

HIGH-TECH INFORMATION AGE
BRINGS SOCIAL APPREHENSION,
IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Candy store of new communications technology has major implications for society's public relationships, says Betsy Ann Plank in 1982 Lecture for Foundation for Public Relations

Research & Education. She has six areas of concern:

1. Instant feedback may threaten the time required to nurture consensus.
2. By mid 1990, 10 million people may be working at home. Will we need new social institutions to provide human contacts & avoid isolation?
3. Clash between information-rich and information-poor classes may rupture social stability.
4. Privacy in an environment of corruptible machines.
5. Language & writing skills -- keys to problem solving -- may be trade-offs for computer literacy.
6. Information overload brings tyranny of overchoice.

Plank urges the Foundation to initiate a symposium from disciplines of public relations & social sciences, and to use her honorarium as seed money. Its goal: to minimize human dislocation in the Information Age.

Paul Lyet adds a note that will directly affect practitioners. "The next great wave of applied technology will land in the white-collar area." Previous impact has been felt by blue collar workers.

GOLD ANVIL AWARD WINNER

Accepting this year's Gold Anvil Award for exceptional lifetime contributions to the profession, Frank Wylie offered a few deeply felt thoughts:

- ¶ "Let us stop vacillating so much about nomenclature to describe our craft. Settle on the term 'public relations' and devote all our time to doing things better."
- ¶ "Let us now cease the 'holy grail' search for the ultimate definition of public relations and spend more time publicizing the good works that practitioners are already doing."
- ¶ "Let us stop squabbling with, or ignoring, other communications & management organizations, and assume the leadership role in bringing all these organizations together in creating an effective reality of cooperation & creative endeavor."
- ¶ Practitioners have not "financed or endowed even one chair in public relations. When one considers the scope of our endeavor and the rewards it has brought many of us, our record of non-support is odious." (For copy of pithy speech, write prr.)

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

ELECTED. PRSA officers for 1983 are: pres, Judith Bogart (vp-pr, Jewish Hospital of Cincinnati); pres-elect, Barbara Hunter (exec vp, Dudley-Anderson-

Yutzky, NYC); sec'y, Frank LeBart (2nd vp, John Hancock, Boston); treas, Jerry Dalton (ass't dir corp comms, Electronic Data Systems, Dallas).

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GROWING ACCEPTANCE OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, RESEARCH
& OTHER KNOWLEDGE FRAMES EVIDENT AT PRSA CONFERENCE;
COULD RESOLVE SPLIT BETWEEN MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS VS. PRODUCTS

Reconciling the political marketplace and the product marketplace is still an issue for public relations, judging from PRSA's 35th national conference last week in San Francisco. For 2 days speakers extolled the importance of knowing the issues and managing responses to them. Then the final day's theme of "Marketing: public relation's link to the bottom line" brought pleas to leave the "ethereal spheres" of issues and "return home" to product promotion & publicity.

What is new -- this dichotomy has been unresolved for years -- is a potential solution: demonstrated interest in adopting social science methods to produce a science of public relations that is applicable to any sphere of human relationships. This possibility has also been touted for years, notably by Rex Harlow beginning in the 30s. A founder of PRSA, he started the Society's Public Relations Journal and his own newsletters, Social Science Reporter & Public Relations Research Review, to turn practitioners on to behavioral science as the underpinnings of the practice. Fittingly, the 92-year old patriarch was honored at the meeting.

Verifying the oft-stated belief that there is no recession in public relations was a record attendance -- 1550, even tho the meeting was held on the west coast. PRSA's roster shows the great majority of practitioners work in the middle & eastern sections.

CURRENT ISSUES CLUSTER AROUND
"HUMAN RESOURCES" THEME

Investment in human resources, training, internal relations, job creation -- these are the big issues now as seen by several speakers.

¶ "Now, with over 30 million people unemployed in the western world, job creation has replaced inflation as the paramount economic issue. Job creation requires healthy trade policies, and all the managerial get up and go that business leadership can muster to identify new markets and enter them aggressively." (Samuel Armacost, pres, Armacost BankAmerica)

OFFICIAL DESCRIPTION OF PR APPROVED
PRSA's governing Assembly made one significant addition. After Grievance Board chrm Ken Clark reported handling 15 cases in '82, NYC counselor Charlotte Klein moved to add ethics to the list of subjects in which practitioners need expertise. It passed unanimously. Except for adding "educational & religious organizations" to the list of those utilizing public relations today, pres. Joe Awad asked delegates to withhold other amendments for later lest "we become the worlds largest editorial board." (See prr 10/1 for text.)



"Through the rest of this century our nation will have to deal with the contradiction of technology. This could threaten the vitality of parts of the economy. And, it will cause social and political tension if we fail to resolve it. The contradiction is this: we constantly invent, develop, and market technology to replace human labor, especially unskilled and semi-skilled workers. But at the same time we fail to accommodate most of these people to use new and -- in the intellectual sense -- more demanding machines and systems." (J. Paul Lyet, former Sperry chrm)

"Changing the attitudes of a nationwide army of sales-oriented account executives is a major internal relations problem caused by expansion of financial services. With 106 items now in their product line, old style commission salesmen cannot provide customer service." William F. Walters, vp & dir marketing svcs, Merrill Lynch, says motivating sales forces to begin cross marketing and finding other incentives to replace commissions require the highest order of public relations persuasion.

"Electronics, computers, artificial intelligence, robotics will influence what needs to be taught in our schools & universities -- as well as to engineers & technicians in order to get & hold their jobs." If higher education doesn't modernize -- using more adjunct professors with real-world experience & reducing extraneous courses were cited as examples -- industry will set up its own "universities." (K.R. Kidoo, vp personnel, Lockheed)

But our institutions "are all pre-1940s and our problems are post-1980s," says Fletcher Byrom, ex-Koppers CEO. He feels we "must move out of our sensate culture to an attitude of community. The New Federalism makes us responsible for the communities in which we live and serve." Public relations can attack this problem with organization development skills.

To Deal Directly With Human Resources, Constituency Communications On The Rise

The fact that heavyweight practitioners Betsy Ann Plank of Illinois Bell is now assigned to employee communications and

Bill Pruett of Coca-Cola is handling stockholder relations demonstrates that "natural constituencies" are getting prominent attention. Illinois Bell can reach 1 million employees and their family members in attempts to gain public support for breakup of the Bell System. And Coca-Cola can better win support for acquisition plans.

RESEARCH AND ITS MANY USES ILLUSTRATED BY CASE STUDIES

Appropriate to declaring the first day of the conference "Rex Harlow Day," the role of social science in public relations was discussed at several sessions.

Research is useful for 1) program planning, 2) deciding on program content, and 3) evaluating programs, says Charlotte Vogel, Carl Byoir vp. She told prr how research helped Honeywell position itself in the computer market. Instead of explaining the product, research showed that the company should concentrate on the human concerns of computer adoption, e.g.: 1) user resistance based on health concerns; 2) organizational change & mgmt stress; 3) training and retraining (80% of office workers will require retraining); 4) office productivity; 5) computer security.

Vogel, in her pd seminar, "Public Relations Research: Critical Tool For Change," said "If you're not committed to using the research you do, don't do it. Also, don't do it if you can't live with the results."

"If you don't reach the right people, it doesn't matter how many people you reach" is a Vogel adage. And you have to reach them with the right message. An Army recruiting campaign aimed at minorities failed because it concentrated on testimonials by successful businessmen & skilled workers who described how skills training helped them in their careers. Actually, as shown by subsequent research, young minority men were interested in the here and now -- subjects like what food would be served, whether they'd get short haircuts, and when they would have to return to their barracks at night.

Other major research presentations were made on the VALS approach by SRI International (see prr 9/20) and ZIP code audience targeting by PRIZM Media Service of Claritas Corp (see t&t 10/27/80; for copy, write prr). The latter gives geo-demographic outlines for ZIP clusters. For example, ZIP cluster #1, called "God's Country," houses mobile, upper-middle-class families who live in the extreme exurbs & new towns. Cluster 28, "Blue Blood Estate," is super-educated, white, suburban, upper class. ZIP 38 is "Share Cropper" -- Southern white farmers, wealthy, conservative.

Results of 2 Delphi studies were presented in tentative form. They are on 1) perceptions of future issues & 2) proper emphasis for pr education.

BIG NAME JOURNALISTS COME AROUND, AGREE MASS MEDIA FAILING SOCIETY

Journalists themselves are agreeing that news media have become entertainment -- especially tv. Mike Jensen, tv's first business reporter,

cites Richard Nixon's bon mot, that tv is to journalism what a bumper sticker is to philosophy. Practitioners must go beyond just placing material to being sure that the reality comes across as opposed to an instant perception of that reality.

Author David Halberstam, delivering the first annual Counselors Academy Distinguished Communication Lecture, feels that on network television news programs "the norm of entertainment flirts dangerously with the norms of news" and this exacerbates the inadequacies of the 1/2-hr (really 22 mins) news show to inform the huge public that daily turns to television as its primary source of information.

Pierre Salinger, ABC's Paris bureau chief, adds that "tv news, the only news source for 75% of the people, provides a mere 'blip' of perception, as opposed to the reality of world affairs. High impact of single stories makes public opinions very volatile -- we need some way of providing news in depth."

"With only 90 seconds typically allocated to big stories, tv is indeed superficial," notes Jensen of CBS. But tv reporters do "get to the bottom line quickly and 'consumerize' the news." Salinger called on public relations professionals to bring the voters "back from the world of instant perception to the world of reality."

Halberstam, in a special interview with prr, said he feels the increasing concentration of media based on financial resources is an essential violation of freedom of speech. He advocates that tv adopt a self-limiting policy on the amount of political advertising accepted in order to prevent dollars from corrupting the political process. If the medium accepts political advertising, it has a responsibility to present responsible coverage of political campaigns. He believes cable television, by segmenting audiences, may lead to political parochialism & decreased common understanding of the issues.