

PRESS AGENCY A LOST ART? "PR is a very disorganized profession,"
 PRACTITIONER LAMENTS BYGONE DAYS feels Sol Abrams, vp corp afrs & comn,
 WHEN PR PEOPLE CREATED NEWS Murphy Realty (Saddle River, NJ). Yet
 it's the oldest profession, dating back
 to the bible when Aaron was Moses' pr practitioner. After all these years,
 we're still arguing over what it is we do. As a result, the public sees us
 with jaundiced eyes."

The longtime media rels advocate's view of the state of the profession:

¶Professional Definition. "We deal with semantics, yet semantics is one of our problems. One year we're a press agent, next year we're publicists, then marketing reps, communicators. We have got to get it together."

¶Accreditation. "I advocate the licensing of pr people. Anyone can get out of bed, shave or put on make-up, go down to the corner print shop & instantly become a pr person. Accreditation is good, but the PRSA test isn't tough enough."

¶Standards. "I recently interviewed a woman for a pr position. Asked what pr meant to her, she said 'talking to people.' I was outraged. What other profession expects graduates to be able to fly out from the nest without more preparation? Not medicine, not law. Real estate is another example -- it requires 75 hours of study, a test, another government exam, then in-house training."

¶Education. College comn courses graduate students who learn all this theory, but don't know how to apply it. PR should have more internships during which graduates train with mentors, are taught by working practitioners. Also, pr doesn't teach its own history. In medicine & law, students learn about the great ones. Not so in our profession."

¶PR & Adv'g. "I'm against ad agencies that have people wearing 2 hats. It's like a brain surgeon doing podiatry work. Adv'g & pr are 2 separate professions."

ITEM OF INTEREST TO PRACTITIONERS

¶Wave Of New Puritanism (prr 3/20) seems to have gained a foothold in tv, may have broad implications. Ad Age says new shows this fall -- family sitcoms, clerical comedies, police & doctor shows -- have little risqué material. "The networks felt the snake bite of special interest groups," says Douglas Ritter, corp broadcast mgr, AT&T. Old bulwark of candor, Saturday Night Live, has lost major sponsors over one too-bold segment. Compare the early days when Chevy Chase sat at the news desk pretending to snort cocaine while co-anchor Jane Curtin ripped off her blouse.

"There has been a lot of change in pr's attitude toward the media. Now we have publicity directories, fax machines & computers. We used to call AP or UPS & give them stories, create the news. Those who sit back puffing on their pipes & waiting for news to happen are doing themselves & their clients a disservice. Exxon is suffering from the ineptitude of its pr dept, which didn't know how to help the press. Whenever there is a disaster, pr should be right there out front -- if you're friendly with media, you'll gain support."

pr reporter

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PUBLICATIONS NOW: GREAT POTENTIAL AS TARGETED MEDIA BUT TINY PERCENTAGES OF INTENDED AUDIENCES READ THEM; ARE THEY WORTH THE EFFORT & COST? HOW TO FIND OUT?

Current readership studies indicate that in nearly all cases only a small percentage of intended audiences actually read even the best publications. And those stalwarts see only a small percentage of the issues or information presented. This double whammy has made publication staffs the first choice of downsizers, with good reason: large sums spent for dubious impact.

How to design effective publications in an over-communicated world?

1. Strategize each step in the usage cycle: a) receipt, b) scan or read headlines to decide whether to peruse further, c) read, d) understand, e) believe, f) act. Most publications editors put all their energy into c -- which makes the giant, often fatal assumption that folks are going to, even want to read.
2. The brevity factor: a) how many subjects per issue are you expecting readers to handle? b) how many pages? c) how often issued? Are your answers dictated by the old idea a schedule must be met ... or by actual usage studies that will let you be reader friendly? Why must it be more than 1-pg, i.e. a flyer or poster? Why must it come out weekly, monthly or whatever instead of when there's something important to communicate? How many ever ask for a back issue or notice if you miss one?
3. Force editors to edit -- and link everything they do to organizational goals -- by limiting each issue to 3 or 4 key topics. They will be read! The goal is communication, not giving 'em more to read or entertainment (the mass media now do that). Editors must work closely with management to select topics, then edit them to reasonable length, charts, pix.

Don't fool yourself with outdated readership questionnaires -- the ones bound into the newsletter or magazine that ask "how much of each issue do you read?" "do you read every/most/some issues?" and similar. They fail the test of valid research: e.g. a self-selected sample, most apt to be returned by the avid readers. People usually answer ideally: what they feel they ought to do rather than actual behavior. To find out true effectiveness, 1) ask content questions 2) in person or by phone 3) of a sample weighted to reflect audience configuration. (But if your job depends on it, don't conduct such research until your resume's updated!)



4. What would people read, that they're actually interested in, which doesn't compete with other media they presently use? If you ran debates, arguments, discussions of sensitive topics, things that really involve them instead of preaching at them -- would this help? Are you honestly doing this now?
5. If audiences are reading some or reading occasionally, can the least read material be dropped & still maintain the majority of the present percentage who actually read? Remember the objective & who's paying the bill. You're not pleasing subscribers by offering as much material as you can cram in -- which, by the way, commercial publishers don't do now either.
6. If opinion leaders/influentials are reading & the rest aren't, instead of justifying the publication on this basis, why not target these key people with another medium, maybe a personal one rather than print?
7. Use research, pre-test & evaluative. a) Fog & Flesch tests, clocking reading time required, asking a panel if they clearly comprehend -- more valuable today than worrying about being Shakespearean. b) Convene an advisory group of non-pr, non-writers, non-publications people. Let 'em be hard-headed as possible, focusing on stated behavioral objectives. c) Do annual content-response studies. They answer both how many are reading & how much is getting thru.
8. The reputation factor. For glossy or design-conscious publications, what value is achieved merely by targets seeing it -- whether read or not? Does the smashing cover say "wow" about your organization? This assumes the intended recipient is seeing the publication -- that some gatekeeper isn't sorting it out or tossing it before it reaches his or her eyes. What fail safe methods can you employ?
9. The family & reminder factors. Even if they never crack the cover, will audiences be reminded of something: That they're part of the family? That they intended to do something? That they've been wanting more info & here it is? A complete list of such possibilities will help shape the behaviors sought by publishing.
10. Could reputational/reminder value be attained with a smaller or less expensive vehicle. If you're distributing a magazine, would an equivalent quality newsletter make the same impressions? If a newsletter, would a 1-page "infogram," flyer or poster series suffice? (See prr 6/22/87 for the impact of poster communication in today's reading environment.)

If you're among the few blessed -- for whatever reason -- with a publication that is provably read; and it motivates readers to action; consider setting up as a consultant. Most counselors on publications seem to operate on a 1960s environmental scan, worrying about prose style rather than ideas imparted, about layout rather than graphic psychology. The bottom line, simply, is: Why are we publishing this? What behaviors do we need to stimulate? Anything else is secondary.

TRENDS STUDY SUPPORTS CONCLUSIONS ABOUT PR & ADVERTISING, ALSO FINDS BIG FIRMS MAINLY PUBLICISTS, MARKETERS' HELPERS

Study by Chester Burger Co. (NYC) confirms Janet Diederich's assertions to the 4-As (pr 5/22). Ad agencies are giving their pr dep'ts short shrift, & the latter are better off independent. CBC conducted personal interviews with senior execs at 26 big firms (ranked by billings).

1. PR divisions owned by ad agencies are considered economically insignificant to overall revenue, run a high risk of being spun off.
 2. Integrated marketing isn't working. Execs estimate they share little more than 25% of business with parent agencies. "Some are trying to reduce that. What became clear during interviews is that pr execs realize they must stand alone in order to survive the ad agency environment."
 3. Old cultural problems thrive -- large salary differentials, poor understanding, little respect. "You wonder how people with comm backgrounds can be so dumb about pr," says one exec. Another: "The truth is pr people don't understand adv'g. They are as superficial about it as adv'g is about pr."
 4. PR is still seen as competing with adv'g for client dollars. Says Burger prez Jim Arnold: "Altho ad agencies bought pr capabilities to offer '1-stop shopping,' they treat them as incremental investments."
- Replies make clear that, despite the growth of pr techniques & the critical role of issues & public policy, big firms are after fat publicity accounts. Language is replete with "media," "marketing," "brand mgr." Asked about evaluation, replies discuss measuring impact of clippings. As the authors note, "product publicity is a commodity." That's not pr counseling of any breadth. "However, it is a commodity to which a major portion of dollars still flows in the public relations agency (sic) world."
- Study Also Found ...
5. Field has grown 20% per year over the past 5 years. Total billings should pass the \$billion mark by the end of year.
 6. PR firm execs are more volume than profit-driven. Is this why critics say we're poor businesspersons? "Sales growth is vanity: profit is sanity" opines one interviewee. Study finds larger firms do not operate more efficiently by consolidating costs or other methods.
 7. Most have yet to take full advantage of technology, even computers.
 8. Altho publicity measurement systems are developed, there is no standardization of gauging impact. And little behavioral measurement. Few clients request measurement because of high cost.
 9. Areas of growth: healthcare, medical/pharmaceutical, sports, high tech. Also, international arena with pending 1992 European market.
 10. Standing out from the crowd of other pr firms is hard to do. Some execs believe there is little or no differentiation.