back to us that they have received our message, but the real question is, have they acted on it?

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### **we need to know how to get through the scepticism in order to stimulate behaviour**

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Here is an illustrative story about countered messages which I am told is true. It is from the field of religion. In the last twenty years, religious organisations have vigorously adopted public relations techniques. That makes me feel good. I figure if they have God on their side but still need public relations, it says something pretty important about our profession. Well, the story is told by the Lutherans that as they began teaching public relations to their individual churches, ministers got excited about using these techniques to fill the pews. Apparently one minister thought and thought about how he might use the techniques, and finally decided that the best public relations campaign available on his budget, which was nothing, was to use the bulletin board in front of his church. You know, those lighted, glass-covered signs that all churches have in front of them. He decided he would use that, and he would create such powerful messages that it would bring people to church on Sunday. So he ruminated and cogitated about just what the right message might be.

Finally, one day in his study in the church about four o'clock, he came up with what he was sure was the right message. So he went out and put it up on the board, and went home for supper. What the message said was 'If you're tired of sin, come in.' To show that every message, no matter who places it, will in fact be countered, when he came back from supper for prayer meeting that evening, there on the glass of the bulletin board was this message

written in lipstick, 'and if you're not, phone 753-6267.'

### **Strategy applies process to outcomes**

The process of public relations does not deal with such an eventuality, but practitioners have to deal with it every day. This means if we are going to look beyond process toward outcomes, hopefully even predictable outcomes, we have to be strategic thinkers.

Let me give an example of how profound public relations activities are in terms of strategy. There are actually five things that happen anytime any public relations message or activity is undertaken. Five things are happening out there, and we have to keep our eye on all of them. First, there is a direct impact of the message or action on the public at whom it is targeted.

Secondly, there are ramifications of that same message, or action, on other publics who are indirectly involved. For example, an employer may send a message to the employees that has to do with vacation time, or health benefits, or what have you. The employees get the direct message and think it sounds pretty fair. Ah, but the indirect ramifications are that the reaction of the employee's spouses and families may be entirely different. So we have to keep both of those audience levels in mind.

Third, there are perceptions of this action by other publics that are neither directly or indirectly involved. Just the general public, if you will, looking interestedly at what is happening.

Fourth, there is a reputational effect. Is this action or message in keeping with what we always thought about that particular organisation.

Fifth, there is always symbolic impact. Something we do that seems perfectly reasonable to us, turns out to be a negative sign to an important public, and that public rebels

### **Writing is process**

Another area where we get carried away with process is one that all of us in this room are deeply involved with. That is the very basic subject of writing. The reason I think we get carried away with the process of writing, and forget the outcome of it, is because good writing is so excruciatingly difficult.

But there is more to it than that. If you think about writing strategically, you recognise that writing is a thought recovery act. That is all writing is. Notice the implication: thought comes first. Yet how many of us say, 'I can't think without a typewriter in front of me.' or 'let's get right to it, let's write it down?' In

public relations that can be fatal, because we all know that once we get words down, we are not exactly our own best editors. Most of us do have at least a mild love affair with the words we put down. And so even this basic act of writing at which we must all be expert, can become a process that diverts us from looking at the outcomes.

Ah, and now we have computer-based electronic technology. It seems certain to focus us on the process, on the screen, on punching it in, not on recognising that the computer is only the typewriter of our century. Just a tool. Human judgment and the application of human nature are still essential, even to computer users.

### **Media is process**

Probably the most difficult part of public relations practice today, when it comes to applying strategy to process, is the relationship practitioners have with media. Lawyers are sometimes called ambulance chasers. In my view, too many public relations practitioners are media chasers. The news media themselves have a very difficult time analysing and determining their role in setting public opinion and contributing to public debate, yet many public relations practitioners have elected the media to an absolutely God-like seat, as if all public opinion were set once and for all by what appears in the media.

### **Short-term thinking ties us to process**

There are three ancillary points I would like to make before I close. The first is how easily we get caught up in short-term thinking instead of long-range thinking — a manifestation of our

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### **I don't think you have to know people, I think you have to know how to work with people**

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failure to concentrate on outcomes. A number of practitioners, for example, express the feeling that somehow it is the contacts you have made, or it is who you know, that make you good in a field like public relations. This, it seems to me, is shirking the tough job of constantly meeting with and getting to understand the opposition groups, the elected officials, the opinion leaders — a perpetual panoply of changing faces, not a pre-established 'old boy or old general' network. I don't think you have to know people, I think you have to know how to work with people. Another short-term line of thinking, it seems to me, is failure to be aware of the linkages

between our jobs, our specific responsibilities, and the outcomes, the ultimate objectives the organisation is pursuing. For example, if I am involved in internal communications, and those who are handling external communications do things that make it difficult for me, should I say, 'Well, you know, it is not my area of concern, it is not my responsibility?' Or, is that just ducking a sense of professionalism?

Have we fallen into the bad habit of saying, 'It is not my responsibility — and I don't want to criticise anyone?' If we do that, we have taken our eyes off the outcomes, off the results the organisation wanted.

### **Ethics help us seek outcomes**

A second concern is that we must be pragmatic and, therefore, all this talk about ethics is really pretty unimportant. There is a great irony about ethics, and it is that ethical behaviour turns out to be far more pragmatic than hard-nosed, blinders-on pragmatism. Consider social responsibility programmes, which some see as 'soft' or 'giveaways.'

I have a hunch that social responsibility is the key not only to our professional philosophy, but to the survival of any organisation in the American court of public opinion. Without socially responsible organisations, we cannot have, literally, a society.

### **Priorities lead us to outcomes**

What are the loyalties of the public relations practitioners? Our loyalties, it seems to me, are first to the democratic system. Without a system in which the public has a right to participate and to make the ultimate decisions, we might not need public relations practitioners. I think that is beyond dispute.

If our first loyalty is to the democratic society, then it follows pretty sensibly that our second loyalty has to be to ethical principles, which is only another way of saying that our second loyalty is to ourselves. We are going to be true to our principles. Thirdly, then, our loyalty is to our clients. Now that's ironic. The people who pay us come third on the list.

But compare an example from public relations practice. It is generally agreed, in corporate life, that the order of priority among the public companies deal with is customers first. Without them, we really don't need the company.

Second is employees, because without them you can't serve your customers. Third is the community, the society in which one does business. Fourth or last come the stockholders who own the business. Now that's ironic too. Yet it is only by paying attention to customers, employees and communities that stockholders can receive dividends, and participate in the success of a company that thrives and grows.

We have years and years of experience to prove these ironies true.

Finally, there is a third manifestation of how we have pulled away from looking for outcomes and got tied up in process. It is what I call practicing micro public relations, instead of practicing macro public relations. We get so busy representing our clients or employers, so busy worrying about things happening in our narrow spheres that we tend to forget the role of our organisation in society, and more importantly the impact we can have on society.

But public relations has the skills. By keeping its eye on the outcome, our field has the ability to do what Edward L Bernays calls. 'Bringing about accommodations in the court of public opinion, getting people to build relationships with one another.' Out of those relationships comes respect, pretty soon some cooperation, and then eventually loyalty. I am firmly convinced that the public relations profession has both the ability and the responsibility to start bringing about these outcomes.

Consider the alternative, like that provocative bumper sticker: 'If you've seen one nuclear war, you've seen them all.' We have diplomatic programmes in this country, and in most countries. We have military programmes. We have information and propaganda programmes. We have foreign aid programmes. But we have no true relationship-building programme. No people-to-people approach.

Take a few billion out of the Pentagon budget — they would hardly miss it — and put it into a major public relationship campaign between the people of our nation and the people of the world. I believe it would make a difference, but it won't happen until public relations professionals, those of us now in practice and those of you preparing for practice, begin to believe that public relations has the ability to motivate outcomes as measured by human behaviour.

All this blind hatred in our world is based on one people's perception of another people. Yet public relations is the art and science of dealing with perception. Therefore, we have a responsibility for subjects even as big as world peace. Certainly we, as all humankind, have great self-interest in ending turmoil. Let's give it a try. We may discover that our ability to build relationships between people is so powerful that, indeed, we can bring about outcomes that benefit all mankind. ■

*Reprinted from a Lecture given at Ball State University, Indiana, USA, in 1984.*

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