

Raising our sights: the future of public relations is within us

by Patrick Jackson, APR

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 our neighbor and colleague 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, teaching at BU in 1966, wrote in the foreword to his revered 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 we 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. Few of us will ever have world peace for 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 clients/employers in the direction of public relations philosophy. I am convinced pr 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 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 we'll be doing very soon (if you aren't already):

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 each practitioner should ask him- or herself. *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.* Whether our answer today be yea or nay, the body of knowledge grows so fast we'll all be back in school. (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 we'll be studying.

You might call them "new product development" for the profession:

1) Organization Development: how to be an effective change agent; 2) Policy Sciences: how to make consensus decisions; 3) Diplomacy: how to say no without stiffening resistance; 4) Arbitration: how to effect compromises and accommodation; 5) Learning Theory: how to educate instead of just "talking at" people; 6) Visual Literacy and Graphic Psychology; 7) Systems Dynamics; 8) Strategic Planning and Futures Forecasting.

I hear someone saying we should know all this already. Well, I said we were 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 occasionally using the blind statistical sample. Do 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 opinion.

The longer-term future. Adopting the can-do attitudes and powerful skills of the New Public Relations suggests these are among the things we'll be doing before too long (if you aren't already):

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.

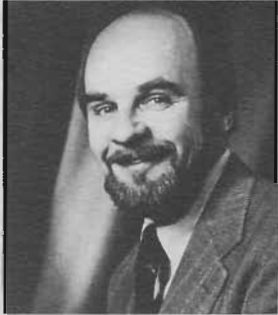
5. *Going by the book.* Presenting recommendations to our management colleagues within frameworks that explicitly demonstrate the body of knowledge and our ability to apply it tellingly. "I think" will give way to "Here are the options and what we can predict for each from research and proven theoretical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

6. *Avoiding the victory syndrome.* Building public relationships has no room for winners/losers. Yet our model has been victor/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 recalcitrant executives didn't understand the court of public opinion.

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 fulltime managers. And, like accountants in the Fifties, our ranks will swell from one or a few per organization to 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.



Patrick Jackson, senior counsel in the New Hampshire firm of Jackson Jackson & Wagner (which celebrated its 25th anniversary last year), was president of the New England Chapter of the PRSA in 1974-75, and served the national organization as president in 1980-81. He is co-editor of pr reporter, a standard weekly newsletter for practitioners, and of Channels, a monthly newsletter for non-profits. He 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 organizations and non-public relations audiences; he has made over 300 appearances in the last four years alone, in all but four states and several Canadian provinces.

President's report

by *Marcelle Farrington, APR*

You were promised last fall that if you would contribute something of yourself to NEPRSA this year, you would get your money's worth from Chapter membership. Your loss if you didn't, because month after month the Chapter provided you with opportunities to expand your horizons and take pleasure in the process. I can make this claim without modesty because the achievements of 1981-1982 were not mine, but those of a number of dedicated people whose committee and task force reports fill this issue of *News & Views*.

Developments this year with the greatest implications for the future were:

- launching of the NEPRSA/Boston University continuing professional development series;
- action to stimulate the formation of new PRSA chapters in New England; Providence is moving ahead full steam;
- completion of a policies and procedures manual for Chapter officers;
- formulation of a new plan for distributing placement information and handling requests for information interviews;
- approval for formation of a new PRSSA chapter at Northeastern;
- completion of a survey of the total membership as a first step toward long-range planning.

The program committee, the membership committee, the special task forces and so many others who contributed to the running of your Chapter this year deserve your appreciation. Please come to the June meeting (for which we have a terrific program) and join me in saying thank you for all the jobs well done.

PRSSA report

by *Cynthia L. Strousse, APR*

1981-82 was a banner year for the Boston University Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter on all fronts — locally, District-wide, and nationally. President Andrew Leipold and his executive committee motivated membership participation in a variety of activities and events to support not only the B.U. chapter, but other chapters and the profession. The executive committee included: Gina Cella, vice president for internal matters, who was elected 1982-83 president; Lisa Wetzel, vice president for external matters; David Downing, secretary; Brenda Colegrove, treasurer; Barry Adrezin, national liaison; Janet Rosen, graduate representative for night students; and Kris Schwartz, graduate representative for day students. Professor Gerald Powers served as faculty advisor.

On the local level, the chapter sponsored five programs on topics ranging from "Fashion Public Relations," to "Sports Promotion," to a lecture by Edward L. Bernays. The chapter newsletter was redesigned and five monthly issues were produced. The Professional Partners Program was rejuvenated and students hosted a reception for the partners at the Harvard Club. In addition, the chapter raised over \$1,500 through fundraisers such as selling coffee in the student lounge and selling raffle tickets.

James Newmann, a graduate student at the School of Public Communication, served as Northeast District Director. Under his direction, the B.U. chapter developed and implemented the Edward L. Bernays Award for an outstanding District member. Andrew Leipold was the recipient of this first annual award. The chapter produced two editions of "Northeast News" and supported the establishment of two new chapters — at Northeastern University and Boston College. The chapter also hosted the National Case Study judging for the East Central District.

Nationally, 12 members — the largest number in the history of the chapter — attended the PRSA/PRSSA Conference in Chicago in November. NEPRSA contributed to the expenses of all 12 registrants. James Newmann and Gina Cella received National Service Citations at the Conference.

Next year the chapter will take an active role in the compilation and production of the NEPRSA Placement Service Newsletter.

The Boston University Students should be commended for their dedication and commitment to their PRSSA chapter.

By-Laws report

by *Paul J. Wetzel, APR*

After many months of study, revision, and more study, changes in the New England Chapter's By-Laws were approved by a unanimous vote of the members attending the April program meeting.

As noted when proposed to the members, the changes principally involved bringing our By-Laws into conformity with those of National PRSA. In addition, changes were made to reflect the addition of the president-elect as one of our officers.

A copy of the new By-Laws is included with this issue of *News & Views*.