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The future of public relations — and maybe the world

“ In a world changing as swiftly as ours, public relations is a survival skill for organizations and the ideas they make manifest. The future of public relations is thus assured. ”

by Patrick Jackson, APR

Patrick Jackson, senior counsel in the international firm of Jackson Jackson & Wagner, served as national PRSA president in 1980. He is editor of the respected weekly newsletter *pr reporter*, a standard weekly newsletter for practitioners, and of *Channels*, a monthly newsletter for non-profits. Jackson has taught public relations at several universities, including nearly a decade as adjunct professor at Boston University. He lectures widely on public relations topics before professional and general audiences; and has made over 300 appearances in the last four years alone, covering all but four states and three Canadian provinces.

Today's encompassing issue is whether humanity will eradicate itself — through nuclear weapons, chemical warfare, or perhaps genetic mis-engineering. Of the disciplines available for dealing with this ultimate problem, only one is directly relevant. It is the science and art we know as public relations.

Denis Gabor put it forthrightly in 1964: "Until now, the problems of mankind have been ones of nature. From now on, they will be ones of *human nature*." Solutions are no longer in technology, but in taking account of actual human behavior.

Speaking in 1976 at the World Congress in Boston, the president of the International Public Relations Association made the linkage. "We must be more than pr technicians," said Sanat Lahiri of India. "We must be *pr humanists*. For the goal of public relations is to reach and touch the hearts and minds of men and women."

For years, Edward L. Bernays has been defining practitioners as "societal technicians with the skills to bring about accommodation in the court of public opinion."

Edward Robinson wrote in the foreword to his 1966 book, *Communications & Public Relations*, "Whenever a public relations situation is analyzed, it inevitably boils down to some sort

of attitude and behavior change or maintenance problem. That is, the practitioner is either trying to change or maintain someone's or some group's behavior and attitudes. That is why I have defined the public relations practitioner as an *applied social and behavioral scientist*."

Are We Slow Learners? These commentators see public relations dealing effectively with even the most difficult world problems. Their messages reached us years ago. Were professionals listening? Though there's little concrete evidence, I think we were. Practitioners know the power — and the social responsibility — of our profession. The barrier has been in applying these lofty principles to daily practice in hospitals, schools, corporations, government, and associations.

Few professionals will ever have world peace as a client. But — just as public opinion consists of an agglomeration of individual opinions, so widespread human behavior depends on the attitudes expressed in every workplace, marketplace, and social grouping. We *can* influence the policies and actions of *our* organizations in the direction of public relations philosophy. I am convinced public relations is a philosophy more than anything else. It is a belief that human dignity is invaluable, that

people are capable of governing themselves, that they are entitled to a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

The Near-Term Future The need is for each of us to provide clients/employers with programs and skills that recognize these realities. We are playing catch-up, but I believe we can pull it off. Here's what I predict professionals will be doing very soon:

1) *Raising our sights.* A maxim of practice postulates that to change others' attitudes, we must first examine our own. So we'd better ask what our attitudes about public relations are. Topical issues like whether we should call it public relations or public affairs, whether it's a profession or a vocation, are insignificant beside one seminal query. Do I truly believe this field has an underlying body of knowledge based in the behavioral sciences and the humanities? More to the point, am I able to apply it to my work?

2) *Learning without end.* The body of knowledge grows so fast that continuing education is becoming a necessity. (If you dislike continual professional development, leave the field. You'll be a drag on your colleagues.) In addition to basics like diffusion process, two-step flow, group psychology, communications modeling, methods of persuasion, and applied semantics, here are some subjects to be studied.

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You might call them “new product development” for the profession:

- a) Organization Development: how to be an effective change agent;
- b) Policy Sciences: how to make consensus decisions;
- c) Diplomacy: how to say no without stiffening resistance;
- d) Arbitration: how to effect compromises and accommodation;
- e) Learning Theory: how to educate instead of just “talking at” people;
- f) Visual Literacy and Graphic Psychology: how to reach and motivate people beyond words;
- g) Systems Dynamics: how the socio-political economy really works;
- h) Strategic Planning and Futures Forecasting: anticipating problems and

opportunities instead of being surprised. I hear some saying we should know all of this already. We are playing catch-up.

3) *Embracing research.* All sound public relations begins with research. And ends with it — as evaluation. The most potent word in our practice is “evidence.” Research provides it. We will master informal research techniques especially as well as using the blind statistical sample. Would you want your doctor prescribing without making a careful diagnosis? Your lawyer going into court without touching the law books? Those activities are often uncomplicated in comparison to what we do when venturing into the court of public opinions.

The Longer-Term Future Adopting the can-do attitudes and powerful skills of the “New Public Relations” suggests these are among the things professionals will be doing before too long:

4) *Becoming “managers of change,”* rather than “defenders of the faith.” No more reactively apologizing but proactively gaining approval of plans that anticipate issues and events.

5) *Going by the book.* Presenting recommendations to our management colleagues within frameworks that explicitly demonstrate the body of knowledge and our ability to apply it tellingly. “I think” will give way to “Here are the options and what we can predict for each from research and proven theoretical concepts.”

6) *Avoiding the victory syndrome.* Building public relationships has no room for winners and losers. Yet our model has been victor and vanquished. Now our goal is success, not victory ... because losers rise again. We will seek consensus or at least compromise.

7) *Learning to trust the people.* Less telling them what's best for them, more listening to what they really expect of our organizations. Going into the court of public opinion carries with it the risk of failing to win consent. We will waste less time and money in protracted, harshly expensive battles like those over nuclear power, efficient automobiles or releasing pollution into the environment — where all of society is the loser because a few recalcitrant executives didn't understand the court of public opinion. Participation is basic to the public relations philosophy.

8) *We'll also have a two-track reward system* in most organizations, whereby you can practice your profession or even a specialty within it and still get the income and honors now reserved for those willing to become full-time managers. And, like accountants in the 1950s, our ranks will swell from one or a few per organization to

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were their energies directed toward rapid resolution of the problem and their own early departure.

The Canadian corporate management initially did not even know about the plans for a U.S. plant to replace the Quebec operation. These plans were developed completely independently in Texas. Only the need for Canadian technology led to word of the Texas plan reaching Montreal.

The vice-president did indeed leave when the closure plan he had engineered began to go sour, but his departure was probably not directly related. He was an American outsider among the Canadian executives in Toronto. His face just did not fit.

The replacement vice-president, although a Canadian, was hardly more sympathetic to the Quebec problem, having already presided over the earlier decline of the business. Indeed, the Montreal assignment was effectively a demotion for him.

Public relations personnel were not consciously telling lies to the media. They got their information from the planners who were either themselves ignorant of the corporate motives, or powerless to tell the truth if they were to protect their own personal interests.

The government bureaucrats at the DITC were just doing what their minister ordered. They were working in a political system with political goals. Even the minister was not as soulless as the cynic might suggest. He was elected, not in a constituency where he was just the party candidate, but in his home town about which he genuinely cared.

The local arm of the multinational merely protected itself as well as it could against financial losses, in what was a poor political situation, when the closure plan collapsed under government pressure.

That the taxpayer was left holding the bag was an unfortunate, but inevitable, result of the political and commercial system. Public money is spent by everyone as if it came from nowhere.

If commercial decisions in a multinational were based on a global public relations strategy with which they had to mesh, then the intractable public relations problems that can erupt in remote corners of the system could be minimized. But the multinational corporation is composed of humans, not automatons, and a global public relations approach would be destined to falter as it became diluted by the diverse motivations of a worldwide operation. The multinational reacts in ways as varied as the people involved and the situations they

encounter. In this case, there was no coordinated plot to take away the jobs of French Canadians and give them to Texans — no planned economic attack on Quebec or Canada. There were perhaps inadequate managers facing overwhelming problems, and powerless staff resentfully protecting only themselves.

Public relations, in a multinational corporation, is too often forced into a reactive stance, firefighting around the globe when the weaknesses of the corporate system lead to a breakdown of image.

Multinational business is too wracked with internal conflict and inefficiency to be as smoothly villainous as its opponents claim, but would it be good public relations to use this truth to rid business of its Machiavellian image?

Like the Abscam congressmen, caught stuffing bribe money into their pockets, who claimed they were drunk at the time, the crime must be really damning and the evidence overwhelming before one admits another weakness to excuse the first. ■

The future of public relations

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large staffs. Organizations do exist by public consent, and we've just begun to realize the many ways that winning consent can influence the bottom line — whatever it is for your outfit. So we'll put more manpower into the challenge' — mainly new practitioners with excellent pre-professional education.

9) *Policy Not Publicity.* Most important of all, practitioners will learn the true role and power of the mass media. That is, they'll recognize the lack of power publicity has to deal with most public relations problems. Then we'll stop expecting the media to do our job for us . . . and get out there building relationships, not one-way communications. To do that, we'll think more about organizational policy, rather than publicity.

The Uncertainty In a world changing as swiftly as ours, public relations is a survival skill for organizations and the ideas they make manifest. The future of public relations is thus assured. The prognosis for present day practitioners and our obsolescent methods is less certain.

But destiny is a matter of choice, not chance. Whether we attain our potential role in society — or perhaps even survive — depends on our will to create the future quickly along lines similar to those outlined here.

One more point, I hope you agree or disagree enough with what I've written to take issue. Debating our future makes it far more likely we will demand ownership and take action. ■