

Opinion piece by [Dannielle Blumenthal](#), Ph.D.

This is the paradox of government public affairs: the professionals who work in this field must work to create a positive relationship between the government and taxpayers, yet without resorting to propagandising.

This seeming dilemma may lead public affairs officers (PAOs) to fall prey to any number of traps. They may avoid mentioning bad news entirely unless forced to by the press. Similarly, they may avoid discussing controversial issues internally just in case the press obtains and distorts their comments. Or, they may turn out crisis response documents that are so bland and meaningless that, although they have no value for real-world guidance, they also cannot be damaging if held up one day before the cameras on Capitol Hill. More subtly, they may conduct strategic planning verbally, to avoid leaving a paper trail, and in doing so leave important options unexplored.

In my own experience, I have found that public and private sector organisations alike address the paradox by being reluctant to proactively report anything but good news, and addressing bad news only when they feel they must. It is as if organisations believe that reporting good news, any good news, automatically creates a good impression of the organisation, whereas even acknowledging bad news does the opposite. In fact, I remember one private sector client that fired my employer at the time (albeit temporarily) for merely finding out negative impressions of the company in internal interviews and then refusing to divulge the source of those impressions.

What can organisations do instead? In short, seize the paradox and eliminate it by focusing on transparency: Rather than running in fear from the truth, embrace it, even if it hurts. Transparency is itself a paradox that works to a public affairs advantage: by telling the truth, even when the truth looks bad, an organisation builds credibility with its stakeholders.

Here is an example. In January 2006, the *New York Times* reported that James Hansen, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) top climate scientist, was experiencing pressure to keep silent on his views about global warming (Revkin, 2006). In April 2006, the *Washington Post* reported that we promote openness and we speak with the facts (Acosta, cited in Revkin, 2006). He then allowed the newspaper to interview a PAO at the Goddard Institute, where Dr. Hansen works. The PAO then spoke freely, making a claim that contradicted the administrator's assertion. The fact that the administrator specifically gave the PAO dispensation to speak without censorship gave credibility to the agency. Since that time, NASA Administrator Michael D. Griffin has issued new rules allowing scientists to talk to the media freely, reports the *Post*, even to express personal interpretations (Eilperin, 2006).

What lesson can we learn from this? That transparency is good public service as well as good PR. To quote one NOAA scientist's comment to the *Post*, American taxpayers are paying the bill, and they have a right to know what we're doing (Thomas Delworth, cited in Eilperin, 2006, last para.). So allow the press to offer both sides of the story, for it enhances credibility to have a third party speak both points of view. When bad news happens, proactively describe what occurred to the public, rather than waiting for the press to bring the story to light. (The exception, of course, is classified or law-enforcement-sensitive information, that cannot be revealed without compromising the agency's mission.) Further, be equally proactive about conveying meaningful information to the public that underscores how well the organisation is performing its mission.

Transparency is not just good government PR, but good private sector PR as well. As R.P. Reid writes in *Waging Public Relations: A Cornerstone of Fourth-Generation Warfare* (2002): Though the truth takes many forms and has many elements, there is no room in media relations for anything but the truth. Lying is not only unacceptable, it is counterproductive. You will be found out. And you will ruin your credibility and your organization's credibility for a long time to follow. Period.

#### References:

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