

Truth, Fact and Perception: A Constant PR challenge

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What do we know? Not much. We can read seven newspapers a day, scan dozens of Web sites and blogs, watch TV, listen to radio and talk to experts. We can accumulate mounds of facts. But do we know the truth of anything? This is the challenge facing PR practitioners tasked with building and maintaining reputations of individuals and organizations.

The truth challenge is as old as Adam and Eve, the first spinners of fact and opinion. The trade-off between truth and perception was a topic thinkers tangled over before Plato and Aristotle. It hasn't changed in thousands of years and won't change thousands of years hence.

PR practitioners work with facts, perception and truth every day. It's what we do for a living. As practitioners, we talk almost casually about changing perceptions, but what does that mean? Merriam-Websters dictionary defines perception as "the act or faculty of apprehending by means of the sense or the mind; cognition; awareness" and notes that it comes from the Latin verb, "percipere," which means "gathering in." Perception, then, is the process by which humans collect information and a basis for how humans see things.

When we as PR practitioners talk about changing perceptions, we mean two things, whether we discuss it or not --

changing individuals' ways of perceiving, their way of gathering in facts as well as changing their understanding and opinions. This is important to remember because it is easy to ignore one part or the other. PR, has two functions – education and persuasion. Education seeks to change the way someone perceives an event and persuasion seeks to change how the individual interprets facts that have been perceived.

Concepts and Opinions

This brings us to a distinction that is too often ignored – concepts and opinions. One can have knowledge of a subject, a concept of it, and a separate opinion about it that may or may not relate to knowledge. Concept is understanding; Opinion is judgment, a formed conclusion. There are at least six possible states in which a message-receiver can have concepts and opinions about anything. (See chart). We identify two basic states of understanding (concepts) – good or poor. We identify three possible types of opinions -- Good, bad or neutral. Within the boxes for each nexus of opinion and understanding is a tactic PR practitioners use. We use these approaches intuitively for the most part. Anyone who has worked in communications will know how to change an approach based on an individual's understanding and opinion. If the individual is on our side and knows us well, we reinforce his or her understanding and opinion. If the individual

knows us well and can't stand us, we rebut the person's negative comments about us. If the individual doesn't know

us well, but thinks highly of us, we educate that person about us and reinforce the good opinion – and so on.

		Opinion		
		Good	Neutral	Bad
Understanding (Concept)	Good	Reinforce	Motivate	Rebut
	Poor	Educate/ Reinforce	Educate/ Motivate	Educate/ Motivate

One point to remember is that PR practitioners adapt communications and facts to the message-receiver's perceptions, understanding and opinions. We don't – or shouldn't -- proceed based on our concepts, perceptions and opinions. We go in the message-receiver's door and come out our own, and we do this because we have to. Effective communication depends on message-receivers and not message senders. The key word is "effective." Most communication is ineffective noise that confuses issues more than clarifying them and fails to produce understanding or opinion change.

Pursuit of truth

Truth is an abstract notion meaning fidelity or compliance with facts. It is the least attainable of the three elements of truth, fact and perception.

Cynics say there is no truth. What one holds as true is an accumulation of perceptions gained from filtered perception of events and environment. One can never know ALL facts of a situation, especially a participant's intent. Others

say there is truth, but it might not be recognized immediately. One may never know ALL facts or intentions but one may know enough to present it truthfully. (Historians claim it takes 20 years after an event to perceive it correctly. Accident investigators say it may take months or years. The commission investigating the destruction of the space shuttle Challenger took months and millions of dollars and manhours just to gather data.)

Unfortunately, PR practitioners deal with now. We can't wait 20 years to get an unbiased perspective on an event. We can't wait for months. We have minutes or, at best, hours to respond. We fumble like anyone else toward the best collection of facts and interpretations of facts in defense of clients while knowing that we don't know everything. We know – or should know -- statements of fact are incomplete and selective, that anyone collecting and/or stating facts has consciously or unconsciously chosen one fact over another and that the fact gatherer might not have grounding

or knowledge to know what it is important.

However, if we do our jobs well, we usually know more about the facts than an outsider does. Secondly, if we are honest, we develop evenhanded interpretations that present clients in the best light possible, given the situation. That's a tall order, but our economic justification rests on building and maintaining reputations of individuals, organizations, products and services. There also is a moral dimension to what we do. The moral dimension comes from balancing perceptions of others through use of our persuasive abilities. Or, if we recognize there is no positive interpretation, we state facts accurately because honesty is the best way to maintain credibility and reputation.

We could use our persuasive ability to tell lies. We can knowingly use inaccurate or incomplete facts and fictional interpretations and still persuade another to our point of view for our own ends. Some practitioners believe winning is all and ethics have no place. Others say those who use persuasion apart from facts jeopardize themselves and clients. Think of Saddam Hussein's information minister who made absurd claims up to the hour American tanks entered downtown Baghdad.

Practitioners who value the moral dimension of PR say that practitioners should know accuracy builds credibility, inaccuracy destroys it and lies shatter trust and reputations. But practitioners sometimes confuse short-term goals with long-term reputation. They feel pressure to act expediently rather than ethically even though if facts come out,

it can harm them and their clients. This is what Donald J. Carty, CEO of American Airlines, learned when he failed to tell his unions about benefits for senior executives after he extracted wage concessions from union workers.

Intention

The mystery in pursuit of truth is intention. No one other than the individual who acted knows the reasons why he or she did what was done. Outsiders can observe act, but not intention. Even if one's intention is stated publicly, it may not be the real intention. An observer, such as a reporter, may conclude on the basis of facts that an individual or company has intended to act well, badly or in some other fashion, but the reporter's conclusion is not factual. Most often, conclusions about another's intentions rest on an individual's credibility. We tend not to trust one who has lied in the past. We tend to interpret acts based on prior knowledge of those we observe. Watching an adult kissing a child may be seen as loving if the one kissing is the parent or horrible if the same person is a convicted pedophile.

While a kiss has no moral dimension other than expression of feeling, one's motivation makes it good or evil, and the one who observes it judges it good or evil based on perception and opinion. This invites misinterpretation. The wave of purported child-abuse scandals in daycare centers in the 1980s and 1990s came from such misinterpretation. Zealous prosecutors who believed child abuse was rampant unwittingly planted false memories in compliant children who could not distinguish fact from fiction. The prosecutors then used the children's' testimony to gain convictions.

The use of DNA in crime investigation has liberated dozens of convicted prisoners who were found innocent. The fact that many prisoners were black appears to relate to prosecutors and juries assuming blacks are more often guilty of crime.

Balancing

Differences in facts, perception, interpretation of intention and opinion create conflict and will always do so. This is why PR practitioners are economically important to individuals or organizations. Reporters reach large numbers of individuals and directly influence opinions about reputations, products, services, issues or individuals. If reporters get it wrong, others suffer and the suffering can be permanent as victims who have been unjustly pilloried in the press have learned.

While practitioners prefer to deal with reporters in a logical manner of education then persuasion, but it is not always possible to do so. When a story is written and about to be published and you have five hours to answer 28 detailed questions, there is not much one can do to proceed step-by-step.

Still, it is best to deal first with how a journalist perceives a potential story – that is, what understanding the reporter brings to it and what the reporter concluded about it, if anything. The best situation is a reporter with an open mind and without a conclusion. It is possible to educate the reporter in this case. Education seeks to change the selectivity or perception with which a reporter approaches a story. For example, a reporter who knows little about retail doesn't know what to ask a retail CEO

about the retail business. The PR practitioner helps the reporter grasp details of the retail business in order to conduct a meaningful interview. The practitioner also guides the reporter to relevant facts that place a client in the best light. When a reporter knows a subject in-depth, the PR practitioner provides supplementary facts the reporter needs to write a story accurately.

One point to remember is that reporters rank facts by importance to an eventual story because all humans do. PR practitioners may suggest to a reporter that one fact is more important than another, but the reporter may not judge it that way. As a result, fact ranking is inherently biased. But that isn't necessarily harmful because reporters and editors tangle with fact and perception constantly. They are – or should be -- masters in separating the two. It is only when a reporter is manifestly wrong and out of control that a PR practitioner might appeal to an editor over a reporter. This rarely happens because most reporters are careful craftspersons who respect truth, fact and perception.

Changing Opinion

The step beyond fact gathering is conclusion or opinion about the subject. This is critical. Some news organizations believe a reporter's job is to state facts accurately and keep opinions to themselves. Other news organizations expect reporters to come to conclusions based on their reporting. Media get reputations based on how their reporters approach the issue of opinion. For example, *Forbes Magazine* and *CBS 60 Minutes* were long feared because reporters came to interviews with a point

of view and used interviews to confirm what they thought they knew.

When a journalist approaches a body of facts with a conviction that “something is rotten here,” the PR practitioner tries to persuade the reporter to suspend or balance judgment. The practitioner should know a reporter well enough to understand whether the reporter is capable of suspending judgment and work with the individual accordingly. That means practitioners should be informed about reporters they deal with and avoid situations where there is high risk. Learning about reporters comes from researching stories under their bylines and experience with them.

Of course, no PR practitioner can know the intention of a journalist, or any human being. A reporter can say he is reporting such-and-such a story then change course after an interview starts. The worst case is when the PR practitioner’s understanding of a story is incomplete, especially if a client has failed to tell the practitioner all. (There is nothing more humiliating than learning one has been set up by a client.) One can stop an interview, but that doesn’t help much. With sensitive topics, it is essential to prepare the interview subject thoroughly for tough questions. This is why media training is important and why clients who want to “toss off” interviews on tough topics are foolish.

Trust

Trust builds through repeated and expected action. It is an essential component of truth, fact and perception. If the PR practitioner is unknown to the reporter, there is no trust. If a PR practitioner says to a reporter “I will get back

to you,” but never does, there is no trust. If the PR practitioner is caught lying, there is no trust. If the practitioner faithfully returns calls, answer questions and plays straight with a reporter, a journalist will begin to trust. The practitioner’s credibility with the journalist rises – but it is always tenuous. The same is true for journalists. An unknown journalist is trusted less than a known one. The journalist who will get back to you but never does is not trusted and the journalist who “burns” sources by violating his word to them, loses them forever.

Truth, fact and perception live through interaction between reporters and PR practitioners. There is never a time when a practitioner achieves a state of full trustworthiness, and there is never a time when an independent journalist is completely under control. Perception is relative to the story being pursued and to the credibility of both the reporter and practitioner. A reporter who is a long-time friend may listen, but the reporter also may reject and tell the practitioner when facts and persuasiveness don’t add up. The practitioner learns to accept limits to a relationship as does the reporter when the PR practitioner does not tell the reporter everything that is occurring.

There are frustrating times when nothing one does can overcome the mindset of the media. One takes the stories that result and hopes over time to achieve balance through changing minds a step at a time with facts. Here is a typical example of what happens daily in PR. A CEO of a retail chain succeeded in enhancing the value of the company’s stock and building cash to the point

where the company's balance sheet was strong even during an economic downturn. Analysts, however, faulted the CEO for declining comparable store sales. That is, store X sold less this year than last year. The CEO saw his job as creating value, and he considered declining store sales to be a temporary phenomenon. The analysts saw declining store sales as the prime indicator of declining company value, even if the company managed to increase cash and bottom-line profits. The company's stock price plummeted as institutions sold off the stock, and the CEO was furious that his good work building a strong balance sheet was ignored. Reporters following the analysts' and institutions' lead wrote story after story about the decline of the company. Turning around this situation around would require careful approaches to journalists with a set of facts that showed convincingly that the company was not in dire straights and was in fact, a good investment. It wouldn't happen overnight but with repeated approaches

some reporter somewhere might listen with an open mind and buck the trend.

There is no novelty about truth, fact and perception but there is mystery. The mystery comes from never knowing what is true and how completely one has the facts. This is why PR practitioners should be cautious about alleging what is true and open to new facts that might change a story in ways unknown. Maintaining a spirit of accuracy is the best way to build credibility with reporters who value accuracy. Maintaining a spirit of service toward reporters and their needs enhances a practitioner's credibility because a reporter has to get a job done. Working with a deadline mentality supports reporters who live by deadlines. Arrogance doesn't become PR practitioners who value truth, facts and correct perception. They understand how difficult it is to get things right.

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