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ISSUES AND TRENDS THAT AFFECT MANAGEMENT

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IS ON THE INTERNET

AN INTERVIEW

WITH

RON HIGGINS, CEO,
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Where Are The Public Relations Leaders?

By MATTHEW S. ZINMAN, APR

Young counselor Matthew Zinman is troubled by the lack of leadership in his chosen field. So to find some answers, he asked the veterans of public relations wars to suggest how leadership in the field might best be kindled.

Their responses and his analysis are well worth the time.

It's always easier to say how things should be rather than change how they are, especially when it comes to the public relations business.

We each tolerate the ongoing challenge we face to create appropriate demand for our services in a profession that generally lacks respect, understanding and appreciation.

For me, this has induced a personal clash between my ideals and the reality of realigning my expectations about reaching my potential as a public relations practitioner.

FRAGMENTATION AND DISUNITY

Achieving advancement is limited by a number of related factors. Industrywide fragmentation and disunity have impeded our ability to convey the value of public relations management practices, especially among bosses, clients and others who affect control of our professional destiny. Individual practitioners have little exposure to broad industry issues or a direction for addressing them.

In agencies, practitioners are limited from educating clients who may perceive their call for services, like strategic counseling, as selfishly motivated. Their corporate counterpart practitioners may be perceived by upper management as

grandstanding for role advancement they don't believe is justified. (That's what lawyers and management consultants are for, right?) Peer forums and efforts to instill senior business executives with public relations savvy remain in short supply.

We've continued to avoid defending and defining ourselves, creating a void for others to fill with negative reinforcements. For example, media misrepresentation of and animosity toward public relations continue to flourish, especially recently, as "spin news" has dominated the mainstream.

As we evaluate how to address these complex issues, a common thread appears at the root — the need for effective leadership.

For now, public relations leadership remains a true oxymoron. But the time is ripe for practitioners with a craving to advance toward greater achievement and provide the guiding light for reaching it.

This is not to slight, in any way, those individuals and groups who dedicate their talents to benefit the public relations industry. The core issue is that there are too many individuals and little unity. Indeed, unity hasn't existed in our profession for 50 years. But establishing a leadership network can provide vision, build bridges toward consensus and set a course of action toward advancement.

IN SEARCH OF LEADERSHIP

Several well-known practitioners and industry representatives were asked for their opinions about leadership, and their responses are instructive for building a leadership framework for our industry.

• "While there is a vacuum of public relations leadership, we must cast out assumptions that people

want to lead,” noted John F. Budd, Jr., APR, Fellow PRSA, chief executive officer of the Omega Group. “Being a leader comes from within individuals who possess the vision, initiative, credibility, intellectual relevance and a degree of presence. They must be risk-takers able to see and hear what others can’t, or choose not to, and be willing to assume an implicit responsibility and accountability to lead.”

• Jack Bergen, president of the new Council of Public Relations Firms, said, “We don’t have a lack of leaders, we have a lack of the defined traditions and cultural norms that help us decide who among today’s outstanding practitioners have earned the right to be called our leaders. Unlike individuals in other professions who advance through rites of passage, public relations people have no such guides or guidebook.”

• Public relations professor and author Glen Broom of San Diego State University didn’t agree that public relations lacked leaders. “I see the opposite. There are many individual leaders but there is no unified front, a monolithic approach to issues in the field. Part of the reason is limited time and resources, but the demand for accountability has shifted many top public relations executives to become subordinate to marketing management, legal affairs or to human resources.”

Supporting this point, 17 of the top 20 public relations firms are owned by advertising/marketing communications interests. It’s possible that many leaders may be hard-pressed to advocate solely for public relations when their responsibilities involve the breadth of integrated marketing practices.

• Larry Weber, chief executive of Weber Public Relations Worldwide, suggested that the field is so new that leaders are just now emerging. “True public relations has only been thriving for a generation, which is a very brief time. The profession will need strong leadership as it enters its second generation, especially to prevent being usurped by other disciplines. These leaders need to recruit MBA types, various consultants and lawyers as advocates. As more CEOs give credence to public relations, we must tap their credibility to most effectively educate

their peers.”

• Patrick Jackson, APR, Fellow PRSA, chief executive of Jackson, Jackson & Wagner, noted the need for more quantitative methods to help propel the standing of the field. “We’re still practicing antique public relations and relegating our role to a staff function for messaging and getting out information. For 20 years now, corporations have sought ways to evaluate performance and return on investment beyond financial measurement, which can be so misleading. At least half of a company’s value is in its nonfinancial assets. Public relations possesses the perfect tools to develop auditing mechanisms for values like employee morale, brand recognition, productivity, customer loyalty, and social responsibility standing. Our leaders should be developing them.”

• Industry commentator and newsletter publisher Jack O’Dwyer, on the other hand, sees leadership potential in the more traditional functions of public relations. Said Mr. O’Dwyer, “What public relations needs is leaders who will talk about its benefits by building a case in an editorial environment. The more independent that environment is, the more effective the case will be.”

OPPORTUNITY IN THE VOID

The leadership void apparently isn’t bad for everyone.

“Lack of leadership is the single best source of business for me,” says Don Middleberg, chief executive of Middleberg & Associates, Inc. “Many of those running big agencies seem to have lost sight of what the business is about. They’ve got internal profit centers competing against one another ... pushing numbers around. That mentality deflates the cooperative spirit and isn’t in the best interest of clients. Big agencies need to recruit entrepreneurial talent and provide them the freedom to bring in the fresh air many desperately need.”

One effort to improve understanding and appreciation of the field is the joint project between the Public Relations Society of America and the Council of Public Relations Firms to use a “Socratic Dialogue” platform as an educational tool for industry forums.

• Ray Gaulke, PRSA president said, “We’re going to business organizations to identify the key issues facing each and how they’re addressing them. We help evaluate their successes and failures and offer an experienced Socratic Dialogue leader. In exchange, they bring the CEOs, lawyers and media to help address these issues. It’s a great vehicle for teaching public relations management strategy.”

Public relations educators, too, are attempting to build bridges with general managers to introduce them to the practice of public relations. Dr. J. David Pincus, APR, professor at the University of Arkansas, noted, “Changing the face of MBA curricula today could yield a new generation of executive decision makers who, unlike their forerunners, would begin careers already understanding and appreciating public relations’ purpose and value within organizations.”

SPEAKING UP FOR AN INDUSTRY

Beyond educating others about the importance and value of effective public relations, the industry must work at building consensus for leadership in a business that remains fragmented.

• Sam Waltz, APR, Fellow PRSA, chairman and chief executive officer of the Society, emphasized the importance of increasing membership to build unity. With close to 20,000 members, the PRSA represents approximately 6% of all U.S. public relations practitioners, according to some estimates.

Prof. Broom suggested that the relatively small numbers may stem from the fact that, “Many don’t see this as a profession, so they don’t identify with promoting ethics and other issues reinforced by associations.”

Then there is the issue of nomenclature.

Only six of the top 50 agencies and 75 of the Fortune 500 companies use the traditional “public relations” term to represent themselves. Another study by the Public Affairs Group indicated that only 16 percent of 539 companies with sales in excess of \$1 billion use the public relations term in department titles.

Finally, two factors that preclude our progress as a profession are the contempt exhibited toward

public relations by the media and political spin.

A *Business Week* reporter recently noted, “The fact is, for journalists, truthfulness remains the objective, even if it’s not always attained. In public relations, truthfulness is rarely even on the radar screen as a value, except perhaps as a convenient option or legal consideration. Hence, the deep distrust between these professions that are (unfortunately) joined at the hip.”

As for “spin,” as counselor Robert L. Dilenschneider wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Spin is to public relations what pornography is to art.”

It is clear from all this that the public relations industry is ripe for new leadership. We are letting opportunity pass us by rather than embracing it. We need qualified leaders to assume the challenge of pursuing advancement on behalf of all practitioners.

One step will be to organize a sanctioned dialogue at this year’s PRSA International Convention, which all practitioners are encouraged to attend. Finding ways to move beyond circular debate and build bridges to consensus will present one of the greatest challenges the public relations industry has faced.

As we seek ways to evolve public relations management, creating a working environment and industrywide culture to foster leadership will be critical for our success. ❖



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