

FROM MERE PUBLICITY TO VITAL COMPONENT OF CLIENT'S MANAGEMENT TEAM

By Irene Maslowski, president, NJ Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America.

Communicating to influence public opinion is not a new phenomenon, and can be traced back to the earliest civilizations. Archaeologists have found bulletins in Iraq dating back to 1800 B.C. that told farmers how to sow and harvest their crops and how to irrigate their land, similar to the bulletins issued today by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Elementary aspects of public relations have also appeared over the years in countries such as India, where spies supported kings by keeping them apprised of public opinion and helped to infiltrate rumors that placed the government in a favorable opinion. The word "propaganda" was coined by the Catholic Church when it formed a *Congregatio de Propaganda*, or "Congregation for Propagating the Faith."

Although the practice of public relations found its roots thousands of years ago, the profession gained its stronghold in the 20th century as the world entered a time that went from utilizing horses as a main source of transportation to observing great accomplishments in the race for space, and in particular, during the post-war era, as the nation moved from an industrial to a service-oriented economy. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the number of public relations practitioners soared, professional associations were formed and television became a powerful communications tool.

In the mid-1950s, the practice of public relations was focused more on press agency and publicity - the practice of gaining press or "ink," - and often practitioners served as "message carriers," running interference between their clients and employers and the press. Many practitioners of the era were former journalists or reporters who had a journalistic background, but lacked knowledge of the industry or did not possess solid business experience.

Tools used by practitioners to spread the word were rudimentary and were basically comprised of manual typewriters, notepads and the telephone. With the onset of television and the expansion into talk radio, the climate began to change in terms of opportunities for messaging and the

new vehicles in which to obtain coverage.

I recall my own early days in the industry when I worked for a New York City-based trade association as assistant public relations director and ran the press room during the trade shows and conventions. We provided banks of manual typewriters for reporters and editors who toured the show and came to the press room to write their stories and even arranged for a courier to deliver their copy to their home office! Press releases were mailed with a comfortable cushion of time to allow for postal delays as faxes and e-mail were non-existent, and clients and employers had a greater window of time in which to answer reporter's questions and then see their comments go live.

Fast forward 50 years later and we see a far different picture. Today's practitioners are expected not only to get "ink," but fully understand all aspects of communications, acting as strategists, educators, or counselors, and know how their role as communicators affects the company's bottom line. Their level of education has also risen, and possessing a masters degree and becoming accredited has become more commonplace in the industry.

But the biggest differences between "then" and "now" are the demands that are faced by practitioners and by those in the corporate and business world. Today's messaging is faster - mostly brought about by e-mail and the Internet - therefore, CEOs, business leaders and those within education and government must be prepared to be pro-active, respond without a moment's hesitation, choose the right words that will be effective in holding their target audience's attention, and most importantly, be construed by the public as credible.

The public relations industry has come a long way in the last 50 years. More and more, we see that public relations leadership is taking a seat at the management table along with the CEOs, attorneys and CFOs and has a voice in making decisions. There is still, however, a long way to go before the power and capability of public relations are fully realized. Reputation, branding and relationships have all been catchphrases of recent years, yet today the industry has evolved even further and is poised and ready to serve the business world as an advocate, as well as a policy-maker, as we see members of the industry continue to evolve from "message carriers" to members of the management team. §

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