

If advertising is better, why bother with PR?

Last night, at a happy hour for the Washington, D.C. chapter of the ASBPE, I got a chance to meet the managing editor of the *Washington Business Journal*, Vandana Sinha. I asked her about the change I discussed [here last week](#), where the *Business Journal* is now charging for personnel announcements in their “People on the Move” section.

Sinha told me that companies are actually very happy about the change, because they can now be assured that their announcements will be printed. Companies feel they’ve gained control over the process.

Paid vs. earned

That reaction points to the advantage of advertising over public relations, and it’s the difference between paid and earned media. If you pay for ad space, you get it. You can place whatever ad or information you choose (within certain limits).

When you rely on media relations efforts to obtain coverage for your organization, you are not assured of success. It will depend on whether what you are trying to get out there is deemed “newsworthy” by the editors/journalists at the media outlet you are targeting. If you get coverage, you’ve “earned” it.

If we are at a point, due to limited resources and dwindling subscriptions, where reporters and editors are stretched to the point that they no longer can entertain pitches and read press releases, what is the future of media relations? Furthermore, if media outlets are searching for more ways to bring in revenue, by seeking various sponsorships and now charging for announcements (and in effect making something

that was previously earned into paid), where does that leave a media relations practitioner?

Clearly, if you pay for your media (advertising), you are guaranteed not only coverage, but coverage that you like. What is the incentive for organizations to hire anybody to do media relations?

Media relations is a tactic

For many years, public relations practice seems to have been more focused on media relations than on strategy and image management. It was easier to do publicity than it was to counsel clients on other ways to improve their public standing.

In my opinion, the practice of media relations has to evolve (or even disappear), if it hasn't already. No longer can agencies simply churn out press releases, pitch editors, and earn media for their clients. That is become increasingly unproductive and difficult to achieve. Additionally, the way people consume news has changed dramatically. There are few true mass media outlets left, and many more targeted, specialty channels.

The media landscape has changed

Because of the new media landscape, public relations, where the practice is about managing perceptions of an organization, has to re-focus its efforts away from media relations. It's important to recognize that media relations is just a *tactic* to help PR achieve its objectives.

Many PR agencies are already turning away from media relations. Today's PR agencies are doing much more social media, marketing, crisis communications and other practices in order to help organization manage their public presence.

Bring back integrated marketing communications!

PR is not advertising, but both are essential components of any communications plan. Perhaps the future will bring us **communications agencies**, where PR and advertising are integrated. Yes, I know this is not a new concept, but it's one that needs to be revisited now that times have changed.

What are your thoughts on media relations practices? Is it something that is still worthwhile? Should PR evolve? Please share your comments.

Publications' need for revenue threatens public relations efforts

Personnel announcements used to be one of the most reliable and easy forms of publicity for a company. In the years I worked at PR firms, we always sent out these type of announcements, usually including a headshot. Eventually, most of them would end up in the business section of the local newspaper, or within specialty newspapers or magazines.

Getting personnel announcements in print was a good way to keep companies in the public eye, and also served as a morale boost to the new or promoted employee. Even 20 plus years later, I still have the clipping from *Adweek* showing my appointment to Boston ad firm Houston Effler (now defunct).

Apparently, those days of easy publicity are coming to an end. A few weeks ago I noticed that the *Washington Business Journal* changed its personnel announcement page (called "People on the

Move”) to show the words “paid advertising” at the top. Effectively, the *Business Journal* had started charging companies in order to publish these announcements.



As someone who has worked in communications for more than 20 years, I am not surprised that this is happening in 2017, but I am disheartened, and pessimistic about the future of media relations.

It's not surprising simply because print publications are struggling with declining subscriptions and reduced advertising, and they are looking for additional revenue. Charging for personnel announcements seems harmless, and if companies want to highlight their new hires, perhaps they won't hesitate to spend a few hundred dollars (the Business Journal is charging \$350 for an “enhanced” profile that will appear online and in print).



It's disheartening because it has further blurred the line

between advertising and editorial content, and opens the possibility up that companies will be willing to “pay to play.” If there is money to be made from charging for what was previously known as earned media, then there is no incentive for publications to cover any press release or announcement unless it is major (e.g., new iPhone).

The pressures on print journalism have been covered before. We know that people are not buying or subscribing as much to print, and we know that publications are asking fewer reporters to produce more content, more often, and with fewer resources. Most publications have a digital presence, and many struggle with instituting a pay wall for readers to access their content.

It may seem trivial for a publication to charge for personnel announcements, but it points to a much larger problem and also to serious consequences for editorial integrity. It’s not only happening in print. Broadcast also seems to require more revenue than what it is getting from traditional advertising. More people are getting news from websites and social media sites, and fewer are watching the evening news. Over the past several weeks, I’ve noticed a trend in which national restaurants are getting local news to cover food and drink specials, not only on air, but on social media channels.

For a specific example, just last Friday, I noticed that WJLA (the ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C., owned by Sinclair Broadcasting) re-tweeted one of its local reporters, Kevin Lewis, discussing a special on a drink offered at Applebees, the national restaurant chain. Lewis included a link to the “news” about this special on the WJLA website, which then linked to a press release directly on Applebees website. At no point did the words “sponsored” or “paid advertising” show on the tweets or on the press release. If the WJLA news team thinks that sharing drink specials from a restaurant is actual news, they are not familiar with real journalism.

In this era where journalism is being called “fake news” whenever it digs up inconvenient information for a politician, it is not a good look to get money to run publicity, without even acknowledging that it is paid.

Decisions with unintended consequences

This is a post about unintended and negative consequences, based on two separate experiences yesterday.

Last minute deal—get in at no cost!

Last night, I attended an event on trends in digital marketing. I signed up for it a couple of days ago, and paid \$11.84. Yesterday, about two hours before the event was due to start, there was an email from the organizer to a listserv I am on saying that she didn't have enough attendees, so if anyone wanted to attend *for free*, they could.

I felt like a sucker. Why had I bothered to pay anything at all for an event that wasn't garnering enough attention to the point that the organizer was begging people to come by offering free admission?

And the real question is, why would I ever pay this organizer for any event when it may be more advantageous to wait until the last minute?

The unintended consequence of this poor decision is to

effectively make people decide to not sign up in advance, to not pay at all, because there's a likelihood that if too few people sign up in advance, the organizer will be desperate enough for warm bodies and offer free admission to all.

Ask and ask and ask again—until they don't want to be asked again

Unless you were not online, or checking email, you know yesterday was Giving Tuesday. Giving Tuesday was developed (supposedly) as an "antidote" to Cyber Monday/Black Friday. In theory, Giving Tuesday is a chance to support charities instead of, or in addition to, shopping like mad for the holidays.

A lot of hoopla has developed around this "holiday." Case in point: Every organization that I have ever supported sent me emails the week before, the day before and the day of, to beg me to give them money on Giving Tuesday. Some organizations sent multiple emails on Tuesday in addition to multiple emails on the days before. My inbox was flooded with requests, and then so were my social media feeds.

Some organizations were getting matching funds on Giving Tuesday, so giving on this day automatically meant more money in the coffers. But the level of pushiness these organizations reached around Giving Tuesday in order to get these extra funds may have had the unintended consequence of reducing the number of people opting in to newsletters. I unsubscribed to at least two, and was seriously considering unsubscribing from all of them.

The intensity of the effort made it seem as if this was your one chance to give, as if you couldn't give any time of the year, and *as if giving at any other time was just not as good*. The other unintended consequence of this extreme focus on Giving Tuesday, I believe, is to reduce year-round giving.

Organizations make lots of decisions to fulfill short-term

goals (get lots of donors on Tuesday), but which neglect to take into consideration long-term goals (develop good relationships and donor opportunities year-round). In other words, before you make a snap decision that only affects one event/day, think about what your overall goals are, and whether this decision furthers those goals or not.

Be very scared (of poor word choice)

You know what is (a bit) scary? When you say or write something that you don't mean. You don't intend to do it, but you do it anyway.

Why would you do something spooky like that?

First, it's because you use words that you don't understand, or you misuse words. This is more common in spoken than in written communications, since we don't have the luxury of having a dictionary available when we talk. This type of scary mistake seems to happen a lot in television/cable news.

Here are two examples:

A political analyst/journalist who said **nonetheless** (which Webster's defines as "in spite of that") when she really meant **never mind** (which means much less or let alone).

Someone who said "from the **outset** (which means beginning or start, and can be used alone, without a modifier, such as, *from the outset*) **of...**" when he/she should have said the **onset of** (which also means beginning or commencement, and is usually used in conjunction a phrase, such as in the *onset*

of winter).

It's easy to mess these up. They are very similar in meaning, and similar sounding, but yet are different words with slightly different usages and meanings.

Second, it's when you use words that are spelled similarly to what you meant to say, but are not the right word. This happens mostly in written communications, and it mostly happens because you rely on spellcheck, and you don't proofread.

Here are a couple I have seen recently:

A sentence that used **neatly** instead of **nearly**.

And even more weird, a sentence that used the word **bong** instead of **bond**.

Don't be ghoulish—use your words carefully—and go ahead, have a happy Halloween!

I've started collecting these, and I intend to publish them once a month. I invite you to share any you find by sending me an email at info@deborahbrody.com.

Closed, or just changing

names?

Today, on my way to the Metro, I walked past where a Mediterranean cafe has been located for the past five years. It was closed, and in the window was a sign saying that “Amai Japanese Crepe” was coming soon.

By the way, anybody know what the hell a Japanese crepe is?

When I got back to my office, I checked on the web to see if I could figure out what happened. I first went to the cafe’s website. It’s still there. Same address. No update on the situation. Then I went to Yelp, and I noticed it said the place was “temporarily” closed but a five-star review had just been posted yesterday. Hmm. Stranger and stranger. I went back to the cafe’s website, and clicked on their Twitter feed. Last post there was from 2015. Not useful at all. Then I went to the Facebook page. I clicked on “posts,” and found one from September 22, which says this:

Thank you everyone for your loyalty and support these past 5 years. We opened in Feburary 2012 and strived to bring a little taste of Isreal and classic Italian espresso to our customers. Now, it’s time to look to the future. XXX will be closed as of September 22 for renovations. We will be closed for two weeks to improve and update the cafe. We look foward to showing the improved us when we reopen.

Errors above appeared in the original post. I just x’ed out the name of the restaurant. There was also a picture of the sign about the Japanese crepes. That’s it. No more information. But now we know the restaurant is changing name and changing focus. What we don’t know is when this will happen, or what the hell a Japanese crepe is supposed to be.

To me, this is a classic and stupid communications failure. Why a failure? Here are the mistakes I see:

1. Failure to use their website to provide updated information.
2. Failure to provide complete information on the actual site (something like: XX cafe is transforming. We aim to re-open on [date]).
3. Failure to use social media appropriately. The Twitter feed should be deleted, and they could provide updates about the renovation, some information about what they will become. Not to mention that Facebook post was from a month ago, where they claim they would re-open in two weeks.
4. Failure to consider what customers need to know. Maybe this is the biggest problem. Nowhere do you really know what is going on.

It's hard to say what will happen here. People who came to this place looking for Israeli food are not necessarily going to feel good about a Japanese crepe (whatever that may be). Passersby will think that the old place is gone, and will not necessarily think the new place is associated with the old.

As with any change, clear and precise communication is necessary. It seems that to this restaurant, communication with customers is an afterthought.

Always aim for clarity

Have you ever read something that left you shaking your head, where you wondered what exactly the writer was trying to say? That's what happens when the writer of what you are reading lacks the ability to communicate clearly.

It's important for your communications to be clear, to be easily understood, and not to confuse your audience. How do you achieve this type of clarity? Following are four suggestions:

1. Know what you are trying to say before you start writing. Remember in high school when you were taught about a thesis and its supporting points? That lesson should be ingrained in any writer's head. Always have a thesis (your premise or argument) and why you support it. It's helpful to jot down your thesis (for this piece—clarity is essential to communication) and then your top reasons for supporting it (for this piece I jotted down too many words, not knowing what you really want to say).

2. Balance your assumptions. Don't assume your audience knows too little or too much—find the middle ground that works for your specific audience. To be able to find the middle ground, you must know who is in your audience. Are they insiders? Are they the general public? How much do they know? Have you ever watched *Washington Week* on PBS? I watch it practically every Friday. One quirk they have is that they insist on spelling out every reference. If a journalist on the panel simply says "McConnell," the host quickly adds: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. This assumes the audience won't understand the reference to McConnell and yet most people who watch *Washington Week* are fairly informed and interested in all things political.

3. Write simply. Often, clarity is compromised by wordiness or

jargon or big words when smaller words would do just fine. It's tempting to stuff articles and blog posts with fancy words, and office speak, but what you end up doing is alienating the audience who may not be conversant in your world. So work to eliminate extra words and jargon, and use plain language instead (e.g., if you see the word "utilize" substitute "use").

4. Reread and edit everything before you make it public. Sometimes we write something and then look it over quickly before we hit "publish." It may make sense to us at that moment, but does it make sense to others? Taking the time to read something slowly, copy edit it, and make sure it says what you want it to say will go a long way in making sure it is clear to *others*. If possible, get another person to read your copy (a copy editor and/or proofreader).

Always aim for clarity. If your audience doesn't get what you are trying to say, then you haven't communicated at all.

Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?

We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing “specials” that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour, Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

Enough!

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old “specials.” Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

How can this model work today?

Here’s a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

Hundreds of viewing options

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

It’s an on-demand world

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).

There’s a streaming channel for that

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like

Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

Is annoying viewers for a \$60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?

Check for accuracy STAT

The other night, I heard a loud, scratching noise in my chimney. It sounded as if an animal had gotten in. My first thought (and fear) was that a small bat was in there and it would then come into the house. Since it was close to midnight, there was nothing I could do except check the website for the local animal trapping company that I've see working in my neighborhood. According to Google results, their office opened at 7:00 a.m. The website listed an 800 number, and four local-area numbers. I decided to call first thing to see if they would send someone right away.

At 7:00 the next morning I called up the company. I got a message saying their offices opened at 8:00 a.m. Their Google My Business listing was wrong and their website did not list hours at all.

Sometimes companies spend more time and money on developing new marketing or on sales pitches, and they forget to check the basics. So, before you do anything else marketing-related, check your current stuff for accuracy. Do it now. Seriously.

What to check:

- Business name (is it complete, spelled correctly?)
- Address/es (accurate, current?)
- Telephone number/s (accurate, current?)
- Website URL
- Hours/days of operation
- Staff names/positions/contact information
- Email addresses
- Pricing information

Where to check:

- Your website
 - Your social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.)
 - Google results/Google maps/Google My Business
 - Yelp and other review or listing sites (e.g., Angie's List) you appear in
 - Printed materials (business cards, brochures, letterhead, postcards, etc.)
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In the end, I was able to get the animal trapping company to come to my house later in the day. They checked the chimney and nothing was there (thank goodness!). They put some mesh on the chimney cap to prevent bats or birds from getting in.

This company has plenty of business around here. I've seen their trucks before as squirrels are constantly getting into attics (and bats are always in the belfry). They certainly have developed brand recognition. But you only call them when you need them and it is usually an urgent situation. Having multiple phone numbers and inaccurate hours is not helpful for anybody needing their services.

Any organization needs to consider what information potential users/customers/donors need to have, and then make sure that

information is easily available and accurate. It just makes good marketing/communications sense.

Why Scaramucci failed

I was going to write a post about how Anthony Scaramucci, the shortest-lived White House Communications Director in history, embodies the problem at the core of the Trump administration's communications failures, and then the "Mooch" got fired after 10 days on the job.

Basically, Scaramucci got fired because he failed at Communications 101. He was bound to fail also because he was not the right person for the job. He had no experience in communications, and his actions showed it. As the wrong person for the job, he got hired by a boss and an administration that don't understand communications fundamentals.

The communications person is never the story

First, Scaramucci failed because he broke the cardinal rule for communications pros: he became the story. As anybody who has worked in public relations/communications knows, the comms person is there to help get the story out. Under no circumstances are you to become the story.

You have to know how news reporters work

Second, Scaramucci did not seem to understand that unless you explicitly state otherwise, everything you say can be quoted. If you have not said something is off the record, it's on the record. Period. Reporters are always looking for quotes. That's what they do.

Just because you feel that you are simpatico, does not mean

you are pals hanging out at a bar

Third, Scaramucci made himself look extremely crass and stupid by using obscenities where none were needed. We all curse, but we know that in certain circumstances we don't. Scaramucci also seems to lack imagination—and here it is—an ability to communicate, in order to convey his thoughts without resorting to obscenities.

But the larger problem is a White House that doesn't get it

In TrumpWorld, it seems communications is *all* about marketing. It's *all* about persuasion. And it's not about sharing information and facts. I don't think this country has ever seen such a fact-averse White House ever.

When you practice communications you are aiming to inform, and yes, to persuade. But persuasion is not something to be done with threats and alternative facts. As I have written before, Sean Spicer (the former communications director/press secretary) thought he was in a fight with the White House press corps. He berated them and belittled them and even refused to provide them with information they requested. He turned the cameras off for briefings, thinking that by cutting off video he would be able to control the narrative. He cherry-picked media outlets to respond to that were sympathetic to the president and would not ask any hard questions.

Communications is not a one-way street

To communicate, you must inform. You can't simply try to force your viewpoint on everyone. We see Trump using Twitter to talk directly to the people. What you don't see is Trump using Twitter to respond to questions from the people. To Trump, communication is a one-way street (sort of how he views loyalty too): push your message out and steamroll anyone who questions it.

Scaramucci's failure is indicative of a much larger problem that does not seem to have a solution: a White House that does not value real communication.

Proof that local TV news still matters

This past Saturday, Jim Vance died after being diagnosed with cancer back in May. Jim Vance was the long-time (45 years!) anchor at Washington's NBC affiliate, WRC (channel 4). His death created a tremendous outpouring of grief, from his colleagues, and from the many people in the area who watched him on TV. You can see how NBC4 reported it [here](#).

When I first read the news of Vance's death on Saturday morning I was not surprised (he had announced on air he had cancer and I hadn't seen him on the news desk in several weeks even though he had said he would work as his treatment allowed), but I was incredibly saddened. I've watched NBC4's evening news for many years, and liked watching him and his anchor partner Doreen Gentzler. I liked how they interacted, how genuinely friendly they were with each other and with the other reporters. I especially remember how Vance paid tribute to Doreen when she celebrated her 25 years of sharing the anchor desk with him.

Since his death, I have come to learn more about Jim Vance. He was incredibly active in his community—speaking at high school graduations, funding scholarships, mentoring others. Many of his colleagues said he lived life to the fullest. A friend of mine told me that as a teen, he met Vance. In other words, Vance was accessible. He was not a distant celebrity, but was

part and parcel of his community.

Every night on NBC4 this week, they have paid tribute to Vance. You can see how deeply they feel his loss. And what is interesting is how the community misses Vance too. What's more, his competitors at other TV stations also paid tribute to him. The news community in DC is tightly-knit. Many reporters have worked at more than one local station. Bruce Johnson, who now anchors at the CBS affiliate, WUSA-9, had been friends with Vance. He devoted his show, *Off Script*, on Monday night to Jim Vance and to helping people quit smoking, an addiction which most likely caused Vance's cancer.

Local TV news still matters. Whether you watch at 6:00 a.m. to get a read on the day's traffic and weather, or at 11:00 p.m. to see what happened in your community, you watch the local TV news to connect to where you live. And because you probably do this habitually, you connect to the people who deliver the news to you. They also live here. They know how hot or how cold or how rainy it is, because they too had to deal with it on their way to work. Local news anchors care about traffic and construction and local crime, because it affects them personally and their families. And because they care about what is going on here, we care about them.

In this age where it seems social media dominates, it's important to realize that people still watch TV news, and they connect with the people they see on the anchor desk.