

**Public Relations in the Vanguard:  
How practitioners can lead the way in the economic recovery**

Notes for remarks by Daniel Tisch, President, Argyle Communications  
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**A parable**

I once heard a story about a young public relations practitioner from a wealthy family. He tells his parents he's engaged to be married. There's just one condition: the bride's family has to come over and meet the family of the groom.

When the bride's parents arrive, they are given a tour of the grand home. The *piece de resistance* is the library – with a huge wall adorned with portraits of the family's distinguished ancestors. The groom's parents tell stories of their forebears: CEOs, cabinet ministers, brilliant academics, Olympic athletes and more.

After a while, the mother of the bride asks why they have neglected to speak about one portrait. An awkward silence descends on the room, for she has identified Great Uncle Harold, who decades ago committed a heinous crime and was put to death in the electric chair.

The young PR professional is eager to explain:

*“Ah, that’s Great Uncle Harold. He occupied a chair in applied electronics at important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, and his death came as a very great shock.”*

For me, this story captures so much about what people think about public relations and those who practise it – both the good and the bad. We’re clever. Good with words. Fast on our feet. But perhaps less than transparent.

I don’t have to tell you about the stereotypes of our profession, because each of us encounters these stereotypes every day. Few professions face more formidable challenges in distinguishing reputation from reality - with the possible exception of massage therapists and undertakers.

### **The paradox of control**

We are in an era of dramatic political, economic, social and technological changes. For example:

- There’s a well-documented decline in public trust in institutions – including a drop in the credibility of advertising.
- NGOs are growing in significance. Today, the UN accredits more than 4000, up from less than 1000 a quarter-century ago.
- We’ve seen the dramatic emergence of web-based participatory media.

**And all this means faster, more widespread scrutiny of companies than ever before.** In this environment, operational risks have become reputational risks. This can happen over big issues – such as the listeriosis crisis at Maple Leaf Foods last year – or small ones, such as the outrage over Tim Horton’s firing a worker for giving away a Timbit for free.

**This creates what I call the paradox of control:** never have we had less control over what others think about us, and what they do with that knowledge. But never has it been more critical that we control what we say and do.

If all this wasn't challenging enough, the news cycle has never been shorter; but thanks to Internet, the legacy of today's news has never been longer.

### **What do PR association leaders think?**

My colleagues and I at the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management recently conducted a survey of those who lead the world's major national and international PR industry associations.

We asked them to identify the greatest opportunities and threats facing public relations professionals in the next five years. We received responses from 16 countries.

They saw **opportunities** for PR in the convergence of communications:

- to "own" social media;
- to own a larger functional responsibility within an organization; and
- to use technology to identify, reach and influence audiences more effectively – and to educate ourselves on their needs

**Most important of all, they saw an opportunity in that the need for our profession has never been greater.** As citizens and consumers become more educated, they respond to the organizations that communicate with credibility, and focus on building long-term relationships with those who are important to their business success.

The association leaders also saw several **threats** facing practitioners:

- If we don't **stay current** – or if we don't have access to relevant knowledge, training and tools – we fail;
- if we don't **follow high standards of practice**, we fail;
- And most of all, we fail if we cannot **make ourselves relevant to the CEO** and others who lead and manage our organizations.

### **Understanding the post-recession CEO**

Let's think about the mindset of that CEO today. In 20 years of practising public relations, I have found that in challenging economic times, executives divide into three categories: the timid, the uncertain, and the bold.

- The timid pare back marketing budgets to cut costs.
- The uncertain succumb to paralysis, using today's environment as a reason to postpone critical decisions.
- The bold see their competitors' timidity and uncertainty as an opportunity to gain market share.

**The challenge – and the opportunity – is to give executives the strategic vision and tactical tools to be bold.**

### **Strategic imperatives for PR**

And so, I would argue there are three imperatives to put PR in the vanguard of the recovery.

There's a macro-level imperative. There's a micro-level imperative. And there's a messaging imperative.

**At the macro level, the imperative is to elevate the public relations profession.**

This is the vital work that happens when practitioners come together in strong, focused, relevant industry associations such as the Canadian Public Relations Society and the Global Alliance.

Elevating the profession means **raising standards** – in ethics, education, credentials and practice.

It means **sharing knowledge** – by building bridges between practice and academia – and providing practitioners with research to make the case for PR – and sharing tools to make PR more effective.

It means **advocacy for the profession** – with the global media and the business community.

And it means **strengthening our own public relations associations**. It is easy for an association to become insular; it is more challenging to become influencing.

### **Micro picture: Skills & services**

**Start with the fundamentals.** We must hone our abilities – and those of our teams – to become better writers, smarter analysts and more confident speakers. We must develop people who can communicate with clarity, concision and precision – whether it's in 140 characters, 140 words or 140 minutes.

We must ramp up our listening and analytical capabilities -- paying close attention to mass culture – but developing an ability to engage in deeper ideas. We must be the people asking the “how” questions – not just the what and the why.

We must never lose faith that public relations at its best is always aligned with the public interest.

And we must build up practitioners' knowledge of business. The single biggest failing in our industry is a lack of business literacy. By the nature of our work, we always get great breadth. It's time to build the depth.

This is not just in our skills. It's also in our services.

In the years ahead, companies have to collect more information than ever about reputational risks; they will have to analyze it in sophisticated ways, and take action across the organization.

Never has this been more critical. But with many corporate affairs departments decimated by recessionary cutbacks, never has business been less up to the challenge.

The use of research, and audience segmentation based on attitudes, behaviours and values – coupled with smart analysis and action planning – can make public relations practitioners indispensable to business.

### **What is our message?**

We need to show management the benefits of being bold:

- That PR isn't about spending a lot of money, or taking excessive risks. It's about "bang for the buck."
- That PR is about choosing strategies that are nimble and scalable.
- That PR is about choosing and using channels to market that are high in creativity, high in credibility, and yet modest in cost.

Today, smart business leaders are re-thinking their interactions with their publics. The smart ones make communications a two-way street, not one riddled with blind spots and stop signs.

Many think social media is the way to achieve that value-for-money; that combination of speed and scalability; and that optimal combination of creativity, credibility and cost.

At PR conferences all over the world, public relations practitioners are being told they need to “own” social media. We hear the facts all the time:

- That the average age of a newspaper reader is about 55.
- That the battle for eyeballs between Peter Mansbridge and Lloyd Robertson doesn’t matter, because fewer and fewer people are watching.
- That we must work hard to help business leaders to adapt to the new paradigm – because this is not easy for them. After all, they remain in the sweet spot of the traditional media demographic. They may not see the new wave.

All of this is true. But it’s the wrong message.

**The greatest messaging mistake we can make is setting up the future as a choice – or even a shift -- from traditional media to social media.**

The real message we must communicate is one that was well known to the pioneers of our profession -- the message conveyed so effectively in the new CPRS definition of public relations.

The message is that we must transform executives’ views of public relations from a one-way process, driven by the goals of the organization -- to a two-way process of relationship management, driven by *both* organizational goals *and* the public interest.

My colleague John Paluszek made a good observation yesterday, reminding me that when the television came along, people said radio would die – and that people would stop going to the movies.

Don’t get me wrong. I am an advocate of social media – and it’s become a critical part of our practice at Argyle Communications. But let’s not underestimate the ability of traditional media to adapt and build a new business model that can accept the role of the audience as a co-creator of content – while leveraging the reach and credibility of their media brands.

Some will succeed. Some will not.

But our profession should be **agnostic** on the medium of choice. And we should be **evangelistic** about the importance of applying universal principles and values to guide communications.

Social media can be a boon to our profession, because it provides the enabling infrastructure that allows us to understand, reach and influence the audiences that matter to our clients and our organizations.

The way I see it, the new media environment presents our profession with an unparalleled opportunity to practice what we preach – and to *perfect* what we practice.

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