

*Public Relations
and
the Community*

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Editor's Note

AERICAN COUNCIL ON PUBLIC RELATIONS is pleased to make available in printed form some of the stimulating ideas which Mr. Louis Lundborg presented before one session of our recent Downtown Evening Course in San Francisco.

The following pages, excerpted from his address, contain some additional material selected from addresses he has given before gatherings in other important Coast cities.

The whole represents a sane, constructive philosophy of public relations which should be of interest and benefit to all who read this pamphlet.

Rex F. Harlow.

Public Sufferance

ALL institutions, even the most despotic dictatorships, exist under sufferance of the public.

Every business, every property title, every institution of government, every church, lodge, recreation exists because the public considers it desirable—or, more accurately, because the public has not decided it was undesirable.

Every business and institution must sell itself to the public, not occasionally, not annually, but every day.

The Threat of Regulation

Every business and institution must demonstrate every day that it is acting in the public interest, that it has the welfare of the community at heart.

With the modern concept that all activities are related to the public interest, no business is immune to government regulation. So there is no business, trade or profession that will not some day need friends in court, in the court of public opinion. The time to make friends is before you're dragged into court. A man under indictment has a tough time winning friends and influencing people.

And it is at the community level that regulation starts.

Trace, for examples, the history of anti-chain store legislation; anti-billboard legislation; public ownership campaigns, prohibition. All started in the communities of the country first, as did the agitation for anti-price cutting laws, wage and hour laws, and many of the others that later reached the halls of Congress.

If a business persists in practices which are against the public interest or which the public thinks are against its interest, which is just as bad, the public is going to slap on a regulation to correct the practice.

And make no mistake: the regulation will invariably be more severe, more restrictive and more costly than a self-regulation that would have satisfied the public if applied in time.

The public lays down the rules for its service, partially in laws and partially in public opinion, which at any time may be made into law. The task which business has, and which it has always had, of fitting itself to the pattern of public desires has lately come to be called public relations.

Important as it had become before the war, public relations will assume vastly greater significance after the war. In the readjust-

ments that will follow in the wake of the war, sound public relations may be the major factor in business survival.

Community Relations

Of all the many phases of public relations, community relations is, to me, the broadest, the most all-inclusive, because it is all the others rolled into one capsule.

All other phases of the subject deal with only a single segment of the public; or, as public relations men say, one of the publics. But the community is the entire public.

"Community Relations" viewed as a special problem, is the purest form of public relations. To support that thesis and as a background for everything else that I shall have to say, I want to analyze for a moment, the general subject matter of public relations.

What is Public Relations?

I don't wish to take up too much space with definitions; but some may be helpful. There are, of course, as many definitions of public relations as there are authorities in the field, with no two in entire agreement. It is not important to agree on exact words of a definition. Unless there is agreement at the outset, as to the goals of a program, however, there is no way of measuring and evaluating the steps taken toward those goals.

In this discussion I am accepting the thesis of Arthur Page that public relations activities are designed to give a business a good reputation with the public, establish it in the public mind as an institution of character and an institution which functions in the public interest.

A few other definitions may be of value:

Willard Chevalier, of *Business Week*, says: "Public relations is not something you say; it isn't something you do; it is something you are."

George Meredith says: "I like to think of public relations as doing the right thing and getting credit for it."

Paul F. Garrett, the director of public relations for General Motors Corporation, says: "Public relations is not something that can be applied to a particular phase of business—nor is it an umbrella covering everything but touching nothing. It is rather a fundamental attitude of mind—a philosophy of management—which deliberately and with enlightened selfishness places the broad in-

terest of the customer first in every decision affecting the operation of business."

To me, public relations work consists of building the character of an institution in line with the public interest—then letting the public know that it *is* in line.

One thing I do want to say. As I understand it, the term "public relations" is not just a fancy name for press agency or publicity, although publicity is one of the important tools.

It is not just the winning of friends among employees—although that may have an important bearing upon public relations.

It is not just the winning of customers for the product or commodity of the institution; that is the function of salesmanship or advertising—although both of those are important factors in public relations.

Goals of Public Relations

The work of public relations is more particularly concerned, not with the product or commodity sold by the institution, but with the institution itself. And it is concerned with creating a friendly and favorable attitude among the general public as distinguished from those small segments of the public comprising the customers or workers.

In some cases, these activities might even be said to be aimed at the members of the public in their capacity as average citizens as distinguished from their capacity as customers. It is entirely conceivable that an individual might be a satisfied customer, yet be the enemy of an institution because of poor public relations.

The Function of Public Relations

With most private business firms, the technique of public relations is applied largely toward protecting the right of the institution to exist, to operate under favorable conditions. That right may be threatened by legislation, by public-ownership condemnation, or by labor disturbances, for example, in which the public attitude may be a deciding factor.

Adjusting to the Public Interest

If a business has a large measure of public approval and the public has a large measure of confidence in it—it will give the business

considerable freedom. If the public lacks confidence, it will restrict the freedom of the business and maybe even destroy it. The pathetic thing is that in endeavoring to defend itself by restricting the freedom of business, the public is inevitably reducing the degree of effective service by that business. By the time a business is so closely controlled by public agencies that it can't do anything bad, it is likewise so tied up it can't do much that is useful either.

Real success, both for business and for the public, lies in enterprise conducting itself in the public interest and in such a way that the public will give it sufficient freedom to serve effectively.

Responsibility to Other Business

Bruce Barton has well stated this responsibility: "If any manufacturer says I do not care what the common mass of the people think about my business, whether it be popular or unpopular with them, that man is a liability to all industry. No major industry has any moral right to allow itself to be unexplained, misunderstood or publicly distrusted; for by its unpopularity it poisons the pond in which we all must fish."

Thus, to a widening group to which business is increasingly telling its responsibilities, must be added the important responsibility of business to business and industry itself.

Three Specific Steps

In our public relations we must try to get favorable public opinion by three definite steps. The first is to find out what the public actually thinks about our business.

If public opinion is not preponderantly favorable, then step two is to change the practices or policies to which the public objects.

Or, if the policies are right but misunderstood, then step three is to supply sufficient information to the public to educate it out of its misconception.

In our education of the public we must remember not only that the "public" is composed of many special groups but also that the public is a constantly changing thing:

There is a new public every day. Every day, 6,485 people in America become twenty-one years of age, and become members of the adult public; 3,838 die and are no longer part of the public.

The Use of Publicity

Publicity is an important part of public relations, but in business as in most human affairs, what you do is more important than what you say. It is always possible to make a good statement on a good set of facts, but no more in business than in politics is it possible to fool all the people all the time. And if we expect to stay in business long, an attempt to fool even some of the people some of the time will end in disaster.

If what the business is doing is not in the public interest, the more explaining the worse the result. But even if the policies are such as commend themselves to the public, the public is generally too busy with its own affairs to know about them unless they are set forth. Moreover, the very setting forth clarifies them in the mind of the business itself and sometimes the public comment on these policies will help the business to modify them in time to prevent serious difficulties.

The Individual

Too many lofty tomes on public opinion and public relations seem to regard the public as a great impersonal mass of statistics, gathered from a public opinion poll. They forget that the indivisible unit in the public is one individual.

When we speak in broad terms of the public interest, let us never forget that the most basic elements of the public interest are the sacred rights of the individual. The one cardinal principle of public relations above all other things, is that of respect for the sanctity of the individual. Unless a public relations program is based upon respect for the dignity of the individual man at the end of the line, no appeal to the mass will ever penetrate below surface emotions.

That is the common denominator between democracy, Christianity, and public relations.

That is the one essential that must run through all forms of public relations activity. The trouble-shooter for the light and power company, calling on a poor customer in "Shanty-Town;" the clerk on the information desk talking to a casual caller; or the general manager meeting with an important business contact, must always let that other person feel that he is highly respected, that his problem is considered important, and that, even if it is not possible to give him all that he wants, we have respect for his point of view.

Seek the Areas of Agreement

There is a strategy, if you wish to call it that, which is more basic than mere cleverness. It is the rule that Eric Johnston, the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, has followed so successfully in his discussions with government officials, labor leaders and others, both at home and in England and Russia. It is to try to find common ground, to seek out the areas of agreement first.

A related zone—a zone of potential danger, which can be made a great friend builder—is the amicable handling of grievances. Again, we should explore the areas of agreement first, to establish a bond of understanding, from which the minor points of grievance can be approached and corrected.

This is simply a matter of following the basic rule of respecting the other man's dignity, his individuality, his right to opinions.

Tests of Good Public Relations Policy

I would suggest the following as a checklist of questions that might be asked in determining the public relations aspects of company policies:

1. Is it best for the public?
2. Does the public know about it?
3. Is it presented to the public in a favorable light?
4. Does it respect the individual?
5. Does he know it—can he feel it?
6. Does your behavior demonstrate a genuine interest in the other person or group? or community?
7. Is it the truth?
8. Is it fair to all concerned?
9. Will it make friends for your company?
10. Will it be profitable to all concerned?

Community Activities

Participation in community activities is in one sense the best of all public relations because it follows the rule laid down by Dr. Raymond W. Miller, one of the sound thinkers in the public relations field: the rule of giving service rather than seeking favors.

There are three main approaches to community relations—three principal reasons for joining in community activities. One is the purely public relations objective—winning public approval by helping a community project that will have no direct value to you. One is to help in community efforts and developments that will increase the efficiency, the effectiveness or the profitableness of business operations. The third is that of doing community work just because it's fun.

There is not a business, not a profession, in any community in America that does not share directly in dollars and cents profit or loss from the improvement or the deterioration in (1) the physical condition of the city's physical plant, (2) the quality of service rendered by the city and other governmental agencies, (3) the quality of service rendered by civic and social agencies, (4) the availability of community resources and facilities to improve the physical, mental and moral health of the populace.

For example, how much does it delay deliveries and handicap customers if streets are unpaved or out of repair? How much gas was saved through the elimination of steep grades? How many hours and dollars are saved by a Bay Bridge?

Fire departments, health departments, schools, churches, playground—these are the resources of a community, its business assets.

There is no business that does not depend upon having a healthy community with respect to all of those conditions and that doesn't pay a heavy price if the community is unhealthy. But those things don't just happen. Somebody has to work constantly to build and maintain every service and every facility.

Yet industrialists operating in large cities sometimes forget that these community assets, services and facilities, operated by a sort of cooperative subcontractor that we call city government or community chest or chamber of commerce are just as important as if they were being operated solely and directly by the industry itself.

The only way they can have those services maintained at high quality is to give at least a fraction of as much personal attention to them as they give to their other business operations and to their other contracts and subcontracts.

By studying the problems of the community agency closest to his interest, a businessman can give practical assistance to it in ways that will improve its value to the whole community.

I have omitted deliberately, throughout this discussion, any treat-

ment of the business-getting values of community activity; and I would warn against exploiting community contacts for direct sales purposes: There is no better business builder, in most lines, than active community contact; but it is one of the paradoxes of this business that community activity will be a better sales builder if you don't try to use it that way. That also applies in large measure to the other direct public relations benefits that can come from community activity—if you don't try to cash in, you will—and if you do try to cash in, you may fail entirely.

Place of the Public Relations Counsellor

Since community relations are, as I believe, the very essence of public relations, I want to spot the public relations function in its proper place in the corporate setup.

No one individual can "handle" this public relations job. The job of representing the company in community activities must never be delegated to any one person hired for that purpose. A wise public relations executive won't let himself be put in that position, and a wise top executive won't try to slough off his responsibility onto the public relations counsel.

A public relations executive who takes on, for himself or his subordinates, all the assignments of serving on committees, making speeches and attending meetings, defeats his own purpose, and the company's purpose. The public is quick to spot such spokesmen, and to resent them. Notice the way a newspaper reporter treats a speech by a person hired to make speeches, as against a speech by a regular operating executive.

It is very tempting, for a man or a woman who likes contact with the public, and who enjoys the limelight, to accept every assignment that comes along to represent the company in a public activity. If he does it, he is signing himself up for a career of mediocrity. He will have no time to devote to his major job, and he will not be taken seriously enough within his organization to be allowed to do his major job. If he is willing to do all the company's errands, he will come to be regarded by public and co-workers alike, as an errand boy. He will not have the prestige that is required to do an effective job.

No, the job of the public relations man, whether he be on a salary or on a retainer, is to be a counsellor. His job is to decide what contacts with the public can be most effectively made by all em-

ployees of the company and then to see that they make them, and that they make them right.

The public relations man must, then, be more than a professional speech maker, more than a professional joiner, more than an errand boy.

Applying this principle to the specific problem of community relations, what is the job? It is to analyze every civic movement; every community organization; every governmental activity; every civic problem that might have any possible relationship to the company, or on which any employee or department of the company might be able to lend a hand. It is, secondly, to analyze the entire personnel of the company, to see who is best adapted to do various community jobs.

To you who have done personnel management work, I might say that the job of a public relations man is to do a piece of "job analysis," "personnel selection," and "job placement" to fit your company officers into community volunteer service.

The Counsellor and General Policy

If the public relations function of an organization is properly positioned within it, the public relations counsellor will enter the picture before the policies and/or the programs of the institution are decided upon—beforehand to guide, not afterward simply to explain or defend.

The counsellor must be in a position not only to initiate programs to improve public relations but to pass judgment on any phase of company management or operation, as to its public relations consequences.

Human Satisfactions in Community Relations

I mentioned earlier three reasons for engaging in community activities. The third, which I have saved for a closing word, is that of doing community work just because it's fun.

Everything we do in life, we do to gain some form of satisfaction—to satisfy some basic human instinct. Properly balanced, so that a man does not neglect his other responsibilities of family and of job, there are probably more rich, lasting human satisfaction to be gained from association with your neighbors in an unselfish effort to better your community, than in any other single form of activity.

