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## **“Beyond ‘PR’: Redefining the Role of Public Relations”**

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Let me begin with a fable. There once lived a king, a very benevolent fellow, loved by his community. He ruled a little kingdom tucked away in a pleasant corner of one of those European regions that used to have little kingdoms tucked away in its corners.

One day an army came and overran the castle, making off with half the treasury. The king decided to tell the people he must increase taxes to make up for the loss. He called in one of the court wise men.

"How can I break the news without inciting a revolt?" he asked. The wise man pondered -- that's his job -- and came up with a gentle way of explaining the theft as a tragedy for the entire kingdom, imploring the people for their support. It went over well.

Time passed, and once again the neighboring army raided the castle, this time carting away much of the food stored for the winter. Once again, the king called upon his wise man -- by this time, he was known as the Director of Wisdom -- and laid bare the facts.

"What can I tell my subjects this time?" the king asked. "They will lose confidence in me if I can't defend the kingdom's food and money."

Again, the wise man pondered. He advised the king to be frank about the loss, but to say only that it had gone to a neighboring kingdom that seemed to need it desperately. And the king told the people, and asked them to work even harder on the year's harvest.

And they did, and all was well.

By this time, the neighboring army was getting rather good at raids. Once again they struck, hauling away horses, hay and other food stock and most of the royal jewels. Once again, the king summoned his trusted advisor, the VP of Wisdom and Sagely Advice. This time, the king was despondent.

"They raid the treasury. They take our food. They steal our livestock," the king wailed. "And the queen's going to kill me about those jewels. You are my most trusted advisor. What shall I do?"

The wise man hesitated. "I think," he said, "I think the time has come for your highness to put the water back in the moat." The moral of the story is simple: solve a basic problem and you won't have as many public relations problems.

Unfortunately, not all solutions are so obvious, or so simple.

Like the wise man, public relations has seen a change in the questions it must answer, in the problems it is being asked to help solve.

This evening, I want to talk about that transformation, about the role we, as public relations practitioners, have played in the past and the one we must play in the future.

We've come far, but there's a lot of ground left to cover, and it won't be easy. Our business is still considered by some as a facade, the practice of form over substance. Our discipline is deprecatingly referred to as "PR," a now-pejorative term I've never cared for.

But our contributions are, in fact, substantial, or can be. I believe they are mainly unrecognized. And too often, we don't help our own situation.

I've been at this business over 40 years now, watching it change and waiting for it finally to mature. That is, to recognize and fulfill its role in our society. Because I believe it has a legitimate role, one with a philosophical and historical basis.

Tonight, I want to discuss three ideas.

First, the fundamental role of public relations. It has always played a part in free societies and the democratic process, and it still does. I think we need to appreciate that heritage.

Second, how we have allowed public perceptions -- our bosses and clients especially -- to lose track of that role, as the basic idea of public relations became an organized discipline, a function, a practice, if you will. That misunderstanding persists for many, and it's partly our fault.

And third, I want to talk about the future. There's an opportunity, even an imperative for us to move beyond the "PR" of the past, to expand, even redefine our role and the role of public relations itself. Whether we can do that is the question, and the challenge for these coming years. I am optimistic about the future.

Let me begin with a little groundwork. Let me tell you, first, what I mean when I talk about public relations. For my purposes tonight, when I refer to public relations I'm talking about the function, not the business. The public relations function is present in every organization, whether clearly defined or not, whether handled internally or by a separate consulting firm. Even when it isn't specifically designated as an organizational responsibility, the function exists.

It would also be helpful, I think, to explain my own idea of what that function is.

As I see it, public relations is defined in terms of public opinion and behavior. Public opinion is a powerful lever that can motivate an audience to a desired behavior. Ultimately, there are only three possible approaches to any public relations exercise that intends to affect behavior. It can seek its leverage

- ... by creating an opinion, where there is none,
- ... by reinforcing an opinion that already exists,
- ... or by changing an existing opinion.

That's all there is. The methods of achieving these objectives are many, and those options are the basis and extent of what we call public relations. Public behavior is the goal, various communication techniques are the tools, but public opinion is the strategy, the lever, the means.

Considered in these terms, public relations has a history that extends back much farther than the business service that seems such a 20th-century phenomenon.

So let's take a quick look at some history. And let's start with our own American democracy.

Our nation is founded on freedom. It's based on the idea that free expression from all corners of society can effectively chart the nation's course. Our democracy embraces public opinion, articulated at the ballot box and through public debate, as the basis for public action.

In such an arrangement, the quality of our government, the quality of our society depends on the quality of the public opinion that directs it. And the value of the public's opinion depends on how well that public is informed.

This is obvious - ignorance does not beget reason.

The founding fathers recognized this. They did more than simply allow a free press -- they encouraged, even assured it. And why? To ensure that all ideas, all opinions would have an avenue into the public forum.

Of course, they realized that many of these views would conflict. But that's not important. Healthy debate would be the rule. Advocacy would be the means by which individuals, or organizations, or even businesses would contribute to the common good.

That invitation to speak out is the basis of democracy. Public opinion is the final arbiter. That idea places a lot of trust in the public, and it makes a few critical assumptions.

It assumes that in the long run, the public will recognize what is in its best interest. Consider the view of Abraham Lincoln, an exceptional molder of public sentiment and a man who placed great faith in its value.

"Public opinion," Lincoln said, "though often formed upon a wrong basis, yet generally has a strong underlying sense of justice."

Trusting in that sense also assumes that the public will weigh opinions and views from many sides.

And it assumes that holders of these myriad viewpoints will avail themselves of the opportunity to present their case, to relate to the public what they themselves espouse.

Call it what you will, but there it is: advancing information in the public forum, for the purpose of contributing to public opinion. That is public relations. It's implicit to the democratic process.

Long before our English colonies broke free, public relations began in practice, if not in name. Greece had its Senate, inviting men to advance their ideas.

Or consider Martin Luther. When he nailed his "95 Theses" to the cathedral door in 1517, he set in motion a debate that deeply affected public opinion -- and precipitated a change in behavior. We mustn't confuse the power and value of his arguments with the means he used to convey them, but we can recognize those means as brilliantly effective public relations.

And on to American history. The republic's early days were great times for the exercise of public relations strategy and techniques, although this was well before the words "public" and "relations" appeared in tandem on any firm's door.

In fact, the term "public relations" doesn't appear until 1803. You know where? In a speech, by Thomas Jefferson.

But even that was more than two decades after an extraordinary campaign -- a public relations operation if ever there was one -- played a pivotal role in the nation's formative years.

The Boston Tea Party, the midnight ride of Paul Revere, Thomas Paine. And, eventually, the Constitutional Convention, concluded in September, 1787. Only 39 of the 74 named delegates had signed the document. Ratification was needed by nine of the 13 colonies, and it was by no means a sure thing. The states were independent. They had differing priorities. Ceding a measure of autonomy to a central body was not a universally accepted idea.

Bring on Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay. They embarked on a campaign of persuasion, and used the communications media of the day to effect it. Their series of essays called the "Federalist Papers," advocated ratification and appeared in newspapers throughout the colonies. They were collected into book form even before the question of ratification was settled.

Their strategy focused on three key states: Massachusetts, Virginia and New York. Hamilton wrote the first, according to legend, in the cabin of a sloop on the Hudson River. It was first published in three New York newspapers just a month after the convention.

The others followed quickly, were printed and reprinted, building the case for accepting a unified nation under the new constitution. Historians agree: the essays made a difference. They may well have made *the* difference.

These men combined passion and eloquence in a carefully planned campaign. As brilliant advocates, they affected public opinion, motivated behavior, and shaped history.

Public relations continued to thrive in the American experiment. Abraham Lincoln was another master of persuasion, presenting his views in the public forum. He knew that leadership entailed convincing others of his opinions, of enticing others to follow.

Listen to what he had to say about public opinion:

"Public opinion is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public opinion goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions."

Lincoln molded opinion. Lincoln, too, shaped history.

Considering this national record of public advocacy, it's no surprise that the rise of public relations -- as a business discipline, as a commercial service -- has been largely an American phenomenon.

Just after the turn of the century, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and his Standard Oil Company were getting what we would today call "bad press." He was known as "Public Enemy Number One."

Then, there was a bitterly contested strike at Rockefeller's Homestead Mining company, in Colorado. Perhaps feeling at a disadvantage in the public forum, the Rockefellers hired a young reporter from the *New York Post* as a publicity consultant. His name was Ivy Lee.

At about the same time, AT&T established a corporate public relations department -- believed to be the first. To exist as a monopoly, a wise management knew it could operate only with public consent and customer satisfaction.

Public relations continued to gain momentum during World War I, when the government's Office of War Information set out to inform and influence the American public about the events in Europe. Its chief was George Creel, another important figure in our heritage.

In the years that followed, corporate America began to recognize the value of public relations as a business discipline. More departments were established. Independent firms sprang up, offering public relations counsel and services.

Then, World War II brought another government-led advocacy effort, this on an unprecedented scale. Our national leaders recognized the need for public support, and the ways to build it. Literally, thousands of public information officers went to work in war zones around the world.

The war ended, and many of those officers brought their expertise to the private sector, establishing their own firms. In the '50s, the growth continued, providing opportunities for dozens of new enterprises. Including one we almost called Marsteller-Burson.

I truly believe in this notion of public relations as a function of the democratic process, within all realms of the republic -- social, political and commercial.

Today, we have only to look across the Atlantic, across Europe and behind the remains of the Iron Curtain, to see it. The transformation of Eastern Europe is, of course, a complex matter. But one of the many contexts in which it may be considered is as a public relations exercise. Certainly, the weight and force of public opinion must be accepted as key to the changes in Eastern Europe. In restrictive societies, providing information to support that embryonic stirring of desire for greater freedom is vital to democratic reform.

But don't take my word for it. Listen to the words of Vaclav Havel -- playwright, former prisoner of his country, and now its president -- as he addressed officials of Voice of America earlier this year:

"You have informed us truthfully," he said, "of events around the world and in our country as well and, in this way, you helped to bring about the peaceful revolution which has at long last taken place."

Havel realized all along that just making the information available -- simply informing the Czechoslovak public -- was a powerful force. As the founders of America believed, the public will act on that information in its own best interest.

The Czech people are further confirmation of that belief. So too are the Poles, the Hungarians, the Rumanians, the Bulgarians and the 16 million Germans who will officially emerge from behind the Iron Curtain just a few hours from now.

We know that information, even opinions, presented clearly and effectively to the public, is a powerful force. And we recognize that public relations embodies the practice of that process.

So we may recognize, too, that the practice of public relations grows and matures in importance and complexity when a society and its communications media become more intricate. Today, that's happening all over the world.

Communications technology continues to revolutionize societies, as well as their relationships to one another. Today, we sit in our living rooms and watch the Berlin Wall come down, live. We watch the students in Tiananmen Square, live. Saddam Hussein closes his borders, but he'll talk to Dan Rather. Our President responds, in part, with other video images, including one in which he and Mikhail Gorbachev shake hands and smile -- at the world, and in solidarity -- at the Iraqi leader.

The news media, specifically television, have moved beyond reporting on diplomatic maneuvers. Simply by doing their job, the media have become a means of diplomatic communication. Heads of state know their televised messages can reach all corners of the globe, almost instantly.

President Bush, it is said, even insists that his overseas accommodations include a television screen tuned to CNN.

As all of this happens, the world shrinks -- effectively, if not literally. The public relations requirements of any organization must stretch to encompass the globe.

For all of these reasons, the public relations discipline is today becoming even more critical, even more complex. Opportunities to expand our role and influence abound.

All that is well and good. But if those opportunities are unrecognized, they will be unfulfilled. So now, I want to talk about how we have at times lost track of our role, and how we can regain it. Indeed, how we are now redefining the role of public relations.

It's ironic that a discipline based on relating to the public has such a problem with public perception. But public relations has a bad record with its own public relations.

It began early. That Office of War Information, under George Creel during World War I, was blamed by many afterward for helping get us into the war.

In the 1930s, during the first great rise of commercial public relations, our business took another couple of setbacks. Remember Ivy Lee? In 1934, he was called into a Congressional hearing as the representative of I.G. Farben, a German dye cartel, a bad no-no, less than two decades after World War I.

Three years later, another public relations man gained notoriety in connection with the German National Trust. Allegedly, it was a front for Fascist elements, and the man representing it, Carl Byoir, became tainted by association. And, for a time, so did public relations.

After World War II, the trend continued. Books such as "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" and "Life in the Crystal Palace" portrayed public relations as a manipulative business. As all show and no substance. As a tool for the unscrupulous.

Even as recently as the Watergate years, if you recall, Richard Nixon was quoted as using the term "to PR" a situation. The public's inference was of an attitude that anything was OK, so long as it could be masked by a good facade.

It's no wonder, really, that we've gotten a bad name.

And through all of it, we've had an unusual relationship with the press, which itself has a great influence on how the public sees us. It's been a love-hate relationship, I think. As we know, there's a tremendous dependence on public relations by the press in some respects, as well as a certain resentment of that.

After all, we're the ones who come between them and the people, sometimes the information, that they're after. Let's face it, at times we seem to function as an obstacle to their designs, just as at other times, we offer invaluable assistance.

That's been a problem. And it isn't one we can easily dismiss, because communication through the media remains a key part -- though not the only part -- of our discipline.



So -- what do we do? How can we best handle these perceptions? How do we, as public relations practitioners, relate to the public?

I've put a lot of thought into this over the years, and we've worked hard at Burson-Marsteller to embrace an approach that is both ethical and pragmatic. It's been successful and it's been satisfying, so let me share a few principles.

We must be clear about who our client is, about what we do, about what our function is, and what our responsibilities are and to whom.

We must be very careful of our relationship with the press and, by extension, the public. Accuracy is paramount. As any editor knows, credibility takes years to develop but can be lost over a single incident. Our position is the same.

Nevertheless, we are advocates, and we need to remember that. We are advocates of a particular point of view -- our client's or our employer's point of view. And while we recognize that serving the public interest best serves our client's interest, we are not journalists. That's not our job.

Often, we are forced to find a balance, a delicate balance of our own professional credibility on one side, and the role of advocating our clients' interests, on the other.

Distributing the weight of those two concerns is critical. If we tip away from our clients, we cease to serve our purpose. Lean heavily toward them, though, and we could sometimes risk becoming little more than elaborate mouthpieces.

Our obligation to the news media is to demonstrate absolute respect for the facts, for accuracy. The information that comes from us must be reliable. But the media should never forget, as I said earlier, that we are advocates -- advocates paid by our employers. Not unpaid surrogates for the media. And that's nothing to apologize for; it's our function.

Some look at this and say we are cavalier toward the truth. We are not. We are, or should be, painstakingly veracious.

What, then, is the real complaint against us? It is that we are less than reverent of the perception advocated by others, the actuality drawn from a truthful set of facts. And we are irreverent, because we often have a separate interpretation to offer. A distinction must be made.

Facts are objective. They are accurate, or they are not.

Perception is subjective. It is the reality drawn from facts, molded by opinion. People sometimes confuse the two or blur the distinction between them, perhaps relying too heavily on their own, subjective perception.

When a man offers his thirsty friend just a sip of water, that's a fact, the truth. One perception might be that he's being stingy, ungenerous. If they are in the desert, rationing a small amount



of water between them, that's another fact. It doesn't change the first one, but it changes the perception.

We offer facts and, based on them, we advocate a perception, one version of reality among many that might be drawn from the same truth.

Here's an example. Not long ago, an environmental group cited a large company as a particularly bad polluter. Their facts -- relating to emissions -- were indeed accurate, but they were a year old. The latest figures were much better, reflecting a concerted effort toward reducing pollution. But the environmental advocates didn't cite those latest figures, although they were available.

The facts were accurate, but what was the reality? A company mistreating the environment or a company working hard to change, and making rapid progress?

We need to distinguish between facts and perception, being aware of the relationship between the two, and our relationship to both.

If we do that consistently, we will earn respect for our own actions, our own posture, standing apart from our clients. That is what we should be after. We should aspire to a role that is clearly defined as serving an advocacy function, in a complex public forum.

In fact, the first amendment to our Constitution guarantees the rights of both freedom of speech as well as petitioning the Government. With a Government "by the people, of the people and for the people," it's clear that presenting one's position to the public is also a part of our society's operation.

Public relations should be recognized as a vital function to which any organization, regardless of its popularity, is entitled. Approaching the public forum today is much like approaching the courts -- it requires specialized expertise.

That's what we provide, and I don't believe we deserve to be the target of scorn when we provide that service in support of unpopular views. I believe that every view has a right to be heard in our democracy. Advancing those views for public scrutiny, even when the judgment is negative, is -- or can be, or should be -- an honorable practice in a free society.

But until we believe that, we cannot expect anyone else to accept it.

However ... when we ask for that acceptance we must also accept a responsibility of our own -- not for our clients' actions, but for our own choices of what organizations, cases or issues we will represent. When we become advocates for an unpopular cause, we are not responsible for that cause -- but we are responsible for having placed ourselves at its service.

And so, we begin with our employers. (And again, it doesn't matter whether we are their public relations firm or their direct employee.) They, too, must recognize the ultimate, long-term

importance of public trust and confidence. They, too, must treat that public trust as something to be earned and maintained.

And they, too, must recognize that trust is something fragile, like glass. Damage, even when repairable, will leave scars that may never be fully obscured.

I've spoken about the public relations function, and how I believe history supports, even endorses our role.

I've spoken also about how that advocacy role developed into a formalized business service, and the difficulty of keeping it defined in a complicated society.

Now, I want to conclude with a look at our future. We can understand our historic role and the heritage that has brought us to our present position. We can understand all of that, but we must also understand the future and its possibilities. For unless we do, we cannot fulfill our potential.

There have been three fundamental, progressive stages to public relations as a business function. I've spoken about these on other occasions.

My story about the seemingly defenseless king, in fact, illustrates this progression.

In the first stage, our bosses decided what they would do and say. With that decision made, they turned to us as public relations experts for advice on how to say it. Public relations got the message out. It wrote press releases, staged publicity campaigns. Public relations crafted a message that was, in substance, handed down.

I am generalizing, of course. Even in its early days, public relations was not universally a mechanical discipline. Certainly, there were always a few who expanded their role, becoming counselors, operating at levels different from the field at large.

But on average, the first phase was defined by the question: "How do I say it?" And that lasted into the 1960s. But in that decade, social changes began to affect how business related to society, and a second phase began.

In the second phase, the question changed. Business no longer asked, simply, "How do I say it?" Now, business began to ask, "What shall I say?"

That's because the message was coming under closer scrutiny. Suddenly, more was expected of business besides turning a healthy profit. Issues such as public and employee safety, equal opportunity in hiring and promotion, and others became central to how a business related to the public. Corporate CEO's were under the gun. How would they -- and the institutions they headed -- respond?

One example is a concern for the environment. It used to be that a good smokestack was one that launched a steady stream of smoke into the sky. That meant business was good, the factory and its

community were healthy. People would joke about the odor of emissions as being the smell of money.

It's difficult to imagine, today.

Environmental protection became a social concern, almost a preoccupation in the late 1960s. Business couldn't ignore these developments. (By the way, I think we're all better off because of it.) Nevertheless, public scrutiny on the basis of this and other issues began to change the role of public relations. We who bore the title, public relations, were increasingly involved in drafting the message, starting with its content.

That stage of determining the content of the corporate message lasted well into the 1980s.

Now, we are in a transition into the third stage. This third stage, as I see it, represents the maturity of public relations as a business function. In this stage, the organization asks us not how to say it, or merely what to say, but what to do.

Why? Because public scrutiny has become even more detailed, more intense. Because today, our bosses realize that public opinion is far more responsive than ever. They know they don't have to wait long for approval or disapproval. They don't have to wait long for an ill-advised action to be judged, and for that judgment to have its effect -- on community relations, on employee productivity, on sales, even on legislation. Today, the loop between message and behavior closes quickly -- the rapidity of communications, even from a world away, has made them almost one and the same. Or, ought to.

Even more important, our bosses know that all of this is unavoidable; they cannot hide. The process of scrutiny and reaction will take place. To be under the magnifying glass, an institution or prominent individual needs only to exist.

And this scrutiny, these public reactions have become more than an inconvenience or, in a happier scenario, a pleasant trifle. Today, an organization's public behavior -- and how it explains that behavior -- are vital to its operation, its public perception as a valued asset or a depressing liability.

With that, its public relations becomes a critical function.

The full maturation of this third stage -- What do I do? -- is our greatest opportunity for the future. With it, public relations becomes strategic. With it, public relations gains a permanent seat at the management table.

We can help make this happen. We can help by recognizing the added responsibilities of this expanded role, by redefining our function, and by preparing ourselves for this broader responsibility.

We don't have to start from scratch. But we do need to begin shifting the balance of our work.

There are two basic components in the public relations process: strategy and execution. Our true value, our unique and vital contribution to our clients and employers is the knowledgeable advice we bring to the decision-making process.

After that, executing the strategy remains. Execution equates, in many cases, to communication. And that will always be important. It will be increasingly challenging, too, as the communications media continue to multiply and expand. There's no less importance there.

But there's growing importance in the strategic component, in providing input that produces the most effective decision -- first about what to do, then about what to say and how.

Are we qualified? In some cases, we may not be. That's why it's so critical for us to recognize the role, its responsibilities and its requirements.

We will need to understand the overall, to broaden our view of the world we live in and of the institutions that employ us. To provide strategic advice, we must understand and identify with the business we're in -- not only the public relations part, but the business itself, the business of our client and of our employer.

Moving "beyond PR" means becoming a part, an integral element of that business -- whether it's manufacturing, retailing, finance, or any other.

We will need to understand its customers, its history, its competitors, its products and all the forces that affect it.

Otherwise, we are just pretenders. If we are going to step forward and offer strategic value -- and there's a need for it, believe me -- then we must arrive with the qualifications. And that means commitment. Commitment, I said in a speech some thirty years ago, is the case where my client gets stabbed and I bleed!

Are we up to it? Time will tell. But I believe that the opportunity is there. Business -- and this applies to other institutions in our society, for-profit and not-for-profit -- needs us more than ever before. If we seize control of our current role, we can shape its future.

That is why public relations is as exciting today as it was in 1953, when I co-founded Burson-Marsteller.

And that is why I am optimistic about the future -- yours and mine.