

The Image Makers

Back in the late 1980s, and way before the spin doctors came to the fore, Tony Taylor prophetically looked at the rise of the public relations consultant - this article was first published in 1988.

*“I’m nobody! Who are you?
Are you – nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! They’d advertise –
you know!”
(Emily Dickinson 1830 –
1886).*

Public relations, once regarded as a luxury enabling the Chairman to entertain his “customers” at Ascot and Henley, is now seen as an essential business tool making a major contribution to performance.

The dramatic increase and awareness of Public Relations as part of the marketing mix has been as significant as it has dramatic. According to the latest statistics, the industry is growing at the rate of 37% per annum¹. This is, of course, a highly satisfactory state of affairs for the industry, but the most pertinent aspect is the substantial growth in the use of public relations consultancy by progressive organisations. It is conservatively estimated that over 4000 organisations make use of these services, in addition to those adopting their own in house operation.

The PRCA (Public Relations Consultants Association) has a membership of 120 member firms in the UK, whilst the IPR (Institute of Public Relations) has an individual membership of around 2,300 – in a global context, it is reasonable to assume that there are in excess of 1600 PR consultancies and 10,000 individuals who would claim to be practitioners in PR. Effective public relations is not a function of agency size. A small agency can be creative and produce results without having the encumbrance of the overheads associated with bigness. The “bigger an Agency grows, the more bureaucratic it becomes” argues David Ogilvy and “creativity is not a function

of size”ⁱⁱ. This comment on advertising agencies is equally true in the PR sector.

The Institute of Public Relations defines PR as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public”. It is the utilisation of channels of communication. There are almost as many aspects to public relations as there are cheeses in France and anyone considering adopting this approach would be well advised to consider their own objectives in a precise and structured manner. One common error is to confuse PR with Advertising, or at least to view the two disciplines as merged together to the point of obfuscation. PR is not “free advertising”. Every organisation is engaged in public relations by virtue of its existence. Organised groups of people have relations with their public and should control and manage these communications for the benefit of the group as a whole. PR embraces a much larger territory than pure advertising and sales promotion. It includes communications with financial institutions, shareholders, employees and suppliers as well as the general public. This applies to non-commercial organisations as much as it does to profit making bodies. One should not denigrate the importance of advertising since it can – and often does – represent an important constituent in the PR process.

A well worked PR programme advances the name of a personality, product, service or organisation; it does so succinctly and with sophistication. The timing and phasing of the PR exercise is of vital importance. Press announcements must not be ambiguous nor appear to be advertising, since the media is

only interested in news which is, in turn, of interest to their audience.

Copywriting of a news release is a skilled activity. Such releases must have journalistic style (without being flamboyant) and be “news worthy”. It is the structured dissemination of news and information. The PR strategy will be targeted precisely following intensive pre-campaign research. In a coordinated programme, the client does not lose control of his public relations – indeed, the use of a third party consultancy ensures a thorough and responsible analysis of the situation and the development of a subtle plan without the obvious restraints of familiarity. To put it bluntly, it avoids the restatement of in-house prejudices.

Public Relations is conceptually orientated; whilst it should be apolitical, it has increasingly come into the sphere of the political arena. Many external influences affect the destiny of a company or organisation. The considerable growth in consultancies engaged in Public Affairs, Political Monitoring and Lobbying is a direct result of this. Lobbying requires careful planning because of the sensitivity of the target audience, who have to consider party, legal and/or career aspirations. Organisations can not afford to remain ignorant of the legislation or administrative processes which affect their operation.

In spite of the concern currently being expressed in the House of Commons, lobbying also provides an invaluable service to the legislators themselves; civil servants and (by and large) politicians have neither the training nor experience to comprehend the implications of their policies without consulting interested parties. The Second

World War saw Britain with a Ministry of Information, whilst the Axis had Goebbels. History has shown the former to be acceptable and the latter has rightly been regarded as repugnant propaganda. In fact, both were conducting an exercise in communications with varying degrees of emphasis. Britain still maintains an effective information service through the Central Office of Information. The Government also makes use of other methods of informing the public – the phrases “sources close to the Minister” and “Cabinet leaks” are now common parlance in Westminster. These are operated on a low key basis (albeit at the highest levels of government) and make use of the primary skills of Public Relations. It is so effective that authenticity is often accepted without question. By custom and practice, governments give out information which may understate the true situation. For instance, if interest rates rise from, say 10% to 11%. A Treasury spokesman will announce that the rate has increased by one per cent, whereas in real terms, the increase is 10% on the old rate. If such a statement were to be made by a small financial advisory company, the Financial Services Act would surely be invoked against the comment – indeed, if it were part of an advertisement, the Advertising Standards Authority might conclude that it was aimed at misleading the public. Lord Armstrong, former Head of the Civil Service, was quite perceptive when he commented that some statements were “economical with the truth” – Clive Ponting, no longer an Establishment figure, has argued that Britain is the most “ill informed democracy in the world”. Whether either of these statements is valid is a matter for conjecture, but they do emphasise the power of communication and mis-information.

The development of sponsorship as a further weapon in the armoury of PR has been remarkable. To be effective,

sponsorship must bring advantages to both parties – the sponsored gains financial and other benefits (including status) and the sponsor an indirect form of advertising without appearing to be overtly commercial and/or achieves the reputation of providing a public service. A sponsor likes to be associated with success (or in the case of Winter Olympic athletes – we all remember “Eddie the Eagle and his gallant efforts - utter failure!) and wishes to be identified with making a positive contribution towards that success. Sponsorship creates awareness for the sponsor, but the recipient must be able to justify the claim that the activity is worth financing in the first place, since sponsorship is invariably a commercial, rather than a charitable, investment. Results are not immediately quantifiable per se, but used correctly, sponsorship is effective and can be several times more so than conventional advertising techniques. Cornhill, for instance, have so far committed over £5m to the sponsorship of cricket – according to Paul Burden, “...the view of the experts is that Cornhill would have to have spent four times that amount to achieve the same exposure through conventional advertising”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Successes are not always quantifiable in the short term, but the considerable growth of the industry must be indicative of positive results. Public Relations does not aim to close a sale, but it creates an environment in which the overall marketing strategy is presented.

Public Relations is comprised of many different but much related activities; each has a distinctive role, but with a common aim – the ultimate improvement in performance, results and image. It is a highly sophisticated form of communication and, in the right hands, can prove to be exceedingly effective.

Emily Dickinson’s Nobody may well have demanded anonymity - her Somebody, presumably,

demands publicity. As William Gilbert wrote “...blow your own trumpet, or, trust me, you haven’t a chance”^{iv}

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He has appeared on television and radio on many occasions and has published articles on a range of management topics as well as football, (one of his other key interests- he is a director of Supporters Direct which works with the football authorities and clubs to improve corporate governance within sport industry). A member of The Kennel Club, he has judged gundogs at Championship Shows in the UK and Australia.

This article was first published in March 1995

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ⁱ ‘Not So Hidden Persuaders’ by Virginia Matthews, The Daily Telegraph, June 15 1988.

ⁱⁱ ‘Ogilvy on Advertising’, by David Ogilvy, pp 63-64, published by Guild Publishing, London, 1983

ⁱⁱⁱ BBC2, The Money Programme, BBC Television, June 12 1988

^{iv} “Ruddigore”, W S Gilbert (1836 -1911)