

Historical and Contemporary Public Relations in America

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International Public Relations Theory

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I. Introduction

Asking two hundred different people for the definition of the term “public relations” would result in two hundred different answers. The varied definitions can focus on tactics, strategies, and ideals – and all would be at least partially correct. The truth is there is no one universally accepted definition of public relations. The industry is so young and multifaceted that it is near impossible to encompass all aspects of public relations with one definition.

Samuel Black defines the purpose of public relations as “to establish two-way communication seeking common ground or areas of mutual interest, and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information. . . [T]he methods will be very similar whether [it] is designed to influence international understanding or to improve relations between a company and its customers, agents and employees” (Black 1989, p. 1). One key word in this definition is *influence*. Stuart Ewen writes that it is the public relations practitioner’s job “to do something noticeable that, at the same time, seem[s] like ‘reality’” (1996, p. 23).

II. Key Figures

The first academic course on public relations was taught by Edward Bernays in 1923 at New York University. Bernays is widely considered to be one of the fathers of Public Relations. The double-nephew of Sigmund Freud, he was well-versed in psychoanalytical thinking and used his knowledge to shape the public relations field. “While most publicists of the day understood their job as merely handing press releases to reporters or staging ritualized press conferences, Bernays’s [sic] instinct was to operate more clandestinely. . . invisibly staging events or ‘circumstances’ that the press would. . . consider newsworthy” (Ewen 1996, p. 160).

He encouraged public relations practitioners to understand and take advantage of Freud's insights on social psychology.

In 1928 Bernays released a book on public relations entitled *Propaganda*. In it, he described the mind of the masses: "In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind, its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader." (Bernays, qtd. in Ewen 1996, pp. 164-5). This idea – that the public will be more inclined to make a decision if it agrees with an authority figure – is a theme running through Bernays' campaigns and is still widely used today.

Bernays' most famous campaign, Torches of Freedom, is well known by public relations practitioners. He was hired in 1928 to increase cigarette sales and quickly recognized the gender gap between men and women was preventing women from smoking. An entire gender was not buying cigarettes. Before the 1929 New York City Easter Parade, Bernays informed newspapers there would be women smoking in the parade. He then hired a number of women to walk down Fifth Avenue, lit cigarettes in hand. Taking advantage of the suffragette movement, he called the cigarettes "Torches of Freedom," claiming the women were freeing themselves and embracing their masculinity. The story reached newspapers throughout the country and the effects are still felt today: In 2006, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated 17.8%, or 20.2 million American women were smokers.

Similar to Bernays, Ivy Ledbetter Lee was enthralled with social psychology: "Publicity is a matter of mass psychology. We must remember that people are guided. . . by sentiment" (qtd. in Ewen 1996, p. 132). But where Bernays preferred to generate third-party endorsements, in many cases keeping his client's name away from events, Lee stressed the importance of

transparency. He cautioned that even private companies are supervised by the public, and all corporations must appeal to the people to succeed. His work with numerous corporations involved guidance on what to say and do, in many ways was a precursor to the modern corporate social responsibility trend. Lee was very concerned with disseminating facts; along with his partner George Parker, he adopted the motto “Accuracy, Authenticity, Interest,” promising to “present only topics of real interest... never sensational, never libelous, always accurate, always trustworthy, always readable” (qtd. in Ewen 1996, p. 76). Although Lee often spoke of transparency and sharing facts, it is important to note his interpretation of the word fact as “information that could *become* fact in the public’s mind as a result of a persuasive argument” (Tench and Yeomans 2006, p. 9).

Bernays and Lee are often cited as the “Fathers of Public Relations,” but there were many other key figures in the development of public relations. Walter Lippman, an American journalist in the early 20th century, spoke to President Woodrow Wilson just before the start of World War I of the importance of keeping “a healthy public opinion” (qtd. in Ewen 1996, p. 108). He gave Wilson a plan for propaganda to keep American morale high during wartime. Bernays, having seen the manners in which the public could be manipulated during wartime, later used similar techniques to sell products during times of peace.

Decades before Bernays, Lee and Lippman became involved in publicity, Phineas Taylor Barnum relied on overt showmanship to move product. Instead of using Freudian beliefs – which, at the time, were not yet developed – he used loud language to grab attention. He exploited the morbid curiosity of the masses before the idea of social psychology was used to sell. Barnum used sensationalism, as many publicists of his time did, but used it to the extreme:

“The only living Orang Outang in either England or America;” “The Greatest Show on Earth.” He “capitalized on public curiosity” when science and history relied on moral overtones (Betts 1959, p. 368). Not only did he enhance America’s knowledge of zoology and similar fields, he did so through a sensationalist form of public relations – getting attention at any cost.

III. Development of Public Relations

While Bernays and Lee, the “Fathers of Public Relations,” weren’t born until the 1870s, the ideas behind the industry have been practiced for centuries. Scott M. Cutlip, in *Public Relations History*, writes: “To function, civilization requires communication, conciliation, consensus, and cooperation – the bedrock fundamentals of the public relations function” (1995, p. x). The ancient empires of the Greeks and Romans, for example, put great emphasis on the importance of public opinion. Public relations “appears to have been an integral part of government. The Romans dramatized the importance of public opinion in the slogan, *vox populi, vox dei* – the voice of the people is the voice of God” (Black 1989, p. 198). They knew that in order for the government to succeed, the public had to believe in them. Very basic forms of public relations have been uncovered in numerous civilizations: in farming instructions in Iran dating from 1800BC; in literature from ancient Egypt, Assyria, and Persia “intended to publicize and glorify the rulers of the day” (Cutlip 1995, p. xi); in election appeals in Pompeii; in Caesar’s reports to the Roman people of his achievements in Gaul. Writings found from ancient India discuss spies of the kings, whose functions included both informing the king of public opinion and spreading positive thoughts about him. In all of these cases, a form of public relations – however basic and rudimentary – is present, and was used to disseminate persuasive information.

The United States of America has a history awash in public relations. According to Sam Black's *Introduction to Public Relations*, the phrase "public relations" may have first been used by US President Thomas Jefferson in 1807: Jefferson "scratched out the words 'state of thought' in one place and wrote in 'public relations' instead" (1989, p. 199). Other US presidents have used various forms of public relations to improve their image. President Andrew Jackson relied on journalists for advice and support. President John F. Kennedy, who served from 1961-1963, often appeared on television to spread the image of himself as visibly approachable. Perhaps the best example of a president using public relations was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who served from 1933-1945. Commonly referred to as FDR, he broadcast thirty Fireside Chats during his three terms as president. These short speeches were more popular than any other radio broadcast. Roosevelt used the speeches to build confidence and raise support in his plans (Black 1989, p. 200). Perhaps more importantly, he used colloquial language and "invited the American people to 'tell me your troubles.' . . . By referring to his audience in terms of "you" and "we," FDR constructed a sense of national identity, encouraged individual participation, and forged an intimate relationship between the president and the public." (Mankowski and Jose 2003). The vast majority of Americans (over 90%) owned a radio, and by the end of his terms as president, Roosevelt had connected with his public in a manner unheard of previously. American author Carl Carmer wrote of FDR in 1945: "I never saw him - but I knew him. Can you have forgotten how, with his voice, he came into our house, the President of these United States, calling us friends" (cited in Mankowski and Jose 2003). Roosevelt used public relations to create a sense of camaraderie among the nation and is remembered fondly in America today.

But public relations was used in America long before this. Centuries earlier the American Revolution was, in essence, made popular through the use of public relations. Men such as Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson circulated leaflets on the street and wrote articles in the press to get their voices heard and incite the American people to a revolution. Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense* to encourage the Revolution during the war when many people were turning against it. While he didn't spread any new ideas, he clarified the thoughts of the Patriots and created a very simple summary, similar to a soundbite. *Common Sense* became a pamphlet with mass appeal, rivaling that of newspapers. Even though many colonists felt they were not oppressed, this group of a few men and one woman created through careful planning a movement that created a country. The techniques they used are still in use today. Cutlip lists them in *Public Relations History*:

1. The necessity of organization to implement actions made possible by a propaganda campaign, for example, the Sons of Liberty, organized in Boston in January 1766 and the Committees of Correspondence, also born in Boston, in 1772.
2. The use of symbols that are easily identifiable and emotion arousing – for example, the Liberty Tree.
3. The use of slogans that compress complex issues in easy-to-quote, easy to remember stereotypes, for example, “Taxation without representation is tyranny.”
4. Stages events that catch public attention and thus crystallize unstructured public opinion, for example, the Boston Tea Party.

5. The importance of getting your story to the public first so that your interpretation of events becomes the widely accepted one, for example, the Horrid Boston Massacre.

6. The necessity of a sustained, saturation campaign using the previous techniques through all available media to penetrate the public mind with a new idea or a new conviction. (1995, p. 18)

IV. Public Relations Today

The foundation of public relations is seen in the aforementioned list; Every one of these techniques are still in practice today. Public relations agencies are essentially organizations created to implement actions and use media to spread ideas. All companies use a logo which is meant to be easily identifiable – such as the Adidas Stripes or the Guinness Harp. Slogans are also important – for example, phone company Orange’s “The future’s Orange.” Energy drink company Red Bull holds an event called Flugtag each year in various cities to bring to life their slogan, “Red Bull Gives You Wings.” Flugtag is a competition during which participants build a small plane and compete to see who can travel farthest. Every year, the event garners publicity and tickets sell out.

Public relations, however, is about much more than a large event or memorable slogan. It deals with organizing and *sustaining* communication between an institution and its audiences. Oftentimes, it relates to branding a community. Florida is known in the US as “The Sunshine State.” The strongest images associated with the state are beaches and the Disney theme parks. Miami touts itself as “the world’s favorite playground.” Tourism is a major industry in Florida,

accounting for \$65.5 billion in sales and 991,300 jobs (Visit Florida 2008). A severe decline in tourism would be a disaster on the Floridian economy. In the early 1990s, that's exactly what happened.

The crime rate of Florida had been steadily increasing at a rate of over 10% annually from 1982 to 1990. There was much social unrest and racial disturbances. In August 1992, Hurricane Andrew hit southern Florida, creating one of the worst natural disasters in US history. Two months later, a British tourist was murdered in Orlando. He was the first of nine international tourists to be murdered in Florida during the next twelve months – five of whom were killed in Miami.

While the Miami-Dade county police force began raising security measures, the Florida Department of Tourism was struggling to project the image of a safe Miami as tourism decreased by almost fifty percent. Rather than simply increase advertising touting Miami as a secure vacation spot, the Florida Department of Tourism and the Miami Convention Bureau launched a complete public relations campaign. They targeted not only international travelers and travel industry personnel, but also tourism workers and Miami residents. Local residents and employees were sent to training sessions on better dealing with customers. The Department and Bureau recognized that cab drivers were often the first contact point for Miami visitors. They gave cab drivers “safe tips” brochures and passengers and required new cab drivers (and encouraged old ones) to attend “Miami Nice” customer-service classes (Tilson and Stacks 2002, p. 158).

Florida officials recognized that the residents of a community must feel safe before tourists will come. By including local residents and cab drivers in their public relations

campaign, the Florida Department of Tourism and the Miami Convention Bureau created a much stronger campaign than if they had only created advertisements and encouraged travel writers to write about Miami. The impact was enormous: From 1994 to 1998 there was an 11% increase in the number of Miami tourists, with more coming each year. The state of Florida also benefitted from the campaign: 48.7 million tourists visited the state in 1998, compared with 3.9 million in 1994 (Tilson and Stacks 2002, p. 162). This campaign was a huge success.

It is important to note that while many people think of external communications when they think of public relations, public relations is in fact a much wider discipline that includes internal communications, crisis management and much more. Particularly with the rise of big business, internal public relations has become as important as external communication. In some cases, this can involve a subset of public relations: crisis management. On a Wednesday in April 1995, the importance of internal communication and crisis management was seen in Oklahoma City, OK during and immediately following the Oklahoma City bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The worldwide headquarters of oil company Kerr-McGee Corporation is located two blocks away from the bombing location. Kerr-McGee had many crisis plans for external issues such as an off-shore oil fire, but had never planned for an internal crises involving the safety of its employees. Managers and other supervising staff were in charge of not only keeping their 900 employees abreast of the situation, but had to keep 4,000 other employees, customers, media and the government informed as well. Kerr-McGee immediately took the stance that its employees were more than faceless names. Supervisors sent all staff members home aside from high level management, who decided their “number one priority was to talk personally to as many employees as possible, answer their questions, and let them know

what was expected of them” (Dozier 2002, p. 109). Management went to another building owned by Kerr-McGee and named it their communication center. Within 36 hours of the bombing, a complete communication center was created, complete with 15 phone lines. The executives spent the next day making phone calls to staff members as well as answering the phones and taking questions.

Kerr-McGee Corporation’s handling of the situation is an excellent example of modern public relations. Although it was focused on the impact the bombing had internally, on its employees and associates, the strong show of support spread a favorable image of the company. When Kerr-McGee reopened for work the following Monday, “top executives stationed themselves at all entrances to the building. . . They handed out the memorial ribbons and gave every returning employee and sincere, sympathetic hug.” (Dozier 2002, p. 111). It also kept a firm of psychologists and psychiatrists specializing in counseling following tragedy on retainer for any employee who wanted their services. In taking care of its employees in such a manner – including paying for damage done to employees’ automobiles – Kerr-McGee showed the world that it genuinely cares for its staff. Although this is an example of internally focused public relations, large corporations are so often in the media that internal communications on occasion becomes external. Within twenty minutes of the bomb blast, media were calling offices around the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Kerr-McGee was able to put forth a positive image.

V. Conclusion

Sherrill Hudson, the former President of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce once said, “Perceptions become reality. It’s a fact of life.” (cited in Tilson and Stacks

2002, p. 155) In his book *PR! A Social History of Spin*, Stuart Ewen recalls a reporter requesting to sit in on one of his courses. Ewen agrees on the condition that she blend in with the other students and does not announce her presence as a reporter. In the class before her visit, Ewen tells the class of the impending visitor and informs them that she believes she would “be inconspicuously observing a routine class session in process. . . [W]e began to discuss what [we] might do clandestinely to shape the experience of the class for her, so as to influence the way she would write about the class. This, after all, was what public relations experts do all the time” (1996, p. 23). This provides an interesting definition of public relations: one which embraces falsifying or influencing a situation when one is aware of the media’s presence.

Public relations began as a way for people and corporations to, in a sense, learn to put their best foot forward. As technology develops, the young field of public relations must rapidly adapt to the growing knowledge of consumers. The public is no longer happy with merely being told a product is good by its producer; rather they seek to understand an all around image of the company, and are more willing to listen to their peers than to behind-the-scenes publicists. Ewen is very comfortable with the idea that public relations relies on the masses and involves shaping perceptions. In today’s rapidly-paced world, is it possible to always be aware of the media? Or should we assume the media is ever-present and seek to shape our actions as Ewen and his class did, constantly presenting ourselves in the best way possible?

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