

Accepting the Arthur W. Page Society Distinguished Service Award
Frank Ovaitt, CEO Emeritus, Institute for Public Relations
September 28, 2015
Chicago, Illinois

What Cincinnatus Knew and Other Lessons of a Long Career

It seems like such a cliché to start by saying how honored and humbled I am to receive this award. But that's the truth, and it's how any of you would feel at a moment like this.

Even more humbling is the challenge to share some wisdom in accepting the award, something relevant to your own careers. So in search of wisdom, I came up with this conceit: What are three things I know today that I wish I had known much earlier?

Some of you are aware that my wife and I now own a small horse farm in Kentucky. I'm not so bold as to compare myself to a giant historical figure, but I have to say I now get Cincinnatus better than I ever did before.

After his success leading Roman armies in battle, the Romans wanted Cincinnatus to stick with the dictator gig. "No thanks," he said, "I'm good. Going back to the farm."

Lesson one of a long career: Whatever "the farm" is in your life, there's always work you could be doing there. Keep that in mind when you're deciding what to do with your time and energy. Frankly, there were days I got through by telling myself, I don't have to do public relations for a living, I have other skills. Try that sometime when you need to feel better about yourself.

Plus, there's always something to learn on your farm. Like starting the 45-year-old tractor in my barn. Never mind that the gauges are obscured by owl droppings so you don't even know what the gauges are or which ones still work. And when the beast roared, the exhaust stack blew chunks of soot all over the barn and me.

But I learned, especially from my upfront research on an inherently dangerous machine. Maybe this is another way of saying, we in public relations and corporate communications tend to be people with options. What we do best is tackling what we haven't done before, confident that with research and critical analysis we'll get it

right. If we stick to that mindset as we approach new problems, the outcomes can be awesome.

* * * * *

Lesson two: Research is so much bigger than measurement, evaluation and data analytics.

I joined the Institute for Public Relations or IPR Board in 1994 and took the CEO role starting in 2004. IPR is a non-profit foundation dedicated to fostering greater use of research in our field – the science beneath the art of public relations. IPR is supported by many people in this room, and that’s what allows us to provide our research free on the web.

For 20-plus years, I’ve noted how the word “research” means so many different things to different people in our field. It’s like each of us can have a definition all our own.

Sometimes it’s just measurement, evaluation, and the fad term now, data analytics. I’m not saying that the collection and analysis of massive amounts of data isn’t valid and here to stay. I’m just saying that if we made a drinking game based on how many times you hear

the term in a public relations context, some in this room would be under the table already.

In any case, to better define how we think about what research is, IPR began articulating three kinds of research in public relations, adapted from Dr. Jim Grunig, a previous recipient of this award. The three kinds are:

1. Research used in public relations, to guide and evaluate communications programs.
2. Research on public relations, to understand what public relations professionals do and how they do it.
3. Research for public relations – the social science underpinnings of our work.

The first kind, in public relations, consists of planning research and measurement. This is how professionals align their work with organizational priorities, set meaningful objectives, execute and measure. By measuring results against objectives, we are able to continuously improve our work and its contribution to organizational goals.

Some of the knowledge we need for planning can be found in existing research and some will require original research. The IPR Measurement Commission has published a wealth of important papers focused on this first kind of research. The Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards, formed under IPR's leadership, is a global effort to reach agreement on what and how we should measure, with adoption by major buyers of research services to give it teeth.

That's the first kind, research in public relations. The second kind of research – on public relations – is often called benchmarking and best practices. Knowing what others are doing in a given situation will never tell you what's right for your organization or client. But it certainly can help you make informed decisions.

Trade media, professional associations and consultants are often good sources of benchmarking and best practices research. They produce studies on trends in public relations practice such as the use of massive data stores, the focus on employees as reputation builders for the organization, how public relations departments are

structured and funded, and even how much public relations people are paid.

But the third kind of research – for public relations – is the underlying social science of our work. It's often something you carry inside your head. Even when it's not front of mind, it affects every aspect of your work.

This kind of research may seem highly theoretical to some professionals. It may come from various fields of study such as psychology, sociology, economics, health, business and political science. But there also exists an enormous body of social science specific to public relations and corporate communications.

At the core, our social science addresses how individuals, organizations and societies form opinions, make decisions and take action. For example, most scholars acknowledge that it takes years to build deep trust in another person or an organization. Yet on social media, we seem to decide very quickly whose opinions we will trust and may change our behavior because of that. Has the human mind evolved that much since the advent of social media, or are there other factors at play that we need to understand better?

In any case, the more you think you are qualified to lead the function, the more you need three kinds of research. I wish I had known that at the beginning of my career the way I know it today.

* * * * *

And so, lesson three: If you fancy yourself a leader, try this sometime. Calculate how much time you spend rushing to “do stuff” that you imagine is important to someone, versus how much time you spend thinking about what you and your organization need to do next, and how to do it.

That someone you’re trying impress most likely has some control – maybe a lot of control – over your career success. Worst case, maybe it’s not even someone you respect. But if you’re not thinking about the future and getting your organization ready for what’s ahead, how long will short-term “doing stuff” impress anybody?

Yes, the speed of change and things that you are expected to know make the job harder and harder. But maybe you’re not the first to go through this, and maybe you can draw from others.

The World Future Society was founded three years before I began my first job in public relations. Futurism, futurology and futurist were not new terms then, but they weren't common either. For some reason, the theme of constant, accelerating change appealed to me. Perhaps because I was working in technology and issues-oriented businesses where you could see change all around you.

When you're young and trying to make your mark, it's easy to think you're the first on your block and in your department to recognize and experience all this. Later on, you start to realize that people who were already giants when you arrived went through quite a lot of change themselves – maybe even deeper change than you.

It's not really about you and social media or any technology or socially-driven change. It's about you, progress and judgment – what will be important in the long run and what won't.

* * * * *

So to recap, there's always work to do on the farm. Research is a big, big word. And how much time do you spend thinking about what you and your organization must do next?

I suggested a moment ago that sometimes there can be a problem with a person who has control over your career and is telling you how good you are or aren't. I've been blessed by incredible bosses, some of them Page Society members, over the years. But it hasn't always worked out that way. I will never forget the day I made a deliberate decision to never again base my self-assessment on the opinions of someone else just because of hierarchy. Within a few years, I reached another turning point, when I decided I would never make another career move based on money. Those two decisions freed me to think about opportunities to serve, especially the profession that has given me so much.

Those experiences were the cake. Tonight's award is icing, and it is sweet. My deepest, most sincere thanks to the Arthur W. Page Society, the honors committee, and all of you.