Chapter 3

Communication

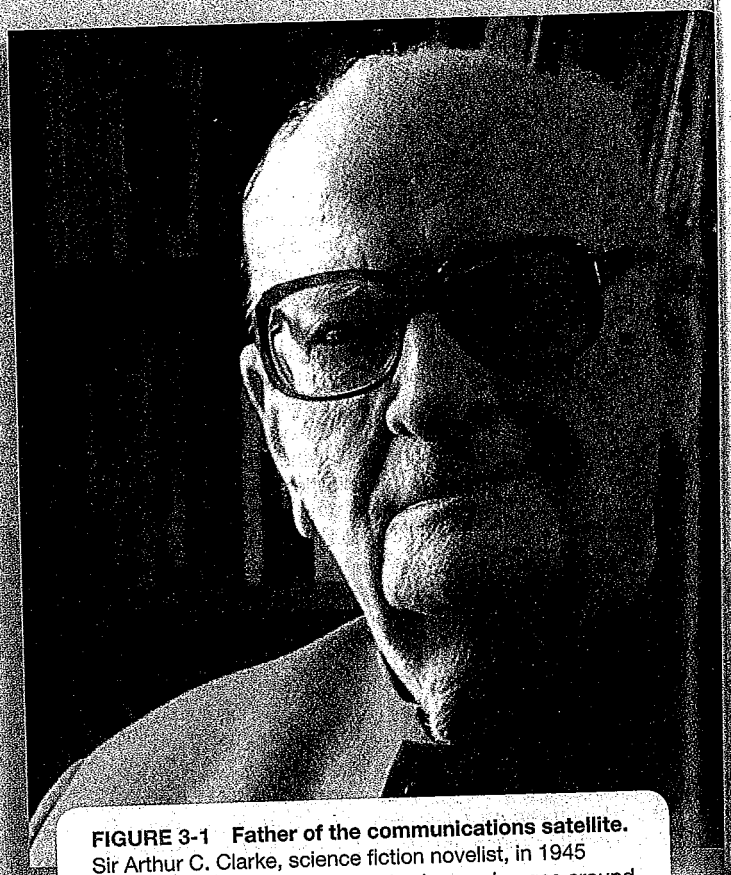


FIGURE 3-1 Father of the communications satellite. Sir Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction novelist, in 1945 envisioned the concept that today beams images around the world in real time. *(Photo: Rohan De Silva, Courtesy Arthur C. Clarke Foundation)*

Chapter Objectives

1. To discuss the goals and theories of modern communication as they relate to the practice of public relations.
2. To explore the importance and proper use of words and semantics to deliver ideas and persuade others toward one's point of view.
3. To discuss the various elements that effect communication, including the media, the bias of receivers, and the individuals or entities delivering messages.
4. To examine the necessity of feedback in evaluating communication and formulating continued communication.

Social media so dominates communications practice today that the most venerable of communication staples, the Encyclopedia Britannica, has been uprooted by an upstart online reference source called Wikipedia.

In today's online world, Wikipedia is the first source that most people—683 million visitors annually—consult. Its name is a blend of the words *wiki*, a technology for creating collaborative Websites, and *encyclopedia*. Launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, it is the largest, fastest-growing, and most popular general reference work on the Internet.[1]

And sometimes, that's not such a good thing. All too often, Wikipedia's "collaborators" are biased, either for or against the subject about which they are "objectively" writing. For example, in the spring of 2007, Wikipedia's founders were shocked when one of the service's most influential contributors and administrators, a chap who billed himself as "Essjay," was found not to be the tenured professor in Catholic law he had claimed but rather a 24-year-old community college dropout. That revelation—along with the knowledge that every day, scores of anonymous, self-styled "correctors" of questionable knowledge are anonymously editing Wikipedia copy—made people wonder about the accuracy of all those millions of articles in 250 languages on Wikipedia.[2] The lesson: Believe Wikipedia at your peril.

Such were the problems with communication in the age of social media.

In the 21st century, nearly the whole world is truly "wired." The power of communication, through the oral and written word and the images that flash around the world to millions of people in real time, is more awesome than any individual, group, or even nation.

What happens at a market in Baghdad is witnessed in a matter of seconds in Berlin and Bangkok and Boise. The world has truly become a "global village."

And perhaps no individual is more responsible for this global phenomenon than a British science fiction novelist who died in 2008 (Figure 3-1). Sir Arthur Clarke wrote a short article in 1945 that talked about combining the technologies of rocketry, wireless communications, and radar to envision an extraterrestrial system that relied on orbiting space stations to relay radio signals around the world.

Today, more than a half century later, Sir Arthur's vision has morphed into the global system of two dozen geo-synchronous satellites that orbit 22,300 miles above the earth, transmitting words and images around the world at the speed of light.[3] Thanks to the "Clarke Orbit" and the uplink technology that continues to be developed, events from coronations to courtroom trials to courageous efforts in the face of overwhelming tragedy are now broadcast globally at 186,000 miles per second (Figure 3-2).

As a consequence, *communication* has never been a more potent tool, and *communications* must be handled with great care.

FIGURE 3-2 The world is watching.
In the summer of 2012, as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad slaughtered his people and thumbed his nose at the world, opposition forces in the country used the Internet to keep the world abreast of the carnage. This placard reads, "Thank you for killing us." *(Photo: JAMAL NASRALLAH/EPA/Newscom)*

Which brings us back to public relations.

First and foremost, the public relations practitioner is a professional communicator. More than anyone else in an organization, the practitioner must know how to communicate.

Fundamentally, communication is a process of exchanging information, imparting ideas, and making oneself understood by others. It also includes understanding others in return. Indeed, *understanding* is critical to the communications process. If one person sends a message to another, who disregards or misunderstands it, then communication hasn't taken place. But if the idea received is the one intended, then communication has occurred. Thus, a boss who sends subordinates dozens of emails isn't necessarily communicating with them. If the idea received is not the one intended, then the sender has done little more than convert personal thoughts to words—and there they lie.

Although all of us are endowed with some capacity for communicating, the public relations practitioner must be better at it than most. Before public relations practitioners can earn the respect of management and become trusted advisors, they must demonstrate a mastery of many communications skills—writing, speaking, listening, promoting, and counseling. Just as the comptroller is expected to be an adept accountant, and the legal counsel is expected to be an accomplished lawyer, the public relations professional must be the best communicator in the organization. Period.

Goals of Communication

When communication is planned, as it should be in public relations, every communication must have a goal, an objective, and a purpose. If not, why communicate in the first place?

What are typical communications goals?

1. **To inform.** Often the communications goal of an organization is to inform or educate a particular public. For example, before holidays, the Automobile Association of America (AAA) will release information providing advice on safe driving habits for long trips. In so doing, AAA is performing a valuable information service to the public.
2. **To persuade.** A regular goal of public relations communicators is to persuade people to take certain actions. Such persuasion needn't be overly aggressive; it can be subtle. For example, a mutual fund annual report that talks about the fund's long history of financial strength and security may provide a subtle persuasive appeal for potential investors.
3. **To motivate.** Motivation of employees to "pull for the team" is a regular organizational communications goal. For example, the hospital CEO who outlines to her managers the institution's overriding objectives in the year ahead is communicating to motivate these key employees to action.
4. **To build mutual understanding.** Often communicators have as their goal the mere attainment of understanding of a group in opposition. For example, a community group that meets with a local plant manager to express its concern

about potential pollution of the neighborhood is seeking understanding of the group's rationale and concern.

The point is that whether written release, annual report, speech, or meeting, all are valid public relations communications vehicles designed to achieve communications goals with key constituent publics. Again, the best way to achieve one's goals is through an integrated and strategically planned approach.

Traditional Theories of Communication

Books have been written on the subject of communications theory. This book is *not* one of them. Consequently, we won't attempt to provide an all-encompassing discussion on how people ensure that their messages get through to others. But in its most basic sense, communication commences with a source, who sends a message through a medium to reach a receiver, who, we hope, responds in the manner we intended.

Many theories exist—from the traditional to the contemporary—about the most effective ways for a source to send a message through a medium to elicit a positive response. Here are but a few.

- One early theory of communication, the *two-step flow theory*, stated that an organization would beam a message first to the mass media, which would then deliver that message to the great mass of readers, listeners, and viewers for their response. This theory may have given the mass media too much credit. Indeed, when media is less "mass" than it is "targeted"—through social media, Websites, blogs, cable TV, talk radio, etc.—people today are influenced by a great many factors, of which the mass media may be one but is not necessarily the dominant one.
- Another theory, the *concentric-circle theory*, developed by pollster Elmo Roper, assumed that ideas evolve gradually to the public at large, moving in concentric circles from great thinkers to great disciples to great disseminators to lesser disseminators to the politically active to the politically inert. This theory suggests that people pick up and accept ideas from leaders, whose impact on public opinion may be greater than that of the mass media. The overall study of how communication is used for direction and control is called *cybernetics*.
- The communications theories of the late Pat Jackson have earned considerable respect in the public relations field. Jackson's public relations communications models, too, emphasized "systematic investigation—setting clear strategic goals and identifying key stakeholders."[4] One communications approach to stimulate behavioral change encompassed a five-step process:
  1. **Building awareness.** Build awareness through all the standard communications mechanisms that we discuss in this book, from publicity to advertising to public speaking to word of mouth.
  2. **Developing a latent readiness.** This is the stage at which people begin to form an opinion based on such factors as knowledge, emotion, intuition, memory, and relationships.
  3. **Triggering event.** A triggering event is something—either natural or planned—that makes you want to change your behavior. Slimming down in time for beach season is an example of a natural triggering event. Staged functions, rallies, campaigns, and appearances are examples of planned triggering events.

4. **Intermediate behavior.** This is what Jackson called the "investigative" period, when an individual is determining how best to apply a desired behavior. In this stage, information about process and substance is sought.
5. **Behavioral change.** The final step is the adoption of new behavior.

- Another traditional public relations theory of communications is the basic *S-E-M-D-R communications process.* This model suggests that the communication process begins with the source (S), who issues a message (M) to a receiver (R), who then decides what action to take, if any, relative to the communication. Two additional steps, an encoding stage (E), in which the source's original message is translated and conveyed to the receiver, and a decoding stage (D), in which the receiver interprets the encoded message and takes action, complete the model. It is in these latter two stages, encoding and decoding, that the public relations function most comes into play.
- Dissonance theory, formulated in the 1950s, suggests that people seek out messages that agree with or are "consonant" to their own attitudes; they avoid messages that disagree or are "dissonant" to their own attitudes. So the fact that liberals watch MSNBC and conservatives watch Fox News is an example of such "cognitive dissonance."[5]
- There are even those who focus on the growing import of the "silent" theories of communication. The most well known of these, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *spiral of silence,* suggests that communications that work well depend on the silence and nonparticipation of a huge majority. This so-called silent majority fears becoming isolated from and therefore ostracized by most of their colleagues. Thus, they invariably choose to "vote with the majority."[6]

All of these theories and many others have great bearing on how public relations professionals perform their key role as organizational communicators.

Contemporary Theories of Communication

Many other communications theories abound today as Internet communication changes the ways and speed at which many of us receive our messages. Professor Everett Rogers talks about the unprecedented "diffusion" of the Internet as a communications vehicle that spans cultures and geographies. Others point to the new reality of "convergence" of video, data and voice, mobile and fixed, traditional and new age communications mechanisms with which public relations professionals must be familiar.

The complexity of communications in contemporary society—particularly in terms of understanding one's audience—has led scholars to author additional "audience centric" theories of how best to communicate.

- *Constructivism* suggests that knowledge is *constructed,* not transmitted. Constructivism, therefore, is concerned with the cognitive process that precedes the actual communication within a given situation rather than with the communication itself.

KNOW YOUR audience

This theory suggests that in communicating, it is important to have some knowledge of the receiver and his or her beliefs, predilections, and background. Simply dispensing information and expecting receivers to believe in or act on it, according to this theory, is a fool's errand. The task of the communicator, rather, is to understand and identify how receivers think about the issues in question and then work to challenge these preconceived notions and, hopefully, convert audience members into altering their views.[7]

- *Coordinated management of meaning* is a theory of communications based on social interaction. Basically, this theory posits that when we communicate—primarily through conversation—we construct our own social realities of what is going on and what kind of action is appropriate. We each have our own "stories" of life experience, which we share with others in conversation. When we interact, say the creators of this theory, we attempt to "coordinate" our own beliefs, morals, and ideas of "good" and "bad" with those of others so that a mutual outcome might occur.

  The point, again, is that communication, rather than being the simple "transmission" of ideas, is a complex, interconnected series of events, with each participant affected by the other.[8]

- Other widely discussed theoretical models of public relations communications are the *Grunig-Hunt public relations models*, formulated by Professors James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt. Grunig and Hunt proposed four models that define public relations communications.

  1. **Press agentry/publicity.** This early form of communication, say the authors, is essentially one-way communication that beams messages from a source to a receiver with the express intention of winning favorable media attention.
  2. **Public information.** This is another early form of one-way communication designed not necessarily to persuade but rather to inform. Both this and the press agentry model have been linked to the common notion of "public relations as propaganda."
  3. **Two-way asymmetric.** This is a more sophisticated two-way communication approach that allows an organization to put out its information and to receive feedback from its publics about that information. Under this model, an organization wouldn't necessarily change decisions as a result of feedback but rather would alter its responses to more effectively persuade publics to accept its position.
  4. **Two-way symmetric.** This preferred way of communicating advocates free and equal information flow between an organization and its publics, based on mutual understanding. This approach is more "balanced"—*symmetrical*—with the public relations communicator serving as a mediator between the organization and the publics.[9]

These are but a few of the prominent theories of communications—all revolving around "feedback"—of which public relations practitioners must be aware. In Chapter 4, we review relevant theories in forming public opinion.

The Word

Communication begins with words. Words are among our most personal and potent weapons. Words can soothe us, bother us, or infuriate us. They can bring us together or drive us apart. They can even cause us to kill or be killed. Words mean different things to different people, depending on their backgrounds, occupations, education, and geographic locations. As anyone who has ever walked into a Starbucks and ordered a "small" caramel mocha macchiato only to be handed a "tall" caramel mocha macchiato knows, what one word means to you might be dramatically different from what that same word means to someone else. For example, when President Obama's surrogates, in the heat of the 2012 Republican presidential nomination process, labeled eventual presidential opponent Mitt Romney as "elitist," his wealthy rival lashed back in anger, the

implication being that he couldn't relate to blue-collar voters. The study of what words really mean is called *semantics*, and the science of semantics is a peculiar one indeed.

Words are perpetually changing in our language. Every day, especially with the Internet, words are added to the lexicon. In 2012, when Marc Zuckerberg's Facebook stock floundered in its initial public offering, those who bought the stock were said to have been *Facebooked* or, worse, *Zucked*. Indeed, *Zuck* became an instant, new four-letter word.[10] What a word denotes according to the dictionary may be thoroughly dissimilar to what it connotes in its more emotional or visceral sense. Even the simplest words—*liberal, conservative, profits, consumer activists*—can spark semantic skyrockets. For example, in 2007, McDonald's launched a petition to get the Oxford English Dictionary to alter its definition of *McJob* as "an unstimulating low-paid job with few prospects."[11]

Particularly sensitive today is so-called discriminatory language—words that connote offensive meanings—in areas such as gender, race, ethnicity, and physical impairment. Words such as *firemen, manpower, housewife, cripple, midget*, and *Negro* may be considered offensive. While "political correctness" can go too far, it is nonetheless incumbent on public relations communicators to carefully assess words before using them.

Many times, without knowledge of the territory, the semantics of words may make no sense. Take the word *fat*. In U.S. culture and vernacular, a person who is fat is generally not associated with the apex of attractiveness. A person who is thin, on the other hand, may indeed be considered highly attractive. But along came 50 Cent and Kanye West and Jay-Z and hip-hop, and pretty soon *phat*—albeit with a new spelling—became the baddest of the bad, the coolest of the cool, the height of fetching pulchritudinousness (if you smell what I'm cookin').

Words have a significant influence on the message conveyed to the ultimate receiver. Thus the responsibility of a public relations professional, entrusted with *encoding* a client's message, is significant. Public relations encoders must understand, for example, that in today's technologically changing world, words and phrases change meaning and drop out of favor with blinding speed (see Outside the Lines in this chapter). During the past century, the English language has added an average of 900 new words every year.[12]

For an intended message to get through, then, a public relations "interpreter" must accurately understand and effectively translate the true meaning—with all its semantic complications—to the receiver.

The Message

The real importance of words, in a public relations sense, is using them to build the messages that move publics to action. Framing "key messages" lies at the top of every public relations to-do list.

Messages may be transmitted in myriad communications media: social media, speeches, newspapers, radio, television, news releases, press conferences, broadcast reports, and face-to-face meetings. Communications theorists differ on what exactly constitutes the message, but here are three of the more popular explanations.

1. **The content is the message.** According to this theory, which is far and away the most popular, the content of a communication—what it says—constitutes its message. According to this view, the real importance of a communication—the message—lies in the meaning of an article or in the intent of a speech. Neither the medium through which the message is being communicated nor the individual doing the communicating is as important as the content. This is why

Outside the Lines

Profizzle of Lexicizzle

The 21st-century lexicon of current words and phrases is ever-changing. What's *in* today is *out* tomorrow.

Doubt it?

Then translate the following phrases that your parents considered colloquial.

- *I'll be a monkey's uncle*
- *This is a fine kettle of fish*
- *Knee high to a grasshopper*
- *Going like 60*
- *Iron Curtain*
- *Domino theory*

Or explain what they meant by the following items.

- *Boob tube*
- *L.D.*
- *Segregation*
- *Mailman*
- *Stewardess*

Or reconcile what you mean with what they mean by the following terms.

- *Gay*
- *Menu*
- *Virus*
- *Crack, smack, snow,* and *blow*

Words change so quickly these days that we even have new instant languages being created before our eyes. Among them, the *gangsta* lexicon of one, Snoop Dogg (Figure 3-3), affectionately known as *izzle speak*, is designed primarily to confuse anyone who isn't an urban Black rapper. To wit:

- *Valentizzle*
- *Tonizzle*
- *Televizzle*
- *President Barack Obizzle*
- *Mitt Romnizzle*

All of which means that for public relations professionals in the 21st century, properly interpreting messages to key publics has become a complicated proposition.

Fo shizzle.

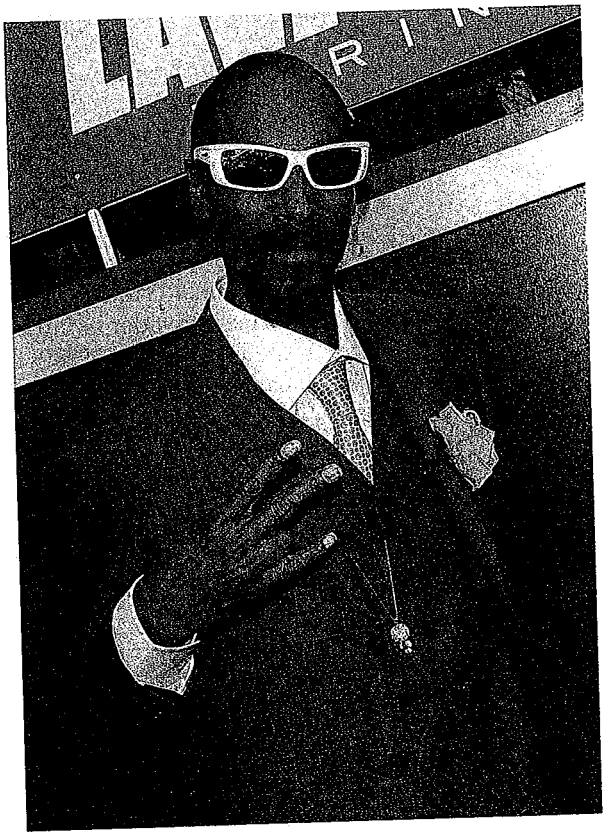


FIGURE 3-3 Profizzle of Lexicizzle.
Rapper Snoop Dogg. *(Photo: Snapper Media/Splash News/Newscom)*

professional public relations people insist on accurate and truthful content in the messages they prepare.

2. **The medium is the message.** Other communications theorists argue that the content of a communication may be less important than the medium in which the message is carried. This theory was originally proffered by the late Canadian communications professor Marshall McLuhan. This theory is relevant in today's hyper-media society, where the reputation and integrity of a particular media source may vary wildly. For example, a story carried on an Internet blog would generally carry considerably less weight than one reported in *The New York Times*. That is not to say that for some receivers, a particular blog's

credibility might surpass that of the *Times*. Personal bias, as we will discuss, is always brought to bear in assessing the power and believability of communications messages. In other words, to some cognitively dissonant citizens, conservative Fox News is the "fair-and-balanced last word" in credibility; to others, it's the liberal MSNBC.

3. **The man—or, to avoid political incorrectness, the person—is the message.** Still other theorists argue that it is neither the content nor the medium that is the message, but rather the speaker. For example, Führer Adolf Hitler was a master of persuasion. His minister of propaganda, Josef Goebbels, used to say, "Any man who thinks he can persuade, can persuade." Hitler practiced this self-fulfilling communications prophecy to the hilt. Feeding on the perceived desires of the German people, Hitler was concerned much less with the content of his remarks than with their delivery. His maniacal rantings and frantic gestures seized public sentiment and sent friendly crowds into frenzy. In every way, Hitler himself was the primary message of his communications.

   Today, in a similar vein, we often refer to a leader's charisma. Frequently, the charismatic appeal of a political leader may be more important than what that individual says. Such was the historic appeal of Fidel Castro in Cuba or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, for example. Political orators in particular, such as former Presidents Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan, could move an audience by the very inflection of their words. The smooth and confident speaking style of Barack Obama was a major plus in his winning the presidency in 2008. Experienced speakers, from Rachel Maddow on the left to Rush Limbaugh on the right, to retired military leaders such as Colin Powell and Stanley McChrystal, to sports coaches such as John Gruden and Mike Krzyzewski, can also rally listeners with their personal charismatic demeanor.

   The point is that a speaker's words, face, body, eyes, attitude, timing, wit, presence—all form a composite that, as a whole, influences the listener. In such cases, the source of the communication becomes every bit as important as the message itself.

Receiver's Bias

Communicating a message is futile unless it helps achieve the desired goal of the communicator. As the bulk of the communications theories cited in this chapter suggest, the element of feedback is critical. This is why Web 2.0 technology—social media, interactive wikis, blogs, and the like—is important and pervasive. Key to feedback is understanding the precognitions and predilections that receivers bring to a particular message.

Stated another way, how a receiver decodes a message depends greatly on that person's perception. How an individual comprehends a message is a key to effective communications. Everyone is biased; no two people perceive a message identically. Personal biases are nurtured by many factors, including stereotypes, symbols, semantics, peer group pressures, and—especially in today's culture—the media.

Stereotypes

Everyone lives in a world of stereotypical figures. Gen Xers, policy wonks, feminists, bankers, blue-collar workers, bluebloods, PR types, and thousands of other characterizations cause people to think of specific images. Public figures, for example, are typecast regularly. The dumb blond, the bigoted right-winger, the bleeding-heart liberal,

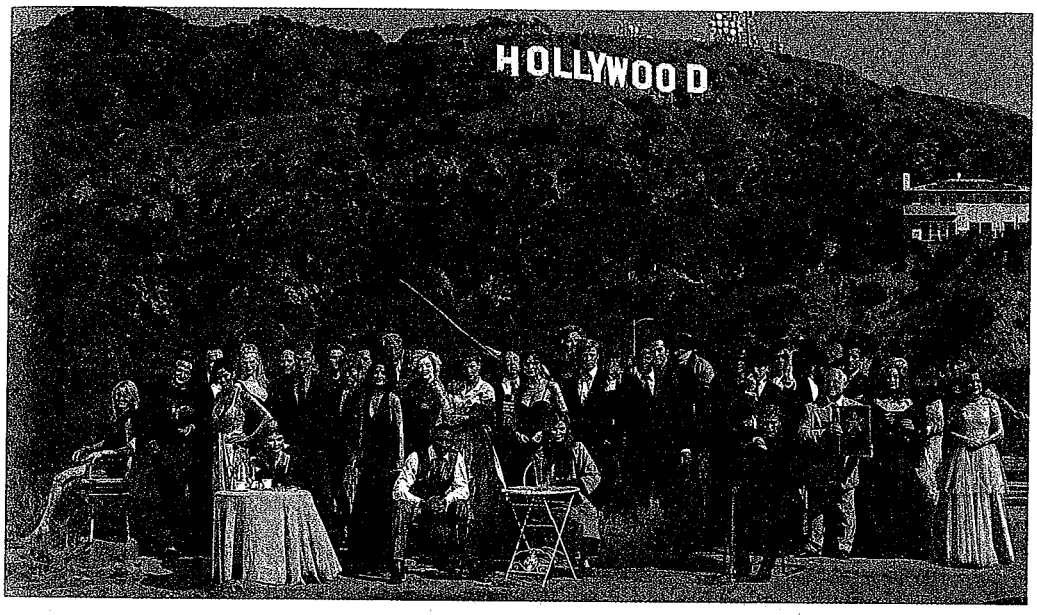


FIGURE 3-4 Seeing stars.
Some of Hollywood's finest, courtesy of Madame Tousssaud's Wax Museum, pose below the iconic Hollywood sign. Located on Mount Lee in Griffith Park, the Hollywood sign is the most famous sign in the world. Originally built in 1923 for $21,000 as an advertising gimmick to promote home sales, the 45-foot-high, 450-foot-long, 480,000-pound sign was restored in 1978—Tinseltown's most enduring and instantly identifiable symbol. *(Photo: Jim Sulley/newscast/Newscom)*

the computer geek, and the snake oil used car salesperson are the kinds of stereotypes perpetuated by our society.

Like it or not, most of us are victims of such stereotypes. For example, research indicates that a lecture delivered by a person wearing glasses will be perceived as significantly more believable than the same lecture delivered before the same audience by the same lecturer without glasses. The stereotyped impression of people with glasses is that they are more trustworthy and more believable. (Or at least that's the way it was before Lasik surgery!)

Also, like it or not, such stereotypes influence communication.

Symbols

The clenched-fist salute, the swastika, and the thumbs-up sign all leave distinct impressions on most people. Marshaled properly, symbols can be used as effective persuasive elements (Figure 3-4). The Statue of Liberty, the Red Cross, the Star of David, and many other symbols have been used traditionally for positive persuasion. On the other hand, the symbols chosen by the terrorists of September 11, 2001—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and most likely the U.S. Capitol and the White House—were clearly chosen because of their symbolic value as American icons.

Semantics

Public relations professionals make their living largely by knowing how to use words effectively to communicate desired meanings. Occasionally, this is tricky because the same words may hold contrasting meanings for different people. Today's contentious

debate about abortion is a case in point, with the debate buttressed by confusing semantic terms—*pro-life* to signify those against abortion and *pro-choice* to signify those in favor of allowing abortions. By the same token, Republican semanticist Frank Luntz warns his party to talk about the *death tax*, rather than the "estate tax," and *economic freedom*, rather than "capitalism."[13]

Controversy also surrounds the semantics associated with certain forms of rap and hip-hop music. To critics, some artists preach a philosophy of violence and hate and prejudice against women. But misogynist gangsta rappers, from the self-promoting Kanye West to the downright filthy Lil John, claim that they are merely "telling it like it is" or "reporting what we see in the streets." When reporters and record company executives give credence, that is, "street cred," to such misguided rhetoric, they become just as responsible as the artists for the often-unfortunate outcomes that result—for example, the child pornography charges against and subsequent 2008 trial of singer R. Kelly.

Because language and the meanings of words change constantly, semantics must be handled with extreme care. Good communicators always consider the consequences of the words they plan to use before using them.

PR Ethics Mini-Case

The Name That Slimed an Industry

The microbiologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture had a couple of choice names for the lean, finely textured beef filler, used in hamburgers to kill bacteria: *pink paste* or *pink goo*.

But wait, said USDA meat inspector Gerald Zirnstein when he pondered the product in 2002, "it's pink. It's pasty. And it's slimy looking. So I called it pink slime" (Figure 3-5).

Perfect.

Or at least it was for a decade.

Then, in 2012—a decade after pink slime had been used regularly, and safely, in ground beef products—a food blogger posted an online petition asking the USDA to stop using the filler in school lunches, using the controversial name as her battering ram.

Within nanoseconds, the net furor had fueled newspaper headlines decrying "pink slime," and opportunistic celebrity chefs, such as Jamie Oliver, quickly denounced the product. Under pressure, McDonald's and other fast-food companies discontinued their use of it. And major supermarket chains, including Kroger and Stop & Shop, vowed to stop selling beef with the low-cost filler, heated and treated with ammonium to kill bacteria.

It was only a matter of time before the company that led production of the beef filler for 10 years, Beef Products, Inc. of South Dakota, closed down the products and three of its four plants, costing 650 jobs.

The company insisted that the product, which remained perfectly safe according to the USDA, was victim to "unfounded attacks and media-perpetuated myths."

And also a very catchy, yet unfortunate, name.*

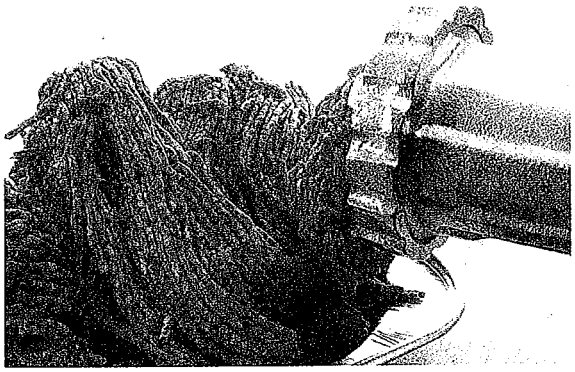


FIGURE 3-5 What's in a name?
Plenty, especially if the name is "pink slime." *(Photo: Creativ Studio Heinemann/Westend61/Newscom)*

Questions

1. How "fair" was the debate over "pink slime," and what does it say about the use of semantics in popular controversy?
2. If you were Beef Products, what public relations approach would you have adopted?

*For further information, see Candice Choi, "The Making of the Term 'Pink Slime,'" salon.com, May 21, 2012.

Peer Groups

In one famous study, students were asked to point out, in progression, the shortest of the following three lines.

A _____

B _____

C _____

Although line B is obviously the shortest, each student in the class except one was told in advance to answer that line C was the shortest. The object of the test was to see whether the one student would agree with his peers. Results generally indicated that, to a statistically significant degree, all students, including the uncoached one, chose C.

Such an experiment is an example of how peer pressure prevails in terms of influencing personal bias. Public relations professionals, intent on framing persuasive communications messages, must understand the importance of peer group influences on attitudes and actions.

Media

The power of the media—particularly as an agenda setter—is substantial. Agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness by the media—the ability to tell us what issues are important. As early as 1922, the legendary newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present biased images to the public. Indeed, two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.[14]

Today, with social media and the Internet so pervasive, cable news and talk radio so popular, and newspaper readership down, some argue that traditional media have lost some clout as agenda-setters. Perhaps. But it is still the case that most national agendas are set by the most powerful national media, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. For example, in the presidential campaign of 2012, both the Obama and Romney camps responded daily to front-page *Times* and *Post* pieces—on everything from politically motivated national security leaks to the impact of lobbyist money on the campaigns to where the candidates chose to spend their pre-election summer vacations—that dominated the news cycles.

By the same token, in interesting the media to pursue client-oriented stories, public relations professionals also have a direct role in setting the agenda for others. The point is that people base perceptions on what they read or hear, often without bothering to dig further to elicit the facts. This is a two-edged sword: Although appearances are sometimes revealing, they are also often deceiving.

Feedback

A communicator must get feedback from a receiver to know what messages are or are not getting through and how to structure future communications.

You really aren't communicating unless someone is at the other end to hear and understand what you're saying and then react to it. This situation is analogous to the old mystery of the falling tree in the forest: Does it make a noise when it hits the ground if there's no one there to hear it? Regardless of the answer, effective

communication doesn't take place if a message doesn't reach the intended receivers and exert the desired effect on those receivers.

Even if a communication is understood clearly, there is no guarantee that the motivated action will be the desired one. In fact, a message may trigger several different effects.

1. **It may change attitudes.** This result, however, is difficult to achieve and rarely happens.
2. **It may crystallize attitudes.** This outcome is much more common. Often a message will influence receivers to take actions they might already have been thinking about taking but needed an extra push to accomplish.
3. **It may create a wedge of doubt.** Communication can sometimes force receivers to modify their points of view. A persuasive message on cable TV can cause viewers to question their original thinking on an issue.
4. **It may do nothing.** At times, the best laid communication plans result in no action at all.

Whether the objectives of a communication have been met can often be assessed by such things as the amount of sales, number of followers, viewers, or votes obtained. If individuals take no action after receiving a communication, feedback must still be sought. In certain cases, although receivers have taken no discernible action, they may have understood and even passed on the message to other individuals.

Last Word

Knowledge of how and when and to whom to communicate is the primary skill of the public relations practitioner. Above all else, public relations professionals are professional communicators. That means they must not only be knowledgeable about the various Web-based techniques and tactics available to communicators in the 21st century but also understand the theoretical underpinnings of what constitutes a credible message and how to deliver it.

The early years of the 21st century indicate that effective communication has never been more important. With the emergence of worldwide terrorism; the Arab Spring; the deepening cultural chasm between West and East, rich and poor, and haves and have-nots; along with economic challenges from the soaring cost of energy to the threat of global recession, to the emergence of China and India as economic super powers—the need for honest, straightforward, and credible communication is critical.

There is no trick to effective communication. In addition to mastery of techniques, it is knowledge, experience, hard work, and common sense that are the basic guiding principles. Naturally, communication must follow action; organizations must back up what they say with what they do. Omnipresent advertising, a winning Website and social media presence, slick brochures, engaging speeches, intelligent articles, and good press may help capture the public's attention, but in the final analysis the only way to obtain continued public support is through proper performance.

Discussion Starters

1. Why is it important that public relations professionals understand communication?
2. What are some principal goals of communication, and what are some contemporary examples?
3. Why do words such as *liberal*, *conservative*, *profits*, and *consumer activist* spark semantic skyrockets?
4. What is the role of a public relations professional in the S-E-M-D-R communications process?

5. What is the difference between the symmetric and asymmetric models of communication?
6. What is meant by constructivism and coordinated management of meaning?
7. What is meant by the media as *agenda setter*?
8. Why is feedback critical to the communications process?
9. What common mistakes do people make when they communicate?
10. What are some contemporary examples of the changing meanings of words over time?

Pick of the Literature

The Power of Communication

Helio Fred Garcia, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2012

One of the brightest lights in the communication profession, Professor Garcia draws on first-hand experience to detail how communication is as powerful as any factor in the 21st century.

The book draws heavily on current examples to link leadership and communication. From Bill Gates to John McCain, David Letterman to Steve Jobs to the CEOs of Hewlett-Packard and Netflix, Garcia applies sensible lessons to contemporary cases.

Through his experience as a teacher and practitioner and especially as counselor to leaders in the military, Garcia offers a valuable text for any public relations practitioner. As the author puts it, "Words matter. Words shape world views." And as one contributor adds, "If you can't communicate, you can't lead."

Case Study Walmart's Bribery Shutdown

For the Sunday *New York Times*, the story was unprecedented.

On April 22, 2012, the world's most respected daily newspaper published a lead story on its front page that extended to three additional full pages inside the paper. The story concerned a multiyear investigation by the *Times* into bribery allegations at the largest foreign subsidiary at the largest retailer in the world.

Walmart de Mexico, the story said, was responsible for orchestrating a campaign of bribery to win market dominance. In its rush to build stores, "the company had paid bribes to obtain permits in virtually every corner of the country," according to the *Times*.

The dispatching of bribes to government officials was not only unethical, it was illegal—a violation of Mexican laws and Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, a federal law that makes it a crime for American corporations and their subsidiaries to bribe foreign officials.

And that was only part of it.

Further, the *Times* alleged, Walmart was fully aware of the bribery accusations against it; but rather than proceeding with a full-scale investigation to reach conclusions, it chose to shut down its internal investigation.

Internal Tug of War

By most accounts, Walmart, the world's largest retailer, was also among the world's most beleaguered companies.

Walmart Stores, Inc., founded by the legendary Sam Walton in bucolic Bentonville, Arkansas, is the world's largest private employer, serving an astounding 138 million customers per week in 8,500 stores in 15 countries under 55 different names. It makes $419 billion in annual sales—or about $35 billion a month—and controls about 20% of the retail grocery and consumables business in the United States.

Walmart is also the world's largest private employer, with 2.1 million worldwide employees, or, as the company puts it, "associates." In Mexico, Walmart employs 209,000 people, making it the country's largest private employer.

Over the years, Walmart has been a lightning rod for controversy. It has been charged with everything from being anti-union to anti-female to anti-community. Through it all, Walmart has adopted a commitment to the highest moral and ethical standards. It has worked to improve its public relations, becoming a more open and transparent company.

So when a former executive in the company's Mexican subsidiary notified Walmart management of the alleged bribery scandal in 2005, it set off, according to the *Times*, "a prolonged struggle at the highest levels of Walmart" between those eager to uphold the public standards the company had embraced and others intent on downplaying any allegations that might interrupt Walmart's relentless pursuit of growth.

Indeed, although Walmart's investigation of the alleged Mexico bribery allegations extended to the highest reaches of the

company, the company failed to report the existence of its internal investigation to the U.S. Justice Department until December of 2011—seven years after the first reports of problems—and right after it learned that *The New York Times* was snooping around in Mexico.

El Lobo Guarding the Hen House

In its exhaustive four-page story, the *Times* suggested that its investigation, which included reviewing thousands of government documents and extensive interviews including 15 hours with the former Walmart executive who originally blew the whistle, showed "credible evidence that bribery played a persistent and significant role in Walmart's rapid growth in Mexico."

According to its accusers, Walmart's strategy was to build stores so fast in Mexico that its competitors would have little time to react. To accomplish this rapid expansion, according to the *Times*, required bribes, bribes, and more bribes to change zoning maps, reduce environmental objections, and otherwise expedite ordinarily lengthy permit processes. To deliver bribes to officials at every level of the Mexican bureaucracy, the company hired "gestores," a fixture in Mexican society, who are paid as "fixers" to do everything from lobby officials to stand in line for individuals at motor vehicle offices to grease the skids for building permits.

The *Times* reported that of all people, Walmart's attorneys led the charge to get management to focus on the bribery allegations and stop those responsible. The lawyers' entreaties, according to the *Times*, were met with delay and skepticism by senior management. While outside lawyers recommended a major top-to-bottom analysis of what was going on, Walmart's top management rejected this suggestion in favor of a more limited analysis.

Walmart's ethics policy, meanwhile, clearly stated, "Never cover up or ignore an ethics problem." Nonetheless, at a meeting in early 2006, reported by the *Times*, in the office of Walmart CEO H. Lee Scott Jr., it was decided to adopt a new, "modified protocol" for internal investigations. And in the case of the continuing Mexican investigation, it was decided to transfer control of the bribery inquiry to the office of a top executive in Mexico, a man who was one of the earliest targets of the bribery allegations.

Incredibly, just a few months after the assignment, the Mexican executive concluded in his final report to management that "no evidence" of bribes was found in Walmart de Mexico. The report further recommended against any "criminal pursuit" of any Walmart executive and with that, the case was closed—until the *Times* reopened it several years later.

Righteous, if Reluctant, Indignation

Walmart's reaction to the *Times*'s expose was one of righteous indignation.

As a spokesperson told the *Times*, "If these allegations are true, it is not a reflection of who we are or what we stand for. We are deeply concerned by these allegations and are working aggressively to determine what happened."

Specifically, Walmart said it was taking steps in Mexico to strengthen compliance with the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. One "step" Walmart would not take was to allow the *Times* to speak with Mr. Scott or other executives involved in the scandal.

The immediate reaction to the *Times*'s story was most felt in the stock market, where Walmart shares on the Monday following the weekend revelation sunk like a stone, accounting for about one-fifth of the losses in the Dow Jones industrial average. Predictably, politicians from Washington to Mexico City called for outside investigations into Walmart's conduct. In Mexico, President Felipe Calderon said he was "indignant" about the company's behavior.

Perhaps most damaging to the company, Walmart building permits from Boston to New York City to Los Angeles were reportedly undergoing increased scrutiny, in the aftermath of the bribery allegations. Over the years, Walmart had worked assiduously to polish its image as it intensified efforts to move from its rural routes into big—and historically hostile—cities. The cries by local merchants that "Walmart will put us out of business" seemed to gain credibility in the wake of the bribery charges.

One venue where fireworks were expected but never materialized was the Walmart Annual Meeting, held a month after the *Times*'s story in Fayetteville, Arkansas. With Chairperson Rob Walton presiding over the 50th anniversary of the company his father founded and with a star-studded cast of marquee entertainers—Justin Timberlake, Taylor Swift, Lionel Richie, Celine Dion, Aerosmith, and Cheap Trick—the 14,000 employees and shareholders in attendance were positively buoyant (Figure 3-6). One reason that shareholders seemed oblivious to the bribery problems was that by the annual meeting, the company's stock had recovered, reaching a 12-year high.

Lest shareholders were concerned about the problems the *Times*'s story had raised, Walmart CEO Michael T. Duke assured them, "Let me be clear: Walmart is committed to compliance and integrity everywhere we operate."*

Questions

1. Had you been public relations advisor to CEO Scott at the time of the bribery allegations, what would you have counseled him to do?
2. How would you characterize Walmart's internal and external response to the bribery charges?
3. How significantly do you think the bribery allegations impacted the company's reputation?
4. What should Walmart's public relations posture be going forward, relative to the bribery charges?

*For further information, see David Barston, "Vast Mexico Bribery Case Hushed Up by WalMart After Top Level Struggle," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2012, pp.1, 8–10; Stephanie Clifford, "Wal-Mart Stock Falls Nearly 5%," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2012; Stephanie Clifford, "The Annual Shareholders' Meeting for Wal-Mart, Like Its Stock, Is Buoyant," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2012; and Stephanie Clifford and Steven Greenhouse, "WalMart's U.S. Expansion Plans Complicated by Bribery Scandal," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2012.

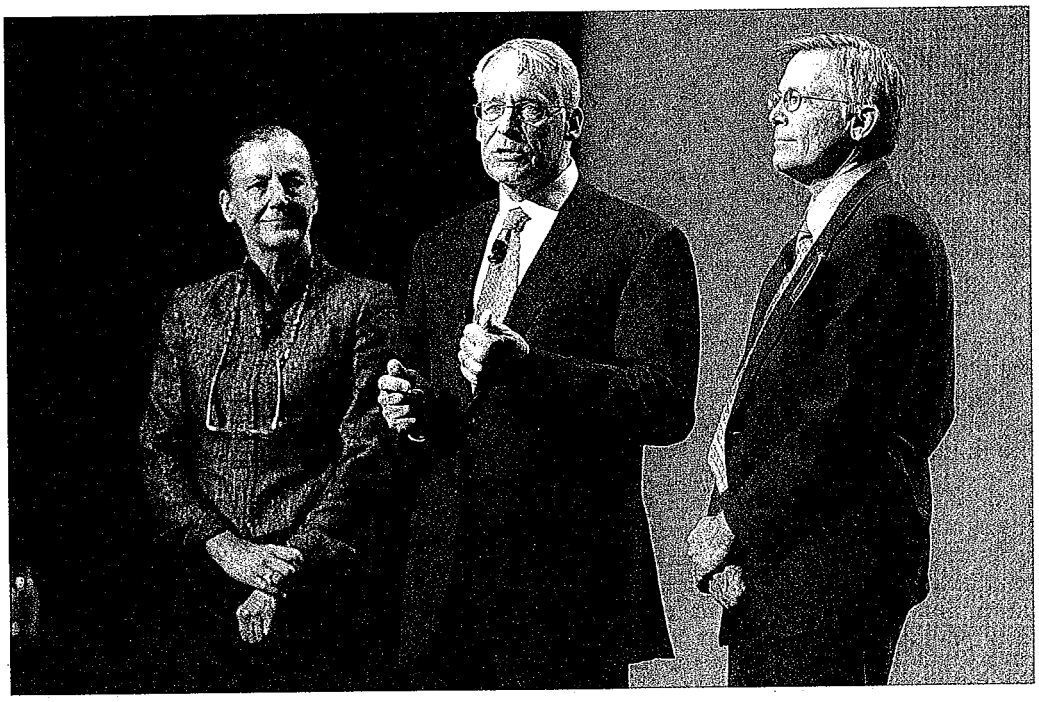
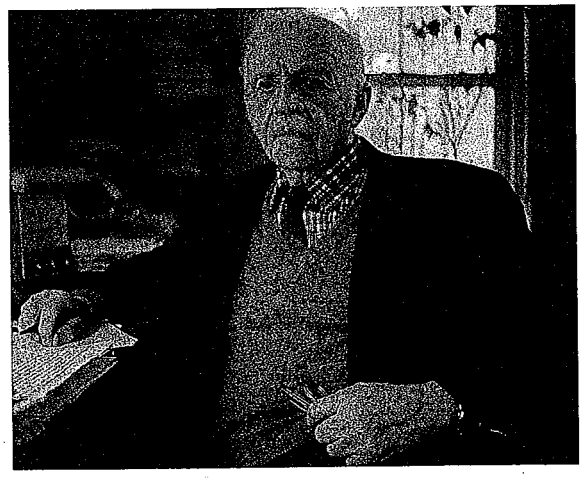


FIGURE 3-6 A big tent.
Chairperson Rob Walton, eldest son of the founder, welcomes 14,000 Walmart shareholders to the company's 2012 annual meeting extravaganza to celebrate its 50th anniversary. *(Photo: Richie Miller/Cal Sport Media/Newscom)*

From the Top

An Interview with Edward L. Bernays



(Photo: Bettmann/CORBIS)

Edward L. Bernays, who died in 1995 at the age of 103, was a public relations patriarch. A nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays pioneered the application of the social sciences to public relations. In partnership with his late wife, he advised presidents of the United States, industrial leaders, and legendary figures from Enrico Caruso to Eleanor Roosevelt. This interview was conducted with the legendary counselor in his 98th year.

When you taught the first public relations class, did you ever envision the field growing to its present stature?
I gave the first course in public relations after *Crystallizing Public Opinion* was published in 1923. I decided that one way to give the term "counsel on public relations" status was to lecture at a university on the principles, practices, and ethics of the new vocation. New York University was willing to accept my offer to do so. But I never envisioned at that time that the vocation would spread throughout the United States and then throughout the free world.

What were the objectives of that first public relations course?
The objectives were to give status to the new vocation. Many people still believed the term "counsel on public relations" was a euphemism for publicity man, press agent, flack. Even H. L. Mencken, in his book on the *American language*, ranked it as such. But in his *Supplement to the American Language*, published some years later, he changed his viewpoint and used my definition of the term.

What are the most significant factors that have led to the rise in public relations practice?
The most significant factor is the rise in people power and its recognition by leaders. Theodore Roosevelt helped bring this about with his Square Deal. Woodrow Wilson helped with his New Freedom, and so did Franklin Delano Roosevelt with his New Deal. And this tradition was continued as time went on.

Do you have any gripes with the way public relations is practiced today?
I certainly do. The meanings of words in the United States have the stability of soap bubbles. Unless words are defined as to their meaning by law, as in the case of professions—for instance, law, medicine, architecture—they are in the public domain. Anyone can use them. Today, any plumber or car salesman or unethical character can call himself or herself a public relations practitioner. Many who call themselves public relations practitioners have no education, training, or knowledge of what the field is. And the public equally has little understanding of the meaning of the two words. Until licensing and registration are introduced, this will continue to be the situation.

What pleases you most about current public relations practice?
What pleases me most is that there are, indeed, practitioners who regard their activity as a profession, an art applied to a science, in which the public interest, and not pecuniary motivation, is the primary consideration; and also that outstanding leaders in society are grasping the meaning and significance of the activity.

How would you compare the caliber of today's public relations practitioner with that of the practitioner of the past?
The practitioner today has more education in his subject. But, unfortunately, education for public relations varies with the institution where it is being conducted. This is due to the lack of a standard definition. Public relations activity is applied social science to the social attitudes or actions of employers or clients.

Where do you think public relations will be 20 years from now?
It is difficult to appraise where public relations will be 20 years from now. I don't like the tendency of advertising agencies gobbling up large public relations organizations. That is like surgical instrument manufacturers gobbling up surgical medical colleges or law book publishers gobbling up law colleges. However, if licensing and registration take place, then the vocation is assured a long lifetime, as long as democracy's.

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