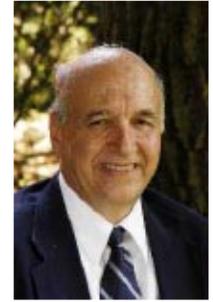


Opinion

Has PR Been Marginalized?

Let's take a breath and pause for a moment to reflect on what we as PR "professionals" bring to the table, why our craft matters in this age of "media-ocracy".



By Frank Corrado

If you Google job sites on most given days for PR jobs in Chicago, or anywhere for that matter, you will see dozens, if not hundreds of positions pop up.

The thing is, only a few are real PR jobs, though many have the words "PR" or "communications" somewhere in their descriptions. This is one indicator, among many, that "everybody's trying to get into the act" as the old vaudevillian Jimmy Durante used to say. It really makes the point that companies are recognizing how important communication is for many kinds of jobs – from customer contact, to management, to HR and even technical specialties.

We see this also as stories proliferate about the democratizing of media and the amazing numbers of new age style "communicators" – bloggers, podcasters, netcasters, net moviemakers and so on. I think our reaction should be, 'Good for them!' It's great to see so many people developing content, building communities, adding their voice to public debate.

At the same time, maybe a little voice inside us asks, "Are we being marginalized?", "Do we matter anymore? Is our profession being over run by amateurs? Even large PR firms are looking over their shoulders, wondering out loud about the impact of all this while at the same time trying to make sure they come up with strategies to respond to our counter these new Towers of Babel.

Well, let's take a breath and pause for a moment to reflect on what we as PR "professionals" bring to the table, why our craft matters in this age of "media-ocracy":

We are a reality check for info that comes in and goes out the door. PR people don't deal in opinions, we deal in facts. Our job is to get the truth to top management and make sure that what we communicate back out has the sound of credibility to it. This is not a job for amateurs.

We use the English language. We are experts in choosing and using clear, understandable English. That means we often have to serve as a check on lawyers, MBAs, technical specialists and others who don't. These interactions are not always pleasant.

We measure outcomes. Our job is to make sure we use measurement techniques to evaluate our organization's messages to stakeholders. While this is easier with internal audiences, the web has given us new tools that can gage how well we're getting the word out.

We are not in marketing. It seems these days that marketing wags the tail of PR. It is an old debate as to what is marketing and what is PR. Many companies see PR simply as an extension of marketing – product support, "reputation management", publicity. If we're not independent of marketing, however, it's too easy to devalue the skills we bring to the table. We need the freedom to support the broader mission of the organization and that means managing crisis, truth-telling to a wide variety of stakeholders and getting non-sales information about the organization out in a credible manner. That's not marketing's job, it's the job of an independent PR function.

We are not fooled by technology. Many managers are looking to PR today to provide web-based glitz to internal and external audiences. They are in love with today's jargon and tools - open web page creation, non-stop town hall meetings, meetings in a box, and so on. Many of these approaches are interesting and can be very successful, but our tool box still needs focus on what really works and that may even include posters, newsletters, flyers and all sorts of old fashioned media. We will know what works, because we measure before and after.

We take the heat. Wal-Mart's job postings for new senior postings include, according to a NY Times story recently, the ability to "triage" calls during a crisis, use "opposition research" and lots of experience in issues management. This company has leaned the hard way over the last few years that real PR has value and takes lots of resources.

Undervalued or not, a competent PR professional is a hell of a corporate asset. Only companies that have had their reputations flailed harshly in the media and seen their stock battered, or sales sag or been through a major crisis or been beat up for their stance on public issues understand the real value of what we do. (At least until the next budget cycle) We welcome the world of amateur communications afforded by the net. But we also know what it means to be a pro. Now let's make sure others understand as well.

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