

# 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.

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## **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.

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## Are we living in a bubble?

I wrote this post back in November, and never published it. But today, I was reading the *Washington Post* and came across Paul Farhi’s column regarding the Brian Williams “scandal.” In case you haven’t heard about it, it involves Brian “misremembering” being shot at in a helicopter in Iraq in 2003. Farhi writes:

*NBC News went into damage-control mode a day after the public symbol of the network, anchor Brian Williams, faced a **torrent** of derision and criticism for telling a story about his wartime reporting that has proved to be untrue.*

*As **public disapproval roared on social media**, NBC sought to protect and defend Williams, its lead anchor since 2004 and the most popular anchor in the nation.*

Bolding is mine. Notice that Farhi writes about the “torrent” of criticism and disapproval...on social media. I stopped reading the article after these two paragraphs because I don’t think there’s a torrent, or a deluge or even a rainstorm of derision outside of social media. I think this is a *social*

*media crisis*, where people in social media all seem to outraged by the “crisis” and where the rest of the country (those people sitting around their living rooms watching TV in the evening) couldn’t care less. Notice too that Brian Williams was on TV last night as if nothing had happened. And maybe it only happened in our little social media bubble.

So this is where I started this post back in November:

When it started three years ago, I was a huge fan of Showtime’s series *Homeland*. I was hooked and had to watch every episode. It bummed me out we had to wait nine months between seasons.

But when the third season started this past September, I was no longer enthusiastic. I watched the first couple of episodes and found that I just didn’t like the main character Carrie anymore. She had become way too crazy (she actually considers drowning her child!) and demanding and unreasonable. The story line had strayed so far from the initial *Homeland* that it was another story altogether. I quit watching. I no longer care.

Because I no longer care, I am no longer living in the *Homeland* bubble. The bubble is one where “everybody” is watching and commenting. Everybody just loves it. Articles and blog posts abound.

It seems that when you believe something or are a big fan of something, you surround yourself with like-minded people and views. In fact, your views are being reinforced. At times, you actively avoid being exposed to opposing views.

Notice what is going on with Uber and Bill Cosby. In case you haven’t seen the reports, Uber threatened to expose the personal life of a reporter who was aiming to write an article about Uber. Several women have come forward to accuse Cosby of sexual assault. Both these cases are serious and they expose great flaws in a popular company and a beloved entertainer.

Many articles, blog posts and Tweets have been devoted to dissecting the PR and communications shortcomings shown by both Uber and Cosby. But here's the thing: does it matter? People are still using Uber. And it was reported that at a comedy show in Florida a few days ago, the comedian got a standing ovation.

There's a disconnect between the world at large and the bubble we surround ourselves with. In PR and crisis communications, both Uber and Cosby are toast. They've handled these situations poorly. But for those who don't delve into how things are communicated, who don't follow the news (and by the way, journalists are living in a bubble sometimes too), the concern is just not there. They don't care about Uber's threats because Uber gives them a convenient way to get places. They ignore the accusations against Cosby because they find him funny.

**What do you think? Are these controversies manufactured? Is the scandal for real? Are we living in a social media culture of outrage? Are we living in a bubble?**

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## **PR for PR people**

You've heard the saying about how the cobbler's children go barefoot. It seems to me that this is especially true for PR agencies and practitioners. They don't seem to get that they need to think about their image and their relations with their public. They are in PR but don't practice PR for themselves.

Recently, a large PR firm had layoffs. They were not publicized as most companies like to keep this information



quiet. I happen to have a connection to some of the people that were laid off, and I heard that the layoffs were not handled nicely (or as nicely as being told you are losing your job can be handled). The people who were laid off were given just a few minutes to collect their belongings and leave the office. They were only given two weeks severance. One of them did not get a chance to take her personal stuff with her, and the agency “lost” it. In short, they were not treated very well.

What’s astounding to me is that a PR agency that is in the business of making clients look good can do things that make itself look bad. Why would you not handle a layoff in a more caring and thoughtful fashion? Don’t you know that people have friends and friends have social media? Don’t you know that reputations depend on cultivating good feelings and trust?

And then there is all the questionable personal stuff that PR people do in business settings, like having incomplete or outdated LinkedIn profiles or using Twitter to post automated horoscope listings. And then there are stories about PR executives that go on Twitter to rant and rave, and sometimes even post nasty comments about clients, as if nobody can see (and copy and disseminate) that?

PR people (and agencies) must learn that what they do—both publicly and privately— is open for scrutiny, and in a digital world, news travels fast and wide. Ultimately, public relations is about protecting reputation and helping build and protect an image. PR agencies and practitioners need to think about their own reputation and image, and act accordingly.

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# Is it a PR problem or is it a business problem?

Yesterday, I read Gini Dietrich's take on the state of the PR industry, *The PR Industry Does Need Better PR*, on her firm's blog, *Spin Sucks*. Basically, Gini points out that what people think they know about PR is wrong or misleading. It's her conclusion that what the PR industry needs is better PR.

**I think what the PR industry needs is better business skills.**

Have you been to a PR networking event lately? If you have, you've probably noticed a lot of young people, mostly women. These young people often have inflated titles—including account manager, account director and even vice president—after being in the industry for three years or so. Many of these PR “pros” studied PR in college. Some may have even had an internship or two.

You may also have met a lot of former journalists who have decided they will have more job stability in public relations, while using their writing skills and knowledge of what is newsworthy.

What few of these PR people have is a solid understanding of business. Few, if any, have gone to business school. Few, if any, understand basic marketing ideas like push-pull. Fewer still understand finance, balance sheets or even how to read and interpret data.

Lots of people are busy trying to figure out how to get the word out about an event, or how to have a great social media campaign, but what they are failing to see is the big picture—how public relations helps a company to achieve its business objectives.

A big part of the disconnect that currently exists between

public relations agencies and the business side of the industries served has to do with the separation between communications functions and marketing and sales roles. Even though public relations is part of marketing communications, public relations does not usually have a stake in marketing and sales processes and outcomes. Businesses may hire public relations agencies to help with image, but even then, the point usually is to increase the bottom line (i.e. sales in for profit organizations, influence or donors at nonprofit organizations).

In his article 3 reasons to find a new PR/social media agency, Scott Signore states quite succinctly the following as his third reason:

*Finally, despite the evolution in the category and the number of significant changes the PR business has endured over the years, it's still about executing a communications program that helps drive business. So, look for another PR and social media agency partner if your current group is not directly supporting your business objectives.*

What Scott is saying is that if PR agencies are not helping companies achieve **business objectives**, they should be fired. Fundamentally, they are not doing their job.

And yet, as I said before, too many PR professionals simply do not understand business. All public relations pros should be reading business books or articles or watching business-focused programs. Those who want to be high-level agency executives should consider going to business school.

What do you think? Is it a PR problem? Or is it a lack of business know-how?

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# What you can learn from John McCain

Do you watch Meet the Press? If so, you have probably noticed that Senator John McCain has been a frequent guest. He's also been on the other Sunday shows like Face the Nation. According to The Washington Monthly, as of 2009, McCain had been on Meet the Press 54 times. Since then, I would say he has been on many more times, making that number 60 or larger.

Other people appear quite frequently too. In fact, based on Sunday show appearances, you would be excused for thinking there are only about 10 senators in the U.S. Senate. Other frequent guests are Senators Lindsey Graham, Chuck Schumer and Dick Durbin. (As an aside, it seems that male senators appear more frequently than female senators...). Back in the 90s, when I first started watching Meet the Press with Tim Russert, the go-to senator was the Senator Orrin Hatch. In fact, I stopped watching MTP because it seemed like Sen. Hatch was always on!

Is John McCain a more important senator than the other 99? No. What he may be is more media savvy. And he is a proven commodity. The Sunday shows know they can count on McCain for making strong pronouncements or taking controversial views.



Sen. John McCain (photo by Medill DC on Flickr)

There's a few PR lessons you can learn from John McCain.

- 1) Be the go-to person on your areas of expertise (McCain's areas are mostly immigration, foreign policy and defense). Some may say this is being a "thought leader."
- 2) Make yourself available and say yes to invitations. (My guess is that MTP knows that it can get McCain pretty much any time.) If you turn down an interview, the producer will simply go on to the next person on the list.
- 3) Have clearly defined, strong messages and/or positions. (MTP knows what it will get when it books McCain.)
- 4) Once you are in, you are in. (McCain does not have to prove anything or do much to get invited on the shows.)

What do you take away from McCain's frequent appearance?

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# Mrs. Maxwell was on the right track, sort of

I finally watched Salmon Fishing in the Yemen last night (Netflix had me wait for this movie for about two months, but that is another story). If you haven't seen it yet, this is the basic plot: Yemeni sheik likes to fish salmon and wants to be able to do so in his country. He hires a British firm to find someone to bring his plans to fruition. British firm reaches out to Dr. Alfred Jones, of the UK Fishing and Hunting Department. Dr. Jones laughs at the idea, but Mrs. Patricia Maxwell, press secretary for the British Prime Minister insists that the project must go on, as a publicity ploy to counteract some bad news. And so Dr. Jones embarks on feasibility studies, etc.

To me, Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is a movie about the power of ~~faith~~ PR. Great public relations takes skill and passion. It is not for the faint of heart, especially when embodied by Mrs. Maxwell, who is played brilliantly, and with comic flair by Kristin Scott Thomas. She is a spot-on caricature of a PR person (always working, smartphone in hand 24-7, running from meeting to meeting). In my opinion, she alone makes the movie worth watching.

Mrs. Maxwell is very adept at PR. Here's what she does well:

- Understands the value of positive publicity ("we need a good news story from the Middle East")
- Is always thinking of what story to tell
- Recognizes opportunities (when she hears there are 2 million fishermen in the UK, she sees voters)
- Knows that every audience has its news source
- Thinks visually (does the Prime Minister fish? No, well send the Foreign Minister instead)

But Mrs. Maxwell is not perfect. Here's where she may have

gone a bit wrong:

- Fails to have a plan B (expects plan she has to work regardless)
- Doesn't understand the constituency (salmon fishermen are pretty passionate about their fish and will not go down easily)
- Is too focused on the end result (goes too far in general)
- Treats people like pawns

What do you think? Do PR people go to far in real life? Do you know a Mrs. Maxwell? Do we need more PR people like her or fewer? And if you haven't seen this movie, try to get it on your Netflix queue now. It may be a while.

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## **Pepco doesn't understand public relations**

I think I finally figured out why Pepco has such a bad image: the company does not "get" public relations. The company seems to believe that advertising alone can build a positive image, while failing to realize that most people differentiate between bought advertising and the third-party endorsement that comes from a public relations program.

If we look at the past month, we have not seen a single positive sign from Pepco. The latest news, out today, is that Pepco is complaining that the reduced rate hike that it is getting from the Maryland Public Service Commission won't be enough to sustain "improvements." Read the article in the

Washington Post here. What we have seen is a large advertising campaign designed to tell people that Pepco responded well to the derecho storm (in spite of ample evidence to the contrary).

Pepco understands that it must have a spokesperson to answer questions, but it does not seem to get that the spokesperson must tell the truth and not minimize the suffering caused by prolonged power outages (which is exactly what Thomas Graham continuously does). As Robert McCartney, columnist for the Washington Post puts it: "A slip of tongue reveals Pepco's contempt for its customers."

Public relations, according to BusinessDictionary.com, is the practice of creating and maintaining goodwill among an organization's publics, through the use of such tactics as media relations, sponsorships and charitable contributions.

As far as I can see, Pepco is not doing a good job at creating or maintaining goodwill. It is failing at public relations (and in my opinion, it is also failing at advertising). More troubling is that the company seems to not care what the public thinks. It seems to believe that if it places enough advertising, the public will believe that it is working hard and improving reliability. As I have said before, the public will only believe that Pepco is working hard— at advertising— unless changes are made that affect them directly (better communication, faster restoration times, indeed, increased reliability).

Pepco—how about you hire someone who "gets" public relations? Perhaps with some wise PR counsel you will improve your image by actually making steps that do increase goodwill.

## **UPDATE**

Tom Graham has this letter to the editor in Wednesday's Washington Post. I quote:



*Critics can say many things about the company and about me, but to question our care and concern for our customers is simply unfair. This is my home, these are my people, and they are – and will remain – my utmost professional priority.*

Do you think this rings true? Is the charge unfair? Moreover, do you think this was a good move on Graham's part?

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## Why is writing well a disappearing skill?

Sally Falkow writes today in her blog, The Proactive Report, that good writing should be considered a primary public relations skill. I agree (and I wrote about that in my post Qualities of a PR Pro).

The question is not whether PR people should know how to write well, but why they don't. April Finnen (@AprilFin) , who writes the blog One Person Shop, said in a Twitter exchange with me:

*"I think a big part of it is that good writing comes from good thinking, and that's becoming harder to find."*

I answered:

*Certainly true, but I do think many people just don't do enough reading either (maybe that's related to lack of thinking...)*

To which April responded:

*“Agree. If you can find a curious PR pro who reads everything, pretty safe bet they’re a good writer.”*

In my opinion, writing well is disappearing because people are reading less. Why is this happening? It may be because they are not curious, not interested, not thinking, working too hard, or any number of other reasons.

If it is lack of curiosity or good thinking, as April says, how are these PR “pros” going to come up with strategies to drive a message?

I can’t tell you how many PR people I have met who don’t ever read books for pleasure or even a daily newspaper. How many PR firms offer grammar and writing courses for their associates? How many PR pros today were English majors in college? Fewer and fewer thanks to the devaluing of liberal arts education and the rise of career-focused majors. If all you studied in college was how to create a PR campaign, but you never read a classic novel, how are you going to appreciate the power of language to convey meaning and emotion?

Do you have thoughts on why good writing is on the decline? Please do share!

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## **WaPo: Carney hopes and Pepco failures**

Two items from today’s Washington Post caught my eye. One was about Jay Carney, the new White House press secretary and the other was a letter to the editor regarding Pepco.

## **Speaking for the White House**

Jay Carney is taking over from Robert Gibbs as White House press secretary. Carney was a journalist, and many people think he will bring a journalist's viewpoint to the White House briefing room. Dana Milbank wonders "Can Jay Carney Hack it as a Flack" in an op-ed in today's Washington Post. Few people will miss Gibbs, so maybe by comparison, Carney will already do better. I wrote about Gibbs snark here. If one thing Carney can learn from Gibbs is how not to act. I think the press corps are looking for information without sarcasm.

## **Proving advertising doesn't turn the lights back on**

Another hot topic this week (other than the ongoing protests in Egypt) is Pepco. If you live in the DC area you know that Pepco failed, once again, to restore power in a timely fashion following a weird snow storm last week. At one point, they had 300,000 customers without power and in many cases, it took them three or four days to restore power to all of them. Witness how people felt about it, and more importantly, about how Pepco mishandled communications by reading letters to the editor in today's Post. Notice the title of the piece includes the word "outrage."

This latest episode in Pepco's ongoing reliability struggle proves my point that no matter how many nice ads and promising assertions you make, you have to back them up with real action. As you recall, Pepco started running an ad campaign talking about all the stuff they are doing to make themselves more reliable and responsive. Well, sadly, it was just words. No one believed it then, and certainly, no one believes it now. Instead of spending lots of ad dollars on an image campaign, Pepco should spend some money figuring out how to increase its reliability, responsiveness and communications with customers.

The bottom line for both these stories is that communications

matter a whole lot. How you handle communications, what you say, when you say it, can truly impact public opinion and your image.