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THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW COMMUNICATION AGE

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Abstract: The challenges posed by the digital network revolution, globalisation and the empowerment of stakeholders (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007), combined with other events such as the global economic recession and a loss of trust in organisations, poses significant issues and opportunities for public relations practitioners. This paper explores the challenges of the new communication age by examining seismic shifts in the context in which organisations operate and the consequent changes in role that this requires of public relations practitioners. It concludes by postulating the contribution that practitioners can make at four levels within organisations and concludes that this is a time of significant opportunity for the profession. The main barrier for taking up that opportunity is the capability of practitioners.

Key words: Communication, public relations, new technology, context, levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Arthur W. Page Society (2007), the public relations profession is at a historic inflection point, generated by:

« the convergence of three major forces – the digital network revolution, the reality of globalisation and the empowerment of myriad new stakeholders – and it is changing the context for business and society.» (p.9)

This paper seeks to explore some of the challenges posed to public relations professionals at this point of inflection. It is structured in three parts; first an examination of the context in which practitioners now operate, second a reconsideration of the role of practitioners in organisations as a result of this environment, and third, an exploration of the opportunities that are now available to practitioners, including a re-articulation of their role.

2. CONTEXT

For a number of years a key role of practitioners has been seen to be that of organisational «boundary-spanners» (Aldrich and Herker, 1977), having one foot inside the organisation and one foot outside (White and Dozier, 1992). They have a strategic responsibility for environmental scanning, that is, interpreting both the external and internal environment for senior managers and representing the organisation to the external world. Hence, they both encounter and are required to interpret the changes and developments in those wider environments and the attendant reactions and adjustments that their stakeholders and organisations are making.

The three major forces identified by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007), mentioned earlier:

«have created a global playing field of unprecedented transparency and radically democratised access to information production, distribution and consumption. They are overturning the corporation's traditional ability to segment audiences and managers and how it wishes to be perceived». (p.6)

This assessment is supported by Alistair Campbell (Campbell, 2008), Director of Communication to former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, who identified six trends which he believes are transforming the role of public relations:

- the rise of the democratic corporation – organisations are being held to account in unprecedented ways as new technologies open up organisational activities to greater scrutiny. Furthermore, there is a greater insistence that their social responsibilities are taken more seriously, especially since the irresponsibilities of the financial sector in particular have been exposed;
- participatory media – the nature of news gathering and presentation is changing both in content and speed. Ordinary citizens are creators and gatherers of news as they too capitalise on low-cost mobile technologies and as news outlets open up to citizen journalism. By the end of 2009 (ITU, 2010), there were 4.6 billion mobile phone subscriptions, with the majority of them being camera phones. Every user therefore has the potential to be a photo journalist and/or documentary maker and as a result content and hence editorial is being wrested from the traditional media sources and filters;
- information has infinity – the advent of the new communication technologies enables information to be unbounded in space, time and place and can exist for infinity;
- the press does not reflect what people think – in pursuit of diminishing audiences it is becoming more negative and cynical: bad news sells newspapers;
- merger of the citizen/consumer – citizens expect the values of the public sector to be embraced by the private sector, and the service standards of the private sector to be adopted by the public sector. The demands on organisations, whether in the private or public sectors, are the same;
- the task of public relations is meaning – the huge amount of information available, the demise of recognised opinion leaders to gatekeep and interpret it, and the fragmentation of information sources (so that there are few common points of reference), means that the task of public relations is to create meaning from the chaos.

Apart from these wider observations, there has been a significant change in the nature of web-based communication, with the advent of social media capability. To provide an indication of the explosive growth of social media, the following statistics indicated usage as of July 2010 (Econsultancy, 2010):

- Facebook has in excess of 350 million active users on a global basis, an increase of 40% in six months and 50% of active users log in each day;
- Twitter has 75 million user accounts;
- LinkedIn has over 50 million members worldwide, and has increased by 1 million members month-on-month since July 2009;
- Wikipedia has 14 million articles, a million new posts in six months;
- 15% of bloggers spend 10 or more hours each week blogging;
- 70% of bloggers talk about brands on their blogs and 38% of bloggers post brand or product reviews.

This on-line activity, combined with the growing use of the internet as a whole (26% of the world's population are users (ITU, 2010)), poses particular challenges for public relations professionals who are usually charged by management with monitoring on and off-line reporting on their organisations and alerting management to any issues that may arise. For a number of organisations there is a growing realisation that their organisations are defined by communication – what others say about them, and what they say about themselves, because that represents the sum of their reputational capital.

However, the challenges posed by the new communication technologies are not the only ones faced by organisations. The recent global economic crisis has led to a deep questioning of values and of the capitalist system itself (Gregory, 2009). While trust in campaigns and government improved modestly in 2010, trust is fragile, and most people, when asked, expect business and financial companies to return to old habits once the financial crisis is over (Edleman, 2010).

Despite the lack of trust citizens remain interested in organisational values and there is an expectation that organisations will invest in corporate responsibility activities and that they should care for the environment (Ipsos MORI, 2010). Reciprocally, organisations recognise that they will have to build relationships with groups other than their employees and customers, and that stakeholder involvement and engagement are of growing importance

because of the new accountabilities that are being placed on them. They are beginning to recognise their dependency on a wider constituency to achieve their objectives.

3. THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

In response to these contextual pressures, the role of public relations practitioners will have to, and is, changing. As the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) reflects, the previous role included building and maintaining relationships with the media, corporate journalism; internal events and speech writing – in other words, a focus on tactical activity. The role of professionals in the «new world» will be in creating and influencing an ecosystem of advocates; stewarding the organisational values; brand and reputation building; shaping cultures and behaviours and empowering employees as communicators. The «new world» will require interaction: collaboration with stakeholders; an ability to clarify and disseminate values; to shape strategic direction and to deal with evaluating the performance of the whole organisation. Reputation will be seen to be a measure of actual performance and the people responsible for guarding and promoting reputation will become increasingly important in organisations.

The Authentic Enterprise (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007) goes on to identify four new priorities and skills that will be essential for senior public relations practitioners and will provide them with an opportunity to fulfil a leadership role

- defining and instilling company values;
- building and managing multi-stakeholder relationships;
- enabling the enterprise with 'new media' skills and tools;
- building and managing trust in all its dimensions.

Indicators from CEO's (O'Neill, 2008) are that they are looking to their senior public relations practitioners to help them to construct new corporate narratives which are authentic. This requires considerable engagement with staff in determining a value base that is regarded as genuine and can be lived and delivered by them since they are the embodiment of the organisational identity. It also requires the testing of these values externally to see if they are representative of the organisation as far as external stakeholders are concerned, and are values that can be supported by those stakeholders. The

notion of a negotiated identity, using values as common starting points (Van Riel, 1995), with co-creation with stakeholders a declared intent, is one that is gaining some traction (Gregory, 2007). The role of public relations practitioner as surfacing, communicating, negotiating and guarding those values is crucial.

CEO's are also realising that a new philosophy of business is required, driven both by the new technological and global context and also by recent economic realities and the attendant loss of trust in business. That philosophy demands that organisational advantage cannot be the sole *raison d'être* for business. Dependence on the state and on taxpayers to rescue businesses (especially banks) from economic collapse means that a new moral contract is emerging where organisations find it increasingly important that they are seen to be working for the public good as well as their own (Edleman, 2010). It is interesting to observe that the German term for public relations is *öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, literally 'public work' and best explained as «working in public, with the public and for the public» (Nessman, 2000), is a good encapsulation of this philosophy. Organisations have to work transparently, cooperatively and not only in their own interests, but also for the benefit of society as a whole. Again, the role for public relations can be seen to be an enhanced one, with social responsibility being at the centre of organisational accountabilities.

Finally, in this section, it is clear that there is a requirement for organisations to understand the public mood. The role of public relations practitioners in environmental scanning as part of their boundary spanning role has long been recognised (White and Dozier, 1992), but more recently the work of Mayo and Noria (2005) has documented that long-term organisational success depends on ability to understand the *Zeitgeist*. Contextual intelligence is a significant asset organisations can utilise in order to enhance reputation and performance by being in tune with the contemporary context. The business professionals best placed to provide this intelligence reside in the public relations function. It is unfortunate that although they recognise that their public relations functions are ideally suited to discharge this critical activity, CEO's have expressed doubts about the calibre of public relations professionals when discussing their capabilities for fulfilling this role (Murray and White, 2004).

4. THE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO PRACTITIONERS

In the light of the demanding context in which organisations now find themselves, and the reconsideration of the roles that are required for practitioners, there is a significant opportunity for public relations to recast its contribution to organisations.

The South African academic Benita Steyn (2007) has matched the various levels of strategy in business to the equivalent level of activities undertaken by public relations professionals. Her work, however, focuses on the private sector. More practitioners work for the not-for-profit, or public sector, so building on Steyn's work, the author has devised a generic model for articulating the different levels of contribution that public relations can make.

In summary there are four levels of contribution:

— *Societal*

At the societal level, an organisation seeks to obtain legitimacy for itself by trying to gain and maintain overall support from society as a whole. Its place, standing and reputation in society determines whether its 'licence to operate' is granted and supported by public opinion. Here the values on which the organisation is based are tested and are either found true or found wanting. Its mission and direction are also put to the same test.

Public relations plays a role in helping to clarify the organisation's values and mission and monitors the way it goes about achieving those to determine whether they are acceptable to society generally. The organisation's reputation with the general public is an indicator of current societal approval. The public relation's function then, acts as the organisational antennae by undertaking the boundary-spanning role indicated earlier: constantly monitoring the external environment and public opinion, to bring essential intelligence into the organisation so that it can act accordingly. It collects evidence about and makes judgements on how society perceives the organisation and identifies any action that may be required if there are issues to be addressed. It also promotes the organisation by the clear communication of its values and purpose and demonstrating consistency of performance against them.

— *Corporate*

At the corporate level, organisations focus mainly on organisational and financial goals. At this level the resources of the organisation are marshalled and the precise scope and nature of activities are agreed. Given resources are scarce, functional departments usually have to compete to obtain their «share».

Public relations activity is often regarded as a cost, but it can be re-articulated as guarding some of the essential assets of the organisation. As Laurati (2008) argues, the cognitive and behavioural assets of an organisation have to be in place in order for it to succeed. There are three elements to this; reputation, relationships and cultural alignment. First, an organisation has to have the reputational capital it requires in order for stakeholders to trust it and to support its future plans. Second, the organisation will need to ensure that it has relationship capital; that is, that the appropriate relationships have been built with those stakeholders who are required to approve of its endeavours. Third, unless the culture of the organisation internally is aligned to the expectations of external stakeholders, then the authenticity of the organisation will be questioned.

Furthermore, at this corporate level, public relations can make an additional contribution. It can support management decision-making by ensuring multi-stakeholder perspectives are taken into account, and that the relative interests of those stakeholders are kept in balance. For example, the interests of shareholders need to be balanced against other legitimate interests and the issues created by management decisions for all stakeholder groups have to be considered. The decisions that are taken must be transparent and demonstrably guided by the values espoused by the organisation: to do otherwise would again threaten its claims to be authentic.

Finally, at the corporate level, it is the task of the public relations professional to coach and mentor other senior managers to be communicatively competent, since it is far too large a task for the public relations professional alone to take responsibility for all organisational communication.

— *Value Chain*

At the value-chain level, the focus will be on those directly in the value-chain of the organisation for example, customers, regulators, suppliers, etc. Their direct connection with the organisation distinguishes them from the broader societal level stakeholders. At the value-chain level, societal and corporate intentions and decisions are implemented. The public relations function clearly has a role to play here in engaging with those in the value-chain. This will also include activist individuals, groups and on-line communities.

Apart from specific, tactical expertise in stakeholder communication, the public relations function will be required to advise, coach and mentor other colleagues to undertake these activities. It will also advise on any potential conflicts and issues that may arise from opposing stakeholder demands.

— *Operational*

At the operational level, public relations professionals will design, implement and evaluate programmes and campaigns which support organisational objectives.

By rearticulating the contribution of public relations in such a way it can be seen that a much expanded role can be envisaged. This is a role that is both necessary for organisations and available to practitioners provided they have the capabilities to undertake it (Murray and White, 2005; O'Neill, 2008).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The challenges organisations face in the new communication age are considerable. Organisational contexts are dynamic and unpredictable, stakeholders are more demanding, empowered and connected. The days when organisations can exert any control over that context are over, if they were ever a reality. The gatekeeping function of public relations professionals is also no longer a possibility. The potential for everyone to be a communicator and for everyone to be communicated with, both inside and outside the organisation means that gatekeeping is a thing of the past. A significant part of the communicator's task is to make the whole organisation communicatively competent.

In this new world, the opportunities for public relations professionals to make a more significant contribution than is generally the case is apparent and desired by CEO's. Indeed an organisation's very survival will involve understanding the organisational context; being able to position the organisation within that context; guarding values as the touchstone of decision-making so that integrity and authenticity (i.e. reputation) is maintained; building relationships and coaching others to be shrewd and trustworthy communicators. These opportunities all lie within the grasp of the public relations professional provided they have the competence to grasp them.

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