

Institute for Public Relations
Annual Distinguished Lecture
November 7, 2002
New York, NY

“The Ostrich and the Giraffe – Is It Time to Stick Our Necks Out?”

David R. Drobis
Senior Partner & Chairman
Ketchum

When Ward called me and asked me to give this lecture tonight, I was surprised and, of course, pleased that I was considered by the Institute to follow in the footsteps of some of the people who have been here before.

Like Don Hewitt, executive producer of 60 Minutes, who wondered aloud five years ago whether broadcast journalism has become a lost art.

Dateline NBC executive producer Neal Shapiro gave us valuable insights two years later about news magazines, and more importantly, what to do when Dateline NBC calls. And the lectures of my public relations agency colleagues, David Finn and Bill Novelli, who have been at the boardroom table -- that Holy Grail for all of us -- and whose lectures were delivered with the powerful voice of their experiences.

And, of course, there was Chester Berger, a colleague I've admired and respected for many years, and who was a great counselor for us when we first came to New York in the early 80s to open Ketchum's headquarters here.

It was people like Chet and Harold Burson, Ron Rhody (Bank of America), Larry Foster (J&J), Betsy Plank (Illinois Bell), Denny Griswold (*PR News*), Ed Block (AT&T), Jack Koten (Ameritech), Jim Tolley (Chrysler) and Jack Felton (two-time PRSA president, head of McCormick & Company's communications for many years and now still very active in helping our profession), who set the tone -- particularly when I was first getting started.

And, of course, Dan Edelman who was so deservedly honored earlier this evening for his great influence and leadership in building a worldwide public relations firm. These are the people who were the pioneers, the risk takers; who weren't afraid to give their advice and they gave it to their competitors as freely as they gave it to their clients and their managements.

I've been anxiously contemplating this speech since Ward called me. There are so many things I've been thinking about in the past twenty years -- yet never had the opportunity or taken the opportunity to talk about publicly.

I have been very fortunate to have traveled around the world and have given dozens of speeches from Tokyo, to Beijing, Paris and Frankfurt, Bratislava, San Francisco, Fort Lauderdale and even Muncie, Indiana.

Last month, I spoke to a terrific audience of very senior public relations people in Oslo. My speeches usually focus on topics like corporate reputation, corporate social responsibility, measuring public relations, globalization and technology or how Ketchum made the Dancing Raisins famous or handled the Bridgestone/Firestone crisis.

But I seldom get to say publicly, what really concerns me about our business and the profession of public relations. And, before I do, let me say very loudly: this is a terrific line of work and I am very proud to be in it.

I've had a great time for the past thirty plus years. I've been involved in so many different, exciting things; worked with and learned from so many interesting people. Our profession has changed and grown tremendously. When I first came into the business, public relations meant that you were writing a release after someone else told you what was happening. That was "it."

Today "publicity" is usually only one element in a public relations program. Public relations has become more valued and valuable since I came to Ketchum in the late 60s and we were basically a one-office firm in Pittsburgh.

Public relations people are now better paid; more experienced and have much greater opportunities.

More of us have advanced degrees -- MBAs and degrees in specialties like law and medicine.

It can be stimulating, exciting and interesting work and what we do helps make people's lives better. We educate them about health care, food choices, how to invest, how to be safe, how and where to travel. We take them through emergencies.

Consider how communications strategy became "operations" on 9/11 -- how many companies from the airlines to the telecoms relied on their websites and other public relations tools to inform employees, customers and shareholders.

We're doing good things and, in very many cases nowadays, we're doing it from the policy-making level, not just communicating but helping to create the programs, policies, actions that help organizations around the world operate in the public good. We are making important contributions to society.

So then why can't we as a profession recognize it and celebrate it -- why are we always complaining about our profession?

Why is there so much dissension about what we do and what we call it? Why are we always splitting hairs? Aren't we letting this get out of hand in our continuous effort at self-analysis, introspection and, perhaps even, a little self-absorption?

Where have we been in the last twelve months of business turmoil as the lawyers, particularly, have taken over creating debacles out of Arthur Andersen, Enron, Martha Stewart, WorldCom? Why haven't we worked to find a united voice to talk to the public and, frankly, help build public confidence? Isn't it time we take some responsibility here?

We have an important role to play here. Because more than anyone in business today, we have a total view of an organization -- all of its publics and how they interact. And we are trained to understand the simple fact that integrity is ultimately more important than quarterly financial performance.

And on the tactical side, why is our relationship with the media so fractured? Isn't media relations the one public relations tool that makes us distinctive from other marketing disciplines? So why do we devalue this relationship so much that we do so little to bridge the gap between the two sides?

A colleague in Bratislava recently told me that reporters in this former communist country have been complaining that public relations is corrupting the media with too much information.

And on the other side, I'm sure you saw the recent New York Times criticism of President Bush's press spokesman, Ari Fleischer, because he too much "manages" the information that comes out of The White House. There is a lot of misunderstanding here.

Then there's the whole issue about measurement -- another one of our holy grails. We can't agree on standard methods, although many exist. This "holy grail" search is much more about building consensus than it is about finding a new measurement tool.

And shouldn't we be working harder to convince the people who are unwilling to pay the costs it takes to evaluate the success of a program? Or to do the upfront research to better understand prevailing attitudes and opinions so we can test our messages and plans better?

And while I'm on this negative track, I should mention our talent pool. It's thin; it's not diverse and it's still really not that well paid in comparison to other professions that don't make nearly the contribution we can -- and do.

And, finally, how come so many CEO's and government officials and marketing-types say they don't know what public relations is all about? Or when they do, it seems to be all about media management or, at worst, spin control.

Even our own people, in a recent study that was done for the Council of Public Relations Firms by the Annenberg School, believe that top management in their organizations see public relations making less of a contribution to success of the company than finance, marketing or IT.

The new minister for corporate responsibility in the British government who monitors CSR in corporations there (isn't it great they have one) said recently that corporate social responsibility has nothing to do with public relations. I think we're not very well understood by him.

Every profession, I know, is concerned about its image and how others view its contributions. Teachers, HR people, lawyers, are all worried about their image. The NBA complains it's misunderstood and needs to tell its story better. Even Hollywood -- the image-makers of image-makers -- doesn't believe the world truly understands its great contribution. And let's not forget journalists and Don Hewitt's concerns about their relevancy.

So the good news: we're not alone in our image crisis. But the irony is that we are the communicators. Regardless of what you want to call what we do and how you want to define it, somewhere in there has to be the idea that we lead, influence, create communications -- as our job.

Before going further, let me attempt to define our image -- as I see it -- as somewhere between Sydney Falco and C. J. Cregg with Lizzie Grubman below the line, although not out of the picture.

First, let's talk about Lizzie -- clearly she isn't a fictional character. But she represents an interesting phenomenon that illustrates one of my points for this lecture.

If we don't define what we do, the actions of a few or the impressions of the media define our industry for us. I am not denigrating what Lizzie does in her business. It's just not what most of us do.

But, as you know, impressions are often created, especially by the media, using the lowest common denominator. And that's Lizzie, and there are a lot of Lizzies out there.

Then there's the spectrum that starts with Sydney Falco and the Sweet Smell of Success, the popular 1970s movie that, fortunately, became a less popular Broadway musical last season. The powerful Walter Winchell-like gossip columnist was played by John Lithgow who, incidentally, won the Tony as the sleazy scribe manipulating Sydney Falco, the feverishly ambitious press agent.

The Lithgow character corrupts and ultimately destroys the publicist, who becomes a louse -- a "cookie full of arsenic" as the Lithgow character calls him. You wanted to take a shower after seeing singer-actor Brian d'Arcy's performance. To what degree does this image represent us?

Then there's the other end of the spectrum -- Allison Janney's press secretary, C. J. Cregg, on The West Wing. She's bright, articulate -- and most importantly -- she is a real counselor to her fictional President Bartlet, who welcomes her advice and even takes some of it.

C. J. has a definite seat at the power of influence -- she's an advisor on policy as well as politics -- and she also seems the ethics officer, questioning actions that raise deep ethical concerns, like lying to the press.

C. J. does a lot for public and media relations practitioners. Because she humanizes us -- in a good way -- a far cry from communications professionals we've seen mostly in the popular media.

So, which depiction is the true embodiment of our profession? Fortunately, most of the practitioners we know -- many of whom are in this room -- are more like C. J. Cregg, who have a seat at the table of influence -- and use it wisely and well. Chief executives -- and even chief legal advisors -- look to their counsel on strategy and policy as well as on communications.

But the big problem is not that there are all these stereotypes. They will always be there and they are there for every profession. The bigger issue is that we have -- forever -- allowed other people to define who we are -- the media, Hollywood, television, our marketing colleagues. The problem is that we don't do it.

Perhaps it is time for us to stick our necks out -- to take some leadership here. There has never been a better time for us to do that to show our value. And a lot of that value goes back to the roots of what public relations is all about... and to some of our founders and how they defined public relations -- founders like Arthur W. Page.

Arthur Page, who retired in 1946 after twenty years at AT&T, was the first public relations person at a major U.S. corporation with a vice president title and a seat on the Board. He viewed public relations as the art of developing, understanding, and communicating character -- both corporate and individual. Page didn't hesitate to stick his neck out. He didn't hesitate to give his opinion. He was not risk adverse.

Next year -- I have to mention -- is the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Page Society which was created to foster his philosophy. It's also the anniversary of his one hundred twentieth birthday.

My friend, Marilyn Laurie, who also was head of public relations at AT&T, said recently that the older she gets, the smarter Arthur Page gets. She said, "I know of no principles that offer better guidance for managing our way back to trust and credibility than Page's."

Page said, "Tell the truth." And, he said, "Prove it with action."

"Listen to the customer," he counseled. Page was a very early supporter of opinion research to learn the issues.

He counseled: "Manage for tomorrow." Page understood the value of long-term, not just quarterly shareholder needs.

And he talked about conducting public relations as if the whole company depends on it. Because it does.

Page believed that public relations is about ninety percent doing and ten percent talking about it. I think we've managed to change the emphasis.

And, finally, and my personal favorite of his principles, he said, "Remain calm, patient and good humored."

Arthur Page was prophetic -- way ahead of his time. His principles are the antidote for many of society's problems, particularly in this global, transparent twenty-four/seven world.

So here we are with a great set of standards, created by one of our founders more than sixty years ago. Yet we're a profession with no universal standards.

We can't even agree on something as simple as accreditation -- an issue we've been wrangling over for more than thirty years.

ICCO, the international trade association for public relations firms, has a set of standards for agency practice known as the Rome Charter that was created in 1991.

The major public relations trade organizations in Europe, who are members of ICCO, subscribe to the Rome Charter. The important thing about the Charter is that it defines how public relations firms should operate. It allows us to set the definition rather than letting someone else tell us how to act.

I mention it now because ICCO is currently revising it to bring it up-to-date. With the U.S. arm of ICCO, the Council of Public Relations Firms now very active, we have the opportunity to work with our partners in Europe to create a uniform set of standards here that will benefit all of our firms, our clients and, therefore, our profession. I hope that happens.

The PRCA, which is the London-based trade association of agencies, has created a certification program for member firms based on activities like training, client satisfaction and service, and business management. Every major firm in London has been through the rigorous certification process.

Other PR trade associations in Europe are adopting it. I hope the U.S. will also look at this as a way to set some uniform standards and definition for the way the public relations business is conducted.

Finally, we need to come together in search of our identity. I am not talking about getting *Business Week* to write a good story about public relations. This needs to be an industry initiative directed at the influentials -- the people who use public relations. It needs to be targeted at the business schools and into the highest levels of business and government -- to show the value of public relations, how it can be measured, how we do make a difference.

I'm not sure why we can't get somewhere on this -- in essence start defining who we are, what we're all about.

There are trade organizations that do it well like PhRMA, the trade association for the pharmaceutical industry. While the corporate members may battle in the doctors' offices, they come together to teach the world the good the industry does. The strength of this organization has come through time and time again as they fight issues like pricing and patent protection.

Whether you agree with the issues or the outcomes is immaterial. The point is that the pharmaceutical industry finds a way to put their business schedules aside, to ignore the fact that they compete as they believe in the end goal -- that of securing a space for all of them to exist in the first place.

Now I recognize that the pharmaceutical industry is much larger and therefore has greater resources. Yet I would argue that we need to pool our resources and find a way to invest the dollars it takes to promote ourselves.

We have the talent. We know how to put together an integrated communications plan that changes opinions. We know how to be resourceful.

And to close on a higher note here, I do want to mention some of the good things going on in our industry.

The Council of Public Relations Firms which was formed a little more than three years ago has more than one hundred and twenty members. Almost every major firm in the U.S. is actively represented at the Council. The Council has in relatively short time become a spokesperson for the business, often speaking out and providing leadership on significant issues.

It has developed some excellent benchmarking on issues -- technology, compensation, training -- that help professionalize our businesses. It has begun working with MBA programs to get public relations cases into the business school classrooms. And is working with some of the schools that teach public relations to help them create curricula on agency management.

The Institute, under Jack's direction, has done a great job of uniting much of our leadership around research and measurement and codifying the tools -- both for planning programs and evaluating them. If you haven't seen their dictionary of public relations measurement tools, you should. The industry needs to get behind them and use the tools that are available to us.

The Page Society has also started an outreach to business schools and is developing case histories that can be used to teach the value of public relations in business classes.

Page also has been the driving force behind a new industry coalition of all the various groups that represent public relations, including IABC, PRSA, NIRI, The Institute, Public Affairs Council, Women in Public Relations. There are more than fourteen organizations that have been meeting informally to coordinate activities. Early next year they will come together in an effort to provide industry positioning on three critical topics: ethics, disclosure and transparency.

These are the kinds of efforts we need. And we need the support of the industry -- particularly our agency and corporate leadership.

We're all very busy people. But we need to invest some time if we're going to make this a better profession and a better business for ourselves and the people behind us. It has to be done collaboratively -- and we need to involve other influencers who use our services or who are served by us.

This is a global business. We in the U.S., particularly, who have created this profession, need to nurture it as it develops in Asia, Latin America, India, Africa.

It is our responsibility to help them professionalize their practice of public relations. We all reflect on each other -- what this profession is all about.

And it is a good time for us to be more proactive. Everyone is talking about openness, honesty, and transparency. This is what we do. This is what public relations is all about. It's what Arthur Page talked about more than sixty years ago.

It's what Denny Griswold used to preach all the time.

Denny, the diminutive editor of *PR News*, was the cheerleader extraordinaire for public relations. Going to lunch with Denny at her favorite spot, The Pierre, was like going to a bonfire. And you never came away without feeling great about what you were doing.

Denny always used to wear a lapel pin that said "PR for PR." She used to try to get everyone to wear it. Few of us did. I was never really into lapel pins. But I wish I had kept one of them.

At the time, I don't think I appreciated the significance of what Denny was saying with those pins, and her annual dinner and her weekly newsletter. She was encouraging us to "stick our necks out" and to stand up for the relevance of public relations.

Denny and Arthur Page and some others were the giraffes that were on my mind as I considered this lecture. I had read about something called the Giraffe Project.

Since the early 80s, this non-profit group, based on Whidbey Island, Washington, has identified and publicized more than nine hundred people around the world with vision and courage, people willing to take responsibility for solving tough problems, on the planet and on their block.

While this dismal economic and business landscape of the past two years has turned many into ostriches, this is not the time for us in public relations to be risk averse. It is the perfect time for us to take action. This is the time when our message will resonate. There has never been a better time to be giraffes.

Let's do what we counsel our managements and clients to do. Let's be courageous. Let's work together to make a difference.

Let's just get on with it.

Why did the ostrich stick its head in the sand? To look at the camels who forgot to put their sandals on. Score: 2. Share: So I was going to blame my pet ostrich for a crime i committed But my lawyer advised that it wouldn't fly in court. Score: 2. Share: Did you hear about the Emu that was so big it was kicked out of the flock? Yeah, I heard it was ostrich-sized. (Credit to my Veterinary Student girlfriend). Score: 1. Share: Did you hear about the Giraffe and Ostrich race? It was neck and neck. Score: 1. Share: Did you know that the fastest animal on land is the ostrich? Actually, it's not but the fastest one is a cheetah. Score: 0. And then there's that neck. Why is it so long? Unlike the swan and the ostrich, which have a surplus of neck bones, the giraffe has seven cervical vertebrae, the standard count for a mammal. But each one is eleven inches in length. A human's entire spine, by comparison, is about two feet from top to bottom, not much longer than a giraffe's tongue. To establish social dominance, male giraffes engage in a practice known as necking, swinging their heads at each other and trying to score a hit with their ossicones, the horn-like growths on their skulls. (Afterward they make up, sometimes quite bawdily.) For the neck to be a primarily sexual characteristic, it would need to be larger in males than in females, like a fiddler crab's fiddle claw but it isn't. Perhaps it is time for us to stick our necks out -- to take some leadership here. There has never been a better time for us to do that to show our value. And a lot of that value goes back to the roots of what public relations is all about and to some of our founders and how they defined public relations -- founders like Arthur W. Page. Arthur Page, who retired in 1946 after twenty years at AT&T, was the first public relations person at a major U.S. corporation with a vice president title and a seat on the Board. Every major firm in London has been through the rigorous certification process. The Ostrich and the Giraffe "Is It Time to Stick Our Necks Out?" by David R. Drobis Institute for Public Relations www.instituteforpr.org. 7. Other PR trade associations in Europe are adopting it. Giraffes use their necks as measuring devices to determine which giraffe is stronger. This is a typically safer way of deciding that it is not worth a smaller giraffe challenging a larger one. If neither giraffe backs down, then the length of their necks and their heavy bludgeoning head facilitates what is effectively a fight between wrecking balls on chains. In this case, one giraffe can certainly cripple another. 4.8K views . It's also likely that the giraffes and their food source evolved at the same time, though this is complete speculation on my part. The following example is also horribly oversimplified. BE WARNED!!! Some people think this behavior results from the fact that ostriches are so stupid that they believe burying their heads will make them invisible to predators. In other words, if they can't see the predators, then the predators can't see them. Animal experts, however, will tell you that this belief that ostriches bury their heads in the sand to avoid predators is nothing more than a myth. After all, if an ostrich buried its head in the sand, it would soon die of asphyxiation. Given what we know about ostriches, though, it's easy to see how this myth got started. Ostriches are the largest and heaviest living birds in the world. Despite standing seven to nine feet tall and weighing as much as 350 pounds, these birds have relatively small heads.