

# PR *update*

News journal of the Public Relations Division of AEJMC -- November 1994

## Public relations

# The professionalism dilemma

By Richard Alan Nelson  
Louisiana State University  
Public Relations Division Head

I find the continuing discussion and emphasis over public relations professionalism interesting, but also damn irritating. Like you, I get a bit tired of justifying the need for public relations — having to explain what it isn't as often as I'm called to lay out what it is — to people whose idea of PR is at best deficient and at worst downright dangerous. And I'm not talking about students here, but people in the business and public policy world who seem to relish their ignorance about our field. We saw this "flack" mentality again exhibited at the last AEJMC convention, a rediscovery particularly disconcerting given the positive things we do.



We can never get very far away from the need to be concerned about credibility, accountability, and responsibility. A friend of mine, Professor Mel Sharpe at Ball State University, goes so far as to argue that the communications made possible by public relations is the key to conflict resolution and world peace. While I'm not sure a PR glasnost is about to erupt, there is potential in what we do to build understanding between groups and institutions that otherwise might not be talking with one another.

So why are we in a continuing dither about the professional nature of what we do? Part of our problem stems from our success--more and more is expected of us. At the same time, in contrast to our friends in advertising

or marketing, the vast variety of activities that fall under the umbrella of public relations--ranging from product publicity to community relations, from social marketing to government relations--makes it much more difficult for our field to define itself.

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## Practitioners identify skills needed in future

By Robert H. McGaughey III  
Murray State University

As public relations practitioners move toward the turn of the century with rapidly changing conditions and a technology explosion, what will be the main skills needed? Will they be new ones, enhanced old ones, or both?

Several members of the Bluegrass chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which has members in the Louisville area of Kentucky and also from Southern Indiana and Western Kentucky, were asked to give their predictions.

As might be expected, most identified communication (written and oral) and computer skills. Several, however, listed issues management, crisis resolution and ability to work on an international level as the top skills needed.

Tab Brockman, assistant general manager of the Louisville Redbirds AAA baseball team responsible for marketing and public relations, likened the PR person in professional sports to a salesman.

He noted the following skills as being necessary in the year 2000:

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## -- The professionalism dilemma . . .

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SO WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM? Researchers say that professionals have five major characteristics:

- A set of professional values--often linked to an important social role in serving others in addition to simply the idea of building a good career.
- Membership in strong professional organizations--which facilitate contact with other professionals, socialize members to a professional culture, accredit members, and discipline those who violate the values and ethics of the profession
- This leads to the third component--adherence to professional norms through codes of ethics and legal sanctions.
- In addition, fourth, a profession needs an intellectual tradition, with its own unique characteristics and well-established body of knowledge requiring theory and a method of formal study. and
- Ongoing development of technical skills that define the profession as a lifetime occupation rather than simply a steppingstone to something else.

In each of these areas, public relations has what Grunig and Hunt call "the necessary infrastructure to be a true profession" but we've yet to be recognized as such because of ongoing problems we still need to address. One reason Bernays has remained so insistent on the idea of licensing over the years is his argument that without such legal status (already accorded the professions of accounting, law, and medicine) we cannot effectively insist on standards of accountability, cannot eliminate the underqualified or unqualified from our ranks, and cannot standardize perceptions of what it means to be a public relations practitioner. He may very well be right.

Social scientists have gone further in defining professionalism as a characteristic of individual practitioners more than a characteristic of an occupation. An occupation is accepted as a profession — rather than a vocation or trade — when a majority of its practitioners qualify as professionals. Our major professional organizations, such as PRSA, IABC, WICI and others,

serve primarily to bring those interested in public relations together. Let me draw an analogy to the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association. One does not expect to find M.D.s and nurses or J.D.s and legal aides in those groups. The failed merger attempts in our groups over the years are essentially caused by inherent differences in emphases between those who are more skill or technically-oriented and those who are more conceptual or management-oriented. One of the problems stemming from the diversity of writing, research, production, and liaison responsibilities falling under the rubric of public relations, then, is a split between our educational backgrounds, expertise as technicians and/or managers, and the resulting lack of a common set of core professional values we are trying bridge.

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*. . . professionalism is more  
than our demeanor . . .*

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So professionalism is more than our demeanor, or whether we have good posture, or like the old ads to build word power, in how we project ourselves orally. It's more than whether we know about VNRS, or how to access Compuserve. Actually, all those things contribute to how others perceive us but they are only the outward signs of an inward process. For professionalism stems--like so much else--from the attributes that make up our person, our way of approaching life, the process of problem solving that expresses who we really are. Part of that process requires conceptual thinking--what some in business call strategic thinking--that allows us to more effectively analyze situations, apply criteria for determining the best course of action given various constraints, and articulating solutions to big problems as well as little ones. This is where theory, differentiated from rote memorization, comes in.

The buck may stop with us — but I don't think we have anything to be ashamed about. We are a new occupation historically, and if we are not a profession yet it's because we are still growing up and specializing. We and others like us are not only the present, but also the future since many of us will move into more senior responsibilities in

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# Minutes of 1994 Business Meeting

By Susanne Roschwalb  
American University  
Public Relations Division Secretary

The 1994 Business Meeting of the Public Relations Division was called to order by Division head Maria Russell at 8 p.m.

Maria Russell extended a welcome to all new members.

Maria Russell requested and received approval by a voice vote of the Minutes of the 1993 Business Meeting held in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Division Head presented a financial report on the financial condition of the Division as of 06/30/94. The report was approved by a voice vote of members.

Russell presented a volunteer sign-up sheet to members with a request to indicate areas of interest for future involvement in the Division.

Committee reports were provided by Committee Chairs both in written and oral formats. Written reports were received from the Professional Freedom and Responsibility, Student Competitions, Scholarly Associations, "PR Update," Professional Associations and Journal of Public Relations Research committees.

Bonita Neff reported that membership had exceeded 400 members. She noted the need for members to establish relationships with other AEJMC members (particularly in the international area) and extended invitations to join the Public Relations Division.

Richard Nelson requested feedback from members regarding convention programming and called for proposals for the 1995 convention. Nelson and Carolyn Cline will travel to New Orleans for the mid-winter meeting where next year's convention programming will be determined. Nelson stated the 1995 program will be "fixed" in December.

Kathy Fitzpatrick reported that the Division sponsored 10 convention sessions related to professional freedom and responsibility issues. The Division newsletter also included numerous articles addressing issues of concern in the area, with one issue devoted to the topic "Litigation Public Relations." Fitzpatrick reported that the Division joined the Mass Communication and Society Division in participating the Spring 1994 conference on "Media and the Environment" in Reno, Nevada. The Division also participated in "Unity '94" held July 26-August 2 in Atlanta. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth arranged the Division's participation in the first national convention for multi-ethnic public relations practitioners, held in conjunction with "Unity '94." Kern-Foxworth and Kathleen A. Fearn-Banks presented a teaching workshop at the convention.

The Teaching Standards Committee reported that the Top Three Teaching Papers were presented awards by a representative from the

International Association of Business Communicators. Winners were Carolyn Cline, Pamela Bourland and Gay Wakefield.

JoAnn Valenti reported that 26 papers were submitted for the Research Competition, with 15 accepted, for an acceptance rate of 54 percent. Valenti noted that she received several submissions inappropriate for consideration by the Public Relations Division and that two of the faculty awards went to students this year. James Grunig suggested that all papers be submitted together, and that top student paper be identified after judging is completed.

Maria Russell encouraged members to read the AEJMC Vision 200 Task Force report and attend the open meeting for discussion of the suggested changes. Russell pointed out that the proposed structure would not include a Public Relations Division per se.

Maria Russell reported for Lynn Zoch on the Student Research Competition. Russell states that there appeared to be some confusion among students regarding the submission process and recommended that the new officers examine the current process for student paper submissions. Russell suggested that additional assistance at the university level would help students understand the process and improve the quality of the papers submitted.

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## Wakefield, Millar added to TPR editorial staff

Gay Wakefield of Butler University and Dan Pyle Millar of Indiana State University have been named Associate Editors for *Teaching Public Relations*. PR Division head Richard Nelson said Wakefield will be in charge of article development and Millar will be handle production.

"*Teaching Public Relations* has evolved from an idea of promoting teaching excellence into a gem of the division," Nelson said.

Nelson said adding two associate editors to perform the tasks formerly done by Founding Editor Todd Hunt of Rutgers University was necessary. "We've reached the point where no one person can do the job," Nelson explained. "We all owe Todd a debt of gratitude for his cutting-edge work in establishing *TPR*."

TPR submissions should be sent to:

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**PRupdate** is a news journal published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Public Relations Division members examine and analyze scholarly, pedagogical and other issues relating to public relations practice and education. We serve educators, practitioners and others who recognize the important contributions made by public relations to an informed society.

Although the newsletter's editor works diligently to maintain a low profile, he welcomes and encourages articles, reviews and opinion pieces from newsletter readers. The editor requests that submissions be sent on a DOS readable disk; Macintosh disks, however, also are acceptable. Edited at Murray State University.

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Carolyn Cline reported that 15 participants attended the pre-convention working papers session and asked for ideas/proposals for next year. Lauri Grunig noted the success of the program during its six years of existence and recommended that the session be made part of convention programming. Richard Nelson suggested that the session be held at an off-site location to allow the Division to maximize convention programming sessions. L. Grunig noted that if the session were co-sponsored, the division would spend only one-half a chit to schedule the session during the convention.

Maria Russell reported that the Graduate Education Task force appreciated the Division's interaction with graduate students. Russell asked for suggestions on ways to increase student interaction with scholars.

In Technology Chair Glen Cameron's absence, Maria Russell reported Cameron's recommendation that the division explore ways to broaden its focus on technology.

Don Stacks reported that the International Committee was continuing its efforts to compile a contact list of educators in the international area and to develop a survey that would identify needs and interest of Division members in the area.

Richard Nelson noted the Division's desire for growth in the international area and pointed out the difficulty in communicating with members from other countries. Nelson suggested that Internet was an important resource, and requested member input on other ways to improve service to foreign members. An unidentified member noted that international members were disappointed with the current mailing process which delayed member receipt of Division materials.

Susanne Roschwalb noted that postage on international mailings is extremely high and expressed a need for a policy decision on whether such mailings should be funded.

Maria Russell thanked all committee chairs for their work and reports. Russell reported that she had compiled a 38-page annual report submitted to AEJMC. Richard Nelson noted that this effort reduced the work of committee chairs, and Marilyn Kern-Foxworth commented that the annual report was excellent.

The Nominating Committee chaired by Dean Kruckeberg announced the Division nominees (in parentheses) and new slate of officers from the recent election: Vice-Head Carolyn Cline (Cornelius Pratt); Secretary Susanne Roschwalb (Bonita Neff); and Elected Delegate-at-Large Marilyn Kern-Foxworth (Bill Adams).

Maria Russell stated that her legacy to the Division would be a long-range strategic plan to guide the Division in the future. Russell noted the need to update the reports on undergraduate and graduate education and proposed that a Division council comprised of past-Division Heads and other members be formed to define the role of the AEJMC Public Relations Division. Russell suggested that the strategic plan be modeled after the AEJMC Vision 2000 Report and designed to study the identity and structure of the Division and the

viability of public relations within schools of journalism and mass communication.

Betsy Plank said the Educational Affairs Committee of PRSA was discussing the development of a second study of public relations education and that Bob Kendall (who conducted the original research) would head the research if funding is secured.

It was suggested that technology issues be included in future studies. James Grunig noted that in studying the viability of public relations departments, relationships with scholars in other fields and with public relations professionals be included.

Maria Russell asked for member approval to form a strategic plan committee and turned the program over to new Division head Richard Nelson. Nelson asked for a motion in favor of forming such a committee. Members provided their approval in a voice vote.

Sue Roschwalb thanked Maria Russell on behalf of the Division for her work as Division head and presented Russell with a present to express the Division's appreciation for her efforts on its behalf.

New Division Head Richard Nelson expressed his desire to advance the interests of the profession during the coming year and said he looked forward to a productive year. Nelson asked for member guidance as he assumed the position of Division Head.

Katie Theus introduced Lynn Webb, president of the Southern States Communication Association and announced the formation of a new Public Relations Interest Group within the Association.

Maria Russell and Marilyn Kern-Foxworth reported that the Public Relations Division had assisted AEJMC this year with convention media and coverage. The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 p.m.

**-- The professionalism dilemma . . .****(Continued from Page 2)**

coming years. We are far more often the solution than the problem. And if more of us need to acquire core professional values, more of us are! Given the lapses in judgment chronicled in the news involving lawyers, doctors, and accountants, I'd say our performance in terms of social responsibility is not only pretty good -- it's on the record. Lenin once asked "What Needs to Be Done?" -- a question that can be answered rather succinctly today. Keep on working at your personal development as scholars and practitioners, don't give up on educating your colleagues, managements and clients about the importance of public relations, and read the new research in public relations that shows how knowing social science and persuasion theory can help you more confidently solve the real world problems you face.

## -- Practitioners identify skills . . .

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- Computer literacy. This enables employees to operate in a computer environment. Also important is the ability to think and create on the CPU so that ideas can be brought to a finished product. The day of mailing out news releases is long gone. In today's media environment, faxes, E-mail and the ability to send press releases electronically are critical. The media expect to get timely information.
- Communication skills. Even though computers have spell checkers, the author must still be able to communicate his/her ideas clearly and succinctly.
- Creativity. With the information clutter which accompanies today's information highway, the ability to get your client's message noticed is critical. If your news releases and messages simply blend in with the hundreds and thousands of other similar messages, the information is likely to be overlooked.
- Personal instruction skills. The surest way to guarantee successful communication with your constituencies is to get to talk to them face-to-face. If you have the savvy and persona to secure a face-to-face meeting, you had better be prepared to impress your audience.

These are basically the same skills my profession is needing today. They all add up to the same end result -- closing a sale. Whether it is selling your story idea to a news editor or reporter, or selling a marketing package to a sponsor, all of the above skills contribute to the end result.

Nancy Jarett, manager of corporate and external affairs for South Central Bell in Louisville, noted that the skills needed in the year 2000 by public relations professionals are those which are needed today.

"First and foremost is writing skills. That is now, and will continue to be the one that separates public relations professionals from the rest of the pack.

"Oral communications skills run a close second. They are very important for any profession -- but especially ours.

"Other vital skills both now and in the future include the ability to determine the needs of the audience both now in the future and to be able to meet those existing needs and adapt to evolving ones. To do this, research is key. And understanding research and what it can do for the communications process is absolutely essential to public relations professionals.

"Leadership skills are also important. A public relations professional must establish his or her place at the decision-makers' table, and must establish him or herself as an authority as vital to the organization as the attorneys or engineers.

"I'm sure others will tell you that computer skills, photography skills, etc., are important. Of course, these skills will change as these tools change. And while I think it is important to know how to utilize these tools in our profession, I do not believe that accomplishing their use in an end in itself.

"In the future, it will be critically important to the survival of the profession that people in this field find some way of concretely measuring their impact for the corporations -- whether that is through tying public relations measurement more closely with marketing goals or to a continual reading of public opinion. Right now, measurement in this profession is still something we are having a difficult time defining."

Leah Wilding, APR, the public affairs administrator for the Louisville Board of Alderman, said, "With the ever changing and fast-paced changes in technology, computer skills and the ability to keep up with technology as a means to communicate will become more important than ever. With the merging and graying of the lines of distinction between marketing and public relations, marketing skills would be most helpful, as well as basic knowledge of advertising."

Wilding also said the understanding the language of other communication professions is important. "Use of advertising, marketing and media (jargon) in terms of measuring result is also necessary in terms of justifying budgets," she said. "Research skills will continue to be a must, as well as written and oral communications skills.

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## -- Practitioners identify skills . . .

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I also think a general business background is necessary to provide skills in budgeting, management, personnel, administration and leadership."

Sandra Stark Wilson, director of public relations for the Westvaco Corporation in Wickliffe, Ky., felt that excellent communications skills, both writing and speaking, were at the top of her list.

Second was crisis management. She said communicators must be willing to "stay the course" and be prepared to handle a crisis. Being in the public relations field involves more than just representing your company during good times. It also involves representing your company in "not so good" times.

Third was media relations or having a general knowledge of how the media work.

Wilson also said a general knowledge of environment affairs, a general knowledge of the regulatory environment and organizational skills were necessary.

Elaine Spalding, vice president of marketing and communications for the Louisville Area Chamber of Commerce, said that writing skills still will be the most important. She said, in fact, that the ability to communicate quickly and clearly over whatever media are used in the future will be the key to success.

She also said having special content skills will be important to position the professional within the company and within the particular business field.

### Position Inserts Accepted

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