

Commentary

Learning to break the PR Habit

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1. Introduction

I entered public relations not by choice but rather kicking and screaming.

My undergraduate business school education led to a brief career in corporate finance, followed by an enjoyable transition to corporate training. In the early 1990s, reorganisations were all the rage in the U.S. oil industry. Those willing to be flexible in their assigned posts were more likely to avoid becoming a victim of “rightsizing,” so I happily learned to bloom where I was planted. That is, until my division office was relocated to another city, and my boss asked me to lead “PR efforts” in our new locale.

For a business-minded, bottom-line scripted young professional, I considered this offer an insult and a sure-fire indicator that my performance was no longer meeting the company’s expectations. Why else would I be singled out to do fluff work in such a promising new enterprise? Despite my resistance, I put on a happy face, reminding myself that fluff work would pay the mortgage just as well as my previous positions.

I soon realized that despite its merits, my business education left me ill-prepared to take on the role of community liaison for my company. I felt a twinge of excitement when I was accepted into a Master’s programme in public relations at the local university. My epiphany struck when my first public relations professor (whose former office I serendipitously occupy today) wasted no time in telling us, “Start now to break the PR habit. The public relations profession is too broad, too important, and too valuable to organisations to be reduced to two letters.”

That brief statement had extraordinary sticking power for me. Throughout my graduate studies in public relations, subsequent positions in corporate public affairs with two other MNCs, and additional academic pursuits, it became clear to me that the career path I struggled to avoid had the potential to affect more lives than I could have ever touched with my business skills alone. And that path deserves to be called by its full name: public relations.

Unlike my begrudging entrée into the practice 12 years prior, I leapt at the chance to teach public relations at my alma mater in 2004. The students in my principles course now get the same lecture my professor gave me over a decade ago. Hence, we use only “public relations” in class. Why? Because professionals who cultivate and steward relationships that provide an overflow of benefits into society should

not be painted with the same brush as those who partake in the BS of insincere, unethical, and uneducated spin doctoring so often captured under the moniker of PR.¹

Most, if not all, who have practised, studied, and/or taught public relations in the U.S. have encountered an eye-rolling response from the uninitiated (as I was not so long ago) meant to discredit and belittle our chosen profession. My students and I have chosen to fight back with a few extra syllables, and the habit appears to be sticking.



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¹ Brad Rawlins and Kevin Stoker of Brigham Young University provide an intriguing read in their paper, *Taking the BS out of PR*, presented at the International Public Relations Research Conference, March 2006, in Miami, Florida.