



Public Relations— A Role for Communicators ?

Harold B. Swanson

We as educational communicators often remind our colleagues that "words don't have meaning, only people have (or give) meaning." Yet we may be overlooking this basic principle when we discuss that often maligned phrase, "public relations." Too often the term stimulates a mental block, causing us and others to conjure images of "sharp practice, tricks, and obfuscation." With that image, public relations is vulnerable to scapegoating by outsiders and to misunderstanding by insiders.

The purpose of this article is threefold:

1. Give a modern 1980s slant to "public relations." Public relations is on the edge of a new era where it can be recognized as a two-way street that improves service to the public and helps bring about reconciliation with a tense society.

2. Emphasize that public relations is a part of the job of every professional communicator in government, education or business. To do the job, educational communicators cannot be regarded only as tools of administration. As a group, they should be considered partners with administrators in public relations planning and execution.

The principal role of the educational communicator, however, must remain the communication of useful knowledge of value to the public. Credibility is essential to success and

Swanson is a professor and former head, Department of Information and Agricultural Journalism, University of Minnesota.

cannot be sacrificed by improper or slanted approaches. The methods we use working with mass media, publications and visual presentations are often the most economical and effective ways of bringing important information to the public.

3. Suggest a set of tenets or commandments that might be useful in viewing public relations activities.

What Is Public Relations?

Public relations has evolved over the years. Unfortunately many communicators, their colleagues in government and colleges, and administrators still give the term a meaning acceptable 30 or 40 years ago but no longer relevant or useful. Fortunately, among public relations professionals the term has evolved from the self-centered seeking of credit to communication, a two-way interexchange, and adjustment to public needs.

We have moved from the old worn out expressions that "public relations is doing a good job and getting credit for it," "good performance, publicly appreciated," or "activities, techniques used to establish favorable attitudes and responses in their behalf on the part of the public." There is much more to public relations.

Golden¹ said that "public relations is much more than massaging the vanity of executives by publicizing them and their organizations as giants of human capacity, perfect in all actions and unsurpassed in wisdom and intelligence." And he added that we must learn that good public relations is performance in the public interest. He suggests we think in terms of relations with the public.

Perhaps public relations is a philosophy or attitude that considers the public's interest in government, education and business. It is a difficult term to define. The essence of public relations might be distilled from many definitions and views, each contributing to better understanding.

During several public relations seminars, Minnesota extension agents and campus staff wrote what the term meant to them. Their perceptions ranged from promotional activities with clientele, power structures, etc.; promotion of positive, productive relationships; an accurate, truthful portrayal of an organization that seeks public support; to providing media with factual information.

¹ Golden, L.L.L. "Public Relations-The Difficult Years." *Saturday Review*, 52:79. May 10, 1969. Page 79.

These ideas recognize important elements of public relations but largely overlook the two-way nature of the process and the need for adjustment to the public.

Lesly² said that public relations has gone through an evolution, involving several stages: publicity, two-way communication, awareness of different publics, greater sophistication with an understanding of the behavioral sciences, segmentation of audiences, and understanding of issues involved.

All of these remain important today, but how many of us and of our administrators have gone beyond the first three?

Lesly³ also emphasized another important element when he said, "We must convince management that communication is not only the prerogative of management, but it is also the essence of management."

Further definitions indicate the scope of public relations and even the dispute over what it is. For example, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has sought a common definition of public relations for years and has reported many different views in the *Public Relations Journal*.

Wilck⁴ said, "Public relations is the function that maintains an organization's relationship with society in a way that most effectively achieves the organization's goals."

Others soon modified Wilck's definition in the "Letter" section of the *Public Relations Journal*. L. J. Horton⁵ had a shorter description, "Public relations is the way an organization works with society to achieve mutual goals."

Dean Kruckeberg⁶ replied to the Wilck definition by saying that "it ignores mutual understanding, social responsibility and sense of community...apparently he feels that ends justify means to reach goals whatever they may be."

Then in 1981, a blue ribbon group, appointed by PRSA and chaired by Lesly, added two more definitions. "Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to

² Lesly, Philip. New Dimensions of Public Relations. *Public Relations Journal*. 35:12. December 1979. Pages 38-41.

³ Lesly, Philip. "The Public Arena". *Vital Speeches*. 39:361-63. April 1, 1973.

⁴ Wilck, C. Thomas. "Toward A Definition of Public Relations." *Public Relations Journal*. 33:12:26. December, 1977.

⁵ Horton, L.J. "Letters". *Public Relations Journal*. 34:4. February, 1978. Page 28.

⁶ Kruckeberg, Dean. "Letters". *Public Relations Journal*. 34:3. March, 1978. Page 6.

one another" and "Public relations is an organization's efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people."⁷

Cutlip and Center⁸ suggested, "Public relations is the planned effort to influence opinion through good and responsible performance based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication."

Assuming that these definitions imply feedback to the organization and adjustment by the organization to the needs of the public served, they provide educational communicators a definition with which they can live. All center on a two-way street, clearly marked "communications."

Public Relations Is Part of Everyone's Job

Public relations is part of every educational communicator's job. Some communicators may play a big part in overall strategy. Others may lend their expertise and craftsmanship to executing details—editing, proofing, layout, pictures, news stories, public service announcements, programs, etc. Both groups can derive professional gratification and pride from their contributions.

Grunig⁹ touches upon the public relations role in ACE this way, "Public relations is any professional activity in an organization that facilitates communication between an organization and its public. That includes university and agency 'public information specialists'. To equate public relations with propaganda or 'selling' is to equate poor public relations with public relations."

The Consulting Communicator

For any organization to be successful in its public relations effort it must rely heavily on its communications unit(s) for both skills and for advice and planning. Thus some communicators must assume the role described by Kern¹⁰ as "consulting communicator." Communicators, themselves, look at this role in at least two ways.

⁷ Lesly, Philip. "The Status and Role of Public Relations." *Public Relations Journal*. 37:1. January, 1981. Pages 14-17.

⁸ Cutlip, Scott M. and Center, Allen H. *Effective Public Relations*. Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Fifth Edition. 1978. Page 16.

⁹ Grunig, James E. "Research on Science Communication: What Is Known and What Needs to be Known." *ACE*. 62:4. October-December, 1979. Page 18.

¹⁰ Kern, K. Robert. "Communicator Roles in Extension". *ACE*. 61:2. April - June, 1978. Pages 3-10.

The first is that of a competent and probably experienced communicator with a broad view and understanding of communications. He or she should not only have knowledge and skills in many of the techniques of communication but also an understanding of psychology, sociology, group and interpersonal communication, and mass media. They need to have a macro, forward-looking understanding of their organization and of communications.

This combination is most frequently found in a communications unit, but even in these, only to a limited extent.

Industry recognizes this macro-view role. For example, Marshall¹¹ discussing a new breed of public relations executives, has said that "corporations are becoming more responsive to changing business, political, and social environments. They are positioning themselves as *proactive* rather than *reactive*."

The second interpretation of consulting communicator is that the person capably advises in his/her particular expertise e.g. typography, photography, TV, radio, etc. This, too, is essential in good, well-planned public relations.

Job is More than Communications Techniques

You can become too immersed in the details of the many ways of communicating and planning and overlook these important elements:

- Public relations must be pragmatic, operating within the bounds of the resources and capabilities of the organization.
- Public relations must provide an "early warning system" to the organization to call attention to present and potential problems as well as opportunities.
- Public relations must provide feedback as programs go forward.
- Public relations must provide for the organization to adjust to meet public needs and desires.

Misunderstandings Hinder Public Relations

Many negative attitudes or at least misunderstandings hinder good public relations in education and government. As a result we sometimes have difficulty fulfilling expectations of some administrators. Instances of a negative atti-

¹¹ Marshall, Larry. "The New Breed of P.R. Executives". *Public Relations Journal*. 36:6. July, 1980. Pages 9-11.

tude toward public relations may be few, but they need airing.

Communicators are guilty; some look with disdain and resist doing jobs necessary to public relations. They say public relations isn't part of their job or it doesn't make the best use of their abilities or it's too routine for their creative talents and someone else should do it or that's publicity not education. And some, too, publicly inveigh against what they regard as "massaging of colleagues' or administrators' egos."

Other communicators have a myopic view about methods, recognizing only their specialty.

Some communicators may regard themselves as all-knowing, resisting the notion that their colleagues in noncommunication roles may have even superior knowledge of audiences.

Still other communicators are unwilling to operate within or according to the rules—many unwritten. They wish to run with the ball rather than play as a team member. A 1980 article in the *Wall Street Journal*¹² reported how executives viewed public relations specialists and levelled two charges that they:

- Sometimes prepare material opposite the company's policy or objective.
- Have inadequate knowledge of the business and an exaggerated sense of their importance.

These charges may fit in government and education as well. Too often we forget the objectives of our organization. Our bottom line is the educational service we provide specific publics as outlined by the organization and the public and not as wholly conceived by ourselves. We have a role in setting objectives. However, after they are agreed upon we should not continue to promote our own ideas or causes to the detriment of the goals of the organization.

A few of our colleagues and administrators are excessively self-seeking, interested in promoting themselves. They may do so in the guise of enhancing the institution or its research, classroom teaching, extension or service functions. Sometimes, of course, building an individual's fame builds the institution and its service to the public.

Egocentrism is not limited to education. Many col-

¹² _____ . "How Executives Rate Accountants, Lawyers, Public Relations Specialists and Others." *Wall Street Journal*. Tuesday, December 2, 1980. Page 25.

leagues in industry and advertising agencies admit, with some resignation, that they are sometimes stroking their bosses' egos at the bosses' direction rather than adding to the sales or profits of the business.

Other communicators fail to see that publicity and so-called image building is only a small but important part of the total job of our relationships with publics. To many of our colleagues and administrators public relations is more than a mention in print or on radio or the glorious feeling of seeing our activities covered on the 6 p.m., 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. TV news. Unfortunately these often are seen as the pinnacles of success.

Perhaps an even more serious block to communicators is the failure by others to recognize that professional journalists and educational communicators have a distinct code of ethics. There is strong dedication to the truth; a feeling of responsibility to provide all the facts; an abhorrence of covering up or hiding the facts if they are contrary to the organization's interests or wishes; and a reluctance to have one's own ethics dictated or controlled by administrators or by the public. These are not too different from those of other professionals in education who would not tolerate cover-up and who strongly advocate openness.

Still another difficulty encountered in public relations in industry and education is the insistence of tangible-minded administrators on imposing measurement mentality into immeasurable, intangible areas of human attitudes. We can apply standards to our communications efforts and judge them in terms of quality, timeliness, appropriateness, objectives, etc. but we cannot isolate the results as effectively as we would like because so many other factors are involved.

Advocacy vs. Information

Among the more difficult public relations questions facing educational communicators are those involved in advocacy.

1. Should communicators assume advocacy roles for colleges and USDA or should they be journalists in the strictest sense? Will the appearance of advocacy destroy the credibility and effectiveness long established in reporting science and other information?

My reaction is that we as educational communicators, especially those dealing with news, cannot become direct advocates but we can help others in their advocacy efforts. We must retain journalistic integrity as reputable reporters.

It is a fine line of distinction open to a variety of interpretations.

2. Does communication of factual, educational information constitute advocacy? Is it public relations?

My answer is that disseminating factual, useful information is not advocacy and is among the best public relations efforts of our agencies or institutions. However, it is only a part of the job of public relations.

3. Should land-grant colleges and governmental agencies (and their staffs) have a responsibility for promoting favorable public attitudes toward agriculture? Zaworski¹³ studied the opinions of officers of professional agricultural communications associations. He found that 87 percent agreed with a statement saying that they have responsibility to some degree. Among ACE officers, 64 percent agreed, 27 percent agreed somewhat, and 9 percent (one) disagreed. The only agricultural communications group disagreeing was the NFAE (Newspaper Farm Editors Association).

Teller¹⁴ in dialogue in ACE appears to agree by saying that "...a sustained effort in behalf of the farmer is of paramount importance...our job as agricultural communicators is to explain to as many publics as possible just exactly what the 4 percent of the nation's work force is doing out there...."

When Zaworski did his study, under my direction, I hypothesized (incorrectly) that educational communicators have a responsibility for promoting agriculture. This reflected my own feelings that public institutions as part of their work should not be spokespersons for or promote the image of any particular area in society. On the other hand, collegiate faculty may speak and participate in such activities as part of their academic freedom.

If one of the stated educational objectives of an institution is to create a better understanding of agriculture, then communicators definitely do have a role. The role is to improve understanding, however, not to improve an image. Realistically most institutions and agencies are concerned with improving the image of their clientele (even with tax money)

¹³ Zaworski, Frank S. Jr. "Maintaining Agriculture's Public Image: An Opinion Survey Of Agricultural Communication Leaders." *ACE*. 63:4. October - December, 1980. pages 9-16.

¹⁴ Teller, Chester J. "Professionals, Terminal Degrees and Terminal Illness." *ACE*. 63:3. July - September, 1980. Pages 37-39.

whether that clientele be homemakers, doctors, farmers or, candlestick makers.

The role of public relations for educational communicators or any other group is difficult to appraise. Public relations is a broad concept with many possible interpretations. There are many impediments to progress and many questions as to what a public employee can or should do. General principles or rules presented in the next section may be useful in carrying out the public relations role.

10 Tenets for Public Relations

The ten commandments that I put forth here now seem less significant, less visionary and less glorious than when I first wrote them in moments of mental brainstorming preparing for public relations workshops.

1. Thou shall listen attentively to thy audiences and adjust to their legitimate, felt, or expressed needs and desires as put forth by them. Or perhaps thou can find these by assiduous research, delving into demographics, psychographics, and other characteristics of the audience. Ask not what are legitimate, expressed, or felt needs. Who knows? (AUDIENCE)

2. Thou shall not bear false witness or "bad mouth" thy colleagues, superiors, organization, or even those who oppose thee and promulgate competing but inferior (of course) programs or products. That's bad PR. (ETHICS)

3. Thou shall not cover up thine own or thy organization's "Watergates." They will catch up with you sooner or later unless they are fortunately forgotten and/or forgiven. You can't depend on that! (HONESTY)

4. Thou shall bring to your organization not only the praise it so richly deserves (at least in its own mind) but also the true nature of the tidings of public feeling and even criticism of your program or products. Yet remember, too, as the ancient proverb intones, that messengers of bad tidings often meet with an untimely end. (FEEDBACK)

5. Thou shall tell thy story clearly, succinctly, in as many ways as possible with thy limited time and resources. Exhibit neither braggadocio nor false modesty but set forth your words with honesty, forthrightness, and pride. (EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS)

6. Thou shall have no other goals and objectives before thee than those of thy organization. Dispel or forget those hidden self-seeking agendas that may lurk clandestinely in your mind. Thou shall not be naive, however, and resist mak-

ing your boss look good. (OBJECTIVES)

7. Thou shall plan thy public relations as thee plans thy entire program, not only for this year but also for the years ahead. If you do, your days could be long in your organization, if you so desire. (PLANNING)

8. Thou shall always communicate with thy colleagues, giving credit where it is due...and even if it isn't due in thy mind. If they know not what you do, how can they help in your unit's public relations? (At this time I pause to give credit to Leigh Hunt, the poet, to Moses and His Inspirational Source, and to all of you whose wisdom I've gleaned from countless programs we've shared. All these led to what some people might dubiously, or even derisively, term my inspiration.) (INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS)

9. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's or colleague's program nor steal her/his good ideas or glory without acknowledgment and deeply felt gratitude. If thou dost, your public relations will go down the drain and your neighbor will look at you with a jaundiced eye and even with axe in hand. (CREDIT)

10. Thou shall encourage thy clientele, thy colleagues, and thy administrators to participate (or allow you to participate) in the glories (and planning) of thy program or product. (PARTICIPATION)

10½. Thou shall forgive thy neighbors and this poor communicator, too, for their follies (imagined or real) and their numerous *faux pas*. Nor should thou spread rumors with these follies. Those in glass houses should not toss stones or something to that effect. (FORGIVENESS)

Unlike the original commandments and more like our United States Constitution, these tenets remain open for interpretation and amendment. In fact an addition of a "Bill of Rights" (especially a first amendment) might be in order, emphasizing the free exercise of speech, press, religion, and assembly and guarantee the right to petition for redress of grievances. Openness, feedback and adjustment are essentials in public relations.

Conclusion

Public relations involving communicators in education should enter a new, more sophisticated era. This will mean some communicators will need to broaden their knowledge and understanding of people and their skills in more areas of communications. They need to be sure and be assured that effective public relations need not destroy their credibility

as honest ethical communicators.

To enter this new era of public relations will require, too, that some of the outdated concepts and prejudices toward public relations held by communicators, colleagues, administrators, or executives must be discarded. In their place must come new views and a new partnership based upon mutual trust and respect, a high degree of professionalism and a new consciousness of the need for adjustment to and working with various publics.

