

ALEXANDER HAMILTON MEDAL ACCEPTANCE REMARKS

by Larry Foster

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I was surprised and honored to get Frank Ovaitt's call about the Alexander Hamilton Medal. When you have been in the profession for fifty years and no longer in the mainstream it is all the more gratifying to be remembered. My sincere thanks to the Institute.

It was fifty years ago that I made a very wise decision to leave journalism, when I was Night Editor of the *Newark News*, then New Jersey's largest newspaper, and join Johnson & Johnson to help form its first Public Relations Department. It was a challenge that I could not resist.

For the next 33 years I felt like the luckiest guy in the world – and I was.

This extraordinary company grew forty times larger while I was there.

From the outset the Chairman/CEO declared that Public Relations would report directly to him – and it still does today.

In 1990 Bill Nielsen succeeded me, and three years ago Ray Jordan took over from Bill. For the past fifty years only three of us have held that job. During that same period there have been five Chairmen, which suggests we're wearing them out faster than they are us.

No question, though, it is a different job today. And that leads me to the single point I want to leave you with in these brief remarks.

I marvel at the wealth of technology that you have access to today, but it also raises a concern. If I am to also raise your concern, I will need your help – and your imagination.

Imagine that I have in front of the podium a very large balance scale. You know, the kind they often use to demonstrate justice. This balance scale has an arm across the top and two large trays suspended by chains from either side. Yours is the left tray - which we'll mark 2007. Mine is the right one, marked 1957.

Now, I'll ask you to magically place on your tray the following -- all of your access to the Internet -- your desktop computers and laptops. Next, your Blackberries and Palms. Your fax, copier, and all of your capabilities related to color television - videotape, DVDs, camcorders. All of your cell phones, iPhones. This would eliminate voice mail and text messaging - and we've already taken care of e-mailing.

(I thought I heard the young lady at the third table say: "He's not getting my cell phone," and she slid hers under her napkin.)

The other side of the scale is empty, because fifty years ago we had none of your remarkable technology. We relied on what we will call Personal Relationships. So we will place that on my side of the scale. Personal Relationships.

I will not attempt to judge how they balance out - the technology which commands a great deal of your time - and developing Personal Relationships, which took most of our time fifty years ago.

I do know that success in Public Relations relies importantly on developing trust between two people, or two organizations. I contend that the best way to generate trust is through a personal relationship - not by e-mail.

And, therefore, I ask: Are you allowing your fascination with technology - and your reliance on it, to deprive you of developing better long-term personal relationships so critical to success in Public Relations?

The wave upon wave of new technology speeds up the pace of your work and adds to the pressure imposed by a constant lack of time to do everything. It is an ongoing challenge.

But so is the need to build on Personal Relationships.

How many people have you been communicating with online for years, and yet have never once met face to face?

And while technology has significantly increased our productivity, it has also had a paralyzing effect on our Personal Relationships.

I strongly believe that your success in our profession will be judged on the quality of your skills, along with your integrity and your ability to generate trust in your relationship with others.

In failing to focus on the importance of Personal Relationships, you are depriving others of the chance to experience your most important quality, your uniqueness as a person. It is what sets you apart from all others.

It is a very personal decision that you must make. Do you allow the tide of technology to dominate your professional life, or do you find a way to use technology, but also the uniqueness that is you.

Only you can decide . . .

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