



Plus ça Change: Three Observations on the State of Professional Public Relations, in the Classroom and Out

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There's an old French idiom that says, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." The more things change, the more they stay the same.

When examining the state of the public relations industry—and public relations education—it appears this idiom is accurate.

For as much as the delivery methods and modes of public relations and media industries change in a flash, the fundamentals of the industry continue to stand true. Public relations keeps pace with the needs of clients and journalists alike with the newest trending topics—as evidenced by Small Programs Interest Group presentations at the AEJMC National Conference in St. Louis in 2011—but at least three standards persevere in PR.

1. The E's Have It

A look at the Public Relations Society of America code of ethics suggests that public relations, as an industry, continues to be dedicated to a lot of

"E" words—"ethical practice," "positive example," "strategic execution," and, of course, "excellence." But ethical practice in an industry with no required competencies of accreditation or certification still stands tall as the most important challenge.

The code preamble states:

The value of member reputation depends upon the ethical conduct of everyone affiliated with the Public Relations Society of America. Each of us sets an example for each other, as well

as other professionals, by our pursuit of excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct. (Public Relations, 2000)

It has been that way since I first joined PRSA as a novice practitioner in 1985, and it continues to be that way today.

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), another association that public relations industry participants join, also likes words that begin with "E." According to this code:

These principles are essential:

- Professional communication is legal.
 - Professional communication is ethical.
 - Professional communication is in good taste.
- Recognizing these principles, members of IABC will:
- Engage in communication that is not only legal but also ethical and sensitive to cultural values and beliefs;
 - Engage in truthful, accurate, and fair communication that facilitates respect and mutual understanding;
 - Adhere to the following articles of the IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators. (International Association, 2011).

All of us, practitioners and professors alike, know that adherence to a code of ethics is based largely on membership in said organizations. But many professional public relations agencies and firms, like many

newspaper chains and groups, adapt a code of ethics for their employees. Consider Fleishman-Hillard's statement of purpose, published on its website:

Fleishman-Hillard continues to live by the code of ethics we established on day one. They're guiding principles we believe should never go out of style—mutual respect, teamwork and old-fashioned “client comes first” customer service. At the same time, the global tapestry of talent that is “our team” continues to cultivate new knowledge, growing and evolving along with an industry we've been an integral part of since 1946. To know Fleishman-Hillard is to know our:

- Client service commitment that moves us to begin each day with you in mind;
- Breakthrough thinking and creative solutions that set your business apart;
- Ability to develop some of the most enduring relationships in our profession;
- Seamless approach to integration supported by a unique and thoughtfully chosen network of experts. (Fleishman-Hillard, n.d.)

Ethics, engagement, expertise, execution, and a pinch of enthusiasm seem to be common in the field today.

Yet in this world of instantaneous communication and 72-day PR Stunt Marriages, how does this industry continue to enforce the standards of its commitment to the E's? Ethics is still first in the mind of every truly professional practitioner—even if P.T. Barnum did remind us, “There's a sucker born every minute.”

So in spite of Twitter jokes, website flaps, and blogging blowups, most public relations professionals continue to practice ethical communication on behalf of a client in the best way they know how. And most professors, through classroom work and such organizations as the Public Relations Student Society of America, continue to teach the same.

2. Public Relations Still Uses News Releases

One can tell public relations professors' vintage based on the name they use to describe this item sent to the “news media” on behalf of a client. For some of us, it will always be a press release, a throwback term to the day when “press” and “media” meant some very specific people and groups.

It's a hard habit to break.

Discussing this here and in my *Principles of*

Public Relations class took me back 35 years to my first-ever public relations class at Georgia State University in the fall of 1976. I was a hard-core reporter back then. I distrusted public relations. (I called them flacks, the most disgusting term one could call a member of the PR trade.) And while I adored my professor, Dr. Harold E. Davis, I was skeptical as we discussed this industry that worried about things like first impressions, remembering someone's name, and most of all, sending news for digestion to reporters. But I was so intrigued I tried to delve more into the process and practice of public relations at my school — only to find then that Davis' course was the only exposure we had to the process. Like the PR men of old (Bernays, Lee, Byoir, Creel, Garrett) I had to learn about PR the old-fashioned way—by doing.

Two quarters later, I found myself in an advanced reporting class, assigned to the press secretary for Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson. Though my professor kept telling me it was an “honor” for me to work with John Head, the award-winning journalist who was then Jackson's press secretary, I had no clue what to do.

So I asked my professors, “How do I write one of these press releases?”

Easy, said both men. Write a good short news story with a solid news lead, a good strong headline, and a couple of good quotes from the subject. And put in a graph at the end that tells the reporter how to get his or her own quotes for additional stories.

Somewhere in my massive files, I still have a copy of the release I wrote. Now, 35 years later, I find that most public relations writing texts teach news release writing the same way. It's simply a means to disseminate news from a client to the media, based on journalistic writing; that is, largely, still written in the inverted pyramid style of reporting.

But today, public relations adds the agility of social media, creating a new delivery format for releases—the social media release.

In an article in *Teaching Public Relations Monographs*, Derville Gallicano and Sweetser note the “invention” of the Social Media Release and write about its conventions for current public relations practitioners:

The layout of the release is not as important as the content within. Defren (2006b) described the following principles of the social media release:

1. Democratize access. Anyone can use the

SMR, not just credentialed journalists.

2. Ensure accuracy. Organizations need to make their logos, graphics, and multimedia available for others to use while also keeping an eye on responsible use.

3. Engage in community building. SMRs encourage a sense of community by allowing for comments and by enabling viewers to download and use parts of the SMR for their own blogs and projects.

4. Share the context. Organizations should share links to industry research and even articles about competitors that can be labeled with the organizations' perspectives.

5. Promote visibility. Using search engine optimization and tags will help others find SMRs. See Defren's blog for a pdf about how to optimize news releases for search engines.

It is well-discussed and accepted that within the SMR, practitioners are encouraged to link to multimedia. A less-discussed tactic and benefit of the SMR is its incorporation of pitch agents. Practitioners can post links to blogs and other media stories that point to the importance of the SMR's topic, which could increase the likelihood that recipients write about the SMR topic. (Derville Gallicano & Sweetser, 2011).

But the content point remains the same. It must be news. Instead of perhaps putting key words in bold, they're now tagged or hot-linked. Photos are embedded or attached. Web sources are available for more information at the click of a mouse. And no longer is a practitioner at the mercy of the U.S. Postal Service. For goodness' sake, public relations has been electronic/digital/wired since the first computers were introduced. I imagine Steve Jobs thinking about that first Apple press kit, sent via snail mail; today, people would download it from a specialized, directed website to the iPhone 4s or iPad 2 of choice.

3. Public Relations, as an Industry, Is Still Growing and Is Still Needed

The 10th edition of *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, by Wilcox and Cameron, early on reminds the student of a few things about public relations. First and foremost, it is a growing, international commodity that is recession-proof. Someone, somewhere, always needs good public relations representation. True, the job market for recent public relations graduates is

holding steady (my alums might even say depressed). But a study published on the blog Ragan's PR Daily suggests that PR is still needed as an industry (Allen, 2011).

The blog discusses the job market for PR graduates, citing a book by Jeff Domansky, CEO of Peak Communications, *PRoactive: The Public Relations Job Hunter's Guide*. According to the blog article:

Domansky says that, despite the country's economic woes, the job market in public relations continues to grow. To buttress this point, he offers a handful of compelling stats, including:

- 24 percent growth in PR jobs forecast by 2018;
- 93 percent increase in PR job listings (November 2009 through May 2011);
- 307 percent more "social media marketing" job listings (November 2009 through June 2011);
- 34 percent of PR professionals will reach retirement age in the next four to seven years.

PR job hunters must source these difficult-to-find job openings and must also make a special effort to be found easily in social media. (Allen, 2011)

A press release on PRWeb (2011) summarizes Domansky's message about strategic job-hunting: "This requires a whole new approach to using social media, managing online profiles and responding quickly to job openings in a very competitive environment."

And according to another article on Ragan's PR Daily, the starting salaries for public relations specialists should stay just above the annual average:

A new report from the staffing firm Robert Half International says that starting salaries in the PR and marketing fields are expected to grow by 3.5 percent in 2012.

By comparison, starting salaries in the legal field are expected to see a 1.9 percent bump, while IT professionals will likely see a 4.5 percent increase. The average increase for all office workers is 3.4 percent.

The report also reveals average starting salaries for a number of positions in the PR and marketing fields. For instance, the starting salary for a PR specialist in a corporate environment with one to five years of experience ranges from \$38,750 to \$60,500. PR specialists with more than five years of experience can expect a starting salary of between \$59,000 and \$82,750 (Sebastian, 2011).

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