

Grappling With "Public Relations"

By Matthew S. Zinman, APR

I had the good fortune to hear Daniel J. Edelman, APR, Fellow PRSA, speak at our Philadelphia chapter luncheon last November. Edelman's comments were reiterated in the February issue of *Tactics*. He advocates that we should universally stand by the term "Public Relations" to represent our multifaceted discipline.

This is a direct reinforcement of PRSA's 1987 report from its Special Committee on Terminology, which concluded that the "diversity of titles and terminologies dissipates the image of the field." However, the fact that only six of the top 50 agencies and 75 of the *Fortune* 500 companies use the traditional "public relations" term suggests the opposite is occurring.

It seems another trend impacting our profession's image is the demand for specialty practitioners which, according to the consensus on the PR Forum listserv <prforum@listserv.iupui.edu>, continues to increase.

This trend is also evident in most large agencies, which divide their services by functional groups specializing in health care, technology, crisis management and so forth.

In addition, disparaging terms such as spin doctors, hacks and flacks seem to be wagging the profession. Should we really be so concerned with semantics without addressing substance and integrity? Does it really matter what we call ourselves as long as we collectively follow and enforce ethical and professional guidelines? Well, for the sake of a focused debate, I'll stick with the semantics for now.

I disagree that the "public relations" term accurately conveys the

breadth of our profession and is worthy of defending accordingly.

The general public, including my friends and relatives, seems to perceive public relations with the ambiguity it presents. Is it because the word "public" is too esoteric to describe a source's constituents or target audiences? Maybe it's obvious that "relations" implies communications, but does it suggest that it is a planned process? Does "PR" sound like a management function worthy of a seat at the CEO's table? And I'm sure that the importance of research gets lost in the decoding process.

Many clients and business types seem to think public relations is all about publicity. Do they perceive that to be a profession? Is it only something to implement in times of crisis? Is it thought to be driven by a body of knowledge and conducted with integrity based on a defined code of business ethics? Do they respect and endorse those ethics?

And then there are public relations and marketing professionals who have their own unique interpretations. I recently heard a local practitioner lecture about public relations to a post-graduate advertising class. She started out by saying, "There are two kinds of public relations... corporate PR and marketing PR." She talked about the four steps of public relations, which she explained begins with planning and ends with evaluation.

Her explanation seemed fluffy and inaccurate. I thought, "How can I perceive what I do so differently from someone with similar experience at another local agency? How can she ignore research to drive planning and provide a benchmark for

evaluation?" And, "How can I let these local advertising professionals leave this room thinking 'that's what PR's all about?'"

Why can't an occupation with an emphasis on reputation and relationship management effectively manage its own reputation? It seems the more I search for answers, the more questions I have.

PRSA may be gaining some ground by branding the APR designation and promoting award programs and speaker forums to the business community, but these efforts will not generate a critical mass of understanding and respect. Unless PRSA, IABC and similar organizations hold a terminology summit, agree on an umbrella term and lead their respective memberships to endorse it, the diversity of titles and terminologies will continue.

Admittedly, when I try to define public relations to someone, I describe it as "Communications Management." The report by the Special Committee of Terminology argued against using the word communication because it "denotes a function rather than a role that emphasizes top-management judgment."

However, that comment related to the corporate communications moniker. "Communications Management" can serve as both a function and a role which, as an umbrella term, could more accurately convey the intricacies of our profession.

It's true that the world is accustomed to public relations and PR. But I've educated enough clients and people close to me to know that "Communications Management" is

more readily and accurately perceived. Most people seem to understand the importance of effective communication — there's a direct correlation with their personal relationships — and know that communication breakdowns and the misperceptions they cause can lead to all kinds of trouble. Naturally they can see why it's in an organization's best interest to manage its communications.

As a business management function, I explain that "planned communications" are conducted to reinforce desired perceptions. These are driven by specific objectives — or goals — that may be used to increase product sales, improve community or employee relations, attract investors or raise money for a good cause.

If my inquisitor is interested, I may further explain that such objectives are defined through comprehensive research and that each audience is targeted with specific messages that are strategically delivered using the most effective tactics and channels of communication.

Finally, I believe the people around me are beginning to understand and have a greater respect for my profession. That makes me feel a lot better about what I do — whatever that is. 🍷



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