

PR Process Today

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Thirteen years ago, one of the few articles focusing on the process of delivering public relations services was published in **Public Relations Journal**, long since defunct. I remember that article because I wrote it. A dramatic shift has occurred in the last 13 years in how we deliver PR services, and it is worth reviewing. One no longer discusses the queue time of documents piled high until secretaries typed or corrected them. Secretaries barely exist in most agencies I know while throughput has increased vastly. We create, edit and deliver documents more quickly than ever before. And, with e-mail, Blackberry mobile e-mail, remote computing, personal digital assistants and cell phones, everyone is in touch with everyone else. Perhaps too much so. PR practitioners need time to think. Constant connectivity has become for some a way to substitute action for thinking.

It is difficult to recreate office life from 1989. Too much time has passed and changes have been so constant that one can no longer remember precisely what was done in a given year. But here are differences I notice:

Paper

Anyone who remembers 1989, recalls the different kinds of paper a PR office stocked. There was generic letterhead on good bond. There was personalized letterhead on good bond for individual practitioners. There was newsclip paper, press release paper, memo paper, notepad paper and second sheet paper. It was expensive and there was plenty of time wasted on reordering, on getting paper for new practitioners while disposing of old paper for practitioners who moved on. There were storage shelves reserved for paper and there was an inevitable “paper

panic” when a large mailing went out and we ran short of press release head.

We still use lots of paper. We pour reams of 20lb, multipurpose, 8.5 x 11-inch white office paper through laser printers, but we rarely replace stocks of personal or generic letterhead or second-sheet paper. As for memo paper, clip paper and press release letterhead, we don't use it. They are templates in our word processing system. We still have personalized notepaper, but my stock has lasted for three years and probably will last a few more. I am not sure we have ever toted the savings from NOT ordering paper. We also have not toted the savings in time required to handle it. In 1989, secretaries routinely replenished paper stocks. They don't do that anymore.

Copier

In 1989, we had a large and clunky copier that broke frequently. One got to know the copier repairman like a friend except that when the copier broke, there was tension in the air and a nightmare in performing client service. As it was, there were lines at the copier when it worked, and people pulled rank to get to it depending on the urgency of an assignment. That's all gone. The last time I used the copier was a couple of months ago and the time before was a space of about two months as well. The copier stands idle most of the day. Our firm traded in its large and sophisticated Xerox for a smaller one – a Xerox 432 DC with a smaller service contract. Compared to the old behemoth, the new one looks lost in the workroom surrounded by storage boxes. I have often wondered how many hours practitioners spent annually fooling with or waiting for access to the copier. It is negligible now. In addition, we spend no time formally or informally in training people how

to use the copier. Hewlett-Packard laser printers are copiers today, as H.P. predicted they would be by the early 1990s. I would like to predict a time when the copier could be removed, but I don't see that happening. There are still newspaper and magazine articles that one might need to copy and an occasional letter.

Phones

The phone system has produced about the least productivity improvement. That's because most people used a phone productively anyway. Productivity might have been greater if we poured money into a system, but why bother? Today's standard office desk phones have plenty of features, most of which we don't use. However, teleconferencing is easier, and transferring phone calls is a one-button exercise. Voice mail is a constant, but it's not that much different from our old system. Cell phones are ubiquitous: In 1989, they were scarce. One improvement is that the cost of calling has declined so far that our firm no longer enters client codes when dialing. While this is not the result of phone system improvements, it shows how long-distance calling has become a commodity and a reduction in the cost of client service.

Computer Network

The big difference since 1989 is computer networking. Back then, a transition from Wang World processors to cranky office-based PC networks was underway. There was no Internet connectivity and e-mail was used only for leading-edge clients who communicated through a private-host service such as CompuServe. Today, we gripe when the computer network goes down. In 1989, there was no network to complain about.

It is hard to believe now, but the tyranny of daily surface mail is gone. We no longer rush to make the final afternoon mail collection nor do we tangle with addressing envelopes and Federal Express or Express Mail labels – all time-wasters. Today, we rarely send paper letters or memos. They go by e-mail. We refill the postage meter less often – about once in every two to three months, in fact. Meanwhile, the real productivity benefit of the

network has come in sending press releases and contact letters to journalists. Only a few journalists remain who do not have e-mail or refuse to use it. We line up e-mail addresses and bulk-mail releases with the touch of a button. The total time elapsed is 10 minutes. By using MediaMaponline.com, we store lists and addresses online and rarely commit them to paper. In addition, we send releases directly to PR NewsWire or BusinessWire from the computer and never see paper. The efficiency is extraordinary. In 1989 media lists were terrible. We had hundreds of them on paper. They were made and re-made over and over and cost huge time losses. I used to say then that I could go into any PR department, look into a file drawer and pull out handfuls of media lists. None would be accurate. That has largely changed although lists are not perfect and never will be with the frequent moves of the media.

In 1989, getting out a release was a tedious process of faxing it to PR Newswire, for example. PR Newswire would type it into its system and fax back a copy for an edit check an hour or so later. We would approve the edit and call in approval. Then the release would be queued on PR Newswire's system and sent. Meanwhile the account executive, a secretary and assistant were making piles of fax cover sheets for the release to send it to specific reporters, friends of a firm and others. This was an all-morning or all-afternoon task if there was a multi-page release going to more than 100 fax addresses. The time spent in sending one release was a significant hit to a client's budget.

Turnaround time has declined dramatically. In 1989, a three-day turnaround without using Federal Express was unheard of. Today, a three-minute turnaround is practical. I send e-mail, and you respond. This, as much as anything else, has caused client response to skyrocket, and it is hard to believe that we accommodated three and four-day turnarounds for anything we worked on in 1989. Of course, Federal Express bills have fallen now because we don't need FedEx that much – a further savings to the client's pocketbook. In fact, overall shipping costs

have declined. Handling large documents or multimedia such as videotape or slides was an orgy of correcting, copying, addressing and mailing. It took a large part of a day. Today, we digitize and e-mail multimedia – or place it on the Web site for instant access.

Coincident with the decline in shipping costs was decline in faxing. We don't use a fax machine much, although we still have several. Fax machines were time wasters. Faxes didn't go through. Machines got jammed. Faxes went to wrong addresses. They were unreadable. Today, we fax only when we have to do so. We have tested in the past unsuccessfully and are testing again, a capability to fax directly from the computer network. If we get this working to our satisfaction, the fax machines will go. Good riddance.

Software

In 1989, we used Wang or WordPerfect or another common PC-based word processor. Lotus 1-2-3 was the dominant spreadsheet, but PR practitioners did not use spreadsheets. There was a presentation package like PowerPoint to dress up sales meetings, but it wasn't used much. Few thought of using a database like today's Microsoft Access. D-Base III, the dominant relational database then was too difficult for any but experts to program. The Wang word processor was a dedicated machine that was woefully inadequate for e-mail and other office functions. Spell checking was a joke. Formatting that we can do today, such as tables, was difficult to do. Multiple colors were unheard of. Other word functions were largely missing, such as outlining, sorting, text-to-HTML and drawing. WordPerfect was a keystroke-driven program with 12 function keys, each with three levels that used the control and alt keys, and a template to tell you what to do. With the advent of Microsoft Office, whether or not you like Microsoft the company, all that changed. Word processing is graphically driven now with icons and drop-down menus to tell you what to do. PowerPoint presentation software is ubiquitous and film-based slides have disappeared. The days it took to write and produce a simple slide program are now

hours. The expense of making a slide program is the initial cost of the software.

PR practitioners use a spreadsheet now, although not comfortably. Many graphs and charts come from Microsoft Excel because it is a point-and-click exercise. Some practitioners keep specialized media lists in Excel although this is not a productive practice. The multiple sorting function of the Excel spreadsheet has proven useful for any number of data projects. Regrettably, few practitioners use a proprietary database like Access even yet. Although our firm developed a relational database for a major client project, their use is not common. This is a gap in client service that needs to be addressed.

Calendars are a mixed result from a process point of view. In 1989, nearly all calendars were paper-based unless one had purchased calendar software separately for a PC. About all the software could do was print your appointments in different formats from wallet to notebook size. Today, for some reason, most practitioners have a paper desk calendar, but increasingly, they keep appointments on Microsoft Outlook software or in Blackberries or personal digital assistants. The Outlook calendar system because it is network-based, coordinates schedules throughout the office and saves time trying to round people up for meetings. I gave up a paper calendar years ago, and I suspect other practitioners will do so as well when they find they don't use them much. I would have thought paper calendars would be gone by now, but some office tools hang on stubbornly.

In 1989, a Rolodex filled with new, old and often-erroneous information sat next to the desk calendar. A Rolodex was and is a time-waster because people's information changes constantly. On the computer, changing information is a matter of a few keystrokes. With a Rolodex, it was typing a new card or scribbling tiny corrections on the original card that were soon joined by other tiny corrections until the card was unreadable. Either way, it cost more time than opening Microsoft Outlook, calling up a name from the

contact program and making changes. The biggest time waster was information needed by more than one person. In 1989, every Rolodex carried duplicate information of vendors, reporters and others. Half the time, this information was out of date so one wandered the office asking if anyone had the number for X. With Outlook's networked contact list, this waste has largely been eliminated. Moreover, Outlook sorts contacts in several ways so one can find names or companies or categories or locations. In the Rolodex, filing changed by user. Some filed by company and some by names and some by both. It was never easy to find information in someone else's Rolodex. Today, if the name is not in the network contact program and no one knows what it is, our next stop is the Internet where we look it up. While this is not failsafe, it is quicker than a telephone book or dialing information.

Another tool on the desktop in 1989 was a timesheet. Although timekeeping software existed and was used by technologically advanced agencies, most had a paper-based timesheet. Timesheets were time wasters and poor timekeepers as well. Unless hounded, PR practitioners did not keep time accurately and some did not keep time at all. It was difficult to report to a client an accurate record of service performed on the client's behalf. There was a fudge factor in every billing report based on whether practitioners filled out timesheets daily, weekly or monthly. Meanwhile, a hidden cost of timesheets was in entering them into the accounting system and providing time reports. In 1989, this was done largely on spreadsheets, but it still required chasing after time sheets and hand entering. That was largely the job of a longsuffering clerk assigned to plead with practitioners to turn timesheets in. Timeslips software changed all that. We use version 10 of the software (which indicates how long it has been around). Entry now is directly into the software, which totes and provides time reports automatically. For those trained and allowed to use the clock that comes with Timeslips, timekeeping is an all-day activity that provides records to the second. Timeslips software has done away with an enormous amount of useless work, but it is

not as efficient as it could be. PR practitioners still dislike timekeeping.

Knowledge management

In 1989, a hunt for lost files was a daily occurrence, and it consumed client service time. Even a small agency had dozens of yards of files and a large one had miles of them. Secretaries were designated file keepers, and file order was directly dependent on a secretary's interest in filing. Today, we still have yards of files, but most could be thrown out and probably will be in years to come. We don't file paper to them often and nothing of immediate need is in the filing system. Rather, our firm set up a central drive on the network where all agency information is kept by client and category of document. We still lose things but not as badly nor as long as we used to do. The current system has eliminated the stress of a file hunt, and we store more data now than we ever used to do. However, the system is not perfect. It doesn't capture e-mail without extra work on the part of the practitioner, and most work uses e-mail. We have addressed that by sending copies of e-mail to others working on an account and by saving critical e-mails to the central drive. We archive e-mails on each individual's PC, so they can be exhumed as we need them. It has saved me when I have had to reprise client interactions to prove we had not failed the client. In 1989, this would have been a scramble for paper memos and phone records that consumed time and would not have been as complete. Today, I reproduce entire e-mail threads that recapture the history and tone of a client interaction.

Research

When we wanted to look something up in 1989, we used Lexis-Nexis or Dialog or the in-house library or local public library. We don't use Lexis-Nexis anymore, but we could. We do use Dow-Jones Interactive, the Wall Street Journal Web page and The New York Times online. We don't go to the local newsvendor who carried out-of-town newspapers. (He's not there anymore). We look up stories on the Web page of a newspaper, magazine or network. It saves days of time. We don't scramble for a

company's annual report. It's on the Internet. We don't collect product brochures. They're on the Internet. We don't fish for our company handbook. It's on the intranet. We do keep an in-house library of publications. It proves useful when one is trying to find information not readily available on the Internet or when one is trying to get a sense of a story's position in a print publication. Research today is a joy by comparison to 1989 and much quicker. Still, there are facts one cannot find on the Internet or in print publications. Research still requires time-wasting digging that today's office tools do not alleviate.

Ratios

What has today's office done to the staff needed to serve clients? Today's staff is a fraction of what was needed in 1989. Back then, the secretarial-to-practitioner ratio was two to one, and that was stretching it because two demanding bosses could keep a secretary running all day. Today, the ratio is one secretary for every seven professional staff, and truthfully, it is not even that. I don't use a secretary anymore except for booking travel. Salaries that do not directly lend to client service have been largely eliminated while speed and quality of client service has been vastly increased. This is what productivity is about. From an efficiency point of view, the good old days of PR service weren't good. In fact, they were terrible. It's better now and will improve. As my hair turns gray, I note that young practitioners have no idea what I am talking about when I mention some of the things we used to do. That's as it should be. No one should want to go back to inefficiency. We should work toward better, faster and less expensive ways to serve clients. PR's worth comes not from time we waste but from value we give.

Jim Horton was one of the earliest writers on the use of PCs in public relations for better, faster and less-expensive client service.