

## **“Mini-Me” History**

*Public Relations from the Dawn of Civilization*

Paper by

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### *Public Relations from the Dawn of Civilization*

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### **Public Relations Time Line (1900-2002)**

- 1900** Publicity Bureau of Boston established as first public relations firm.
- 1904** Ivy L. Lee becomes public relations counselor.
- 1913** Ludlow Massacre establishes value of corporate public relations
- 1923** Edward L. Bernays publishes *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, first book on professional public relations.
- 1929** Bernays stages “Torches of Freedom” march to promote smoking
- 1948** Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) founded.
- 1950** PRSA Code of Professional Standards adopted.
- 1955** International Public Relations Association (IPRA) founded.
- 1965** PRSA Accreditation established.
- 1970** International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) founded.
- 1989** Exxon Valdez crisis becomes PR nightmare.
- 1998** Council of Public Relations Firms founded.
- 2000** PRSA Code of Ethics revised as inspirational guidelines.
- 2002** PRSA promulgates Universal Accreditation as standard for practice.

### **Preface: To My Colleagues in Public Relations**

The profession of public relations lacks a serious, comprehensive history. Considering the power that we have evidenced throughout the years as practitioners, it seems somewhat ludicrous that we don't have at least one book we can point to with pride as a truly credible, challenging chronology and interpretation of PR's origins and actions, both good and bad. Suffice it to say, it will be a long time before we have such a tome. But all is not lost.

While we wait, there have been contributions in the professional literature that impart a meaningful, albeit skeletal, picture of our past and present. This abbreviated “mini-me” history is a modest example, compiled through research for chapters I have authored for textbooks, an international encyclopedia and innumerable articles, and leavened by my personal experiences over more than 30 years in the profession, first in the corporate world, then in the not-for-profit world, then in my own agency, which I sold in the early 1990's.

Most of the early chronological references and some of the interpretations come from two of the three extensive histories that we can call “our own”: Edward L. Bernays' *Public Relations* (Univ. of Oklahoma, 1952), and Scott Cutlip's *Public Relations History from the 17th to the 20th*

*Century* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995). The third history is also by Cutlip – *The Unseen Power: Public Relations* (also Lawrence Erlbaum) – but I didn’t consult it for this paper. Of all the people who have written about the course of public relations, Scott did the most and was interested, with the right financial and logistical support, in producing a larger history, but he died August 18, 2000, at the age of 85. Scott’s obituary can be read at:

[http://www.athensnewspapers.com/stories/082400/obi\\_01.shtml](http://www.athensnewspapers.com/stories/082400/obi_01.shtml).

For this “mini-me” history, I also gathered and checked facts in such leading textbooks as *The Practice of Public Relations* by Frasier Seitel (Prentice Hall), *Effective Public Relations* by Scott Cutlip and Alan Center (Prentice Hall), and *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations* by Doug Newsom, Judy Van Slyke Turk and Dean Krukeberg (Wadsworth). Everyone in the profession should read at least one of these texts from cover to cover, and share it with colleagues.

This was pretty much the extent of my walk through our past, although I did read a few articles and essays many years ago in the *Public Relations Review* and *Public Relations Quarterly*, our only research journals of note. In any event, if you read what I have written here I hope it will encourage you and other practitioners to think more seriously about the big-picture opus we need and how you might help to bring it to fruition. Publishers are waiting for the right author. And I think it would be a best seller in the field and a valuable addition to the history of our country and its communications professions. I also hope you will send me suggestions for improving the accuracy of “mini-me,” expanding its references to encompass more recent events, and balancing its tone and interpretations. But go easy. I’m a PR guy, not a historian. My personal e-mail is:

[batesdon1@msn.com](mailto:batesdon1@msn.com).

## **This Thing We Call “PR”**

Viewed as a professional endeavor, public relations is most often defined as the management function that seeks to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization, commercial or non-commercial, and the audiences or "publics" on which the success of these entities depends. These publics may include any of several possible

constituencies: customers, investors, employees, suppliers, legislators, competitors, government officials and other “influentials.”

Working within the context of the prevailing public opinion, laws, politics and societal norms of the country or countries in which they work, public relations practitioners develop programs and craft messages aimed at creating favorable support for the goals of the organizations they represent. Obtaining significant, positive news and feature coverage in the print and broadcast media is a key objective.

Unlike advertising or marketing, with which it is often confused, professional public relations is more “soft sell” than “hard sell.” It emphasizes information and persuasion as opposed to packaging and paid media, diplomacy as opposed to force. Owing to its subtleties, it is occasionally viewed as “propaganda” or, in more current jargon, “spin,” the intentional manipulation of public opinion without regard for what is accurate or true.

Although professional public relations has certainly been misused from time to time, its record of historical achievement suggests a much deeper and abiding respect for and adherence to openness and honesty in its dealings and communications. Public relations blossomed as a professional endeavor in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most conspicuously in the United States, but its roots, both philosophical and pragmatic, can be traced throughout civilization.

## **Roots in Ancient Civilization**

Edward Bernays, whom many have considered the founder of modern public relations, wrote, “The three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people. Of course, the means and methods of accomplishing these ends have changed as society has changed.”

For Bernays and other historians of the practice, professional public relations has always gone hand in hand with civilization. In their eyes, much of recorded history can be interpreted as the practice of public relations. Whereas primitive societies ruled mainly through fear and

intimidation, more advanced cultures depended on discussion and debate. As rulers sought to build consensus, persuasion became less and less grounded in force and more and more grounded in words, although force or the threat of force – witness the 9/11 tragedy – too often still drives the deliberations. With the invention of writing, public relations in the formal sense took shape.

Whether they were promoting their image as warriors or kings, leaders of ancient civilizations such as Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, and Persia used poems and other writings to promote their prowess in battle and politics. In Egypt much of the art and architecture (statues, temples, tombs) was used to impress on the public the greatness of priests, nobles, and scribes. In ancient Israel, the Bible and other religious texts became a powerful means for molding the public mind. With the growth of the Hellenic world, the word, both written and spoken, exploded as a force for social integration. And the Athens marketplace became a center of public discussion concerning the conduct of business and public life. Oratory flourished, and the public interest became a central concern of philosophical speculation.

### **Hail, Caesar!**

In ancient Rome, the force of public relations was evident in phrases such as *vox populi, vox Dei* (“the voice of the people is the voice of God”), and *res publicae* (“public affairs”), which means “republic.” Julius Caesar carefully prepared the Romans for his crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E. by sending reports such as “Caesar’s Gallic Wars” (52 B.C.E.) on his epic achievements as governor of Gaul. Most historians agree that he also wrote his Commentaries as propaganda for himself. Recognizing the power of news to mold public opinion, Caesar published a daily paper called *Acta Diurna* (“daily acts” or “daily records”) that continued for 400 years.

When Christianity emerged at the height of Roman influence, the teachings of Jesus and his apostles took center stage in the battle for religious dominance in the public mind. Once the Christian church took shape, it relied on eloquent speeches and letters, such as Paul’s epistle to the Romans, to win converts and guide the faithful.

## Origins of Modern Public Relations

Public relations continued to develop even during medieval times, using the “new media” of that day, such as the Bayeaux Tapestry, a woven wall hanging that extolled the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. It was not until the Renaissance and Reformation that the foundation of the modern world arose—and with it the underpinnings of the kind of public relations that has become vital to the management of public and private institutions. Great documents of liberty crystallized the power of public opinion. For example, the *Magna Carta*—the thirteenth-century English charter of rights and liberties—inspired the U.S. Constitution.

The word “propaganda” originated in the Catholic Church. In the seventeenth century, it set up its *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, the “congregation for propagating the faith.” In doing so, it explicitly acknowledged the need for a third party to facilitate communication between government and the people. Along with the spread of new knowledge in new forms—such as translations in the fifteenth century of the *Bible* from Latin into everyday languages, mass-printed books, and newspapers—there was an explosion of public communications.

When the French Revolution arrived, the stage was set. In their *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens* (1789), the leaders of the French Revolution proclaimed the right of citizens to express and communicate thought freely. In 1792 the National Assembly of France created the first propaganda ministry. It was part of the Ministry of the Interior and it was called the Bureau d’Esprit, or “Bureau of the Spirit.” It subsidized editors and sent agents to various parts of the country to win public support for the French Revolution.

## The American Way

England’s rebellious American colonies produced a host of public relations experts who used oratory, newspapers, meetings, committees, pamphlets, and correspondence to win people to their cause. Included among them were Paul Revere, Benjamin Franklin, John Peter Zenger, Samuel Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. Adams has been called the great press agent of the American Revolution for fashioning the machinery of political change. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay are credited with winning ratification of the Constitution by

publishing letters they had written to the press in 1787–1788. These letters became known as the Federalist Papers.

The other great documents produced by the founders of the United States—the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Constitution*, and the *Bill of Rights*—may all be seen as masterworks of public relations. These documents, essential to the notion of tying one’s destiny to the public interest, also helped establish the United States as the breeding ground for pursuing public relations as a profession that represented the diverse interests of democracy and free enterprise.

Many American legends are the result of public relations campaigns. For example, the story of Daniel Boone was created by a landowner to promote settlement in Kentucky. And Davy Crockett’s exploits were largely created by his press agent, Matthew St. Clair, to woo votes away from President Andrew Jackson. The master of all nineteenth-century press agents was Phineas T. Barnum. Showman par excellence, Barnum created a wave of publicity stunts and coverage that made his circus, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” an irresistible draw in every city and town it visited after its inception in 1871. Press agency was so successful that it became an essential undertaking for companies that depended on the public’s attention. Indeed, the success of Barnum and his colleagues in manipulating the press was so great that, to this day, the media still harbor skepticism toward anything that suggests commercial promotion.

### **Age of the Robber Barons**

It was in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century that professional public relations bloomed. This was the era of America’s wild and woolly development as the center of capitalist enterprise, when industry, the railroads, and utilities exploded across the face of the nation.

The hard-bitten attitudes of businessmen toward the public were epitomized in 1892 by the cold-blooded methods of Henry Clay Frick in his attempt to crush a labor union in the Carnegie-Frick Steel Companies plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. The employees’ strike was ultimately broken and the union destroyed by the use of the Pennsylvania State militia. Brute force won the

battle for immediate control, but public opinion, framed in the struggle of the workers, won the war. Much of public relations history is woven into this unending struggle between employer and employee, though today, fortunately, the war is waged by discussion and negotiation, not private police or armed guards.

Corporations quickly learned the value of combating hostility and courting public favor through professional public relations. Corporations also learned the value of publicity in attracting customers and investors. Companies across America established press bureaus to manage the dissemination of news favorable to themselves and unfavorable to their competitors. The “battle of the currents” between Westinghouse (advocate of alternating-current, or AC, power transmission) and Thomas A. Edison’s General Electric (advocate of direct current, or DC, transmission) is one of the earliest examples of how public relations was first conducted in the United States by powerful economic interests. Using former newspapermen as their publicists, the companies fought each other tooth and nail for media attention, political influence, and marketing advantage. Trade associations also caught the public relations fever in the late 1800s. The Association of American Railroads claims it was the first organization to use the term *public relations* in its 1897 *Year Book of Railway Literature*.

In the 1900s, public relations evolved from individual press agents and publicists to counseling firms that offered their services as experts in the field. The nation’s first publicity firm, The Publicity Bureau, was founded in Boston in 1900 by George V. S. Michaelis, Herbert Small, and Thomas O. Marvin. In 1906 the bureau came into prominence when it was hired by the nation’s railroads to oppose adverse regulatory legislation that was then in Congress. The firm failed in its efforts, but soon after, the majority of railroads established their own public relations departments.

## THE PRESS RELEASE IN HISTORY

The workhorse of public relations, the press release was invented in the 1800s. Written in the form of a conventional news story, a release presents the point of view of the organization that disseminates it. Newspaper editors and reporters often use facts, quotes and other information from releases to amplify their stories or support their accuracy and credibility.

Press releases were first used by the country's big railroads, although they rapidly became the norm in all corporations and large organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ohio Bell Telephone discovered that if it handed out "canned" news in this form, newspaper reporters would stop going to telephone rate hearings to get the information in person, thereby minimizing uncomfortable inquiries about the rates and related matters. More often, releases were used, and continue to be used, to attract the media to attend press briefings or request follow-up interviews

Initially considered a form of advertising because of their self-serving content – and charged for accordingly by some media during the early years of their use – releases quickly became accepted for what they remain today: a free source of news and information that can be used by newspapers and other media in their coverage as they see fit, usually heavily edited and infrequently as is. The traditional format (one or two pages of double-spaced text with standardized spelling and punctuation) was developed to satisfy the needs of editors for space in which to edit the text, and typesetters who required certain kinds of editorial markings in order to follow the flow of individual pages while typesetting the text. With more and more releases distributed via e-mail and more and more print media moving to digital printing, the format of press releases has become far less important for recipients.

Many public relations practitioners also disseminate their releases far beyond the media to key audiences such as employees and investors – people who are as interested as the media in what the organizations they support are doing. Examples of press releases abound in the online press rooms of most public companies.

## PR Pioneers

**Ivy Ledbetter Lee.** Lee was perhaps the most famous of the early public relations practitioners, and with good reason. He helped develop many of the techniques and principles that practitioners follow today. He believed in open communications with the media, and he was candid and frank in his approach to the press. He understood that good corporate performance was the basis of good publicity. Many believe that his major contribution was to humanize wealthy businessmen and to cast big business in a more positive light.

A former Wall Street reporter, Lee became a public relations counselor with George Parker in 1904, although he didn't use the term *public relations* until more than a decade later. He believed that business had to tell its story honestly, accurately, and openly in order to win public understanding and support. Two of his most famous clients were the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Rockefeller family.

On their behalf, he developed a publicity policy of “the public be informed” in contrast to the infamous statement of financier William Vanderbilt, “the public be damned.” When he sent news releases and other statements to the press, Lee included a copy of his Declaration of Principles, which read in part,

“This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter properly ought to go to your business office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of the business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.”

Some of Lee's most important work was for the Rockefeller family, which he began to assist in 1914. In that year John D. Rockefeller, Jr., asked for his advice in handling the so-called Ludlow Massacre that began in 1913 in southern Colorado when some 9,000 people went on strike. In April 1914, an accidental shot led to a battle in which several of the miners, two women, and 11 children were killed.

With the Rockefeller name being pilloried across the land, Lee told John D., Jr., to practice a policy of openness. He had Rockefeller visit mining camps after the strike was over to see for himself the conditions under which miners worked. He also advised John D., Sr., who was being attacked by muckrakers as an arrogant capitalist, to let the public know about his charitable contributions, which he had kept secret.

In the end, Lee died in disgrace for putting his considerable skills to work in getting the Soviet Union recognized in the United States in the 1930s and for assisting the Interessen Gemeinschaft Farben Industrie, a Dye Trust that was eventually taken over by the Nazis. The Germans didn't take his advice, which was to be open and honest, but the damage was done. Lee was covered in the press as "Hitler's Press Agent."

**Edward L. Bernays** and his associate and wife, Doris Fleischman, were among those who competed with Lee for prominence. Bernays is credited with coining the term public relations counsel in his first book on the subject, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, originally published in 1923. In 1928, he published *Propaganda*, and in 1952, *Public Relations*.

Bernays viewed public relations as an art applied to a science—the art of communications applied to social science. He and his colleagues went well beyond publicity in their roles as consultants to business, government, and not-for-profit enterprises.

In 1917, during World War I, the Committee on Public Information, also known as the Creel Committee after the name of its chairman, former newspaper reporter George Creel, was organized to help sell war bonds and generally to promote the war effort. Bernays was among those who lent his talents to the war's publicity front. World War II had the Office of War Information, which organized one of the largest public relations campaigns in history to muster support for America's entry into the war. Between world conflicts, the Roosevelt administration relied heavily on public relations techniques to promote its New Deal legislation.

Bernays actually became a full-fledged public relations counselor in 1919 when he established his own counseling firm with his wife. Over the years, they represented hundreds of clients in all major fields of business. They also worked for not-for-profit organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

One of Bernays' most famous and quintessential campaigns was the 1929 Torches of Freedom March in which he had ten carefully chosen women walk down Fifth Avenue smoking cigarettes. The women were advancing feminism while setting the stage for a surge in smoking by women.

What the public and the press didn't know was that Bernays was a consultant to the American Tobacco Company at the time, raising an ethical issue that still confronts the public relations profession today.

Bernays also helped establish beer as “the beverage of moderation” and created innumerable front groups, such as the Trucking Information Bureau and Better Living Through Increased Highway Transportation, to pursue private interests with the support and assistance of the general public.

Recently, two books have been published that view Bernays as the father or master of “spin,” the art of intentionally manipulating public opinion in support of one's products, services, ideas, or issues without regard for truth or reality. These books are *PR!: A Social History of Spin*, by Stuart Ewen (1996), and *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations*, by Larry Tye (1998). Ewen says spin “obliterates the distinction between persuasion and deception.”

Despite this criticism, Bernays remains the preeminent figure in the field of public relations for his tireless efforts – in articles, speeches, lectures and professional consulting, in addition to his books – to educate generations of practitioners and the institutions they serve in the value of public relations as a tool of management and human relations.

### **Public Relations and The Bell System**

One of the most famous corporations in history was the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T), founded in the 1870s, with its 23 Bell Telephone companies, a manufacturing and supply unit (Western Electric), and several other technical and research entities, including Bell Laboratories. Collectively, it was known as “The Bell System” or more affectionately, Ma Bell. Until the U.S. government split it into several different companies in January 1, 1984, it was the most formidable telecommunications giant in the world.

Although it made great products, had an almost monopolistic control over telephony, and thrived on high-end technical research and development, a central aspect of the company's success over the years was its use of professional public relations. The practice was integrated as the critical tool for communicating and managing its relations with employees, suppliers, legislators and, most important, consumers. Two individuals stand out in the crowd of AT&T executives who made public relations a core value of their company:

**Theodore N. Vail:** Vail, who joined the company in 1879 as a manager, rose to the top by applying the latest tools and techniques of modern management. When he became President in 1907, after having been ousted from the company for several years during which it went into a tailspin, he immediately added public relations to this mix of tools and techniques. One author said, "He was the first major business leader in America to recognize that good public relations will build the proper climate in which to build a successful business." In Vail's first Annual Report to shareholders, published in 1908, he titled the first section "Public Relations." To him, good public relations meant honest reporting. "If we don't tell the truth about ourselves," he wrote, "somebody else will."

**Arthur W. Page:** Over the years, the Vail legacy continued, but it wasn't until 1927 that it truly became a core value in everything that Ma Bell thought and did. That was the year that the company hired its first vice president of public relations, Arthur W. Page. A former writer and editor for *World's Work Magazine* and other publications, Page made it clear that he would not take the job unless the company met certain conditions. He would not serve as a publicist. He had to be involved in the development of policy. And the company's performance would have to be determined by its public reputation. He stated his philosophy as follows:

*"All business in a democratic country begins with public permission and exists by public approval. If that be true, it follows that business should be cheerfully willing to tell the public what its policies are, what it is doing, and what it hopes to do. This seems practically a duty."*

To cement his position, he promulgated five principles of corporate public relations that the company would follow:

- To make sure management thoughtfully analyzes its overall relation to the public.
- To create a system for informing all employees about the (company's) general policies and practices.
- To create a system giving contact employees (those having direct dealings with the public) the knowledge needed to be reasonable and polite to the public.
- To create a system drawing employee and public questions and criticism back up through the organization to management.
- To ensure frankness in telling the public about the company's actions. (Seitel, 1997).

Page retired in 1947 and continued his work as a consultant until his death in 1960 at the age of 77, but his philosophy and principles continue to retain their currency and value. In 1983, just before the breakup of their beloved company, AT&T executives founded the Arthur W. Page Society to promote and publicize his ideas to other companies and in other contexts. The organization's membership is composed of leading corporate communicators and public relations counselors. The Bell System may be gone, but the practices that it and legends such as Vail and Page spawned live on.

## **Public Relations Matures**

With the post–World War II economic boom, which turned the United States into the wealthiest country on earth, public relations prospered as never before. New and old institutions of business, government, and not-for-profit enterprise had seen what public relations had done for the war effort, and they wanted to tap its evolving power for purposes of publicizing their products and services for the burgeoning consumer markets, both at home and abroad.

In the 1930s and 1940s, several organizations were founded to represent the interests of public relations practitioners, culminating in 1948 in the formation of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Today, the PRSA remains the world's largest public relations membership association with more than 20,000 members, primarily in the United States.

By the late 1960s, public relations had matured into a full-blown professional enterprise, comprising, in the United States, several hundred public relations agencies, large and small, and more than 100,000 individual practitioners whose ranks mushroomed to double that number by the year 2000. Public relations specialists became an integral part of top management, often reporting directly to the president or CEO of the institutions they served.

Part of the driving force for this growth in the 1960s and into the 1970s was the great burst of political turbulence that engulfed the world. Part was also the burgeoning consumer movement that sought to protect the average person against unsafe products, unsanitary working conditions, unfair pricing and other breaches, real and alleged, of the expanding social contract that said, in effect, the “Customer is King.” Corporations, in particular, found themselves crafting “Bills of Rights” for their customers, recasting their credit agreements in “plain English,” and instituting numerous other reforms to guarantee consumer satisfaction. Colleges and universities were particularly affected, as their campuses became hotbeds of social action. Like business and government, they, too, had to pay attention to their “publics” or suffer the consequences.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the struggle for equality among the races and sexes continued, even as massive change in these areas became the norm, but new issues arose to spark other manifestations of activist militancy—much of it focused on environmental and quality-of-life issues. Business and government became the primary targets for initiatives aimed at curbing air pollution, water pollution, deforestation, and the general threat of ecological disaster caused by global warming and the destruction of the world’s natural habitats.

Here, too, public relations practitioners were called upon to assist in addressing these highly charged issues and, more important, in communicating what their employers or the activist organizations they represented were doing to improve matters. This period also witnessed the growth and extension of consumer activism around issues such as unfair labor practices and unbridled corporate expansion and market control.

Over time, public relations professionals are called upon to handle a multiplicity of assignments. At the most rudimentary level, they disseminate news and other non-controversial information about their employer's operations and accomplishments. At a more sophisticated level, especially at the highest reaches of government or in the world's largest corporations, they manage communications related to more substantive issues such as industrial accidents, environmental disasters, product recalls, and unfair labor practices. The list of challenges is endless. Corporations are particularly vulnerable to public antipathy toward irresponsible social behavior or breaches of accepted standards of institutional conduct. Some headline situations since the 1980's underscore the social and political impact that various kinds of crises can have for corporations:

- Union Carbide's Bhopal (India) chemical plant explosion
- Perrier's benzene-tainted bottled water
- Dow Corning's faulty silicone breast implants
- Nike's unfair labor practices in Asian plants
- Coca-Cola's tainted beverage scare in France and elsewhere in Europe
- Shell Oil environmental pollution in Ogoniland, Nigeria
- Microsoft's fight against U.S. government charges of monopolistic abuse
- Bridgestone/Firestone's faulty manufactured tires and their link to hundreds of deaths and injuries in Ford cars and trucks
- Enron's managerial deception and financial malfeasance

Each of these companies faced reverberations around the globe as the press and government authorities took them to task for failing to prevent or minimize the resulting damage, or for misrepresenting the facts and implications once the situations arose. Crises of this magnitude are infrequent, fortunately, but owing to the level of damage, actual or potential, and the degree of controversy they engender, they are usually in the headlines for weeks or months and the effects on the companies involved may linger for years. In some instances, the companies go bankrupt.

## **Rise of Public Relations Ethics**

Down the years, ethical and legal breaches of conduct led to the formation of the Public Relations Society of America (1948) and to the promulgation by that organization in 1950 of a Code of Professional Standards. Since these guidelines were introduced, more than 200 colleges and universities in the United States have begun offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in public relations in which the courses offered emphasize ethical issues. Nonetheless, enforcement has been lax, principally because of the difficulties involved in trying to prosecute breaches of conduct by individuals who work in an unlicensed profession in which freedom of speech and related Constitutional privileges are inherent in their right to practice.

Enforcement has become so challenging and costly that the PRSA in 2000 completely revised its Code of more than 50 years so that its power to expel a member for transgressions only applies if he or she has been “sanctioned by a government agency or convicted in a court of law.” Now, the Code is framed as a self-directed teaching tool that expresses the “universal values that inspire ethical behavior and performance.” Other public relations membership organizations, such as the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), have continued to promulgate codes of conduct with specific examples of what they consider unprofessional and/or unethical behaviors, but as with PRSA, neither organization has an enforcement program in place that can realistically punish breaches of its code.

As these organizations grew in influence, many of the power groups within them, most notably agency owners and the nation’s top corporate PR executives, felt the need for more specialized attention which led to the formation of several small but highly influential “splinter” groups that have had a marked impact on ethical as well as strategic thinking. Included among these groups are the Public Affairs Council, the Arthur Page Society, the Council of PR Firms, and the U.S.-based Institute for Public Relations.

In reality, there probably will never be an effective mechanism for “policing” the practices of public relations professionals, but there will always be a need for documents and programs

aimed at encouraging and assuring ethical standards of behavior among all practitioners, regardless of their particular institutional allegiance.

### **The New Millennium Meltdown**

Among the challenges that confronted practitioners early in the New Millennium was the aftermath of the dot.com era collapse in the late 1990's, followed quickly by the greed-induced meltdown of ethics in companies such as Enron and Worldcom. The Enron-Worldcom scandals alone had extraordinary consequences. Most conspicuously, these scandals made it tougher for public relations practitioners to prove their value in assisting clients and employers to serve the public interest while pursuing private goals. Then came the horrific 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Practitioners were suddenly challenged to express corporate social responsibility as never before.

For the public relations industry, the response to these national and world crises was a mixed blessing. Many corporate and agency practitioners were chastised for not persuading their employers and clients to come clean about their own financial deceptions. On the other hand, there was at least as much praise heaped on other practitioners for all they did pre- and post-9/11 to talk to the American public about what had happened and how business was pitching in to help restore order.

### **PR “D-Day”: The 9/11 Attacks**

On September 11, a day that, like the attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II, “will live in infamy,” corporations, government agencies and nonprofit enterprises suffered an unprecedented breakdown in operations as they dealt with the tragedy's impact on their employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and others. They were challenged as few times in history to help their organizations get back on track. As communicators, they played a major role in fashioning and disseminating advisories and announcements to these audiences amidst the chaos of the moment.

At companies such as Merrill Lynch, whose headquarters next to the Trade Towers were badly damaged, and whose business was shut down for days, the goal was to assure the safety of its

workforce and return the world's largest securities firm to a semblance of normalcy. As reported in *The Public Relations Strategist* (Winter, 2002), "At the heart of (ML's) expansive, improvised strategy was a simple message repeated over and over again: Merrill Lynch was intact. The challenge...was in convincing an emotionally charged audience not to think with its emotions. Any good financial communicator knows emotions are the stuff of investor panic and bank runs."

Merrill Lynch's actions included call centers set up as crisis response offices for employees and investors, recorded messages from the CEO, and scores of internal and external web sites commandeered for reporting operational status and related information. One immediate problem was dispelling a rumor in the press that the ML headquarters building was on the verge of collapse. Company executives also went on the major network news shows to update the public on the financial impact of the attacks, and company communicators wrote and distributed dozens of daily press releases.

As the *Strategist* also reported, the terrorist attacks paralyzed air transportation in the U.S., stranding tens of thousands and putting planes out of commission for days. At Delta Airlines, as at all the major carriers, public relations staff had to address a myriad of challenges affecting their company and the general public: e.g., communicating with employees and employee families; drafting materials explaining refunds and reimbursements; coordinating approvals of communications by top management to the press and others; reporting actions leading to immediate improvements in security and passenger safety.

Problems were no less challenging for the country's major retailers who had to deal with everything from potential terrorist attacks on their premises to rumors about things being done or said by employees, to comments and actions by customers that could have led to hate crimes. Dunkin' Donuts is a case in point. Within two days of 9/11, the company was the subject of an e-mail hoax that alleged, among other offenses, that franchisees in and around Cedar Grove, NJ, supposedly the location of a terrorist cell, were desecrating the American flag and celebrating the attacks. There were also false reports that the company wasn't supporting relief efforts.

Dunkin' Donuts' public relations staff answered each complaint about the allegations, tracked down the source of the original e-mail and reported her to the police, and sent updates to Web sites that cover hoaxes and rumors. The originator of the e-mail said she had sent it after hearing the uncorroborated story from acquaintances.

Besides dealing with the e-mail allegations, the company's communications staff explained DD's relief efforts to the press and customers. They also engaged a public relations firm to create a patriotic poster campaign. And because some franchisees were of Middle Eastern background, the communications staff provided information and advisories to them for improving their personal safety and the security of their stores.

Probably the biggest public relations job of 9/11 was the work that government agencies, both local and national, did to inform the citizenry about what was happening in the wake of the deadly attacks while trying mightily to minimize the potential for public panic. One can barely imagine how many people were involved, how much planning was done, how much paper was generated, and how much information was disseminated. Without a doubt, 9/11 was the biggest PR effort in history for public officials and public servants. For obvious reasons, the bulk of public relations activity was done with the media, which by default became the government's "public address" system.

For the Department of Defense alone, there were 10,000 media hits a day to take care of, according to Victoria Clarke, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs to U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld. In New York City and Washington, DC, where emergency services were stretched to the breaking point, public information officers of police and fire departments went on duty virtually 24/7 as they and their departments were overwhelmed with inquiries, requests for assistance and rumors that had to be dealt with under conditions of extraordinary stress.

In the aftermath of 9/11, most major organizations have instituted policies and practices for dealing with terrorist attacks and other crises, much of the initiative developed by their public

relations staff and consultants. Equally important, many of these organizations have instituted various forms of sensitivity training to assure that their employees remain tolerant and respectful of the law in their dealings with people of Middle Eastern descent who live and work among them.

In commenting on the role of public relations professionals during and after the 9/11 tragedy, the editor of *Strategist* wrote: “The events of Sept. 11 didn’t necessarily precipitate a huge change in the way communications leaders do their jobs. Rather, they accelerated the speed of existing trends to decentralize, install better backup technology, and pay more attention to employee concerns. The new irony of crisis communications is we must expect the unexpected – and be ready for it when it happens. In addition to managing the fallout for whatever the future may hold, corporate communications will play vital roles in the re-branding of corporate America in a more sensitive society.”

If nothing else, 9/11 dramatically reinforced the need for and efficacy of sound public relations in helping institutions and the people and communities they serve to cope during times of life-threatening crisis, then move forward with strength and determination to reconstitute their lives and reaffirm the moral and political values that are at the core of a society’s very survival.

## **PR History in Perspective**

Looking back, professional public relations has more than fulfilled its role in society despite the many setbacks that seem to go hand in hand with the practice from time to time. What began as mainly a U.S. enterprise in the early 1900s, with a few agencies and a few hundred practitioners, has grown, almost inexorably, to become a global enterprise, far surpassing what even the most visionary of its early proponents imagined. PR practitioners have prospered as the issues with which they concern themselves have grown in magnitude and impact.

Along the way, the "legends" and "stars" of yesteryear were replaced by a new breed of highly skilled executives whose names and front-page exploits became far less important as a measure of success than their day-to-day accomplishments as professional communicators. Most of them

became well-paid professionals on a par with other major professions, although many practitioners who owned and ran their own consultancies became multi-millionaires for their labors. And following national and international trends, the profession moved from being a largely all-white, all-male, preserve to an ethnically diverse, gender-integrated enterprise.

As a group, these practitioners, both male and female, became more alike in their education, knowledge and skills. On the job, they became the promotional voice for thousands of public and private interests, performing a wide variety of communications functions aimed at persuading customers, employees, stockholders, taxpayers, investors, donors, legislators and others to support those interests.

Professional public relations will always be an imperfect “art,” depending as it does on imperfect information and imperfect relationships, but as I hope this modest history has shown it has served as a powerful voice not only for its employers but for the publics which it serves and with which it stands. As long as free enterprise drives the economies of progressive nations, professional public relations will continue to thrive and flourish. May its practitioners never forget their central role in helping to preserve that enterprise in the public interest.

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***SEE ADDEMDUM BELOW FOR MINI HISTORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN EUROPE.***

## **ADDENDUM**

### **Europe Joins In**

In Europe, too, professional public relations mushroomed after World War II as diplomacy and mass communications became central to the stability and reconstruction of scores of countries. In the post-war era, the great powers also embarked on the ideologically charged Cold War, propagandizing their views through a host of intermediaries and enlisting the media, domestically and globally, to further their aims. The struggle between the U.S. and Russia dominated the headlines for nearly 50 years. Although nuclear confrontation defined the territory of discussion, public discussion and debate was the field of battle.

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the growth of public relations became evident in the formation of national professional associations in South Africa, Australia and Western Europe. Despite language and culture, these and the other organization showed a remarkable consistency in programs and activities. U.S. influence was strongest, but there was general agreement regarding the basic principles and practices of public relations; e.g., the power of public opinion, the need for relationship-building between institutions and their publics, the influence of the press as a force for free speech, and the value of corporate citizenship. Public relations increasingly borrowed from and redefined philosophical concepts such as human rights, fairness and social freedom.

### **The British Influence**

*(The information in this sub-section was provided in large part by Dr. Jacquie L'Etang, member of the Stirling Media Research Institute and public relations instructor in the Film and Media Department at the University of Stirling, Scotland. She is currently completing a history of public relations in the United Kingdom.)*

If any country can be said to rival the United States as a center of professional public relations power and influence, it is England and by extension all the countries of the United Kingdom. The most important early influence came in the 1930s from local governmental authorities (not be confused with the separately elected governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

These authorities were charged with providing a wide range of civic services such as fire, police and state education.

Following social reforms in the 19th century, they were forced to give serious consideration to public communications. Then, in the early part of the 20th century, as their involvement in these initiatives grew, local government administrators, specialists in communication among them, began to “professionalize.” It was local government officials who were most responsible for founding the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in the UK in 1948, the first organization of professional practitioners.

As the communication role of the UK central government grew, particularly during the first and second world wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) when propaganda was in high gear, a small number of professionally oriented public relations practitioners began to emerge. The most notable of these was Maurice Buckmaster, head of Special Operations Executive (France), who was responsible for dropping agents into that country. Before the war, he worked for the Ford Motor Company in Europe in a non-public relations capacity, then again after the war, later becoming a consultant for the French champagne industry. He was president of the Institute of Public Relations in 1955-1956.

Central government peacetime propaganda was also important to the development of public relations in the UK. Of note was the establishment of the Empire Marketing Board, which was designed to implement imperial preference through market research, supply chain management and publicity. Its secretary, Sir Stephen Tallents, had an enthusiasm for national propaganda that was best encapsulated in his pamphlet, “The Projection of England,” published in 1932.

Among others, he offered patronage to the leader of the British Documentary Film Movement, John Grierson, whose interests encompassed democratic education and public relations, and about which he wrote extensively between the wars. Grierson's ideas influenced a number of leading practitioners in the post-war era.

Tallents' own ideas achieved realization in the formation of the British Council, which, for all intents and purposes, is still the UK's largest public relations agency. Lesser influences during this period were publicity agents from theatre, film and sports, from the burgeoning design industry, and from the corporate sector.

The post-World War II era left new challenges for the UK, most notably its relationships with other countries, and during the process of de-colonization, which stimulated the growth of public relations. In terms of domestic politics, the major policy shift was nationalization, whereby government took ownership of core industries from the private sector. The threat of nationalization led to the formation of organizations that could lobby on behalf of private enterprises. Subsequent UK governments have engaged in both nationalization and privatization, necessitating substantial communication. In the 1960s, following the delayed post-war economic recovery, public relations consultancies became a sector of great importance to the evolution and practice of public relations.

Other key figures in the history of UK public relations prior to World War II included several individuals of note:

J. H. Brebner had a distinguished career in the 1920s and 1930s at the Post Office and at the Ministry of Information where he was successively Director of the News Division, Special Overseas Operative and, at Supreme Allied Headquarters, Director of Press Communications. In 1949, he wrote the first British book that had "public relations" in its title, *Public Relations and Publicity*. This remained the only book on public relations until the IPR published its own edited volume some 10 years later.

Basil Clarke, a former Daily Mail journalist, worked for central government at the Ministry of Reconstruction, the Ministry of Health and, finally, as Director of Public Information in Dublin Castle at a time of the Irish conflict. He then set up his own agency, Editorial Services, which became a large and influential consultancy.

Fleetward Pritchard was head of the pre-war agency Pritchard Wood, which started as an advertising agency and then expanded its operations to encompass public relations. He employed many of the up and coming post-war generation of practitioners such as Freddie Lyon, Tim Traverse-Healy, and Colin Mann. Mr. Pritchard was particularly interested in the topic of persuasion and was influential in establishing many of the day-to-day practices in consultancy.

As in the U.S., the UK public relations industry is now managed by a growing cadre of skilled professionals who are educated in the same liberal arts tradition and who practice their profession with the same basic tools and techniques.

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