

# Public Relations: Where Illogic and Logic, Chaos and Control Collide

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From the beginning of disciplined thought, there has been tension between the chaos of human activity and rational control. It was Plato who wrote in Book Six of *Laws*:

*Man...is a tame or civilized animal; nevertheless, he requires proper instruction and a fortunate nature, and then of all animals he becomes the most divine and most civilized; but if he be insufficiently or ill educated he is the most savage of earthly creatures.*

Albert Einstein wrote of the distinction pointedly:

*...one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one's own ever-shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from the personal life into the world of objective perception and thought.*

Tension is embodied in public relations where painful crudity and ever-shifting desires are the milieu in which practitioners represent clients and influence perceptions.

Corporate management, while accepting the chaos of human affairs, doesn't kowtow to it. In business, one learns mathematics and matrices and other logical categorizations. These are supposed to impose rationality on the irrational and chaotic episodes of business life.

In public relations, irrationality and chaos are a given. At the same time, planning and execution hew to business rationality. We mount campaigns. We execute. We measure success or failure in economic or other terms.

All well and good. But, much of what PR practitioners do is handling chaotic events and issues outside the scope of control. Practitioners deal with people driven by self-interests, fears and opposed principles. We hope by educating them we can build bridges of understanding and support, or, conversely, lessen support for opponents in favor of our clients.

A practitioner doesn't have to work in PR for long to understand there are barriers to acceptance that are unbridgeable – some for lack of interest and others from the fact that individuals have made up their minds. There are also barriers to rejection that

have little to do with controlled communications. Although President John F. Kennedy's legislative fecklessness and rumors of his priapic tendencies have long since been confirmed, there are those who consider him a great president. The Democratic political establishment disdained President Reagan, but Reagan enchanted voters. So too, some companies, organizations and individuals have "charmed" existences, while others struggle. There is no particular reason for it. Wall Street talks about companies and industries being "in or out of favor." Hollywood talks about stars who are "bankable" and fading celebrities who aren't. Acting ability may have nothing to do with why one person is on top of the game and another isn't. Conversely, there are those who are "snakebit" in unfashionable businesses, and those trapped forever as "wannabes" who haven't made it.

Odd and illogical factors might go into hardening of opinion. Performance of a candidate, as the famous Nixon-Kennedy debates proved, can be decisive. That is decidedly illogical but candidates know a TV camera is pitiless in helping people form impressions. Hence, an industry grew that attempted to help candidates, CEOs, celebrities and others control their appearances before a camera. The net result is that many spokespersons seem artificial with the machinery of media training showing in look, gesture and word. That, in turn, alienates citizens seeking authenticity.

So why do we spend so much time in public relations aping the logical and controlled methods of business? Perhaps we should concentrate on the illogic of reality and adjust business accordingly. The answer is self-evident. The rubric of business is built on logic and control: It is uncomfortable with anything outside of an orderly perception of life.

It takes good managers to understand how messy business is. It takes great leaders who accept messiness and still motivate employees and customers. Wise CEOs don't expect 100 percent fulfillment of every corporate objective. They know behavioral change takes time, and it comes with chaos and illogic. Thus, for example, in a visit to a retailer known for its emphasis on control, the author discovered the store was missing a key manual, could not look up the product within its system, could not find the product online and had no idea what the company's stock number was for the item. Moreover, an employee of the retailer spent time blasting both the CEO for incompetence and the company's information technology system. Were the CEO watching this more than hour-long cock-up, he would be angry, but he shouldn't be surprised. Communications don't get down the ranks, and behaviors don't change like business planners say they do.

Perhaps the old-style publicist who grabs for any opportunity to get a client's name known has a better understanding of the way the world works. The publicist is closer to a day-trader in financial markets. One seizes advantage based on what is there and not what one plans. It is the antithesis of crafted marketing campaigns in which MBA marketers are schooled.

The rise of the internet and decline of network television has thrust painful crudity and ever-shifting desires back to the forefront of marketing. One can no longer depend on an annual upfront buy of TV advertising time to gain gross ratings points and awareness, all of which fit mathematical formulae. Marketers are trying a number of different media from guerilla tactics through fake blogs and viral videos. They're finding they are being outed by the public and their efforts wasted. Witness the embarrassment that Wal-Mart and Edelman Public Relations suffered by creating a fake blog. Edelman, which took complete responsibility for the subterfuge, was attempting a controlled use of blogging to tell Wal-Mart's story. It paid a blogger to tour the country on behalf of Wal-Mart. The resulting disaster earned Edelman a blast in *BusinessWeek*, which noted the firm had failed the standards it helped write for the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. Wrote *BusinessWeek*:

*As CEO Edelman says on his blog, his firm helped write the rulebook for companies trying to tap into the blogosphere. But his firm didn't follow its own rules for transparency... The first of six key guidelines, as spelled out by the trade group called the Word of Mouth Marketing Assn., is that "Consumer protection and respect are paramount." The second: "Honesty of Relationship, Opinion, and Identity." Outsiders marvel that the firm could go so far off track. "They certainly weren't doing what they preached," says Kevin O'Keefe, a lawyer-turned-blogger who founded LexBlog and helps law firms set up their own blogs.*

*The question in the blogosphere is: How could Edelman have tried to pull something like this over on us? After all, Richard Edelman has lectured blog writers, America's largest companies, and even politicians on how to use this new medium.*

Blogging comes from the messy world marketers fear. One can't control what a blogger writes, unless one writes the blog. There is too much illogic and chaos in free speech that business-trained marketers cannot accept. Edelman, apparently deemed it necessary to control the blogger in order to send a consistent and controlled message. This is not to criticize Edelman. The firm is a leader in adapting new technologies: It has made mistakes, and it will make more. Sooner or later, it will use messy media like blogs effectively. The issue that snagged Edelman is control and cession of it.

CEOs believe with the right PR person they can control what news media say about CEOs and their companies. They also believe if they don't talk to the media that the media won't talk about them. Both cases are partial truths. A good PR person might channel a news story in a certain direction, but the practitioner can fail just as easily. A company can disappear from public notice by avoiding the media but there is no guarantee it can always do so. It is humbling and angering for CEOs trained to control businesses to discover there are instances in which they have no control and no say. Good CEOs learn to live with criticism as a price of doing business. Less

competent leaders develop enemy lists and witch hunts, not unlike the spying that brought down the chair of Hewlett-Packard. In HP's case, there was leaking from the board of directors of the company's most sensitive plans. A director was disloyal, and the board felt it had to act. The board deputized its chairperson, Patricia Dunn, to conduct an investigation to find out. The investigation into reporters and directors led to four felony charges against Dunn. HP's reputation was savaged.

What should the board and Dunn have done? An easy answer would be not what they chose to do, but that doesn't help anyone. The board had lost control of a director who successfully hid in the background. It could have lived with the leaker in its midst, accepting the illogic and chaos of private conversation continuing to be made public. It could seek to stop leaks and impose discipline – rationality – on the process. While the board might have been more tolerant, it could not have carried business forward effectively with its sensitive deliberations exposed in news columns days later. The board's public relations problem started with its directors and radiated far from the boardroom to the trash can of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter on whom the company snooped.

The chaotic and illogical world poses conundrums like these to PR. Companies that define PR solely as a subset of marketing restrict relationship building solely to that which they can control. They tie PR to publicity, to column inches in newspapers, mentions in blogs and controlled events. Unfortunately, chaotic interruptions don't go away. The effects of illogic and chaos are simply shifted to departments other than public relations, such as the office of the general counsel. The assumption is that a general counsel will know better how to deal with a public relations mess. The reality is that most general counsel don't know what to do and their efforts to control a situation usually revolve around risks of tort. Hence, they provide advice about what not to say and how to remain silent to avoid depositions, when sometimes the remedy is saying the right thing and/or taking the right public action.

While degrees in communications and/or PR do not confer the ability on one to handle chaotic and illogical events, neither do law degrees. The ability of one person rather than another to handle illogic adroitly is born of experience and judgment more than of training. To put it simply, some can do it, and some can't. However, an ability to handle illogic and chaos is not enough in itself, and this is where communicators – and lawyers -- fail often. What is missing is the ability to get outside of organizational and individual self-interest and to look at issues and events from the perspective of target individuals.

Over-emphasis on control is the trap of fixed messaging. Staying on message is a benefit, especially in political campaigning. There are campaign themes, themes of the week and even, themes of the day. No matter what happens, the candidate gets back to the message and quote of the day. This is useful because it takes time to gain awareness among voters. One hammers until voters hear what is being said. The trap of themes is that they can and do conflict with the chaos of daily events. When a candidate is staying on message about Social Security but front-page news

is about nuclear tests in North Korea, there is a good chance the candidate won't be covered, or voters are distracted. Staying on message makes a candidate less flexible to adjust. There are moments when a candidate needs to have a thought of his or her own. It's in those moments the media, especially, and voters take notice. Howard Dean's unscripted scream on the road to the presidency ended his campaign. John Kerry's tacking and veering did him in his presidential campaign. George W. Bush's malapropisms and mangled syntax nearly sank him during his first try for the White House.

In the corporate arena, staying on message has similar benefits and traps. While it gets the word out about a product, service or company, a fixed message can run into trouble, if the media have no interest or find the message incredible. Such themes work best in marketing where the message is conveyed in controlled media such as advertising and events. However, there is no guarantee target audiences or influentials will respond to either. A PR practitioner often needs to get off message in order to get information out, especially when working with difficult reporters, skeptical customers, opinionated activists and hostile community leaders. Staying on message rigidly produces unfortunate outcomes such as happened to Edelman with its sponsored blog for Wal-Mart.

When staying on message works, a company gains awareness quickly. When it fails, it drags communicators down. Marketers trained in control often don't understand that chaos and illogic makes staying on message difficult, if not impossible. They order PR practitioners to use exact themes and quotes and to get these into news columns or on the air. They react with disappointment when it doesn't happen. They rarely realize that when controlled messaging breaks down, practitioners resort to creativity. Practitioners may use ideas far removed from the message but incorporate the message into them in unusual ways.

A second failure of communications in the face of illogic and chaos is cynicism. Cynicism is a belief that every individual acts only out of self-interest without reference to ethics, principles or objectivity. Journalists often view companies, candidates and individuals cynically with good reason. They witness lying, tortured reasoning and lack of respect for facts. Perhaps the one arena in which they observe most glaring examples of cynical communication is in politics. As Ambrose Bierce wrote in the *Devils Dictionary*:

*Politics, n. Strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles.*

Even before the beginning of the American Revolution, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century rationalist fathers of the United States understood the messiness of human affairs and knew one of their jobs was to develop a self-correcting – i.e. controlled -- political system. They witnessed the romantic ideal of democracy, espoused by Thomas Jefferson, twisted into the guillotine of the French Revolution.

From later experience, it is clear that rationalist politicians like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton felt there was no place in politics for self-interest that would lie, cheat and steal to get ahead. Their fear of mob action drove them into opposition with Jefferson. That fear also resulted in The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 designed to mute internal dissent and restore rational management of political affairs. The Acts were a debacle. Politics became ugly and chaotic early on in US history with battles between Jeffersonians and Federalists. The chaos remains today. Charge is met with counter-charge. Ugly insinuations are met with salacious rumors. Bloggers, e-mail and web pages have exaggerated such behavior in a return to charged argument and *ad hominem* of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Cynicism rules in commercial communications as well. Too many PR practitioners have little respect for facts and place too much emphasis on selling, no matter the cost to accuracy. The sad part is that many PR practitioners never realize they are doing it. Yes, they read critiques about publicists who badger the media with inappropriate and/or poorly supported story ideas, but that is never them. It must be a PR person in the next agency over who angers reporters. Such practitioners have made a cynical bargain with clients. Clients pay: Practitioners spray. Practitioners work under the assumption that if one contacts enough reporters, some are bound to write the story. If enough do and the practitioner generates enough airtime or column inches, the practitioner satisfies ROI objectives. There is no concept of the practitioner as a resource to the target audience. It is unilateral communications of the worst kind that pays no attention to media likes, dislikes and interests and it is the same over-control of message discussed earlier.

Public relations works between marketer and media, between consumer and company, between community and corporation and mediates communication to both. PR is not – or should not be -- a unidirectional pipeline of fixed messages from a company outward. PR practitioners become cynical when they fail to address concerns of those who don't pay practitioners but have a stake in a message. When that happens, the practitioner is a mouthpiece, a spinmeister justly disdained. While one-way communication is valued by many companies, it takes the relations out of PR. It reduces PR to one more communications tool designed to raise awareness without reference to behavioral change and reinforcement. If PR practitioners are not alarmed by this, companies should be. The Individuals to whom practitioners communicate are influential in how companies are perceived. Journalists, especially, collect opinion about companies and can relay what the perceived reputation of companies are. Journalists can bias perceptions of companies for better or worse by what they report. It is no different with consumers whose word of mouth is still the strongest selling tool and with communities for whom companies are friends or enemies.

An argument against two-way communication in PR may well be that companies have research resources to determine public opinion. They don't need PR practitioners to tell them what is being said outside corporate walls. Practitioners should assimilate research, develop messages and communicate in a controlled

fashion. Unfortunately, this view fails to recognize that average or median numbers do not account for this reporter, that consumer and that community up in arms over plant discharges.

A fatal flaw of much PR reasoning is to assume there are publics. There are no publics. There are individuals whose opinions and perceptions are collected into publics. Numbers obscure individual opinion and perception and often ignore the importance of the populace surveyed. An opinion from the President of the United States usually carries more force than the opinion of a homemaker in Weehawken, NJ. If the President of the United States calls for getting steroids out of baseball in a State of the Union message, as President George W. Bush did, it can break a long-standing logjam between baseball players and team owners over the issue, which is what happened. If a journalist writes a devastating expose of a company, which journalists do, the journalist can ruin the reputation of the company in the stock market, among regulators, with customers and others. If a community conducts a boycott of a company because of pollution, its local protest in the internet age can easily become global. If a customer tells 10 friends to stay away from a company's "lousy" product and these 10 friends tell 10 friends, a disaster is in the making. The opposite is true as well. Positive stories and experiences boost confidence in companies and management among shareholders, give customers comfort and open doors in communities.

However, accepting the existence of individuals over mathematical bundles of opinions and perceptions accepts chaos in life, the lack of precision and the difficulty of communications and relationship building. That's the trade-off in PR between logic and illogic, control and chaos.

Today, measurement is a mantra in PR, but rush to measurement threatens to turn PR into matrices and boxes. The more one is fascinated by logical relationships, the farther one is removed from the messiness of life where relationships are, at best, obscure. The PR practitioner should not – and cannot – ignore the logical disciplines of business, but neither should the practitioner ignore the imperative to remain grounded in what is happening outside organizational walls. PR practitioners work with half of the brain given to organization and the other half observing chaos. One should inform the other constantly.

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