

Staying on Message

One-way Communication Versus Relationships

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One of the most irritating of spokespersons is one who never gets off message. Everything the spokesperson says is a bullet point packed in a mental can. You see such one-way communications regularly in political briefings.

Q. Why is the president going to sign this bill?

A. Because it's good for the American people.

Q. Does this mean that the president supports the XYZ provision in it that has caused public protest?

A. The president is signing the bill because it is good for the American people.

Q. Senator Y has says the bill is pure "pork barrel."

A. The president believes this bill is good for the American people.

And so on.

Controlled messages annoy for several reasons. Messages should adapt to audiences. Environments change, so message expression should too. Bullet-point messages lack detail and canned responses aren't enough to explain them.

Canned messages:

- Are one-way communication because they don't take into account listener comprehension or acceptance.
- Lead to message exhaustion when listeners stop hearing, processing and believing them.
- Are contradictory when one claims to be building relationships because relationships by definition require two-way communication.
- Are advertising dressed up as publicity.

But, on the other hand, there are reasons for staying on message.

- Uniformity of transmission facilitates reach and prevents misunderstanding. It takes time for people to hear and understand a message. (It's like a mother telling junior to pick up his clothes and clean

his room for the 100th time. Someday, junior might remember without being told.)

- Saying the same thing the same way prevents misunderstanding or reading in, especially in hostile environments.
- A crafted message is measurable in ways that varied presentation isn't.
- Messages shouldn't vary much because strategy shouldn't vary greatly.

Whether messages should be crafted or not goes to the heart of a long-standing division over what PR should be. Many PR practitioners consider messages to be sales tools and not conversations to build relationships. This is part of the reason why PR practitioners continue to be called "spinmeisters." It is an issue that bothers leaders in PR, such as Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman, the world's largest independent PR firm, who describes PR's status. (http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/ 7/25/2005)

We should modify our vocabulary. We talk with pride about developing messages for our clients. ...Maybe the idea of controlled messages is something that worked in a world of relatively few media and is now obsolete. We have to get away from anything that smacks of control and manipulation of audiences. We should opt for public relationships where the operational words are dialogue, transparency and speed to market. ...we need to have PR that is policy based, not the PR of defense and spin... We need to have a seat at the table in the C Suite, with a real voice in corporate strategy and ability to assure delivery on the promise. We must also defend the need for PR, which is to educate the multiple stakeholder universe and particularly the general public so that they can make informed decisions. We are the essential bridge in a world lacking in trust, where there is heavy reliance on friends and family because of a loss in confidence in traditional institutions of business, government and media.

Edelman tackled the subject again on August 9, 2005 in the same blog.

...I would like to suggest a new communications eco-system, that I have called The Learning Cycle...The Learning Cycle is a stark contrast to the one-way communications model which emphasizes messages and control, relying heavily on paid media for assured delivery to a targeted audience (consumers). It calls for companies to listen to a broad range of stakeholders, then to innovate, to co-create with interested parties, to communicate and launch, to listen again and learn, finally to modify and explain..... We need to have an intellectual framework that moves us from megaphone to receiver and translator.

From the early days of PR as a separate communications function, there have been two views about it. The first is that PR is publicity, and publicity is a megaphone. Most PR is still publicity and a megaphone. Only a few individuals

have shown another way. Perhaps the best known was Arthur W. Page, the first PR leader at AT&T who served from 1927 through 1946 and after whom the Arthur W. Page Society gets its name (<http://www.awpagesociety.com/>). His principles of public relations are at the heart of the second view.

Page served a company that was in an unusual position as a regulated monopoly after Theodore Vail, AT&T's CEO, crafted a compromise with Congress in 1913. AT&T reported to state rate-setting commissions, as well as to the Federal government. The company had to be aware of public interest. This fact gives an oft-used quote from Page particular meaning:

All business in a democratic country begins with public permission and exists by public approval.

Page's principles of PR came out of a context in which AT&T did not experience competition as other corporations do. Yet, the principles outline a view of what PR could be, but most often, isn't. The following list is from an essay by Edward M. Block, who was himself one of AT&T's PR leaders.

(<http://www.awpagesociety.com/resources/BuildingTrust/PagePrin.pdf>).

- **Tell the Truth.** This means maintaining transparency with publics that one-way bullet-point communication often doesn't. Canned messages can obfuscate rather than clarify.
- **Prove it with action.** Page knew, as all communicators do, that the best communication is action and not crafted messages. Canned messages backed by action can be effective, but too often aren't because action doesn't equal words.
- **Listen to the customer.** Canned messages assume a customer is a receiver and not a transmitter.
- **Manage for tomorrow.** Good CEOs know the value of an organization relies on building understanding, processes, products and services that result in sales and earnings today and tomorrow. Canned PR messages usually, but not always, focus on winning a game today with little reference to tomorrow.
- **Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it.** Page meant that business should deploy all of its resources to building public approval and keeping it. Canned messages tend to be sales-oriented – win now and not later.
- **A company's true character is expressed by its people.** Canned messages have little to do with employee information, training and action. In fact, employees see through one-way messages more quickly than external audiences do.

- **Remain calm, patient and good-humored.** This assumes an environment in which openness is valued and where defensiveness and fear do not rule relationships. Today, companies like Google! blackball media that have offended them, and corporations shun financial analysts who fail to give them high ratings. Canned messages thrive in an environment like this.

Déjà vu

What Edelman wants as PR's future is akin to what Page discussed more than 70 years ago. The future continues to recede like videophones that AT&T demonstrated for more than 40 years, but still has yet to sell. One could argue that AT&T's view of PR was successful because Page was a businessman who established high standards and captured management's attention as a businessperson. There have been few such PR leaders. Further, it could be argued that when AT&T was forced to compete, Page's vision fell apart along with the company.

Nevertheless, Page's principles exist, but they aren't labeled as PR. They are called any number of things from organizational behavior through marketing and strategy. The principles are common to several business disciplines. PR lost control of Page's principles long ago – if it ever had a grip on them. With rare exception, PR is still considered publicity, a craft that broadcasts messages about products, services and issues through multiple unpaid media.

What is a proper role for PR practitioners? To shape and hammer a message, to listen, or both? Since the advent of politically driven message control, listening has largely depended on polling, focus groups or other mass measurement techniques. Such techniques are good when used well, but too often they are employed badly or for short-term goals and not for relationship building. Political polling, for example, is focused on the one-day sale when people vote and not on longer term relationships, which companies should worry about. Further, averages of opinions do not substitute for leanings of discrete persons, nor do they necessarily reflect individuals' long-term concerns. It depends on how a question is asked, as pollsters will tell you. Junk surveying has been the bane of public opinion researchers for decades. It has grown worse with badly designed online surveys that have little or no randomness and less accuracy. PR particularly has used polling badly to support one-way, canned messaging.

Political campaigning has become a rigid series of messages and themes (Theme of the Week) projected by a candidate in set-piece environments with much handshaking and little real communication. Town halls hardly make up for orchestration because even town halls are orchestrated. Political PR practitioners have refined message control and instilled an attitude that message transmission is about winning and losing. This is critical for political candidates because if a vote goes against them, they disappear. It is political life and death.

It isn't true for companies that may be here tomorrow, even if their latest product or service fails to set the world afire.

In defense of political PR, however, John Dean's aborted campaign for the presidency did show campaigners ways to personalize communications and build two-way relationships with voters through adroit use of the internet with meet-ups to organize small groups (<http://www.meetup.com/>), forums and e-mail techniques. It made a massive difference in Dean's fundraising and caught the attention of many. It didn't make a difference in Dean's campaign because he became the issue.

Companies can get second chances where politicians don't, and it is in second chances where relationship building is critical. If a public trusts a company, it is more likely to give a company benefit of doubt. Goodwill is not bankable, however. It can be destroyed depending on what company employees have done. Just ask Merck, which is defending itself against lawsuits related to its Vioxx drug. For many years, Merck was one of the most admired of US companies for its ethics.

Still, relationship building:

- Is action-oriented more than message-driven.
- Recognizes that one doesn't always win in the short run.
- Assumes long-term continuance of communications between target individuals and a company and not a life-death experience.
- Has a longer time span in which to get a message heard and response back because it is more than selling products, services or issues.
- Accepts environmental change as part of normal relationships and not as threats to success.

While PR practitioners trained in campaigning bring urgency and organization to communications, they distort the meaning of relationships. Consider:

When I vote in a general election, I choose or not a president who then becomes a somewhat distant leader in Washington DC. I see the President on TV and read about him in a newspaper, but the President rarely affects my life directly. Losers like Al Gore or John Kerry descend to relative obscurity. When I buy a car, I enter a relationship with the auto company during the time I own and drive the car. The relationship is in the product before me every day. I may never deal with the company directly after the purchase, but I do relate to the company's expression of its business and concern for me in the auto. The company's message is molded into steel, glass and plastic. If it's a badly built machine, the company says it doesn't care about me. If it is a well built machine, the company says it values me as a driver of one of its products.

The same holds true for many products and services we buy, or as Page said, "Prove it with action." We judge a company's communications by actions it takes to serve us. We believe canned messages only if experience proves them. That is true as well for politicians, but politicians can't prove their worth until elected. They are placed in a position of communicating to win before they can prove their merits as officeholders. This opens a chicken-egg question for companies as well. How do they gain a reputation when they are new in the marketplace except by one-way communications in the same way a politician does? At the beginning, they are in the same position as a politician, but as they survive, their reputation becomes more what they do than what they say.

Last year, I purchased a Honda, which, so far, has been a wonderful machine. Based on driving the vehicle and a lack of repairs and recalls, I have concluded that Honda knows autos and me. But how did I know to buy the Honda in the first place? Honda conducted publicity and advertising campaigns, but I paid no attention to advertising or press releases, none of which I read before I purchased the vehicle. I relied on word of mouth and impartial testing by *Consumer Reports*. How Honda reached me was through prior action. It has a history of making good vehicles, and this one was judged to be well made too. My approach to an auto purchase is how millions choose a panoply of consumer products and services from movies to restaurants to clothes in which impartial reviews and word of mouth play a greater role in purchase decisions than PR messaging.

So, when Honda's PR practitioners drummed facts to the media, and the media relayed those facts, did they do their jobs? Some practitioners say they did, and PR was successful, whether or not Honda's messages reached or influenced me. If one measures success on the basis of placements in the media and media's reach to readers, viewers and listeners, they were. However, measured on the basis of my relationship with Honda, they weren't. One-way PR message-sending has little to do with relationships, and that is what Edelman is unhappy about.

Relationships are more complex than purchase decisions, as PR practitioners know, and they are not isolated to consumers, as Wal-Mart discovered. For years, the cash register told Wal-Mart where it stood in public opinion. The sales receipt was the consumer's vote for the company, as it is for most retailers. But, sales receipts were not enough when employees revolt over wages and working conditions. It is a retail version of what happened to Detroit automakers in the 1930s, and unions are aiding and abetting complainers. Standing in contrast to Wal-Mart is Costco, which pays employees better but also is a low-cost retailer. While a message of "Always low prices" works for relationship building with shoppers on the one hand, it failed with Wal-Mart's employees on the other.

Should PR practitioners be held responsible for relationships when they have no input on the conditions of the relationship? Reasonable observers would argue they should not be, but in making the argument, PR consigns itself to message shaping and delivery and not relationship building. Moreover, the push to make PR measurable appears to focus more on short-term ROI for a discrete set of messages rather than long-term credibility for a company as a whole. This pushes PR even farther from relationships.

No Easy Answer

For PR to become involved in relationship building, it must lessen reliance on message-shaping and communication and become a dedicated listener, as Edelman wrote. But, to do so would require reshaping the DNA of the industry, which is unlikely. Further, it is not always clear, as political communicators contend, that one-way communication is worse than two-way listening. When one needs to win the day, pushing canned messages can work. If it didn't, campaigners would have dropped the approach long ago. They know by staying on message and parrying media questions that are off-message they come close to forcing the media to carry their message. One-way communication is what movie producers want and many marketers of goods and services. When budgets follow wants, message shaping and distribution is what PR departments and agencies supply.

To escape concentration on sales and to rise to relationships requires entrée to CEOs focused on business for today and tomorrow. But, it isn't always the case that CEOs are concerned with the long term. This is what Krispy Kreme, the donut maker, learned when it concluded that its former CEO and COO had failed to establish proper accounting and business controls before they drove company growth. When Krispy Kreme's business went off the cliff, its board learned the truth. Krispy Kreme, however, is an extreme example of a difficult situation that bedevils CEOs and those who would focus on relationship building. This is Wall Street's view that a company is only as good as its last quarterly earnings. Shareholder pressure for performance and immediate return has narrowed communications to one-way selling rather than relationship building in many companies. Some CEOs have not withstood Wall Street's pressure, especially since boards of directors are more independent. Other CEOs have recognized obsession with short-term earnings is unhealthy and have stopped giving quarterly projections, but the pressure remains. Either way, short-term performance puts a burden on practitioners who want to focus on long-term relationship building. They need the business credibility of an Arthur Page to make their cases with CEOs. Unfortunately, few PR practitioners have business credibility. PR practitioners are largely viewed as message makers and senders who package the views of leadership rather than helping leaders develop strategies.

There are a number of steps that PR leaders and practitioners need to take to change from “spinmeisters” to relationship builders. All are challenging.

A first step is to focus on better selection of people entering PR and competitive pay to attract higher-power talent. Today, PR tends to develop and promote communicators rather than train businesspersons to communicate. It focuses on graduates of journalism schools and communications departments rather than graduates of business schools and science and engineering. As a result, PR becomes a communications ghetto from the outset rather than a department tied closely to the business of a business. How many line managers looking for career advancement would take a PR job or be desired in one by other PR practitioners?

How PR talks and teaches about itself is a barrier to PR’s success in moving beyond one-way communication. Concentration on communications techniques and tactics, as much of PR training does, reinforces message-creation and sending rather than issue orientation. (Even so, PR is not in the vanguard of communications research. Technologists are, as a *New York Times* article noted.¹)

PR needs more stress on issues research. This has happened with some PR agencies, notably Burson Marsteller, which has positioned itself as an authority on leadership and CEOs. (See CEOgo <http://www.ceogo.com/pages/home>) while Hill and Knowlton has established its Corporate Reputation Watch (<http://www.hillandknowlton.com/crw/index/>). Other agencies have made efforts toward producing intellectual capital, but none approaches the quantity or quality that a major consulting firm produces. Wouldn’t it be interesting if there were a McKinsey (<http://www.mckinsey.com/>) of PR where research and ideas precede implementation? There isn’t one today.

PR’s leaders have not helped the situation through a tendency to disassociate themselves from everyday PR practitioners rather than elevate practitioners to deeper business understanding. Segregation of PR elites into the Arthur Page Society, the PR Seminar and Wisemen highlights a division between functionaries and leaders. The elites communicate by their action that once one has reached prominence, one no longer needs to be associated with common practitioners. But, it is the common practitioner who will move PR from one-way communication to relationships by how the practitioner analyzes challenges, relates to businesspersons and implements programs. It might be better if leaders focused more on mentoring subordinates than discussing a future that never arrives.

Yet another barrier for PR in moving toward relationships is the PR practitioner’s attitude toward technology. PR has lagged in the use of new communications technologies to listen and build relationships. The Internet is the first medium controlled by individuals and not publishers. It allows individuals to speak out as

easily as publishers through e-mail, blogs, web pages, instant messaging, etc. PR practitioners have been slow to adapt to the internet. The business of web page creation largely belongs to marketing and web development companies that are not associated with the PR business. As for blogging, PR practitioners were slow in using it too. Technology workers, political commentators and even lawyers led the way.

PR hasn't handled software well either. Software systems such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) have explored individualized customer attention and advanced in maintaining a record of individual interaction with a company. PR has had no input into the development or use of CRM. PR's personalized relationships are largely confined to ancillary groups such as the media, industry analysts or not-for-profits. Even among these groups, practitioners still fail in such basics as knowing what a reporter, analyst or blogger is interested in before contacting the person.

Communications consulting has not been successful either for PR companies. Early on, it was fashionable for PR firms to offer communications audits in order to sell business. It didn't take long for clients to get wise to the sales technique. Some PR firms still offer audits but it isn't clear they are that successful in generating business or in moving PR to a consultative status. Most communications firms offering full-time consulting are small and dependent on one or two partners to attract business. Meanwhile, PR faces competition from organizational consulting firms dealing with internal relationship issues, such as Mercer Human Resource Consulting. While it is possible to position a PR firm as a purveyor of relationship-building solutions, the hard part is finding a feasible business model and persevering until it works.

Ultimately, it is necessary to act what you are before you are accepted as being what you are. Actions speak louder than words. It is time for PR practitioners to stop crying for a seat at the CEO's table and act as if they have a seat by how they counsel business leaders from a knowledgeable business perspective first and communications/PR perspective second. The seat will come in time, but only if an individual wins it. Ability is a function of a person and not of an agency or title. A practitioner may, on the strength of business understanding and counsel, win a place in the highest councils. A practitioner of lesser ability will continue to be excluded.

PR practitioners must understand that relationship building internally and externally can be accomplished in any number of ways. It doesn't have to come from PR. A company can farm out PR's body of knowledge and tactics to different groups within an organization for implementation. In fact, this has happened to some degree. PR isn't guaranteed recognition and credibility within corporate boardrooms. It can remain what it is unless practitioners elevate it.

In the end, the craft of shaping and staying on message may be where PR belongs.

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James L. Horton, the founder of online-pr.com, has been in public relations for more than 25 years.

ⁱ Lohr, Steve, **A Techie, Absolutely, and More: Computer Majors Adding Other Skills to Land Jobs.** *The New York Times*, Business Day, Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2005. p. C1ff.