

## Public Relations in Post-Bubble America

*By Richard H. Truitt*

**S**ome people in our industry believe public relations has lost its precious position as a valued business tool. Some feel the role of public relations in corporations is fragile and failing. I agree with them.

And in today's environment of suspicion and corporate mistrust, that's very troubling. But it hasn't always been that way with me.

After a graduate degree in journalism from Northwestern, I went to the *Chicago Tribune* as a reporter. Then I joined Carl Byoir & Associates in Chicago.

Byoir was a huge, proud public relations firm with large corporate clients and what always appeared to be a direct link between our senior peo-

ple and their. In almost every case, we reported to the president or the chairman. I was in charge of our two dozen regional offices and affiliates, and I also supervised two of the firm's biggest accounts, Honeywell and Hallmark Cards. These were huge operations. We had 22 full-time staff people working on Honeywell, for example, and seven working full time on Hallmark. I was in regular touch with Ed Spencer, who was the chairman of Honeywell, and Joyce Hall, who was the founder and owner of Hallmark Cards. That's how it worked at Byoir. We reported to the boss.

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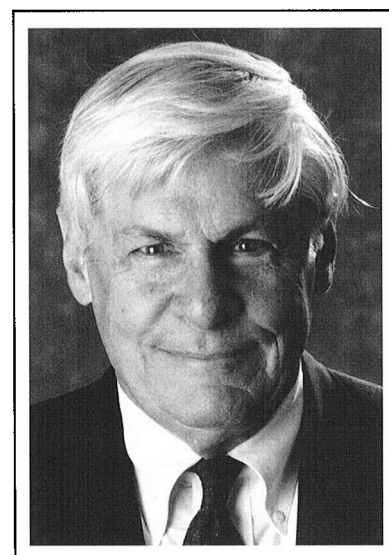
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These were the days in which public relations

people described themselves as the conscience of the corporation. This was a reasonable purpose for executives whose role was to help maintain beneficial relationships with groups of people whose attitudes could bear on the corporation's success.

But much has changed since those challenging and productive days of the 60's and 70's. Business is still around and public relations is still around, but both have fallen on hard times. The respect and trust that they enjoyed have been diminished. Perhaps they could have done a better job of helping each other, but they didn't.

For decades, polls have pointed to the steady decline in trust in America, and nearly all institutions have suffered. Now, the last 12 months have offered up a devastating string of big business scandals, obliterating any public confidence that might have lingered.



Richard H. Truitt

Companies that had won support from analysts, trust from investors and accolades from the media, fell into deep disdain because they cooked the books. The respected Big Five accounting firms lost a member because of this, and now are referred to as the Final Four.

The stock market has managed to lost more than \$1 trillion in this time, much of it in retirement funds. It's no wonder that skepticism is running amok.

If we were security analysts in a down market, we'd be looking fervently for a bottom along about now. If we were basketball fans losing a big game we'd be looking hopefully for a turning point. But we're journalists and teachers and public relations people, and we just might have found our moment.

If that's the case, its symbol is the sight of corporate executives, one after the other, being brought to the bar, embarrassed before their peers, and perp-walked away in handcuffs. These are the business heroes who used to be celebrated on magazine covers for their aggressive styles. They still show up in news photos, but the recent ones offer proof that corporate corruption can be found out, and will be punished. Because we might have hit bottom, there seem to be indications that business now has the chance to reestablish its reputation for trustworthy performance, and that public relations practitioners can help.

They're getting ready as we speak. Some larger firms have designed new departments just to deal with corporate responsibility issues, and that's good. But we can't do everything, in spite of what some enthusiasts believe. In fact we can do very little, directly, to restore confidence in business. But we certainly can play a strong supporting role. So let's look, realistically, at how that role might look.

I feel that to provide real help in the rebuilding process, we must reclaim our journalism foundation that seems to have crumbled during the past decade of fast and reckless growth. We need to get back in touch with the fundamental disciplines that were so critical to the public relations process when its power was at its peak. I am not into curriculum-building, but I do have some thoughts about three communications disciplines that practitioners must understand and learn to apply.

Each of these is founded in education, and particularly in journalism education. Perhaps this is the right time, and it's certainly the right place, to discuss them.

### Writing is Critical

The first of these is that good, thoughtful, well-founded writing is as critical to the public relations craft as it is to news journalism. When I joined Carl Byoir & Associates in 1959, I came up against a

company rule that almost kept me out of the firm. It said that every new employee must have at least four years' professional experience working in the editorial department of a respected newspaper, magazine or radio station. One day I asked George Hammond, Byoir's chairman, why the firm was so stringent. He was very direct. He said that good writing depended almost entirely on organized thinking, and this was as good a test as he could find to weed out lazy thinkers.

But that only hinted at the true value of being able to write well. Years later, when I was in the position to counsel executives of our client companies, I found that the person who could write cogently often was the person who carried the day. I learned that when I was in a meeting of executives who were trying to formulate an action plan or a response to a crisis, I was the one who could excuse myself and find a typewriter to bang out a draft statement. When I got back into the room,

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where the participants were still debating, I could present my version and then, like magic, it became the center of attention and often ended up as the guts of the response statement or policy paper.

I learned that when I was the speechwriter for the boss, my own ideas found themselves firmly lodged in his final presentation because I was the one who had crystallized them and put them into type. That sounds scary in a sense, but there's an interesting other side.

I was the one who did the research, the long thinking, the sensibility checks with colleagues and the painstaking phrase development. If my work clicked with the boss's basic views it became public, and then occasionally it became policy.

Some of today's public relations companies pay little attention to the value of good writing. One of these retains a single full-time writer who handles the heavy stuff. The rest of the staff muddles through with little journalism education and no experience in the news business.

Another firm conducts writing workshops for about an hour, twice a year. In these firms, as in so many others, young people who have neither learned to write news nor seen the inside of a news-

room spend countless hours trying to get past the voice mails of thoroughly disinterested reporters.

On the other side, there are a few journalism-grounded firms around whose strength lies in good writing and the thinking process that goes with it. These are firms or corporate departments that truly connect not only with editors but with their bosses and clients, and by and large they are doing well in the current downturn. I feel that any public relations professional who is going to help his company or his client recover its status and its reputation in post-bubble America is going to need to know how to write, and thus, as George Hammond told me, how to think.

The second fundamental concept is that public relations practitioners must learn about and become practiced in the basic skills of persuasion. At the most fundamental level, of course, this discipline is important to publicists who are trying to get people to sign up for insurance, attend a fund raising dinner or buy the client's toothpaste. On a larger scale, the public relations practitioner might be seeking public support for new tax legislation or construction of a paper mill down the road. At the highest level of our craft, the public relations counsel frequently directs this process inwardly, working to convince his own company's executives to adopt new policies or deep-six unethical practices.

It's no surprise that the fundamentals of persuasion apply across this spectrum. But it is a big surprise, to me at least, that precious little effort is applied to teaching this critical capability. If a psychologist were examining this issue for us, she probably would tell us that there are half a dozen elements of persuasive message design that we should know about. There's the business about taking sides, and whether a two-sided message in which the persuader who acknowledges but does not attack the other side is more credible. There's the issue about provoking fear, and whether such an appeal is useful in creating change because it motivates intense thinking about our message. There's the value derived from offering proof — stories and evidence provided by someone else that lends strong credibility to our case. There's the business about revealing intent, where most persuaders agree you will be most effective when you minimize forewarning. There's the fascinating technique called storytelling, which relies on the fact that interesting stuff is more interesting than boring stuff, and also that most people hope to minimize the amount of thinking they must do.

### **Beating Them With Their Own Stick**

Finally there is the granddaddy of all persuasive techniques that has been the foundation of those public relations programs we admire most. It's usu-

ally called "convincing them with their own arguments," but some of us who have used this trick successfully for years call it "beating them with their own stick." The foundation of this idea is that it's always easier to persuade someone who already agrees with you. If you tell them something that sounds exactly like something they would say, they will take your side. They'll nod up and down and exclaim, "That's right. I hear you. That's what I always say myself."

I read a fair amount of John Locke when I was at Northwestern, and later I decided that he could have been a fairly good PR man. Locke was the English philosopher who shook up everyone three centuries ago with the idea that societies were ruled not by divine right but by what he called the consent of the governed. Locke said that men had left the wild state voluntarily and thus made a sort of contract among themselves to protect life, liberty and property. When tyrants came along and snatched these away, they were breaking the contract and war was inevitable.

But in today's environment of thought, it's not enough to rush forward with a strong arm and a few facts in order to win the day. The folks out there

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have their own facts and their own muscle. So winning consent is key. Locke would argue that consent can be obtained by indirection, by muting the arguments that appeal most to us and by appealing instead to the self-interest of those we want to reach. He would tell this story by way of example. Englishmen of the 17th century who believed in freedom sought to remove the licensing of printing.

John Milton, the epic poet, decided to try to advance this cause and so he wrote *Areopagitica*, the greatest prose work ever produced in denunciation of censorship. But in spite of its eloquence, the licensing of printing stayed in effect. Later in the century, Locke addressed himself to the same subject. He argued that licensing of English printers drove up the price of books and was causing the industry to move to France. He said the economic cost of censorship was too high. And then, for the kinds of pocketbook reasons they understood then

as well as we do now, Parliament removed the licenses and freed the press. If Locke were here today, he would remind us that an appeal to self-interest is more useful than an appeal to reason in persuading our audiences to consent.

I feel that any public relations professional who is going to help his company or client recover its status and its reputation in post-bubble America must be sophisticated in the art and ethics of persuasion.

The third fundamental notion is that public relations executives must apply their journalistic and persuasive skills to establishing a strong supporting role in corporate integrity. I am not talking about ethics administration. You know that many big corporations, perhaps 8 out of 10, maintain codes of ethics. Most of these companies employ someone they might call the chief ethics officer, and he is responsible for compliance. This usually means that anything permissible under law is also ethical, by definition.

It's fairly clear that the ethicists at Enron or WorldCom or a host of other companies that have massaged their financial reports, were operating outside the sphere of influence. I suspect that the legal and public relations experts at these firms also were in the dark.

But the fact is that, even at this unfortunate moment in the history of corporate trust, public relations people are in a unique position to help restore a sense of what is right for their companies. This is not about their familiar role of selling corporate decisions. Instead, it's about helping management arrive at those decisions correctly. They will be particularly able to grow in this function if they are trained as journalists.

My education really began working with some of the wise old heads who were covering impossible beats in Chicago — city hall, the environment, and the South Side police. I would sit in a meeting with

one of these veteran newsmen and pick up very little of substance. But they would go back to the *Tribune* and file a story wealthy with details about critical issues and heated controversies that I had never tumbled to. They could smell things that I couldn't see or hear. Their senses, and their private contacts of course, reached deeply into the workings of Chicago. They were more than reporters, and even more than investigative reporters. They were spooks who knew where all the skeletons were hanging and who knew whether, and how to deliver this information usefully.

### Restoring Public Trust

Do you imagine that tycoons at this moment in post-bubble corporate America could use this kind of professional sensitivity in framing the consciousness of their corporations? You bet they could, and they're probably not going to find it in the accounting department or in law. They're going to find it down the stairs and around the corner in public relations. These are the folks who can look their bosses right in the eye and say, "That's a very interesting plan. How would you feel if you were to read all about it in tomorrow's *Wall Street Journal*?"

In recent years, many of these corporate leaders have not really bothered to understand what superb communications could do for them. They were succeeding too fast. But in today's climate, they need your kind of help, and they know it. If you go to them as a skilled and sensitive journalist with your head together, your facts in order and your tools sharpened, they will listen. PRG

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### The James C. Bowling Lecture, The University of Kentucky

James C. Bowling was one of the first senior vice presidents of public relations at the Philip Morris companies. When he died, his alma mater, the University of Kentucky, established this lecture in his name. The above article is an excerpt of the lecture given by Richard H. Truitt.