

Chapter 1

Defining Public Relations

Chapter Objectives

1. To define the practice of public relations and underscore its importance as a valuable and powerful societal force in the 21st century.
2. To explore the various publics of public relations, as well as the field's most prominent functions.
3. To underscore the ethical nature of the field and to reject the notion that public relations practitioners are employed in the practice of "spin."
4. To examine the requisites—both technical and attitudinal—that constitute an effective public relations professional.

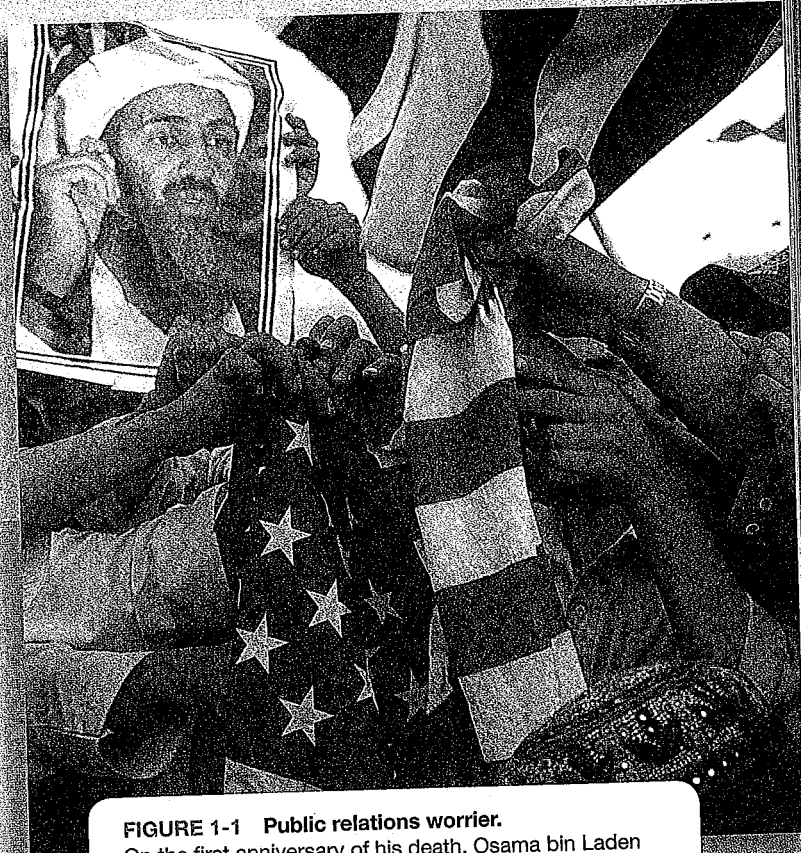


FIGURE 1-1 Public relations worrier.

On the first anniversary of his death, Osama bin Laden was remembered by anti-U.S. protestors in Pakistan.

(Photo: MUSA FARMAN/EPA/Newscom)

The year 2012 was a perplexing one for the practice of public relations.

On the one hand, after a century of high-level public relations activity, the field still struggled with defining itself, so much so that an effort by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to reach a common definition was greeted, as *The New York Times* put it, with "widespread interest, along with not a small amount of sniping, snide commentary and second-guessing."¹ The PRSA received 927 suggested definitions from public relations professionals, academics, students, and the general public. Finally, in March, the winning definition was selected:

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial

relationships between organizations and their publics.

Not bad, although practitioners still grumbled and even the CEO of PRSA admitted, "Like beauty, the definition of 'public relations' is in the eye of the beholder."²

On the other hand, the power and value of public relations in the 21st century wasn't at issue; indeed, most accepted that the practice of public relations had become one of society's most potent forces.

The greatest testimony to that reality came from none other than the late, and not-so-great, former Al Qaeda terrorist-in-chief Osama bin Laden (Figure 1-1). According to letters unearthed from bin Laden's last-stand compound in Abbottabad,

Pakistan, a year after the terrorist was taken out by Navy SEALs, bin Laden spent his last months on the planet fretting about public relations. Among the bearded bomber's most pressing concerns were the following:

- He contemplated ways to improve news media coverage, souring on MSNBC and favoring ABC News.
- He worried about his place in history, writing "some in the media and among historians will construct a history for me, using whatever information they have, regardless of whether their information is accurate or not."
- He was deeply concerned about Al Qaeda's image and contemplated a name change to give the group a more religious ring.

Finally, bin Laden argued that Al Qaeda attacks on Muslims in Muslim countries "would lead us to winning several battles while losing the war at the end," which, thankfully, he did.³

In the 21st century, few societal forces are more powerful than the practice of public relations, especially when combined with social media—the agglomeration of Facebook and Twitter messages, email, cell phone photos, blogs, wikis, Web casting, RSS feeds, and all the other emerging technologies of the World Wide Web.

Together, the combination of the two—social media and public relations—has revolutionized the way organizations and individuals communicate to their key constituent publics around the world.

Indeed, *revolution* was the watchword in the "Arab Spring" of 2011 when a wave of demonstrations, sparked by public relations messages on social media, brought down despotic rulers throughout the Arab world, from Tunisia to Egypt, from Libya to Yemen (Figure 1-2). Social media channels and public relations techniques combined to organize, communicate, and raise awareness to beat back state-sanctioned repression.

In the 21st century, even terrorists understood the impact of public relations messages and the reach of the World Wide Web to deliver them.

But what is *public relations*, anyway?

That is the question the PRSA tackled in 2012 and is still asked, even by many of the 200,000-plus people in the United States and the thousands of others overseas who practice public relations.

In a society overwhelmed by communications—from traditional and increasingly threatened newspapers and magazines, to 24/7 talk radio and broadcast and cable television, to nontraditional social media, instant messages, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and assorted other Internet exotica—the public is bombarded with nonstop messages of every variety. The challenge for a communicator is to cut through this clutter to deliver an argument that is persuasive, believable, and actionable.

The answer, more often than not today, lies in public relations. Stated another way, in the 21st century, the power, value, and influence of the practice of public relations have never been more profound.



FIGURE 1-2 Social media revolution.

Protestors gathered in Tahrir Square, focal point of Egypt's 2011 transfer of power. A year later, the country held its first democratic presidential election. (Photo: ZUMA Press/Newscom)

Prominence of Public Relations

In the initial decade of the 21st century, public relations as a field has grown immeasurably both in numbers and in respect. Today, the practice of public relations is clearly a growth industry.

- In the United States alone, public relations is a multibillion-dollar business practiced by 320,000 professionals, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Furthermore, the Bureau says that "employment of public relations managers and specialists is expected to grow by 21% from 2010 to 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. New media outlets will create more work for public relations workers, increasing the number and kinds of avenues of communication between organizations and the public."⁴
- Around the world, the practice of public relations has grown enormously. The International Public Relations Association, now in its sixth decade, boasts a strong membership in more than 80 countries.
- Approximately 250 colleges and universities in the United States and many more overseas offer a public relations sequence or degree program. Many more offer public relations courses. Undergraduate enrollments in public relations

programs at U.S. four-year colleges and universities are conservatively estimated to be well in excess of 20,000 majors. In the vast majority of college journalism programs, public relations sequences rank first or second in enrollment.⁵

- The U.S. government has thousands of communications professionals—although none, as we will learn, are labeled *public relations specialists*—who keep the public informed about the activities of government agencies and officials. The Department of Defense alone has 7,000 professional communicators spread out among the Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- The world's largest public relations firms are all owned by media conglomerates—among them Omnicom, The Interpublic Group, and WPP Group—which refuse to divulge public relations revenues. The field is dominated by smaller, privately held firms, many of them entrepreneurial operations. A typical public relations agency has annual revenue of less than \$1 million with fewer than 10 employees. Nonetheless, the top 10 independent public relations agencies in the United States record annual revenues in excess of a billion dollars, with the top independent firm, Edelman Public Relations, with 4,120 employees, earning nearly \$605 million in annual revenues.⁶
- The field's primary trade associations have strong membership, with the Public Relations Society of America encompassing nearly 21,000 members and 10,000 college students in 100 chapters and the International Association of Business Communicators including 15,000 members in 80 countries.

In the 21st century, as all elements of society—companies, nonprofits, governments, religious institutions, sports teams and leagues, arts organizations, and all others—wrestle with constant shifts in economic conditions and competition, security concerns, and popular opinion, the public relations profession is expected to thrive because increasing numbers of organizations are interested in communicating their stories.

Indeed, public relations people have already attained positions of prominence in every aspect of society. Jay Carney, President Barack Obama's press secretary, is quoted daily from his televised White House press briefings. His predecessor, Robert Gibbs, is a close Obama advisor. Karen Hughes, a public relations advisor to George W. Bush for many years, moved from a Special Assistant to the President position in the White House to become Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy responsible primarily for changing attitudes internationally about the United States. Where once public relations was a profession populated by anonymous practitioners, today's public relations executives write books, appear on television, and are widely quoted. When United Parcel Service (UPS) appointed communications professional Christine Owens to its top internal body in 2005, CEO Mike Eskew said, "Communications is just too important not to be represented on the management committee of this company."⁷

Perhaps the most flattering aspect of the field's heightened stature is that competition from other fields has become more intense. Today the profession finds itself vulnerable to encroachment by people with non-public relations backgrounds, such as lawyers, marketers, and general managers of every type, all eager to gain the management access and persuasive clout of the public relations professional.

The field's strength stems from its roots: "A democratic society where people have freedom to debate and to make decisions—in the community, the marketplace, the home, the workplace, and the voting booth. Private and public organizations depend on good relations with groups and individuals whose opinions, decisions, and actions affect their vitality and survival."⁸

What Is Public Relations?

The PRSA's 2012 definition—"Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics"—is really pretty good.

Public relations is, indeed, a "strategic" process, which focuses on helping achieve an organization's goals. Its fundamental mandate is "communications," and its focus is "building relationships."

Another approach to a definition is, "Public relations is a planned process to influence public opinion, through sound character and proper performance, based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication."

At least that's what your author believes it is.

This definition adds the elements of "planning," so imperative in sound public relations practice, the aspect of "listening" through "two-way communications," as well as the elements of "character" or "ethics" and "performance." Public relations is most effective when it's based on ethical principles and proper action. Without these two essential requisites—character and performance—achieving sustained influence might be either transitory or impossible; in other words, you can fool some of the people some of the time but not all of the people all of the time; in other other words, "You can't pour perfume on a skunk!"

The fact is that there are many different definitions of public relations. American historian Robert Heilbroner once described the field as "a brotherhood of some 100,000, whose common bond is its profession and whose common woe is that no two of them can ever quite agree on what that profession is."⁹

In 1923, the late Edward Bernays described the function of his fledgling public relations counseling business as one of providing

*Information given to the public, persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions, and efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with those of that institution.*¹⁰

And way back in 1975, when people didn't have a clue what "public relations" was, one of the most ambitious searches for a universal definition was commissioned by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education. Sixty-five public relations leaders participated in the study, which analyzed 472 different definitions and offered the following 88-word sentence:

*Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.*¹¹

In adopting its 2012 definition, the Public Relations Society of America noted that its definition implied the functions of research, planning, communications dialogue, and evaluation, all essential in the practice of public relations.

No matter which formal definition one settles on to describe the practice, to be successful, public relations professionals must always engage in a planned and ethical process to influence the attitudes and actions of their target audiences.

Planned Process to Influence Public Opinion

What is the process through which public relations might influence public opinion? Communications professor John Marston suggested a four-step model based on specific functions: (1) research, (2) action, (3) communication, and (4) evaluation.¹² Whenever a public relations professional is faced with an assignment—whether promoting a client's product or defending a client's reputation—he or she should apply Marston's R-A-C-E approach:

1. **Research.** Research attitudes about the issue at hand.
2. **Action.** Identify action of the client in the public interest.
3. **Communication.** Communicate that action to gain understanding, acceptance, and support.
4. **Evaluation.** Evaluate the communication to see if opinion has been influenced.

The key to the process is the second step—action. You can't have effective communication or positive publicity without proper action. Stated another way, performance must precede publicity. Act first and communicate later. Indeed, some might say that public relations—PR—really should stand for *performance recognition*. In other words, positive action communicated straightforwardly will yield positive results.

This is the essence of the R-A-C-E process of public relations.

Public relations professor Sheila Clough Crifasi has proposed extending the R-A-C-E formula into the five-part R-O-S-I-E to encompass a more managerial approach to the field. R-O-S-I-E prescribes sandwiching the functions of objectives, strategies, and implementation between research and evaluation. Indeed, setting clear objectives, working from set strategies, and implementing a predetermined plan are keys to sound public relations practice.

Still others suggest a process called R-P-I-E for research, planning, implementation, and evaluation, which emphasizes the element of planning as a necessary step preceding the activation of a communications initiative.

All three approaches, R-A-C-E, R-O-S-I-E, and R-P-I-E, echo one of the most widely repeated definitions of public relations, developed by the late Denny Griswold, who founded a public relations newsletter.

*Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.*¹³

The key words in this definition are *management* and *action*. Public relations, if it is to serve the organization properly, must report to top management. Public relations must serve as an honest broker to management, unimpeded by any other group. For public relations to work, its advice to management must be unfiltered, uncensored, and unexpurgated. This is often easier said than done because many public relations departments report through marketing, advertising, or even legal departments.

Nor can public relations take place without appropriate action. As noted, no amount of communications—regardless of its persuasive content—can save an organization whose performance is substandard. In other words, if the action is flawed or the performance rotten, no amount of communicating or backtracking or post facto posturing will change the reality.

The process of public relations, then, as Professor Melvin Sharpe has put it, "harmonizes long-term relationships among individuals and organizations in society."¹⁴ To "harmonize," Professor Sharpe applies five principles to the public relations process:

- Honest communication for credibility
- Openness and consistency of actions for confidence
- Fairness of actions for reciprocity and goodwill
- Continuous two-way communication to prevent alienation and to build relationships
- Environmental research and evaluation to determine the actions or adjustments needed for social harmony

And if that doesn't yet give you a feel for what precisely the practice of public relations is, then consider public relations Professor Janice Sherline Jenny's description as "the management of communications between an organization and all entities that have a direct or indirect relationship with the organization, i.e., its publics."

No matter what definition one may choose to explain the practice, few would argue that the goal of effective public relations is to harmonize internal and external relationships so that an organization can enjoy not only the goodwill of all of its publics but also stability and long life.

Public Relations as Management Interpreter

The late Leon Hess, who ran one of the nation's largest oil companies and the New York Jets football team, used to pride himself on *not* having a public relations department. Mr. Hess, a very private individual, abhorred the limelight for himself and for his company.

But times have changed.

Today, the CEO who thunders "I don't need public relations!" is a fool. He or she doesn't have a choice. Every organization *has* public relations whether it wants it or not. The trick is to establish *good* public relations. That's what this book is all about—professional public relations, the kind you must work at.

Public relations affects almost everyone who has contact with other human beings. All of us, in one way or another, practice public relations daily. For an organization, every phone call, every letter, every face-to-face encounter is a public relations event.

Public relations professionals, then, are really the organization's interpreters.

- On the one hand, they must interpret the philosophies, policies, programs, and practices of their management to the public.
- On the other hand, they must convey the attitudes of the public to their management.

Let's consider management first.

Before public relations professionals can gain attention, understanding, acceptance, and ultimately action from target publics, they have to know what management is thinking.

Good public relations can't be practiced in a vacuum. No matter what the size of the organization, a public relations department is only as good as its access to management. For example, it's useless for a senator's press secretary to explain the reasoning behind an important decision without first knowing what the senator had in mind.

So, too, an organization's public relations staff is impotent without firsthand knowledge of the reasons for management's decisions and the rationale for organizational policy.

The public relations department in any organization can counsel management. It can advise management. It can even exhort management to take action. But it is management who must call the shots on organizational policy.

It is the role of the public relations practitioner, once policy is established by management, to communicate these ideas accurately and candidly to the public. Anything less can lead to major problems.

Public Relations as Public Interpreter

Now let's consider the flip side of the coin—the public.

Interpreting the public to management means finding out what the public really thinks about the firm and letting management know. Regrettably, history is filled with examples of powerful institutions—and their public relations departments—failing to anticipate the true sentiments of the public.

- In the 1960s, General Motors (GM) paid little attention to an unknown consumer activist named Ralph Nader, who spread the message that GM's Corvair was "unsafe at any speed." When Nader's assault began to be believed, the automaker assigned professional detectives to trail him. In short order, GM was forced to acknowledge its act of paranoia, and the Corvair was eventually sacked at great expense to the company.
- In the 1970s, as both gasoline prices and oil company profits rose rapidly, the oil companies were besieged by an irate gas-consuming public. When, at the height of the criticism, Mobil Oil spent millions in excess cash to purchase the parent of the Montgomery Ward department store chain, the company was publicly battered for failing to cut its prices.
- In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan rode to power on the strength of his ability to interpret what was on the minds of the electorate. But his successor in the early 1990s, George H. W. Bush, a lesser communicator than Reagan, failed to "read" the nation's economic concerns. After leading America to a victory over Iraq in the Gulf War, President Bush failed to heed the admonition "It's the economy, stupid," and lost the election to upstart Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton.
- As the 20th century ended, President Clinton forgot the candid communication skills that earned him the White House and lied to the American public about his affair with an intern. The subsequent scandal, ending in impeachment hearings before the U.S. Congress, tarnished Clinton's administration and ruined his legacy.
- In the first decade of the 21st century, Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, earned great credit for strong actions and communications following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the nation. The Bush administration's public relations then suffered when the ostensible reason for attacking Iraq—weapons of mass destruction—failed to materialize. Bush's failure to act promptly and communicate frankly in subsequent crises, such as Hurricane Katrina, hurt his personal credibility and irreparably tarnished his administration.
- Bush's successor, Barack Obama, was hailed for his messianic communication skills as he stormed into the White House with a message of "hope and change"

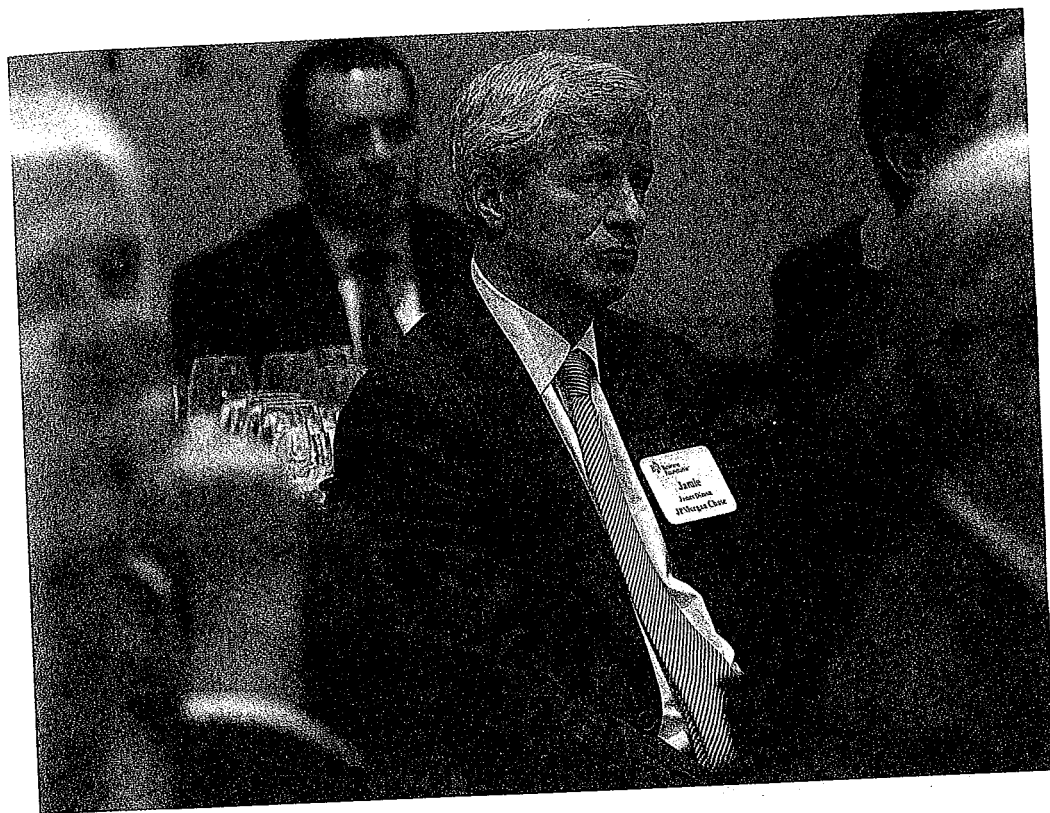


FIGURE 1-3 Dimon in the rough.

In the spring of 2012, JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, hailed as a leader with great communication skills, was put to the public relations test when his institution stubbed its toe on a \$3 billion+ loss. (*Ouch!*) (Photo: SAUL LOEB/AFP/Getty Images/Newscom)

in 2008. By the end of his first term in 2012, with the economy flagging from an unprecedented financial meltdown and the Republicans chomping at the bit to replace him, Obama struggled to regain his “communication mojo” to earn reelection.

- Part of President Obama’s problem was that his administration was met by a pervasive economic crisis, marked by CEOs from the nation’s largest financial companies, among them Citigroup, AIG, Washington Mutual, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Countrywide Financial, Goldman Sachs, and Bank of America, exposed before the American public as inept—some would argue “law-breaking”—stewards of the public trust.
- The coup de grace occurred in the spring of 2012 when the nation’s strongest financial institution, JP Morgan Chase, was rocked by a derivative trading loss in excess of \$3 billion while trying to “protect” its investments. Outspoken CEO Jamie Dimon was forced to make a blunt, public apology for his bank’s “stupid, self-inflicted mistakes” (Figure 1-3). And politicians piled on to use the bank’s embarrassing public relations revelation to stiffen regulation.

In the first decade of the 21st century, then, the savviest individuals and institutions—be they government, corporate, or nonprofit—understood the importance of effectively interpreting their philosophies, policies, and practices to the public and, even more important, interpreting back to management how the public viewed them and their organization.

PR Ethics Mini-Case

Firing the Nazi in the House of Dior

In the spring of 2011, flamboyant John Galliano, creative director of the legendary Dior fashion house, was the hit of Paris.

For 15 years, Galliano had held forth as the universally praised arbiter of youth and vitality for the Dior line. His early collections, including one inspired by Paris' bums and spoofed in the movie *Zoolander*, were the talk of Paris. He was a master designer of all phases of fashion, from ready-to-wear collections to couture. And his outrageous getups—braids, pirate hats, astronaut suits, and other assorted wacky garb—stoked the anticipation of his presentations during Paris Fashion Week (Figure 1-4).



FIGURE 1-4 Walking the plank.

Gifted designer John Galliano was shown the door by Dior after anti-Semitic remarks challenged the firm's credibility. (Photo: MAYA VIDON/EPA/Newscom)

Galliano was credited with playing a major role in restoring the stuffy Dior brand back to relevance. The name Dior, itself, was credited with saving the French couture industry after World War II, when the Nazi occupation of Paris effectively shut down the haute couture industry. As the Germans threatened to move the entire industry to Berlin, a few Parisian designers continued to make dresses for Nazi officials' wives and French collaborators. One such designer was the young couturier Christian Dior, who worked for the house of Lucien Lelong. After the war in 1947, Dior opened his own house of fashion, and the industry in Paris, almost destroyed by war, was revived.

This history was brought into vivid display when, in late February 2011, Galliano was arrested after allegedly making anti-Semitic comments at a Paris bar. Hate speech is a crime in France. Dior suspended Galliano on the news of his arrest. Then, after the British tabloid *The Sun* published a damning video of Galliano at the bar saying "I love Hitler" and telling two women, "Your mothers, your forefathers, would all be f***ing gassed," Dior fired him.

Dior CEO Sidney Toledano was unforgiving in a statement issued to employees and the media. Toledano said, in part:

What has happened over the last week has been a terrible and wrenching ordeal for us all. It has been deeply painful to see the Dior name associated with the disgraceful statements attributed to its designer, however brilliant he may be.

Such statements are intolerable because of our collective duty to never forget the Holocaust and its victims, and because of the respect for human dignity that is owed to each person and to all peoples.

So now, more than ever, we must publicly recommit ourselves to the values of the House of Dior.

Stated another way, no matter how talented or valuable their creative director, the credibility and reputation of the organization was eminently more important.*

Questions

1. What other options did Dior have beyond firing Galliano?
2. Do you agree with the categorical decision made by the House of Dior?

*For further information, see Raquel Laneri, "Why Dior Did the Right Thing Firing John Galliano," *Forbes.com*, www.forbes.com/sites/raquellaneri/2011/03/01/why-dior-did-the-right-thing-firing-john-galliano/, March 1, 2010.

The Publics of Public Relations

The term *public relations* is really a misnomer. *Publics relations*, or relations with the publics, would be more to the point. Practitioners must communicate with many different publics—not just the general public—each having its own special needs and requiring different types of communication. Often the lines that divide these publics are thin, and the potential overlap is significant. Therefore, priorities, according to organizational needs, must always be reconciled (Figure 1-5).

Technological change—particularly social media, mobile devices, blogs, satellite links for television, and the computer in general—has brought greater interdependence to people and organizations, and there is growing concern in organizations today about managing extensive webs of interrelationships. Indeed, managers have become interrelationship conscious.

Internally, managers must deal directly with various levels of subordinates as well as with cross-relationships that arise when subordinates interact with one another.

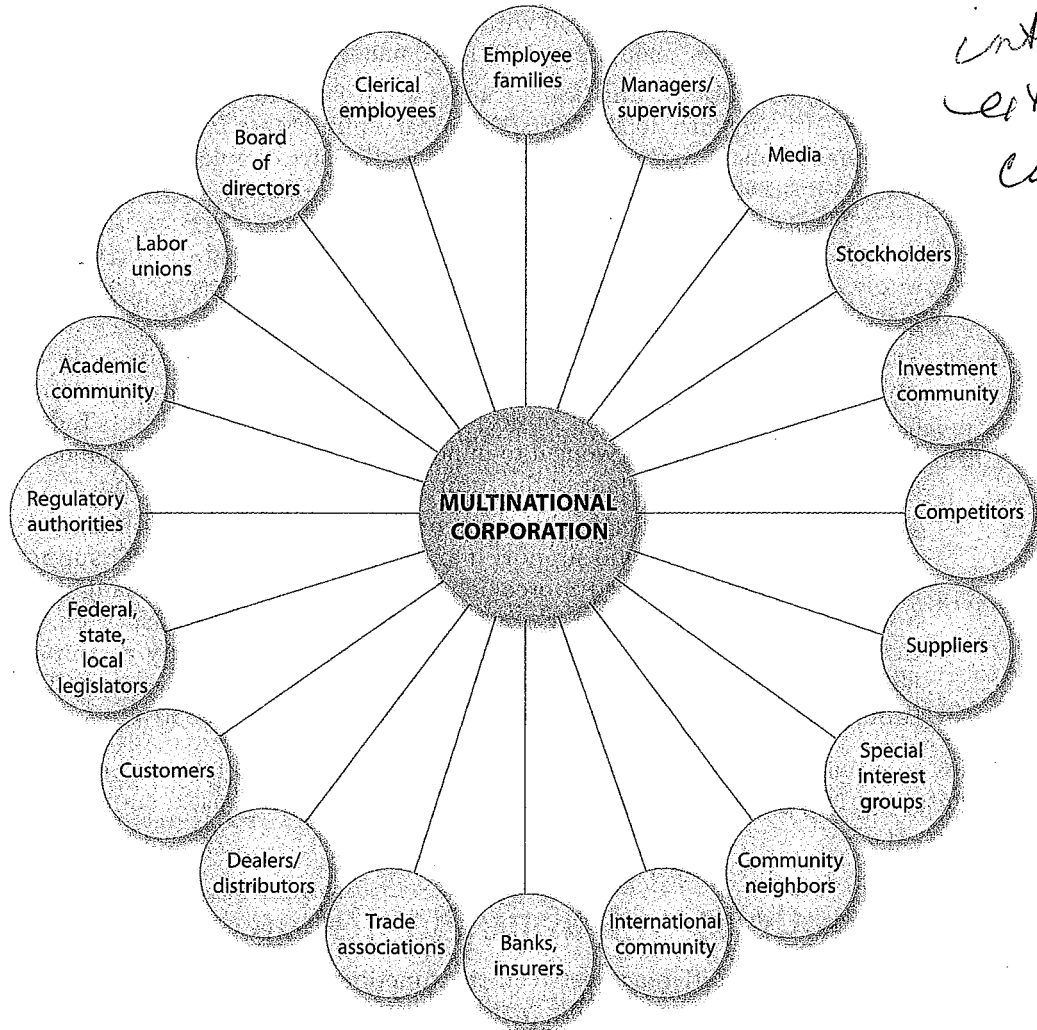


FIGURE 1-5 Key publics. Twenty of the most important publics of a typical multinational corporation.

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beyond firing Galliano? A decision made by the

Externally, managers must deal with a system that includes nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government regulatory agencies, labor unions, subcontractors, consumer groups, and many other independent—but often related—organizations. The public relations challenge in all of this is to manage effectively the communications between managers and the various publics, which often pull organizations in different directions. Stated another way, public relations professionals are mediators between client (management) and public (all those key constituent groups on whom an organization depends).

Definitions differ on precisely what constitutes a public. One time-honored definition states that a public arises when a group of people (1) faces a similar indeterminate situation, (2) recognizes what is indeterminate and problematic in that situation, and (3) organizes to do something about the problem.¹⁵ In public relations, more specifically, a public is a group of people with a stake in an issue, organization, or idea.

Publics can also be classified into several overlapping categories:

- **Internal and external.** Internal publics are inside the organization: supervisors, clerks, managers, stockholders, and the board of directors. External publics are those not directly connected with the organization: the press, government, educators, customers, suppliers, and the community.
- **Primary, secondary, and marginal.** Primary publics can most help—or hinder—the organization's efforts. Secondary publics are less important, and marginal publics are the least important of all. For example, members of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, who regulate banks, would be the primary public for a bank awaiting a regulatory ruling, whereas legislators and the general public would be secondary. On the other hand, to the investing public, interest rate pronouncements of the same Federal Reserve Board are of primary importance.
- **Traditional and future.** Employees and current customers are traditional publics; students and potential customers are future ones. No organization can afford to become complacent in dealing with its changing publics. Today, a firm's publics range from women to minorities to senior citizens to homosexuals. Each might be important to the future success of the organization.
- **Proponents, opponents, and the uncommitted.** An institution must deal differently with those who support it and those who oppose it. For supporters, communications that reinforce beliefs may be in order. But changing the opinions of skeptics calls for strong, persuasive communications. Often, particularly in politics, the uncommitted public is crucial. Many a campaign has been decided because the swing vote was won over by one of the candidates.

It's true that management must always speak with one voice, but its communication inflection, delivery, and emphasis should be sensitive to all constituent publics.

The Functions of Public Relations

There is a fundamental difference between the functions of public relations and the functions of marketing and advertising. Marketing and advertising promote a product or a service. Public relations promotes an entire organization.

The functions associated with public relations work are numerous. Among them are the following:

- **Writing**—the fundamental public relations skill, with written vehicles from news releases to speeches and from brochures to advertisements falling within the field's purview.
- **Media relations**—dealing with the press is another frontline public relations function.
- **Social media interface**—creating what often is the organization's principle interface with the public: its Website, as well as creating links with social media options, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the rest. Also important is monitoring the World Wide Web and responding, when appropriate, to organizational challenge.
- **Planning**—of public relations programs, special events, media events, management functions, and the like.
- **Counseling**—in dealing with management and its interactions with key publics.
- **Researching**—of attitudes and opinions that influence behavior and beliefs.
- **Publicity**—the marketing-related function, most commonly misunderstood as the "only" function of public relations, generating positive publicity for a client or employer.
- **Marketing communications**—other marketing-related functions, such as promoting products, creating collateral marketing material, sales literature, meeting displays, and promotions.
- **Community relations**—positively putting forth the organization's messages and image within the community.
- **Consumer relations**—interfacing with consumers through written and verbal communications.
- **Employee relations**—communicating with the all-important internal publics of the organization, those managers and employees who work for the firm.
- **Government affairs**—dealing with legislators, regulators, and local, state, and federal officials—all of those who have governmental interface with the organization.
- **Investor relations**—for public companies, communicating with stockholders and those who advise them.
- **Special publics relations**—dealing with those publics uniquely critical to particular organizations, from African Americans to women to Asians to senior citizens.
- **Public affairs and issues**—dealing with public policy and its impact on the organization, as well as identifying and addressing issues of consequence that affect the firm.
- **Crisis communications**—dealing with key constituent publics when the organization is under siege for any number of urgent situations that threaten credibility.

This is but a partial list of what public relations practitioners do. In sum, the public relations practitioner is manager/orchestrator/producer/director/writer/arranger

and all-around general communications counsel to management. It is for this reason, then, that the process works best when the public relations director reports directly to the CEO.

The Sin of "Spin"

So pervasive has the influence of public relations become in our society that some even fear it as a pernicious force; they worry about the power of public relations to exercise a kind of thought control over the American public.

Which brings us to *spin*.

In its most benign form, spin signifies the distinctive interpretation of an issue or action to sway public opinion, as in putting a positive slant on a negative story. In its most virulent form, spin means confusing an issue or distorting or obfuscating it or even lying.

The propensity in recent years for presumably respected public figures to lie in an attempt to deceive the public has led to the notion that "spinning the facts" is synonymous with public relations practice.

It isn't.

Spinning an answer to hide what really happened—that is, lying, confusing, distorting, obfuscating, whatever you call it—is antithetical to the proper practice of public relations. In public relations, if you lie once, you will never be trusted again—particularly by the media.

Nonetheless, public relations spin has come to mean the twisting of messages and statements of half-truths to create the appearance of performance, which may or may not be true.

This association with spin has hurt the field. *The New York Times* headlined a critical article on public relations practice, "Spinning Frenzy: P.R.'s Bad Press."¹⁶ Other critics admonish the field as "a huge, powerful, hidden medium available only to wealthy individuals, big corporations, governments, and government agencies because of its high cost."¹⁷

In recent years, the most high-profile government public relations operatives have often fallen guilty to blatant spin techniques. The term *spin* was coined in the Clinton administration, when a bevy of eager communications counselors, such as James Carville, Paul Begala, and Lanny Davis, eagerly spun the tale that intern Monica Lewinsky was, in effect, delusional about an Oval Office affair with the president. (*She wasn't!*)¹⁸ In the Bush administration, high-level advisors Karl Rove and Lewis Libby were implicated in a spinning campaign against former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who questioned the motives of the war in Iraq. In 2005, Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's top aide, was convicted for "obstruction of justice, false statement, and perjury" in the Wilson case.¹⁹ In 2012, former senator and presidential candidate John Edwards was prosecuted for using political campaign funds to hide a mistress and their love child, while spinning a tale of "no mistress and somebody else's baby." Meanwhile, notorious media spinners from Donald Trump to Nancy Grace to Al Sharpton exaggerate indiscriminately and are rarely challenged.²⁰

Faced with this era of spin and continued public uncertainty about the ethics of public relations, practitioners must always be sensitive to and considerate of how their actions and their words will influence the public.

Above all—in defiance of charges of spinning—public relations practitioners must consider their cardinal rule: *to never, ever lie.*

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What Manner of Man or Woman?

What kind of individual does it take to become a competent public relations professional?

A 2004 study of agency, corporate, and nonprofit public relations leaders, sponsored by search firm Heyman Associates, reported seven areas in particular that characterize a successful public relations career:

1. Diversity of experience
2. Performance
3. Communications skills
4. Relationship building
5. Proactivity and passion
6. Teamliness
7. Intangibles, such as personality, likeability, and chemistry²¹

Beyond these success-building areas, in order to make it, a public relations professional ought to possess a set of specific technical skills as well as an appreciation of the proper attitudinal approach to the job. On the technical side, the following six skills are important:

1. **Knowledge of the field.** The underpinnings of public relations—what it is, what it does, and what it ought to stand for.
2. **Communications knowledge.** The media and the ways in which they work; communications research; and, most important, how to write.
3. **Technological knowledge.** Familiarity with computers and associated technologies, as well as with the World Wide Web, are imperative.
4. **Current events knowledge.** Knowledge of what's going on around you—daily factors that influence society: history, literature, language, politics, economics, and all the rest—from Kim Jong Un to Kim Kardashian; from Ben Stein to bin Laden; from Dr. Phil to Dr. Dre; from Three Penny Opera to 50 Cent; from Fat Joe to Lil' Kim to Pink. A public relations professional must be, in the truest sense, a Renaissance man or woman.
5. **Business knowledge.** How business works, a bottom-line orientation, and a knowledge of your company and industry.
6. **Management knowledge.** How senior managers make decisions, how public policy is shaped, and what pressures and responsibilities fall on managers.

In terms of the "attitude" that effective public relations practitioners must possess, the following six requisites are imperative:

1. **Pro communications.** A bias toward disclosing rather than withholding information. Public relations professionals should want to communicate with the public, not shy away from communicating. They should practice the belief that the public has a right to know.
2. **Advocacy.** Public relations people must *believe in* their employers. They must be advocates for their employers. They must stand up for what their employers represent. Although they should never ever lie (Never, ever!) or distort or hide facts, occasionally it may be in an organization's best interest to avoid comment on certain issues. If practitioners don't believe in the integrity and credibility of their employers, their most honorable course is to go to "Plan B"—find work elsewhere.

3. **Counseling orientation.** A compelling desire to advise senior managers. Top executives are used to dealing in tangibles, such as balance sheets, costs per thousand, and cash flows. Public relations practitioners deal in intangibles, such as public opinion, media influence, and communications messages. Practitioners must be willing to support their beliefs—often in opposition to lawyers or human resources executives. They must even be willing to disagree with management at times. Far from being compliant, public relations practitioners must have the gumption to say *no*.
4. **Ethics.** The counsel that public relations professionals deliver must always be ethical. The mantra of the public relations practitioner must be to *do the right thing*.
5. **Willingness to take risks.** Most of the people you work for in public relations have no idea what you do. Sad, but true. Consequently, it's easy to be overlooked as a public relations staff member. You therefore must be willing to stick your neck out . . . stand up for what you believe in . . . take risks. Public relations professionals must have the courage of their convictions and the personal confidence to proudly represent their curious, yet critical, role in any organization.
6. **Positive outlook.** Public relations work occasionally is frustrating work. Management doesn't always listen to your good counsel, preferring instead to follow attorneys and others into safer positions. No matter. A public relations professional, if he or she is to perform at optimum effectiveness, must be positive. You can't afford to be a "sad sack." You win some. You lose some. But in public relations, at least, the most important thing is to keep on swinging and smiling.

Last Word

Spin, cover-up, distortion, and subterfuge are the antitheses of good public relations.

Ethics, truth, credibility—these values are what good public relations is all about.

To be sure, public relations is not yet a profession like law, accounting, or medicine, in which all practitioners are trained, licensed, and supervised. Nothing prevents someone with little or no formal training from hanging out a shingle as a public relations specialist. Such frauds embarrass professionals in the field and, thankfully, are becoming harder to find.

Indeed, both the Public Relations Society of America (Appendix A) and the International Association of Business Communicators (Appendix B) have strong codes of ethics that serve as the basis of their membership philosophies.

Meanwhile, the importance of the practice of public relations in a less certain, more chaotic, over-communicated, and social media-dominated world cannot be denied.

Despite its lingering problems—in attaining leadership status, finding its proper role in society, disavowing spin, and earning enduring respect—the

practice of public relations has never been more valuable or more prominent. In its first 100 years as a formal, integrated, strategic-thinking process, public relations has become part of the fabric of modern society.

Here's why.

As much as they need customers for their products, managers today also desperately need constituents for their beliefs and values. In the 21st century, the role of public relations is vital in helping guide management in framing its ideas and making its commitments. The counsel that management needs must come from advisors who understand public attitudes, moods, needs, and aspirations.

Contrary to what misinformed critics may charge, "More often than not, public relations strategies and tactics are the most effective and valuable arrows in the quiver of the disaffected and the powerless."²² Civil rights leaders, labor leaders, public advocates, and grassroots movements of every stripe have been boosted by proven communications techniques to win attention and build support and goodwill.

Winning this elusive goodwill takes time and effort. Credibility can't be won overnight, nor can it be bought. If management policies aren't in the public's best interest, no amount of public relations effort can obscure that reality. Public relations is not effective as a temporary defensive measure to compensate for management misjudgment. If management errs seriously, the best—and only—public relations advice must be to get the truthful story out immediately. Indeed, working properly, the public relations department of an organization often serves as the firm's "conscience."

This is why the relationship between public relations and other parts of the organization—legal, human resources, and advertising and marketing, for example—is occasionally a strained one. The

function of the public relations department is distinctive from that of any other internal area. Few others share the access to management that public relations enjoys. Few others share the potential for power that public relations may exercise.

No less an authority than Abraham Lincoln once said: "Public sentiment is everything . . . with public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed. He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who executes statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute."²³

Stated another way, no matter how you define it, the practice of public relations has become an essential element in the conduct of relationships for a vast variety of organizations in the 21st century.

Discussion Starters

1. How prominent is the practice of public relations around the world in the 21st century?
2. What is the PRSA's definition of public relations? How would you define the practice of public relations?
3. Why is the practice of public relations generally misunderstood by the public?
4. How would you describe the significance of the planning aspect in public relations?
5. Within the R-A-C-E process of public relations, what would you say is the most critical element?
6. In what ways does public relations differ from advertising or marketing?
7. If you were the public relations director of the local United Way, whom would you consider your most important "publics" to be?
8. What are seven functions of public relations practice?
9. How do professional public relations people regard the aspect of "spin" as part of what they do?
10. What are the technical and attitudinal requisites most important for public relations success?

Pick of the Literature

Rethinking Reputation: How PR Trumps Advertising and Marketing in the New Media World

Fraser P. Seitel and John Doorley. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

One outstanding educator and another guy critique how a social media-dominated society with declining journalistic societal standards impacts the quest for credibility.

The authors demonstrate how public relations can help build successful enterprises, even with a minimum of advertising support. The book focuses on real-life cases, including student designers of a successful footwear company who market themselves through networking, Facebook, and Twitter; Merck CEO Roy Vagelos, who developed a cure for river blindness and ensured the drug was made available where needed for free; and Exxon-Mobil,

which resurrected its reputation through on-the-ground meetings with critics and a more accessible public relations posture.

The book also reviews the new 21st-century public relations realities, in which even "taking the low road" can lead to success, as in the cases of Donald Trump, Al Sharpton, Nancy Grace, and Dominic Strauss-Kahn. They forcefully argue, though, that "taking the high road," a la Paul Volcker and T. Boone Pickens, is eminently preferable. Worth buying, if for no other reason than one of the authors needs the money!

Case Study

BP's Loose Lips Sink Credibility Ship

For a company so assiduously devoted to polishing its reputation, the events of April 20, 2010, had to be particularly painful.

That morning, officials of the worldwide oil company BP, supervising drilling of the 18,000-foot Macondo Prospect well, 41 miles off the Louisiana coast, joined the 140 crew members on the company's prized oil rig, Deepwater Horizon, to celebrate the fabled rig's overall record for uninterrupted "safety."

How tragically ironic.

Ten hours later, gas, oil, and concrete from the Deepwater Horizon hurtled up the well bore onto the deck, unleashing a bone-rattling explosion and a massive fireball that killed 11 workers on the platform and submerged BP into the most disastrous public relations crisis in the history of the oil industry.

Bigger than the British Isle

BP was the world's third-largest energy company and the fourth-largest corporation in the world, employing 80,000 people and operating in 100 countries. Although BP, based in Great Britain, was the biggest company in the United Kingdom, it wanted the world to know it was a lot bigger than the British isle. So in 2001, the company formally dropped its legal name, British Petroleum, and became BP plc, to suggest its global clout and focus.

To corporate critics, environmentalists, and their ilk, BP was a particularly vulnerable target. In 1991, BP was cited as the most polluting company in the United States, based on Environmental Protection Agency toxic release data. In response, BP worked hard to distinguish itself from its generally hardnosed and standoffish oil industry brethren, as a responsible and concerned—and approachable—company.

- It broke with the industry in acknowledging the possible link between greenhouse gases and climate change.
- It invested heavily in sustainability and biofuels.
- It spent millions promoting its environmentally friendly views and programs in ads and public relations sponsorships around the world.

BP recognized that its reputation mattered, and it worked diligently to polish that reputation, while trolling the world for black gold.

This added to the company's shock and horror when on April 22, two days after the explosion, BP's Deepwater Horizon sunk to the bottom of the ocean floor. And the BP Corporation became embroiled in the most damaging corporate public relations catastrophe in history, costing the company billions of dollars and proving once again the ancient Chinese aphorism: "A reputation carefully honed over hundreds of years can be destroyed in a single moment."

Shockwaves from the Gulf to D.C. to London

The BP spill in the Gulf sent off public relations shockwaves all the way to the halls of Barack Obama's White House in Washington.

Dogged by an unpopular war in Afghanistan and economic problems at home, the last thing Barack Obama needed in April 2010 was a major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Initial administration response to the blowup in the Gulf was tepid. But as public anger rose, the Obama response morphed from one of "the Coast Guard is directing the response" to one of "the President is closely monitoring the situation" to one of "BP has the unique equipment to deal with the situation" to one of "my job is to get this fixed. BP will pay. If its CEO worked for me, he'd be fired."

Predictably with the American president breathing down its neck, at BP executive offices at St. James Square in London, all was chaos at the 100-year-old energy company.

The oil in the Gulf was leaking uncontrollably. The crisis was rapidly deteriorating into a full-blown media onslaught. And nobody at BP North American headquarters in sleepy Warrenville, Illinois, or at its international headquarters in London had the foggiest idea what to do.

The only thing BP knew for certain in those first days of oil spill Code Blue was: *We cannot become another Exxon Valdez.*

The *Exxon Valdez*, of course, was the mother of all public relations crisis catastrophes. In March 1989 in Prince William Sound, Alaska, an Exxon tanker (piloted by a captain who, as it turned out, was also reportedly "tanked") crashed into a reef and spilled 700,000 barrels of oil into the pristine Gulf of Valdez, soiling and killing everything in its wake.

Determined to prevent another *Valdez*, BP immediately took three actions:

- First, BP stepped up to take charge of handling the spill.

This wasn't necessarily a "given." There were other deep-pocketed players involved, from Transocean, which owned the rig, to Cameron International Corporation, which made the ill-fated blowout preventer, to Halliburton, which advised BP on plugging the well, to Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, which owned one-quarter of the BP well. When all of the others ducked for cover, BP stepped up to take the hit, alone.

- Second, also without prodding, BP stepped forward to pick up any "legitimate claims" associated with the Gulf spill.

One month into the spill, 65,000 compensation claims from assorted fishers, hotel and restaurant owners, and others had been filed, and BP had paid out \$2 billion. The company also agreed, at the Obama administration's insistence, to set up a \$20 billion claims fund—labeled a "shakedown" by one overzealous Republican congressman—to compensate those affected.

- Third, vowing to be public with its decisions, BP dispatched its young, dynamic chief executive, Anthony Bryan "Tony" Hayward, personally to take charge on the ground of the Gulf oil spill (Figure 1-6).

This final decision—assigning CEO Hayward to take charge of the crisis—proved a tragic miscalculation.

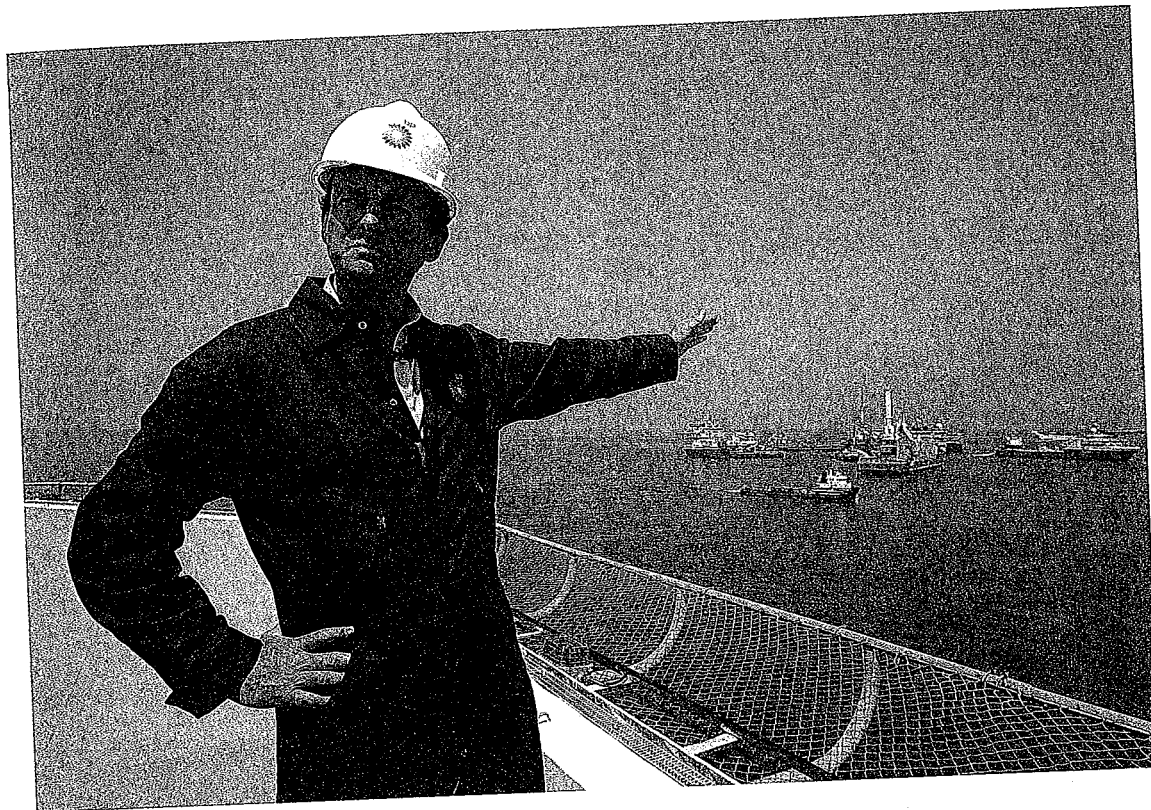


FIGURE 1-6 Tony on the spot. BP dispatched its CEO, Anthony "Tony" Hayward, to Louisiana to deal with the worldwide oil spill media. (Photo: SEAN GARDNER/POOL/EPA/Newscom)

"I'd Rather be Sailing."

There is no question that CEO Hayward meant well.

But in a public relations crisis the magnitude of the burgeoning BP spill, with the eyes of the world on your every move and the ears of the world on your every word, the difference between "meaning well" and "performing admirably" is as wide as the vast ocean into which Hayward figuratively plunged upon opening his yap.

As the days wore on and Hayward continued to stumble rhetorically, the reputation that BP had built began to crumble. Its CEO's most egregious public relations errors included the following:

■ **He predicted a speedy conclusion to the crisis.**

One irrefutable rule of public relations crisis is *never, ever, predict*. As much as the press and public want to know the likely outcome and timetable, in a crisis the worst thing one can do is predict what will happen.

Tony Hayward violated this principle almost immediately.

Early on, the BP CEO volunteered—to his and his company's ultimate detriment—that the environmental impact of the spill would be "very, very modest."

It made little difference that Hayward's full quote was a lot more measured, "It is impossible to say and we will mount, as part of the aftermath, a very detailed environmental assessment but

everything we can see at the moment suggests that the overall environmental impact will be very, very modest."

Too late. The BP CEO's "modest impact" prediction snippet—played in an endless loop on cable TV—was enough to set a sinking early tone for Hayward and his company, right out of the box.

■ **He painted a perpetually upbeat picture.**

Just as you never predict in a public relations crisis, so, too, do you always attempt to *play down expectations*.

As BP's lead spokesperson, CEO Hayward, obviously "hoping for the best," once again violated this simple rule from the get-go.

One example: BP first estimated that perhaps 1,000 barrels a day would leak from the rig, making the problem seem manageable. When it quickly became obvious that the problem was eminently more significant, BP raised its estimates to 5,000 barrels a day.

A disbelieving Obama administration chartered its own panel of scientists to estimate the spill. By mid-June, the Obama panel estimated that, contrary to BP's Pollyannaish analysis, 35,000 to 60,000 barrels per day were leaking.

Had CEO Hayward downplayed expectations early on and warned that a greater amount of oil might leak, the company's credibility wouldn't have suffered so dearly in light of the constantly worsening reality.

■ **He whined.**



FIGURE 1-7 Tony off the rails.

CEO Hayward's recurring verbal faux pas inspired protestors and the public to downgrade BP's response to the spill.
(Photo: MICHAEL REYNOLDS/EPA/Newscom)

Another cardinal rule for any spokesperson is to *keep the focus on the individuals affected and not on yourself.*

Once again, CEO Hayward failed to heed simple public relations advice, committing yet another fatal faux pas for himself and his company.

After endless tracking of his every move, Hayward was growing testy with the press. On the morning of May 31, after another disappointing weekend of nonstop spillage, with the visibly downcast CEO once again cornered by the worldwide media, Hayward offered few answers beyond "how sorry we are for the massive destruction that cost lives, and there's no one who wants this thing over more than I do."

"I mean," concluded the CEO, "I'd like my life back."

Taken out of context—as it would be over and over again throughout the globe—Hayward's ad lib remark smacked of callous, condescending, self-centered whining, utterly devoid of any sensitivity to the 11 who died on the rig and the thousands in the Gulf whose lives had been ruined.

The CEO spokesperson was officially "toast." And Tony Hayward was relieved of his duties by BP, who would soon also relieve him of his CEO role (Figure 1-7).

■ He went sailing.

Eager, as he disastrously noted, to get "his life back," the day after being relieved of his public relations duties in the Gulf, Hayward decided to jet back overseas to watch his 52-foot yacht, *Bob*, compete in a swanky race off England's shore.

Predictably, as Hayward rooted on *Bob*, worldwide photographers and Internet bloggers recorded the fact that "when the going got tough, the CEO went sailing!"

BP tried to play down the Hayward yacht race. "He's spending a few hours with his family," said a BP spokesperson. "I'm sure that everyone would understand that. He will be back to deal with the response. It doesn't detract from that at all."

Well, actually it did. And BP felt the public's wrath.

The "end" for Tony Hayward came approximately three months after his company's oil well blew up in the Gulf of Mexico and one month after his yacht competed off the coast of England. On July 26, 2010, BP announced that BP Managing Director Bob Dudley would replace Hayward as BP CEO.

Hayward, it turned out, would remain with the company and reassigned to run a new BP unit—in Siberia!

Questions

1. How would you assess BP's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill?
2. How could BP have prevented the damage done by its CEO spokesperson?

3. Had you been advising Hayward, what would you have suggested he say in response to the questions he was asked?

*For further information, see John M. Broder and Tom Zeller Jr., "Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, But How Bad?" *The New York Times*, May 3, 2010; Justin Gillis, "Size of Oil Spill Underestimated, Scientists Say," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2010; Peter S. Goodman, "In Case of Emergency, What Not to Do," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2010; and Michael Sebastian, "BP Internal Pub Extols the Virtues of the Oil Disaster," *ragan.com*, June 23, 2010.

From the Top

An Interview with Harold Burson



Harold Burson is the world's most influential and gentlemanly public relations practitioner. He has spent more than a half century serving as counselor to and confidante of corporate CEOs, government leaders, and heads of public sector institutions. As founder and chairperson of Burson-Marsteller, he was the architect of the largest

public relations agency in the world. Mr. Burson, widely cited as the standard bearer of public relations ethics, has received virtually every major honor awarded by the profession, including the Harold Burson Chair in Public Relations at Boston University's College of Communication, established in 2003.

How would you define public relations?

One of the shortest—and most precise—definitions of public relations I know is "doing good and getting credit for it." I like this definition because it makes clear that public relations embodies two principal elements. One is behavior, which includes policy and attitude; the other is communications—the dissemination of information. The first tends to be strategic, the second tactical—although strategy plays a major role in many, if not most, media relations programs.

How has the business of public relations changed over time?

Public relations has, over time, become more relevant as a management function for all manner of institutions—public and private sector, profit and not-for-profit. CEOs

Need

increasingly recognize the need to communicate to achieve their organizational objectives. Similarly, they have come to recognize public relations as a necessary component in the decision-making process. This has enhanced the role of public relations both internally and for independent consultants.

How do ethics apply to the public relations function?

In a single word, pervasively. Ethical behavior is at the root of what we do as public relations professionals. We approach our calling with a commitment to serve the public interest, knowing full well that the public interest lacks a universal definition and knowing that one person's view of the public interest differs markedly from that of another. We must therefore be consistent in our personal definition of the public interest and be prepared to speak up for those actions we take.

At the same time, we must recognize our roles as advocates for our clients or employers. It is our job to reconcile client and employer objectives with the public interest. And we must remember that while clients and employers are entitled to have access to professional public relations counsel, you and I individually are in no way obligated to provide such counsel when we feel that doing so would compromise us in any way.

What are the qualities that make up the ideal public relations man or woman?

It is difficult to establish a set of specifications for all the kinds of people wearing the public relations mantle. Generally, I feel five primary characteristics apply to just about every successful public relations person I know.

- They're smart—bright, intelligent people; quick studies. They ask the right questions. They have that unique ability to establish credibility almost on sight.

- They know how to get along with people. They work well with their bosses, their peers, their subordinates. They work well with their clients and with third parties like the press and suppliers.
- They are emotionally stable—even (especially) under pressure. They use the pronoun “we” more than “I.”
- They are motivated, and part of that motivation involves an ability to develop creative solutions. No one needs to tell them what to do next; instinctively, they know.
- They don’t fear starting with a blank sheet of paper. To them, the blank sheet of paper equates with challenge and opportunity. They can write; they can articulate their thoughts in a persuasive manner.

What is the future of public relations?
More so than ever before, those responsible for large institutions whose existence depends on public acceptance

and support recognize the need for sound public relations input. At all levels of society, public opinion has been brought to bear in the conduct of affairs both in the public and private sectors. Numerous CEOs of major corporations have been deposed following initiatives undertaken by the media, by public interest groups, by institutional stockholders—all representing failures that stemmed from a lack of sensitivity to public opinion. Accordingly, my view is that public relations is playing and will continue to play a more pivotal role in the decision-making process than ever before. The sources of public relations counsel may well become less structured and more diverse, simply because of the growing pervasive understanding that public tolerance has become so important in the achievement of any goals that have a recognizable impact on society.

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