

Alexander Hamilton Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Public Relations
Acceptance Remarks by Mike Fernandez
November 17, 2015

Alexander Hamilton once spoke to the Constitutional Convention for six straight hours. I will attempt to be a bit shorter. As my Cuban grandfather used to remind me: “En boca cerrada no entran moscas.” For the uninitiated that translates as: “The closed mouth provides no entry for flies.”

Thank you Tina and thanks to the Trustees of the Institute for this recognition...and special thanks to Frank Ovatt, who not only served as one of our ablest leaders, but who was the first to engage my interest in the Institute, its research and its commissions nearly 20 years ago.

I owe a debt of gratitude to those who came before me... from Harold Burson to Jim Grunig, Marilyn Laurie, Margery Kraus, and Bill Nielsen... whom have served as informal mentors to me and showed many in this profession a better way. And I owe my career to the ten CEOs and one U.S. Senator that permitted me to practice my craft, the best of whom were not only good leaders but great listeners.

And as I humbly accept your honor this evening...in my mind there is no greater honor than having been married to my wife, Pat, for more than 30 years. The line from the movies is that a good partner completes you. I know that a great partner makes you better than you could have ever imagined alone. My most valued awards are my four very accomplished children (Lucy, Dorothy, Laura, and Will). They eclipse me. They are all smart, engaged, independent thinkers, putting their own mark on the world – and I am extremely thankful for how each of them have shaped me.

That said, the most important thank you goes to the incredibly talented and industrious men and women who I have had the honor to work with through the years from my days on Capitol Hill to Kodak, US West, Cigna, ConAgra Foods, State Farm and now Cargill...they have made me appear to be much more productive and smarter than I truly am. I’m proud that several of them – like David Beigie (State Farm), Barry Caldwell (Waste Management), Jonathan Freed (NSA), Denise Hill (Delahaize America et al), Bob Kula (Kiewit), Bill Myers (DaVita), Emilio Pardo (AARP), Teresa Paulsen (ConAgra Foods), and Marti Smith (ShoreTel et al) – have gone on to lead and serve as chief communications officers and chief marketing officers in their own right. In short, this moment is as much theirs and is best expressed as a work in progress.

I have to be clear: I am overwhelmed by the moment. Receiving an award for one’s lifetime achievement – when there are still a million things I haven’t done – is both daunting and distressing.

On top of that you honor me with a medal bearing the name of Alexander Hamilton...

Alexander Hamilton was a lieutenant colonel in General George Washington's army, he was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he founded the Bank of New York, The New York Post, and the U.S. Coast Guard, he served as the nation's first Treasury Secretary and, important to our assemblage, he wrote 51 of the 85 opinion pieces which were part of our nation's first successful PR campaign that we all know now as *The Federalist Papers*.

Those accomplishments are awe-inspiring enough, but when you think about it, when Alexander Hamilton was my age he had been dead for more than a decade.

The other day my wife and I went to see Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton the Musical*. It is dynamic, dramatic, and very different; and I loved every minute of it and would recommend it to all of you.

The staccato rhythms of hip-hop merged with an incredibly diverse cast, where Blacks and Latinos play many of our forefathers, reinforces the fact – counter to what some in American politics might portray today – that we are a nation of humble beginnings and immigrants and that those forefathers made America great not by revering the past or simply protecting against the risks of the future, they did so by engaging and creating that very future.

Rather than accepting the status quo or running from a crisis or saying “no comment”, Hamilton found his peace in the eye of the storm applying his skills with words to a world he helped to turn upside down.

Aaron Burr, Hamilton's nemesis throughout the play and in real life, would warn Alexander to speak less, smile more. But that was not Hamilton's way, nor should it ever be our own.

In my mind this is a great time to be in public relations. Our skills and talents are needed and being called upon more than ever.

In recent years, we have wrestled as a profession with our own identity and direction as the rhythms of our industry became increasingly syncopated by the tapping of keys on mobile devices in a world that is always on.

In the words of my favorite philosopher, former New York Yankee baseball great Yogi Berra: “The future ain't what it used to be.” Not only will the world never be the same. The pace of change will never be slower.

I know some in our industry debate our fate. *PRWeek's* April issue posed the question: “Is the chief communications officer... going the way of the dodo?” Some see the multi-channel world we operate in and see the two worlds of marketing and public relations as coming together. Richard Edelman has coined the term “communications marketing”. Still others see one function being subsumed by the other.

Last year Arthur W. Page Society began an exploration into the future of the CCO. In initial conversations, lots of the participants talked about how technology is changing what we do. Others spoke of the power of thought leadership and content marketing. Others still mentioned big data, measurement and even neuroscience. And virtually everyone said they were shifting dollars into storytelling and social media.

But when the cacophony of voices cleared, Harold Burson reminded us that technology has always changed and that we have always told stories. He said that we were too focused on the tools, and not what was being changed by them.

The real revolution, you see, is not to be found in the tools we use to communicate; it's that to succeed we need to do more than communicate.

We need to step up and take our shots when asked to solve problems, build relationships that matter, and engage.

That means even engaging with our most ardent critics to try to establish a shared understanding of the facts and see if we might achieve a shared belief in a collective aim as to where we are going and how we might get there. It's never easy. As we know from many a survey fewer people trust business, government, NGOs and other institutions than ever before.

To rebuild that trust requires a greater degree of transparency and dialogue, which is difficult to do if the reflex of our leaders is to retreat and cover in the midst of conflict, or worse yet require us to communicate something less than the truth.

As Lori Johnson who leads global communications for me likes to say, "You cannot just tell a better story; sometimes you need a better story to tell."

For the research crowd in attendance, what is required is the fullest manifestation of what Dr. Grunig's research called out in the 1980s as the "two-way symmetrical" model of public relations or what the Page Society calls its Page Model where through mutual understanding and respect you resolve conflict and solve real problems.

At Cargill, we have tried with some modicum of success in conducting what we call "learning journeys" to get suppliers, customers, NGOs, and public policy makers on the same page to map out complex issues like supply chains with the overall goal of improving environmental sustainability. This has not only improved our business with customers, in some small way it has changed the world. Imagine if politicians sat down with the other party not just to debate the issues but resolve them.

Engagement is not just an apt remit for what we should do in our jobs; it is also instructive for what we need to do to improve one of our profession's gravest challenges. Senator Fritz Hollings once said, "What a man will do is often best told by what he has done. Performance is better than promise."

As an industry we have promised to diversify our ranks, particularly at the executive level. For more than a decade IPR has been in the forefront of publishing research pointing to the need; and earlier today the Page Society met to advance the cause. Now it is time for our agencies and companies to coalesce and take concrete action. This fall for the first time the overall number of Latino, African-American and Asian students in U.S. public K-12 classrooms surpassed the number of non-Hispanic whites.

If we do not move more quickly to provide a hand-up to our diverse talent through focused professional development, networking, mentorships and real opportunities, our charge to communicate might be compromised by an inability to relate to the very audiences we seek to reach.

Alexander Hamilton once wrote: “I never expect a perfect work from an imperfect man.”

This imperfect man is greatly humbled by the honor you bestow on me; and I am confident that our industry – and our clients – will best thrive when we seek to do more than just communicate, and, like Hamilton himself, engage and lead in an effort to change the world. Thank you.