
PR & JOURNALISM – THE LOVE HATE RELATIONSHIP

*"News is what someone does not want you to print – the rest is advertising"
- Randolph Hearst*

The relationship between the news media and the Public Relations industry is a complex and increasingly symbiotic one. The media is the central vehicle for much of the PR industry's messages. PR practitioners want to place their stories in the news or other publications and programmes. Without being able to do this, PR would lose one of its main avenues for communication with the public.

The media in turn has become more dependent on PR to supply content to fill airtime or column inches. Whilst newspapers have been steadily shedding staff over the last couple of decades they have simultaneously managed to produce ever thicker publications, and the ever growing ranks of PR are happy to help fill the pages.

The power of the big agencies and spin doctors goes beyond this however. As the primary point of contact between businesses and the media, PR practitioners can control access to information which journalists want. This gives them tremendous leverage in negotiating with journalists, as they are in a position to refuse information. As an American magazine editor, Mark Dowie, comments "even the most energetic reporters know that they have to be somewhat deferential in the presence of a powerful publicist. No one on a national beat can afford to get on the wrong side of a Frank Mackiewicz or a Harold Burson, knowing that their firms (Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller) together represent a third of the most quotable sources in the country."

Many journalists have a distrustful attitude to PR. There is a wariness of professional story-pitchers. In order to overcome this barrier, the professional communicators aim to build close relationships with journalists and media sources. The more and better relationships they can build, the more influence they can exert on the media.

The nature of the relationship is worth probing if we are to understand the modern media/PR system. Neil Macdonald, editor of 'Business Monthly', the newsletter of the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, provides some rare insights into the relationship. He tells of how, in the summer of 2002, he was approached by a number of PR practitioners asking him to provide some advance coverage of the IPRA conference, which was to take place in Cairo that year. Despite feeling "uneasy" with accepting a story from PR people, he ultimately concluded that he "couldn't afford to create a bad relationship with PR agencies" and assigned a freelancer "who I figured could take the fall if the individuals being written about didn't like what they read".

"Most journalists will have taken the PR shilling at some point in their career... Most of the time it is a straightforward love-hate relationship," observes Nic Paton, writing in the Media Guardian, "To the journalist, PR is a necessary evil. And PR is willing to suffer all that talk about integrity and independence as long as it gets the client those valuable column inches."

A recent report by the International Public Relations Society of 'unethical media practices' concluded that 'cash for editorial' practices are widespread around the world, especially in central and southern Europe and Latin America, in both print and broadcast media.

Although the bribing of journalists and / or editors to run certain stories is held to be quite rare in Western Europe and North America, (the PR industry continually stresses its strict adherence to honesty and integrity) some questionable traditions have developed. One relationship-building practice is known as 'selling in'. Journalists are employed as freelancers by a PR agency to write up stories on behalf of a client and to then sell them on to the press. The newspaper then never knows that it is carrying PR and the practice saves a lot of effort for the PR agency. Admitting to 'selling in' is not good for a journalist's reputation and is rarely discussed, so it is virtually impossible to determine how widespread this tactic has become. In spite of qualms of conscience, many journalists end up taking fees from both the PR agency and the publisher.

Like many journalists, Wall Street Journal reporter, Dean Rotbart went on to work for the PR industry. He set up a company TJFR Group to provide intelligence and background information on journalists for PR agencies. "The exclusive subscriber site contains stories, bios, columns, photos and streaming video that are useful to those dealing with and who have an interest in the business media." Such information is doubtless invaluable for media manipulation, enabling them to match the stories they want to place with the journalists most likely to be sympathetic. Rotbart's client list includes the biggest PR companies in the world and some of the largest corporations from every industry sector

One of the most alarming effects of the burgeoning PR industry's relationship with the media, is that it leads to a steady dumbing down of most news outlets.

Today the media is dominated by big corporations. Few newspapers in Britain or America are not owned by a media corporation. And as the press has become more corporate so its emphasis has shifted from traditional news values - investigation and reporting - to market driven values - profitability, and maximising readership. Noam Chomsky suggests that the most important value for the modern press is to deliver audiences for their advertisers, who supply the bulk of revenue. Fewer journalists are employed and less and less time is available for investigation. Instead content is supplied ever more directly from the press release. Investigative journalism becomes rarer and is supplanted by source journalism. The same can be said of the media world in India.

In this environment the PR companies have become a necessary crutch for the media, but not one that the media is keen to investigate and expose to the public, "like an alcoholic who can't believe he has a drinking problem, members of the press are too close to their own addiction to PR to realise there is anything wrong."

Keeping the uneasy peace

Alastair Campbell was the Director of Communications and Strategy for 10 Downing Street. He has been a controversial figure in British politics in recent years. Most recently, he has been accused of manufacturing evidence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to justify the 2003 Iraq war.

He became embroiled in controversy after the BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan broadcast claims that the government had "sexed up" an earlier dossier (about Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction). In a later newspaper article Gilligan said that his source had specifically identified Campbell himself as responsible for the alleged exaggerations. Campbell demanded a retraction and apology from the BBC, but none was forthcoming.

The BBC's source David Kelly identified himself to his employers at the Ministry of Defence. The government released this news and gave sufficient hints for his identity to become public. Kelly committed suicide shortly afterward and the Hutton inquiry into the circumstances of his death pushed Campbell further into the limelight. The Inquiry showed that Campbell had been working closely with the Intelligence Services, and made suggestions about the wording of the dossier. He had also been keen that Kelly's identity be made public writing in his diary "It would fuck Gilligan if that were his source". However, Lord Hutton cleared Campbell of acting improperly, as the Joint Intelligence Committee had taken all editorial decisions. Hutton also found that Kelly's name would have had to be made public to avoid allegations of a cover-up. The Hutton report was widely criticised in the media, however, and Campbell's "Presidential"-style press conference afterwards was widely perceived to be misjudged, with Campbell attacked for appearing to gloat over the BBC's misfortune.

The conflict between Alastair Campbell and the BBC is still being hotly debated and both sides are being criticised in equal measure. One of the issues this sorry saga highlights is the tenuous relationship between journalists and communications specialists.

Respected columnist Brian Appleyard claimed: "Truth is destroyed by public relations executives". He even referred to PR practitioners as "scum". Mind you, the argument is somewhat 'pot calling the kettle black' when the previous year John Mortimer - talking about the British press in the Spectator - said: "We may not be the crème de la crème, but we are the crème de la scum."

Appleyard went on to concentrate on the terrible relationship and "unholy alliance between powerful PR practitioners and craven hacks". Clearly not every journalist believes that PR practitioners are scum or vice versa. The relationship is at worst suspicious and at best ambivalent. Ultimately the partnership between the two, no matter how fragile, is a necessary evil. Simply put, there is a mutual dependence that needs to be respected.

The relationship is complex and of course symbiotic. The media is the key vehicle for many a PR tactic and central to communicating with the public. On the other side, journalists rely on the PR industry for their 'bread and butter' stories, especially as

media becomes ever more proliferate. There are some estimates claiming that 40 per cent of business news comes via PR releases and PR influences at least 80 per cent.

Yet, even with the obvious need for harmonious interdependence, the sparks fly. The biggest argument used against the corporate communicator is that there is no truth in what they say. And recent Campbell/BBC shenanigans do little to dispel the general suspicion. *'Toxic Sludge is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry'* by Stauber and Rampton makes you believe it too; it presents a rather horrifying tale of how public relations has conspired to defeat various activists that pose a potential threat to America's billion dollar corporations.

Even aside from the terrifying conspiracies of big companies, PR is, by its very nature, a spin on the facts to build a more positive image of a company or celebrity and a play down of the negatives.

Even though so much PR does make it through to news, it can be a hard fought battle. Getting coverage in business news is particularly challenging. Research by media evaluation company Carma International claims that the UK media is more cynical on corporate issues than the media in almost any other country.

But this doesn't mean some in the PR industry don't wield more power than they should. Some PR practitioners control access to company information making the most of the competition within media. These PR practitioners act as gatekeepers to those they don't want to let in and exert tremendous influence when negotiating with journalists. On occasions, and often more publicly, these spinmeisters go beyond merely promoting the good points of a company. They stop being the facilitator between the organisation and press and instead become more prominent and infamous than the story itself. Take a look at Alistair Campbell.

Add to this the impression that public relations is full of fluffy, nefarious '20 somethings', or alcoholic, designer label loving, mad women who lunch, vis a vis 'Ab Fab', and it seems the PR industry needs to look carefully at its own image. It is a case of doctor heal thyself.

But of course these notorious examples and caricatures are the exception to the rule. We know not all journalists are clichéd, chain-smoking, curmudgeons lurking in bushes to scoop the latest celebrity revelation, and the vast majority of people in both industries are consummate professionals.

It is about thinking longer-term than just the next press release. There is no value in lying or 'sexing-up' the story. You wouldn't do it with your colleagues, best friends or your loved ones because you are in it for the long-term. Give journalists the same courtesy. Yes, sometimes lunch is required, or a few drinks (although you may notice these days that the old-world journalist booze up is fast disappearing as the younger and healthier reporters come up through the ranks), but like any worthwhile relationship it is built on trust and a mutual respect, not on the size of the bar bill. Sling insults, deceive and throw tantrums and you will alienate each party and end in an unsightly, mud slinging divorce. But win hearts and minds with honesty and consideration, keep your integrity and dignity and you will be held in esteem.

It will never be an easy relationship as both parties have different objectives. The media endeavour to communicate true events and the PR practitioners strive to present their clients or organisations in the best possible light. And occasionally the relationship crashes on the rocks, just as it has for Campbell and the BBC.

In an issue of Editor & Publisher magazine, New York writer Jennifer Nicholson Graham lamented how difficult it was to get rehired in any newsroom after she served as a government press secretary.

Her column, humorously titled "flack Like Me," recounted the disdain that greeted her as she made the rounds of editors with her resume in hand. Graham tried to put a positive spin on her experience as a PR practitioner, saying that she had learned things that many longtime reporters still don't get:

"Former flacks will never alienate sources by leaving self-important voice messages such as, "This is John Smith. Call me immediately."

"Former flacks have been misquoted. They won't do it to anyone else."

"Former flacks will never address a public official or company CEO by his or her first name (or worse, nickname), unless invited to do so first. They understand that the rules of polite society aren't suspended for the Fourth Estate."

"Former flacks, having previously earned big bucks, have acquired all the material things they need and will not whine about pay."

Graham concluded that "if a former flack returns to journalism, despite a pay cut and despite the disparagement of peers, you know that this a person who truly loves the trade, who will give his all every day. So bring the flacks back."

PR PEOPLE, MEDIA WANT THE SAME THING

News people continue to use the derogatory term "flacks" when talking about PR practitioners. Well, OK, I guess we sometimes deserve it. But you know, I don't ever recall news people calling themselves "hacks" in the same headline as "flacks." This doesn't strike me as objective.

In general, the news media carries an outdated image of PR practitioners. Usually, their only contact with us comes when we approach them with an idea for a story, or they receive a news release in the mail, or when we meet on "flack-hack" panels that lament the so-called "love-hate" relationship between the news media and PR profession.

The fact is that public relations and journalism are after the same thing. We both want to work toward the public good and to make life better for those who live in our society. The only difference is that journalists do it from the outside, chipping away at the stone walls that organizations create because they don't trust the media.

Meanwhile, PR professionals do it from the inside, counseling management on the "right thing to do," urging candor and honesty, advocating the adoption of socially responsible policies, getting employees involved in the community, and basically telling our bosses that they'd better change if they plan to be around in 25-50 years.

And if PR practitioners aren't completely forthcoming or timely in their answers to journalists' inquiries, then shame on us, even if we are bound from revealing everything we know.

PR professionals have a huge problem. It's called the "advocate trilemma:"

1. We need to know everything about our company or organization if we are to give counsel.
2. We need to keep certain things confidential for business, legal or competitive reasons.
3. Because of our social responsibility, we need to tell everything we know.

But if we aren't forthcoming or timely because of the crude, cynical and inaccurate reporting we've seen in the past, then shame on journalists. They don't like being treated unfairly, and neither do PR practitioners. Above all, we are all human beings. For journalists, the answer to everything is either black or white; there can be no gray areas. In reality, there is very little that is either black or white.

As for the matter of pay, let me set this matter straight once and for all. Most PR practitioners are not well-paid. The higher-paid professionals are those who have achieved "counselor" status, and whose advice (business, social responsibility, communication strategy) is highly valued. In this respect, the senior practitioner is no different than any other corporate officer, including a senior editor or publisher.

The fact is that we live in a free-market society, and those who are valued and whose talents are in short supply make more money than the rest of us.

PR practitioners should have a difficult time re-entering journalism, no doubt about it. Having worked both sides of the fence, I know that I cannot be an objective reporter again. I don't want to be. I can do a better job trying to change things from the inside. And whether the news media like it or not, we do a pretty good job as partners for a better society.

*-By Craig Miyamoto
(International public relations industry veteran)*

An uneasy alliance – media, PR, companies

(Excerpted from an article by Grant Common, Managing Director of Sydney-based Network PR)

A vitriolic attack on PR in the Australian Financial Review in early November by one of Australia's most prolific and well-respected marketing and media journalists ruffled quite a few PR feathers.

This was because Neil Shoebridge's article delved into the uneasy and uneven relationship – often called one of love/hate – between media and PR.

Apparently drawing on his personal journalistic experience, Shoebridge pinged PR people for almost every imaginable sin. These ranged from sending too many media releases to not responding to phone calls. He inferred that dealing with the media was not difficult and that it all it required was honesty and responsiveness.

He also inferred that much of the problem was with PR people over-selling what they could achieve in the media for clients. He said that clients should do all the media work themselves.

Of course, he's right about many of the things he writes about. Media are hounded by PR people, too many media releases are sent out and sometimes calls from journalists are not returned. But all industries have their problems. Too many salespeople make unwanted calls and often mislead potential customers. Tradespeople are notoriously unreliable. Doctors habitually keep patients waiting. We all get annoyed by telemarketing. It happens.

However, media are not without their own issues. Some have been known to misrepresent people in stories, quote people wrongly and run material without even bothering to check they have the facts. Some media even blatantly promote information about themselves as news.

PR people with a similar length of experience to Shoebridge could write an equally scathing article on the failings and inconsistencies of journalists. There are two sides to every story! But so what – it's just an occupational hazard, and not something to get upset about.

PR people shouldn't be absolved from their sins. But nor should the messenger – the PR person – be blamed for everything.

What Shoebridge's flogging of PR people missed was the fact that if there is a problem it's a three-angled one – involving companies, their PR people and the media. All three contribute to it!

Here are some observations:

What's News?

The more inconsistent media is in treatment of news, the more pressure it puts on those supplying so-called news. And the media can be extremely inconsistent. News is subjective. It can't be assessed by running it

through a computer program. One media outlet can run something on the front page – while another consigns it to the rubbish bin.

Some media run stuff that is blatantly not news – but just run it on someone's personal whim. Some media, and individual journalists, have their own 'causes' that they pursue – so something that would ordinarily not make news appears as news.

These inconsistencies make it difficult for clients and their PR people. If Company A was lucky or connected enough to have had publicity for something quite mundane, it will be a brave PR consultant to Company B, wanting to say something equally mundane, who will say – “don't release it because it's not news”.

It's often the client who pushes for the media exposure

PR is a competitive business – with around 120 registered consultancies/agencies across Australia – and probably another 500 who claim to be in PR. Despite all the talk about media only being a small part of what PR does, it still dominates client thinking – especially amongst medium sized companies.

If 20 companies issue competitive briefs this month to PR agencies you can bet that 15 of them are primarily looking for publicity. Up to six agencies will enter each beauty parade – and the one most likely to win is the one that can offer or promise the best chance of publicity.

Suggesting that the product or company isn't going to be attractive to media, and that alternate communication channels should be considered, is often something the prospective client doesn't want to hear. Just as in the beauty parades, they say it's on other factors, but usually it comes down to just one thing.

If Shoebridge contends that the media is inundated with media releases (and he is right) he would be staggered to see the number and types of releases that companies try to get up, only to be knocked back by their PR people.

The issue here is that the mentality of companies needs to be appreciated. Often in the commercial world it's a numbers game – so what if you send 100 pieces of paper (or even emails, as they cost nothing) and you only get one response? That's one you wouldn't have received if you hadn't sent out the hundred. That's how they sell their products, so why shouldn't the same process apply to gaining coverage? Many of them don't want a professional relationship, they just want results.

PR people are in the middle

PR people are the tip of the iceberg that the journalist sees. That's why companies pay PR agencies. They often want them to build and manage the relationship with the media, because they don't have the time or, in many cases, the requisite understanding to do so themselves. They have outsourced that function to a PR agency just as they might outsource their accounting, IT maintenance or advertising.

But the media wants the relationship to be with the client, often seeing PR agencies as a hindrance to that end. Having media understand their clients' wants is a delicate proposition for a PR agency, and it's not helped by the fact that there are now fewer journalists on publications than there were just a few short years ago, and that they are therefore more time-poor.

Try explaining to a journalist that the client wants a relationship with the media, but insists that the relationship be managed by a third party – the PR agency. It's not what the journalist wants to hear, it's often not what the PR agency wants either, but it is what the client wants to happen.

PR people in general have made great strides over recent years in educating clients about the role of PR and the importance of the relationship with the media. Rather than PR people taking umbrage at what Shoebriidge wrote perhaps it's just evidence of what an uneasy alliance it is between journalism, PR and companies.

Shoebriidge did concede that there are some PR people and agencies who do a good job (they must do something right because quite a large proportion of what appears in the media does in fact emanate from PR sources. But whoever it was that put the burr under Shoebriidge's saddle was obviously not from one of those agencies.

To many, PR is simply about working with the media and gaining publicity or reacting to it. How well are you or your organisation really handling your media relations? Too many organisations feel they are handling their media well just because they prepare and release media statements when the organisation is doing something they think may be of interest. However, that's only a starting point. Good media relations practice is about planning and implementing a series of activities, always with the ultimate aim of ensuring your organisation gets the coverage it deserves.

10 ways NOT to handle your media relations

Do Not:

1. Use the global media release without changing a word

Some multi-national companies have a policy that won't allow you to do anything else. Others think it's a way to save money, effort and time. This is probably the single worst approach any company can take – because apart from probably reducing your chance of coverage by 60-70 per cent, it sends all the wrong messages to the media. You are in India, our media write for Indians, they want news and comments that is predominately angled towards India. If you want media coverage to influence your Indian market it's important to present it with this in mind. That's a key part of the PR role.

2. Send your release to as many media as possible in the hope of getting a 'strike'

One journalist described this at a media seminar as 'the Somme approach' – wave after wave of releases are sent out. Most have no hope of being used, but it doesn't matter – someone, somewhere might use one. This is a waste of time.

You can so annoy media across the board that when you do have something relevant to them they will be unlikely to pay attention. The key to good media coverage is knowing your media, knowing what they want and only sending what is relevant to them.

3. *Issue press releases on all your new products - including all the features from the sales brochure*

It happens all the time. Because there's a new product on the market, companies think it warrants a press release - even for the most inconsequential product. And of course we have to make sure that all the features from the sales brochure are included (plus a copy of the brochure!). Some industries will have specialist media that do want new product information - but even then it has to be abbreviated and summarised. Don't see publicity as a substitute for advertising. The PR role is to determine what's news rather than just what's new.

4. *Call to ask media if they've received your release and will they run it*

Few things annoy media more - yet most clients expect their PR agency to do this for every single release sent out. The fact is that most media receive a constant stream of releases and they make their judgement based on what they perceive as news value. Calling them isn't going to change their mind. The PR effort should go into making sure that the release is written and angled as specifically as possible for the media to which it is being sent.

5. *Have a policy of talking or commenting only in certain circumstances*

Some companies foster this approach. It often comes from the sales side of the business - senior people only talk when there's good news, when it's about our company or product and we don't talk about the industry as a whole. But it's wrong as a media strategy and shows a lack of understanding of the media and how it works. Some media call it the 'two-faced PR strategy'. If a company only wants to talk about itself, it is unlikely to get extensive media coverage and be portrayed as a leader in its sector.

6. *Let your sales people loose with the media*

Wherever possible keep your sales people away from the media - it's generally not a good mix. Sales people come from a different planet than journalists. Generally they 'come on' too strong and simply put journalists' hackles up. If you have no option, then ensure that the sales person is properly briefed and if possible has undergone some basic media training.

7. *Expect to forge your media relations over lunch*

The media sees its role as 'breaking' stories and giving news. These days most media are inundated with information and the business is more competitive than ever. It's far better to build up personal contacts and a reputation with media over time - but do that primarily on the basis of a professional relationship. Lunch is seldom possible for the busy journalist and if it is, it's probably better that you include someone important or newsworthy, like a visiting VP, or the engineer or technician responsible for a product breakthrough.

8. *Demand editorial space when you book an advertisement*

Journalists are professionals. Attempting to obligate them into giving you editorial space simply because you booked an advertisement shows a lack of

respect towards them. In daily mainstream media it's simply unacceptable. In trade and business media, if the advertisement is booked into a feature, then by all means ask the editorial staff what type of articles they are looking for, but never just assume that there's an unwritten quid pro quo.

9. *Expect journalists to let you know when a feature is coming up*

Features editors often work well in advance of publishing deadlines. They want the feature to have a particular flavour or thrust. By researching forthcoming features, you can be proactive, contacting journalists well in advance to see what type of line they are taking with the feature. Chances are, you will be able to discuss what you see as issues within the subject matter, often being able to contribute significantly to the editorial content. If you wait for them to contact you (if they actually do) chances are you'll only be filling in some gaps for them.

10. *Make it hard for journalists to get information in any other way than talking to you*

Good journalists do a lot of research before actually picking up the phone to call industry leaders for comment. That research can include a search of the 'newsroom' or 'media' section of your web site. The more relevant information you have there, and the easier it is to get to, the more chance you will have of being included in an article. Too many corporate web 'newsrooms' are nothing more than a repository of old media releases, rather than an information resource for journalists.

Here are a couple of quotes from US IT journalists taken from a seminar on how they view corporate media releases.

"I'm the filter. I'm the membrane between your company and my readers. It's not my job to get your company in the papers. It's my job to tell the stories my readers need in the best way possible."

John Markoff of the New York Times.

"Companies expect you to swallow their messages hook, line and sinker. I don't want to do that. I want to write about what I'm interested in and companies may not always like that."

Deborah Branscum, Newsweek and Upside.

While the comments are from the US interview, if you were to interview any two or three Indian journalists in a highly competitive media sector do you really believe the responses would be any different?

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop, held in Mumbai on November 30, 2005)