Public Relations and Framing the Message

In the mid-1950s, the blue jeans industry was in deep trouble. After hitting a postwar peak in 1953, jeans sales began to slide. The durable one-hundred-year-old denim product had become associated with rock and roll and teenage troublemakers. Popular movies, especially The Wild One and Blackboard Jungle, featured emotionally disturbed, blue jeans-wearing “young toughs” terrorizing adult authority figures. A Broadway play about juvenile delinquency was even titled Blue Denim.

The worst was yet to come, however. In 1957, the public school system in Buffalo, New York, banned the wearing of blue jeans for all high school students. Formerly associated with farmers, factory workers, and an adult work ethic, jeans had become a reverse fashion statement for teenagers—something many adults could not abide.

THE DELINQUENT IN JEANS
Marlon Brando in The Wild One (1953)
In response to the crisis, the denim industry waged a public relations (PR) campaign to eradicate the delinquency label and rejuvenate denim’s image. In 1956, the nation’s top blue jeans manufacturers formed the national Denim Council “to put schoolchildren back in blue jeans through a concerted national public relations, advertising, and promotional effort.” First the council targeted teens, but its promotional efforts were unsuccessful. The manufacturers soon realized that the problem was not with the teens but with the parents, administrators, teachers, and school boards. It was the adults who felt threatened by a fashion trend that seemed to promote disrespect through casualness. In response, the council hired a public relations firm to turn the image of blue jeans around. Over the next five years, the firm did just that.

The public relations team determined that mothers were refusing to outfit their children in jeans because of the product’s association with delinquency. To change this perception among women, the team encouraged fashion designers to update denim’s image by producing new women’s sportswear styles made from the fabric. Media outlets and fashion editors were soon inundated with news releases about the “new look” of durable denim.

The PR team next enlisted sportswear designers to provide new designs for both men’s and women’s work and utility clothes, long the backbone of denim sales. Targeting business reporters as well as fashion editors, the team transformed the redesign effort into a story that appealed to writers in both areas. They also planned retail store promotions nationwide, including “jean queen” beauty contests, and advanced positive denim stories in men’s publications. The team’s major PR coup, however, involved an association with the newly formed national Peace Corps. The brainchild of the Kennedy administration, the Peace Corps encouraged young people to serve their country by working with people from developing nations.

Envisioning the Peace Corps as the flip side of delinquency, the Denim Council saw its opening. In 1961, it agreed to outfit the first group of two hundred corps volunteers in denim. As a result of all these PR efforts, by 1963 manufacturers were flooded with orders, and sales of jeans and other denim goods were up. The delinquency tag disappeared, and jeans gradually became associated with a more casual, though not antisocial, dress ethic.
THE BLUE JEANS STORY ILLUSTRATES A MAJOR DIFFERENCE between advertising and public relations: Advertising is controlled publicity that a company or an individual buys; public relations attempts to secure favorable media publicity (which is more difficult to control) to promote a company or client. The transformation of denim in the public’s eye was primarily achieved not by purchasing advertising but by restyling denim’s image through friendly relations with reporters, who subsequently wrote stories associating the fabric with a casual, dedicated, youthful America.

Public relations (PR) covers a wide array of practices, such as shaping the public image of a politician or celebrity, establishing or repairing communication between consumers and companies, and promoting government agencies and actions, especially during wartime. Broadly defined, public relations refers to the total communication strategy conducted by a person, a government, or an organization attempting to reach and persuade an audience to adopt a point of view. While public relations may sound very similar to advertising, which also seeks to persuade audiences, it is a different skill in a variety of ways. Advertising uses simple and fixed messages (e.g., “our appliance is the most efficient and affordable”) that are transmitted directly to the public through the purchase of ads. Public relations involves more complex messages that may evolve over time (e.g., a political campaign or a long-term strategy to dispel unfavorable reports about “fatty processed foods”) and may be transmitted to the public indirectly, often through the news media.

The social and cultural impact of public relations has been immense. In its infancy, PR helped convince many American businesses of the value of nurturing the public, who became purchasers rather than producers of their own goods after the Industrial Revolution. PR set the tone for the corporate image-building that characterized the economic environment of the twentieth century and for the battles of organizations taking sides in today’s environmental, energy, and labor issues. Perhaps PR’s most significant effect, however, has been on the political process, where individuals and organizations—on both the Right and the Left—hire spin doctors to shape their media images.

In this chapter, we will:

• Study the impact of public relations and the historical conditions that affected its development as a modern profession.
• Look at nineteenth-century press agents and the role that railroad and utility companies played in developing corporate PR.
• Consider the rise of modern PR, particularly the influences of former reporters Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays.
• Explore the major practices and specialties of public relations.
• Examine the reasons for the long-standing antagonism between journalists and members of the PR profession, and the social responsibilities of public relations in a democracy.

As you read through this chapter, think about what knowledge you might already have about what public relations practitioners do, given that PR is an immensely powerful media industry and yet remains largely invisible. Can you think of a company or organization, either national (like BP) or local (like your university or college), that might have engaged the help of a public relations team to handle a crisis? What did they do to make the public trust the organization more? When you see political campaign coverage, are you sometimes aware of the “spin doctors” who are responsible for making sure their candidate says or does the “right thing” at the “right time” so they can foster the most favorable public image that will gain the candidate the most votes? For more questions to help you understand the role of public relations in our lives, see “Questioning the Media” in the Chapter Review.

“An image . . . is not simply a trademark, a design, a slogan, or an easily remembered picture. It is a studiously crafted personality profile of an individual, institution, corporation, product, or service.”

DANIEL BOORSTIN, THE IMAGE, 1961
Early Developments in Public Relations

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States shifted to a consumer-oriented, industrial society that fostered the development of new products and services as people moved to cities to find work. During this transformation from farm to factory, advertising and PR emerged as professions. While advertising drew attention and customers to new products, PR partly began to help businesses fend off increased scrutiny from the muckraking journalists and emerging labor unions of the time.³

The first PR practitioners were simply theatrical press agents: those who sought to advance a client’s image through media exposure, primarily via stunts staged for newspapers. The advantages of these early PR techniques soon became obvious. For instance, press agents were used by people like Daniel Boone, who engineered various land-grab and real estate ventures, and Davy Crockett, who in addition to performing heroic exploits was also involved in the massacre of Native Americans. Such individuals often wanted press agents to repair and reshape their reputations as cherished frontier legends or as respectable candidates for public office.

**P. T. Barnum and Buffalo Bill**

The most notorious press agent of the 1800s was Phineas Taylor (P. T.) Barnum, who used gross exaggeration, fraudulent stories, and staged events to secure newspaper coverage for his clients; his American Museum; and, later, his circus. Barnum’s circus, dubbed “The Greatest Show on Earth,” included the “midget” General Tom Thumb, Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, Jumbo the Elephant, and Joice Heth (who Barnum claimed was the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington, but who was actually eighty when she died). These performers became some of the earliest...
nationally known celebrities because of Barnum’s skill in using the media for promotion. Decrying outright fraud and cheating, Barnum understood that his audiences liked to be tricked. In newspapers and on handbills, he later often revealed the strategies behind his more elaborate hoaxes.

From 1883 to 1916, William F. Cody, who once killed buffalo for the railroads, promoted himself and his traveling show: “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World.” Cody’s troupe—which featured Bedouins, Cossacks, and gauchos, as well as “cowboys and Indians”—re-created dramatic gunfights, the Civil War, and battles of the Old West. The show employed sharpshooter Annie Oakley and Lakota medicine man Sitting Bull, whose legends were partially shaped by Cody’s nine press agents. These agents were led by John Burke, who successfully promoted the show for its entire thirty-four-year run. Burke was one of the first press agents to use a wide variety of media channels to generate publicity: promotional newspaper stories, magazine articles and ads, dime novels, theater marquees, poster art, and early films. Burke and Buffalo Bill shaped many of the lasting myths about rugged American individualism and frontier expansion that were later adopted by books, radio programs, and Hollywood films about the American West. Along with Barnum, they were among the first

EARLY PUBLIC RELATIONS
Originally called “P. T. Barnum’s Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Hippodrome,” Barnum’s circus merged with Bailey’s circus in 1881 and again with the Ringling Bros. in 1919. Even with the ups and downs of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus over the decades, Barnum’s original catchphrase, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” endures to this day.

TYLENOL SCARE
After a criminal laces Tylenol capsules with cyanide in 1982, Johnson & Johnson responds with rapid and ethical PR crisis management, saving the Tylenol brand (p. 377).

EXXON VALDEZ DISASTER
Exxon’s initial denials of responsibility and slow response to the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 severely damage its reputation (pp. 376–377).

VIDEO NEWS RELEASES (VNRs)
Responding to citizen pressure, in 2005 the FCC mandates that the source of a VNR must be clearly disclosed when broadcast (p. 370).

PRSA
To better its standing among the public and news media, the PR industry forms the Public Relations Society of America in 1948 to function as an internal watchdog (p. 380).

CONSUMER RELATIONS
In 1965, consumer activist Ralph Nader publishes Unsafe at Any Speed, a book that blasts the safety conditions of GM’s Chevrolet Corvair. A consumer movement is ignited, and the PR industry develops new customer relations strategies (pp. 372–373).

BP OIL SPILL
A deadly explosion and gushing leak at a BP deep-sea oil well in the Gulf of Mexico becomes the largest U.S. oil spill ever and annihilates BP’s effort to cultivate an environmentally friendly image (pp. 376–377).
to use **publicity**—a type of PR communication that uses various media messages to spread information about a person, corporation, issue, or policy—to elevate entertainment culture to an international level.

**Big Business and Press Agents**

As P. T. Barnum, Buffalo Bill, and John Burke demonstrated, utilizing the press brought with it an enormous power to sway the public and to generate business. So it is not surprising that during the 1800s America’s largest industrial companies, particularly the railroads, also employed press agents to win favor in the court of public opinion.

The railroads began to use press agents to help them obtain federal funds. Initially, local businesses raised funds to finance the spread of rail service. Around 1850, however, the railroads began pushing for federal subsidies, complaining that local fund-raising efforts took too long. For example, Illinois Central was one of the first companies to use government *lobbyists* (people who try to influence the voting of lawmakers) to argue that railroad service between the North and the South was in the public interest and would ease tensions, unite the two regions, and prevent a war.

The railroad press agents successfully gained government support by developing some of the earliest publicity tactics. Their first strategy was simply to buy favorable news stories about rail travel from newspapers through direct bribes. Another practice was to engage in *deadheading*—giving reporters free rail passes with the tacit understanding that they would write glowing reports about rail travel. Eventually, wealthy railroads received the federal subsidies they wanted and increased their profits, while the American public shouldered much of the financial burden of rail expansion.

Having obtained construction subsidies, the larger rail companies turned their attention to bigger game—persuading the government to control rates and reduce competition, especially from smaller, aggressive regional lines. Railroad lobbyists argued that federal support would lead to improved service and guaranteed quality, because the government would be keeping a close watch. These lobbying efforts, accompanied by favorable publicity, led to passage of the Interstate Commerce Act in 1881, authorizing railroads “to revamp their freight classification, raise rates, and eliminate fare reduction.” Historians have argued that, ironically, the PR campaign’s success actually led to the decline of the railroads: Artificially maintained higher rates and burdensome government regulations forced smaller firms out of business and eventually drove many customers to other modes of transportation.

Along with the railroads, utility companies such as Chicago Edison and AT&T also used PR strategies in the late 1800s to derail competition and eventually attain monopoly status. In fact, AT&T’s PR and lobbying efforts were so effective that they eliminated all telephone competition—with the government’s blessing—until the 1980s. In addition to buying the votes of key lawmakers, the utilities hired third-party editorial services, which would send favorable articles about utilities to newspapers; assigned company managers to become leaders in community groups; produced ghostwritten articles (often using the names of prominent leaders and members of women’s social groups, who were flattered to see their names in print); and influenced textbook authors to write histories favorable to the utilities. The tactics of the 1880s and 1890s, however, would haunt public relations as it struggled to become a respected profession.

**The Birth of Modern Public Relations**

By the early 1900s, reporters and muckraking journalists began investigating the promotional practices behind many companies. As an informed citizenry paid more attention, it became more difficult for large firms to fool the press and mislead the public. With the rise of the middle class, increasing literacy among the working classes, and the spread of information through
print media, democratic ideals began to threaten the established order of business and politics—and the elite groups who managed them. Two pioneers of public relations—Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays—emerged in this atmosphere to popularize an approach that emphasized shaping the interpretation of facts and “engineering consent.”

**Ivy Ledbetter Lee**

Most nineteenth-century corporations and manufacturers cared little about public sentiment. By the early 1900s, though, executives realized that their companies could sell more products if they were associated with positive public images and values. Into this public space stepped Ivy Ledbetter Lee, considered one of the founders of modern public relations. Lee understood that the public’s attitude toward big corporations had changed. He counseled his corporate clients that honesty and directness were better PR devices than the deceptive practices of the 1800s, which had fostered suspicion and an anti-big-business sentiment.

A minister’s son, an economics student at Princeton University, and a former reporter, Lee opened one of the first PR firms in the early 1900s with George Park. Lee quit the firm in 1906 to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, which, following a rail accident, hired him to help downplay unfavorable publicity. Lee’s advice, however, was that Penn Railroad admit its mistake, vow to do better, and let newspapers in on the story. These suggestions ran counter to the then-standard practice of hiring press agents to manipulate the media, yet Lee argued that an open relationship between business and the press would lead to a more favorable public image. In the end, Penn and subsequent clients, notably John D. Rockefeller, adopted Lee’s successful strategies.

By the 1880s, Rockefeller controlled 90 percent of the nation’s oil industry and suffered from periodic image problems, particularly after Ida Tarbell’s powerful muckraking series about the ruthless business tactics practiced by Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1904. The Rockefeller and Standard Oil reputations reached a low point in April 1914, when tactics to stop union organizing erupted in tragedy at a coal company in Ludlow, Colorado. During a violent strike, fifty-three workers and their family members, including thirteen women and children, died.
Lee was hired to contain the damaging publicity fallout. He immediately distributed a series of “fact” sheets to the press, telling the corporate side of the story and discrediting the tactics of the United Mine Workers, who organized the strike. As he had done for Penn Railroad, Lee also brought in the press and staged photo opportunities. John D. Rockefeller Jr., who now ran the company, donned overalls and a miner’s helmet and posed with the families of workers and union leaders. This was probably the first use of a PR campaign in a labor-management dispute. Over the years, Lee completely transformed the wealthy family’s image, urging the discreet Rockefellers to publicize their charitable work. To improve his image, the senior Rockefeller took to handing out dimes to children wherever he went—a strategic ritual that historians attribute to Lee.

Called “Poison Ivy” by newspaper critics and corporate foes, Lee had a complex understanding of facts. For Lee, facts were elusive and malleable, begging to be forged and shaped. In the Ludlow case, for instance, Lee noted that the women and children who died while retreating from the charging company-backed militia had overturned a stove, which caught fire and caused their deaths. His PR fact sheet implied that they had, in part, been victims of their own carelessness.

Edward Bernays

The nephew of Sigmund Freud, former reporter Edward Bernays inherited the public relations mantle from Ivy Lee. Beginning in 1919 when he opened his own office, Bernays was the first person to apply the findings of psychology and sociology to public relations, referring to himself as a “public relations counselor” rather than a “publicity agent.” Over the years, Bernays’s client list included General Electric, the American Tobacco Company, General Motors, Good Housekeeping and Time magazines, Procter & Gamble, RCA, the government of India, the city of Vienna, and President Coolidge.

Bernays also worked for the Committee on Public Information (CPI) during World War I, developing propaganda that supported America’s entry into that conflict and promoting the image of President Woodrow Wilson as a peacemaker. Both efforts were among the first full-scale governmental attempts to mobilize public opinion. In addition, Bernays made key contributions to public relations education, teaching the first class called “public relations”—at New York University in 1923—and writing the field’s first textbook, Crystallizing Public Opinion. For many years, his definition of PR was the standard: “Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution.”

In the 1920s, Bernays was hired by the American Tobacco Company to develop a campaign to make smoking more publicly acceptable for women (similar campaigns are under way today in countries like China). Among other strategies, Bernays staged an event: placing women smokers in New York’s 1929 Easter parade. He labeled cigarettes “torches of freedom” and encouraged women to smoke as a symbol of their newly acquired suffrage and independence from men. He also asked the women he placed in the parade to contact newspaper and newsreel companies in advance—to announce their symbolic protest. The campaign received plenty of free publicity from newspapers and magazines. Within weeks of the parade, men-only smoking rooms in New York theaters began opening up to women.

Through much of his writing, Bernays suggested that emerging freedoms threatened the established hierarchical order. He thought it was important for experts and leaders to control the direction of American society: “The duty of the higher strata of society—the cultivated, the learned, the expert, the intellectual—is therefore clear. They must inject moral and spiritual motives into public opinion.” For the cultural elite to maintain order and control, they would have to win the consent of the larger public. As a result, he termed the shaping of public opinion through PR as the “engineering of consent.” Like Ivy Lee, Bernays thought that public opinion was malleable and not always rational: In the hands of the right experts, leaders, and PR counselors, public opinion could be shaped into forms people could rally behind. However,
journalists like Walter Lippmann, who wrote the famous book *Public Opinion* in 1922, worried that PR professionals with hidden agendas, rather than journalists with professional detachment, held too much power over American public opinion.

Throughout Bernays’s most active years, his business partner and later his wife, Doris Fleischman, worked with him on many of his campaigns as a researcher and coauthor. Beginning in the 1920s, she was one of the first women to work in public relations, and she introduced PR to America’s most powerful leaders through a pamphlet she edited called *Contact*. Because she opened up the profession to women from its inception, PR emerged as one of the few professions—at that time. Today, women outnumber men by more than three to one in the profession.

**The Practice of Public Relations**

Today, there are more than 2,900 PR firms worldwide, including 1,900 in the United States; thousands of companies and organizations also have in-house departments devoted to PR. Since the 1980s, the formal study of public relations has grown significantly at colleges and universities. By 2010, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) had nearly ten thousand members and 284 chapters in colleges and universities. As certified PR programs have expanded (often requiring courses or a minor in journalism), the profession has relied less...
and less on its traditional practice of recruiting journalists for its workforce. At the same time, new courses in professional ethics and issues management have expanded the responsibility of future practitioners. In this section, we discuss the differences between public relations agencies and in-house PR services and the various practices involved in performing PR.

**Approaches to Organized Public Relations**

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) offers this simple and useful definition of PR: “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.” To carry out this mutual communication process, the PR industry uses two approaches. First, there are independent PR agencies whose sole job is to provide clients with PR services. Second, most companies, which may or may not also hire the independent PR firms, maintain their own in-house PR staffs to handle routine tasks, such as writing press releases, managing various media requests, staging special events, and dealing with internal and external publics.

About 1,900 U.S. companies identify themselves as public relations firms. Many large ones are owned by, or are affiliated with, multinational communications holding companies like WPP, Omnicom, and Interpublic (see Figure 11.1). Two of the largest PR agencies, Burson-Marsteller and Hill & Knowlton, generated part of the $13.6 billion in PR revenue for their parent corporation, the WPP Group, in 2009. Founded in 1953, Burson-Marsteller has 138 offices and affiliate partners in eighty-one countries and lists the U.S. Bureau of Engraving & Printing, IKEA, Coca-Cola, Sony, and the United Arab Emirates among its clients. Hill & Knowlton, founded in 1927, has 70 offices in forty countries and includes Johnson & Johnson, Nestlé, Proctor & Gamble,
Starbucks, Splenda, Florida Healthcare, and Latvia on its client list. Most independent PR firms are smaller and are operated locally or regionally. New York-based Edelman, the largest independent firm, is an exception, with global operations and clients like the American Beverage Association, the European Commission, General Electric, Microsoft, Samsung, and Unilever/Dove.

In contrast to these external agencies, most PR work is done in-house at companies and organizations. Although America’s largest companies typically retain external PR firms, almost every company involved in the manufacturing and service industries has an in-house PR department. Such departments are also a vital part of many professional organizations, such as the American Medical Association, the AFL-CIO, and the National Association of Broadcasters, as well as large nonprofit organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, the Arthritis Foundation, and most universities and colleges.

**Performing Public Relations**

Public relations, like advertising, pays careful attention to the needs of its clients—politicians, small businesses, industries, and nonprofit organizations—and to the perspectives of its targeted audiences: consumers and the general public, company employees, shareholders, media organizations, government agencies, and community and industry leaders. To do so, PR involves providing a multitude of services, including publicity, communication, public affairs, issues management, government relations, financial PR, community relations, industry relations, minority relations, advertising, press agentry, promotion, media relations, social networking, and propaganda. This last service, *propaganda*, is communication strategically placed, either as advertising or as publicity, to gain public support for a special issue, program, or policy, such as a nation’s war effort.

In addition, PR personnel (both PR technicians, who handle daily short-term activities, and PR managers, who counsel clients and manage activities over the long term) produce employee newsletters, manage client trade shows and conferences, conduct historical tours, appear on news programs, organize damage control after negative publicity, analyze complex issues and trends that may affect a client’s future, manage Twitter accounts, and much more. Basic among these activities, however, are formulating a message through research; conveying the message through various channels; sustaining public support through community and consumer relations; and maintaining client interests through government relations.

**Research: Formulating the Message**

Before anything else begins, one of the most essential practices in the PR profession is doing research. Just as advertising is driven today by demographic and psychographic research, PR uses similar strategies to project messages to appropriate audiences. Because it has historically been difficult to determine why particular PR campaigns succeed or fail, research has become the key ingredient in PR forecasting. Like advertising, PR makes use of mail, telephone, and Internet surveys and focus group interviews—as well as social media analytic tools such as BlogPulse, Trendrr.

**WORLD WAR II** was a time when the U.S. government used propaganda and other PR strategies to drum up support for the war. One of the more iconic posters at the time asked women to join the workforce.

“It was the astounding success of propaganda during the war which opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind.”

EDWARD BERNAYS, PROPAGANDA, 1928
or Twitalyzer—to get a fix on an audience’s perceptions of an issue, policy, program, or client’s image.

Research also helps PR firms focus the campaign message. For example, in 2006 the Department of Defense hired the PR firm Fleishman-Hillard to help combat the rising rates of binge drinking among junior enlisted military personnel. The firm first verified its target audience by researching the problem of binge drinking among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old servicemen. It then created a health-related behaviors survey and conducted focus groups to refine the tone of its anti-drinking message, and developed and tested its Web site for usability. The finalized campaign concept and message—“Don’t Be That Guy!”—has been successful: It has shifted 40 percent of binge drinkers’ attitudes toward less harmful drinking behaviors through a Web site (www.thateguy.com) and multimedia campaign that combines hard facts and useful resources with humorous videos, games, and cartoons. By 2009, the award-winning Web site was being viewed, on average, by approximately 21,000 users per month and had been implemented in forty-two states and eleven countries.9

Conveying the Message

One of the chief day-to-day functions in public relations is creating and distributing PR messages for the news media or the public. There are several possible message forms, including press releases, VNRs, and various online options.

Press releases, or news releases, are announcements written in the style of news reports that give new information about an individual, a company, or an organization and pitch a story idea to the news media. In issuing press releases, PR agents hope that their client information will be picked up by the news media and transformed into news reports. Through press releases, PR firms manage the flow of information, controlling which media get what material in which order. (A PR agent may even reward a cooperative reporter by strategically releasing information.) News editors and broadcasters sort through hundreds of releases daily to determine which ones contain the most original ideas or are the most current. Most large media institutions rewrite and double-check the releases, but small media companies often use them verbatim because of limited editorial resources. Usually, the more closely a press release resembles actual news copy, the more likely it is to be used. (See Figure 11.2.)

Since the introduction of portable video equipment in the 1970s, PR agencies and departments have also been issuing video news releases (VNRs)—thirty- to ninety-second visual press releases designed to mimic the style of a broadcast news report. Although networks and large TV news stations do not usually broadcast VNRs, news stations in small TV markets regularly use material from VNRs. On occasion, news stations have been criticized for using video footage from a VNR without acknowledging the source. (See “Case Study—Video News Releases: Manufacturing the News” on page 370.) As with press releases, VNRs give PR firms some control over what constitutes “news” and a chance to influence what the general public thinks about an issue, a program, or a policy.

The equivalent of VNRs for nonprofits are public service announcements (PSAs): fifteen- to sixty-second audio or video reports that promote government programs, educational projects, volunteer agencies, or social reform. As part of their requirement to serve the public interest, broadcasters have been encouraged to carry free PSAs. Since the deregulation of broadcasting
began in the 1980s, however, there has been less pressure and no minimum obligation for TV and radio stations to air PSAs. When PSAs do run, they are frequently scheduled between midnight and 6 A.M., a less commercially valuable time slot.

Today, the Internet is an essential avenue for transmitting PR messages. Companies and organizations upload press releases, press kits, VNRs, and images on all sorts of Web sites to enhance their image; but they also exploit Web 2.0 sites driven by user-generated content (See more about the Internet and PR in “Public Relations Adapts to the Internet Age” on page 375).

Media Relations

PR managers specializing in media relations promote a client or an organization by securing publicity or favorable coverage in the news media. This often requires an in-house PR person to speak on behalf of an organization or to direct reporters to experts who can provide

College credit: Miami students run their union

Miami University is one of the first public institutions to offer college credit for running student unions. Students in the union program, which began in 1983, can earn a bachelor’s degree in union administration. The program is designed to prepare students for careers in union leadership, labor relations, and other fields related to the labor movement. Students take courses in union organizing, labor law, tobacco control, and other topics.

FIGURE 11.2
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A PRESS RELEASE AND A NEWS STORY

News reporters can be heavily dependent on public relations for story ideas. At right above is a press release written by the News & Public Information Office at Miami University about students who started a finance business; the other two images show the magazine and newspaper articles inspired by the release (above left and center).
Video News Releases: Manufacturing the News

You may have seen these seemingly innocuous stories on your local TV news over the summer: tips for staying in motels/hotels with pets; the importance of getting rental-car insurance; or how-to instructions for taking great digital photos of your vacation. These may not sound like traditional news stories, but they were broadcast because (1) a company called Synaptic Digital (formerly Medialink) promoted them with text, photos, and digital video downloads, and (2) companies—like Google, the Gates Foundation, and BMW—paid Synaptic Digital to promote these stories (which subtly mention their products and services) as news. Synaptic Digital, a $20-million business headquartered in New York City, specializes in video news releases (VNRs), a form of public relations it pioneered in 1986.

Oftentimes, these VNRs aren’t labeled as company-sponsored material, so local TV stations mistakenly treat them as real news. Other times, local affiliates are just plain understaffed or sloppy, and either take the VNRs as is or repackage them. Since the late 1980s, television stations across the country have been bombarded with VNRs from Synaptic Digital and other sources. Synaptic Digital distributes the VNRs and even tracks the number of “plays” its clients’ VNRs get on television stations around the world, providing a return on its clients’ investment.

The obvious question might be: Why don’t Motel 6, Allstate, Fuji, and other companies spend their money on advertising instead? The answer is simple: The news has more credibility.

The success of VNRs to disguise marketing as news hasn’t been lost on government officials, either. As reports in the New York Times in March 2005 revealed, the federal government has become a major originator of VNRs. During the first four years of George W. Bush’s administration, $254 million in taxpayers’ dollars was spent on PR contracts, almost double the amount spent in the previous four years. A significant part of this spending was for VNRs—sometimes with PR officials posing as reporters—emanating from at least twenty different federal agencies, promoting the Bush agenda on issues such as the Medicare prescription drug law, post-invasion Iraq, and agriculture programs.

This production of “good news” from the White House has one little problem: It’s illegal. As Congress’s General Accounting Office (GAO) noted, the federal government can’t use covert propaganda—that is, VNRs that don’t identify themselves as the work of government agencies. In fact, the GAO issued three opinions on the illegality of such VNRs and notified the White House to stop using them. The Bush administration told its federal agencies to ignore the GAO, Congress’s investigative arm.

With the pressure of more than forty thousand citizen petitions to stop government VNRs, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) responded on April 13, 2005, with a public notice that stated, “Whenever broadcast stations and cable operators air VNRs, licensees and operators generally must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material that they are viewing.” As FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein noted at the time, “People have a legal right to know the real source when they see something on TV that is disguised as ‘news’.”

Yet follow-up studies in 2006 and 2007 revealed a continued use of unattributed VNRs across the country.¹

Whether produced by the government or a company, VNRs are a pressing problem for local markets. Why? Local news directors often get their video from other larger news services, such as CNN Newsource, NBC News Channel, or ABC. These TV news services supply the video for national and international news stories that air on local TV. The problem is that these services are also sometimes paid to distribute VNRs in their news feeds as well. “If you’re going to take that video, you’re trusting that they went out and generated that video,” Becky Lutgen-Gardner, news director at KCRG-TV in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says. But “unless they flag it, I wouldn’t know.”

information. Media-relations specialists also perform damage control or crisis management when negative publicity occurs. Occasionally, in times of crisis—such as a scandal at a university or a safety recall by a car manufacturer—a PR spokesperson might be designated as the only source of information available to news media. Although journalists often resent being cut off from higher administrative levels and leaders, the institution or company wants to ensure that rumors and inaccurate stories do not circulate in the media. In these situations, a game often develops between PR specialists and the media in which reporters attempt to circumvent the spokesperson and induce a knowledgeable insider to talk off the record, providing background details without being named directly as a source.

PR agents who specialize in media relations also recommend advertising to their clients when it seems appropriate. Unlike publicity, which is sometimes outside a PR agency’s control, paid advertising may help to focus a complex issue or a client’s image. Publicity, however, carries the aura of legitimate news and thus has more credibility than advertising. In addition, media specialists cultivate associations with editors, reporters, freelance writers, and broadcast news directors to ensure that press releases or VNRs are favorably received. (See “Examining Ethics: What Does It Mean to Be Green?” on page 374.)

Special Events and Pseudo-Events

Another public relations practice involves coordinating special events to raise the profile of corporate, organizational, or government clients. Since 1967, for instance, the city of Milwaukee has run Summerfest, a ten-day music and food festival that attracts about a million people each year and now bills itself as “The World’s Largest Music Festival.” As the festival’s popularity grew, various companies sought to become sponsors of the event. Today, Milwaukee’s Miller Brewing Company sponsors one of the music festival’s stages, which carries the Miller name and promotes Miller Lite as the “official beer” of the festival. Briggs & Stratton and Harley Davidson are also among the local companies that sponsor stages at the event. In this way, all three companies receive favorable publicity by showing a commitment to the city in which their corporate headquarters are located.

More typical of special-events publicity is a corporate sponsor aligning itself with a cause or an organization that has positive stature among the general public. For example, John Hancock Financial has been the primary sponsor of the Boston Marathon since 1986 and funds the race’s prize money. The company’s corporate communications department also serves as the PR office for the race, operating the pressroom and creating the marathon’s media guide and other press materials. Eighteen other sponsors, including Adidas, Gatorade, PowerBar, and JetBlue Airways, also pay to affiliate themselves with the Boston Marathon. At the local level, companies often sponsor a community parade or a charitable fund-raising activity.

In contrast to a special event, a pseudo-event is any circumstance created for the sole purpose of gaining coverage in the media. Historian Daniel Boorstin coined the term in his influential book *The Image* when pointing out the key contributions of PR and advertising in...
the twentieth century. Typical pseudo-events are press conferences, TV and radio talk show appearances, or any other staged activity aimed at drawing public attention and media coverage. The success of such events depends on the participation of clients, sometimes on paid performers, and especially on the media’s attention to the event. In business, pseudo-events extend back at least as far as P. T. Barnum’s publicity stunts, such as parading Jumbo the Elephant across the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1880s. One of the most successful pseudo-events in recent years was the temporary transformation of selected 7-Eleven convenience stores into “Kwik-E-Marts” in 2007 to promote the release of The Simpsons Movie. The campaign generated millions in free publicity and attracted thousands to take photos and buy Squishees and Simpsons Sprinkalicious donuts. In politics, Theodore Roosevelt’s administration set up the first White House pressroom and held the first presidential press conferences in the early 1900s. By the 2000s, presidential pseudo-events involved a multimillion-dollar White House Communications Office.

As powerful companies, savvy politicians, and activist groups became aware of the media’s susceptibility to pseudo-events, these activities proliferated. For example, to get free publicity, companies began staging press conferences to announce new product lines. During the 1960s, antiwar and Civil Rights protesters began their events only when the news media were assembled. One anecdote from that era aptly illustrates the principle of a pseudo-event: A reporter asked a student leader about the starting time for a particular protest; the student responded, “When can you get here?” Today, politicians running for national office have become particularly adept at scheduling press conferences and interviews around 5:00 or 6:00 P.M. They realize that local TV news is live during these times, so they stage pseudo-events to take advantage of TV’s appetite for live remote feeds and breaking news.

Community and Consumer Relations

Another responsibility of PR is to sustain goodwill between an agency’s clients and the public. The public is often seen as two distinct audiences: communities and consumers.

Companies have learned that sustaining close ties with their communities and neighbors not only enhances their image and attracts potential customers, but also promotes the idea that the companies are good citizens. As a result, PR firms encourage companies to participate in community activities such as hosting plant tours and open houses, making donations to national and local charities, and participating in town events like parades and festivals. In addition, more progressive companies may also get involved in unemployment and job-retraining programs, or donate equipment and workers to urban revitalization projects such as Habitat for Humanity.

In terms of consumer relations, PR has become much more sophisticated since 1965, when Ralph Nader’s groundbreaking book, Unsafe at Any Speed, revealed safety problems concerning the Chevrolet Corvair. Not only did Nader’s book prompt the discontinuance of the Corvair line, it also lit the fuse that ignited a vibrant consumer movement. After the success of Nader’s book, along with a growing public concern over corporate mergers and their lack of accountability to the public, consumers became less willing to readily accept the claims of corporations. As a result of the consumer movement, many newspapers and TV stations hired consumer reporters to track down the sources of customer complaints and embarrass
companies by putting them in the media spotlight. Public relations specialists responded by encouraging companies to pay more attention to customers, establish product service and safety guarantees, and ensure that all calls and mail from customers were answered promptly. Today, PR professionals routinely advise clients that satisfied customers mean not only repeat business but also new business, based on a strong word-of-mouth reputation about a company’s behavior and image.

**Government Relations and Lobbying**

While sustaining good relations with the public is a priority, so is maintaining connections with government agencies that have some say in how companies operate in a particular community, state, or nation. Both PR firms and the PR divisions within major corporations are especially interested in making sure that government regulation neither becomes burdensome nor reduces their control over their businesses.

Government PR specialists monitor new and existing legislation, create opportunities to ensure favorable publicity, and write press releases and direct-mail letters to persuade the public about the pros and cons of new regulations. In many industries, government relations has developed into lobbying: the process of attempting to influence lawmakers to support and vote for an organization’s or industry’s best interests. In seeking favorable legislation, some lobbyists contact government officials on a daily basis. In Washington, D.C., alone, there are about fourteen thousand registered lobbyists—and thousands more government-relations workers who aren’t required to register under federal disclosure rules. Lobbying expenditures targeting the federal government rose to $3.3 billion in 2009, up from $1.44 billion ten years earlier.¹¹

Lobbying can often lead to ethical problems, as in the case of earmarks and astroturf lobbying. **Earmarks** are specific spending directives that are slipped into bills to accommodate the interests of lobbyists and are often the result of political favors or outright bribes. In 2006, lobbyist Jack Abramoff (dubbed “The Man Who Bought Washington” in *Time*) and several of his associates were convicted of corruption related to earmarks, leading to the resignation of leading House members and a decline in the use of earmarks.

**Astroturf lobbying** is phony grassroots public-affairs campaigns engineered by public relations firms. PR firms deploy massive phone banks and computerized mailing lists to drum up support and create the impression that millions of citizens back their client’s side of an issue. For instance, the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF), an organization that appears to serve the interests of consumers, is actually a creation of the Washington, D.C.–based PR firm Berman & Co. and is funded by the restaurant, food, alcohol, and

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¹¹ “I get in a lot of trouble if I’m quoted, especially if the quotes are accurate.”

A CONGRESSIONAL STAFF PERSON, EXPLAINING TO THE WALL STREET JOURNAL WHY HE CAN SPEAK ONLY “OFF THE RECORD,” 1999
Back in the 1930s, public relations pioneer Edward Bernays labored behind the scenes to make green a more fashionable color. Why? Bernays was working to change women’s attitudes toward the forest green packaging of his client Lucky Strike’s cigarettes so women would smoke them.

Today, public relations professionals are openly working on behalf of clients to promote a different kind of “green”—environmentally sustainable practices. The idea of green practices goes back at least as far as the very first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, which marked the beginnings of the modern environmental movement. The term “green” as a synonym for being environmentally conscious was inspired by Greenpeace, the international environmental conservation organization founded in 1971, and by the similar political ideology that gained roots in Europe and Australia in the 1970s that prized ecological practices, participatory democracy, nonviolence, and social justice.

Corporations in the United States and elsewhere began adapting to the changing culture, integrating environmental claims into their marketing and public relations. But it wasn’t always clear what constituted “green.” In 1992, the Federal Trade Commission first issued its “Green Guides,” guidelines to ensure that environmental marketing practices don’t run afoul of its prohibition against unfair or deceptive acts or practices, sometimes called “greenwashing.” As concern about global warming has grown in recent years, green marketing and public relations now extend into nearly every part of business and industry: product packaging (buzzwords include recyclable, biodegradable, compostable, refillable, sustainable, and renewable), buildings and textiles, renewable energy certificates and carbon offsets (funding projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in one place to offset carbon emissions produced elsewhere), labor conditions, and fair trade.

Although there have been plenty of companies that make claims of “green” products and services, only some have infused environmentally sustainable practices throughout their corporate culture. In the United States, the New Hampshire–based footwear and clothing company Timberland has been a model for green practices and PR. In 2008, Timberland released a short- and long-term plan for corporate social responsibility performance covering the areas of energy, product, workplace, and service that represent the company’s material impacts. Timberland’s plan is particularly noteworthy in that it reports its key corporate social responsibility indicators quarterly (not just once a year) and encourages a two-way dialogue with its stakeholders using Web 2.0 platforms. Most recently, Timberland unveiled its Earthkeepers 2.0 boat shoe. Designed for disassembly, 90 percent of the components can be recycled.

A 2008 survey of senior Fortune 1000 business executives found that 80 percent of them are “personally concerned about climate change and its impact on the quality of life for future generations,” yet not all of their companies have taken corporate action, despite the fact that most believe it will improve their corporate and brand reputation. But a number of public relations firms specializing in corporate responsibility and sustainability—including Interraction in the United States and Futerra in the United Kingdom—have sprung up to advance clients toward a greener future.

Ultimately, green PR requires a global outlook. In 2008, media giant Bertelsmann joined the United Nations Global Compact, a strategic policy initiative for businesses to align their operations and strategies with ten universally accepted principles in human rights, labor, environment, and anticorruption. Launched in 2000, the Global Compact counts more than 8,200 corporations and organizations in 130 nations as members. Joining the Global Compact gives Bertelsmann, and other companies, a chance to publicly affirm their core values and attach themselves to the “green” issues of growing importance to consumers.
tobacco industries. According to Sourcewatch.org, which tracks astroturf lobbying, “Anyone who criticizes tobacco, alcohol, fatty foods or soda pop is likely to come under attack from CCF.”

Public relations firms do not always work for the interests of corporations, however. They also work for other clients, including consumer groups, labor unions, professional groups, religious organizations, and even foreign governments. In 2005, for example, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, hired Brown-Miller Communications, a small California PR firm, to rally support for landmark legislation that would ban junk food and soda sales in the state’s public schools. Brown-Miller helped state legislators see obesity not as a personal choice issue but as a public policy issue, cultivated the editorial support of newspapers to compel legislators to sponsor the bills, and ultimately succeeded in getting a bill passed.

Presidential administrations also use public relations—with varying degrees of success—to support their policies. From 2002 to 2008, the Bush administration’s Defense Department operated a “Pentagon Pundit” program, secretly cultivating more than seventy retired military officers to appear on radio and television talk shows and shape public opinion about the Bush agenda. In 2008, the New York Times exposed the unethical program and its story earned a Pulitzer Prize. The Obama administration pledged to be more transparent and established the Office of Public Engagement, which uses online tools—including a blog, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and iTunes podcasts—to sustain public communication and an ongoing public record of the administration.

Public Relations Adapts to the Internet Age

Historically, public relations practitioners have tried to earn news media coverage (as opposed to buying advertising) to communicate their clients’ messages to the public. While that is still true, the Internet, with its instant accessibility, offers public relations professionals a number of new routes for communicating with publics.

A company or organization’s Web site has become the home base of public relations efforts. Companies and organizations can upload and maintain their media kits (including press releases, VNRs, images, executive bios, and organizational profiles), giving the traditional news media access to the information at any time. And because everyone can access these corporate Web sites, the barriers between the organization and the groups that PR professionals ultimately want to reach are broken down.

The Web also enables PR professionals to have their clients interact with audiences on a more personal, direct basis through social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, and blogs. Now people can be “friends” and “followers” of companies and organizations. Corporate executives can share their professional and personal observations and seem downright chummy through a blog (e.g., Whole Foods Market’s blog by CEO John Mackey). Executives, celebrities, and politicians can seem more accessible and personable through a Twitter feed. For example, U.S. senator Claire McCaskill turned to Twitter to combat some voters’ impression that she was smart but cold, saying, “I probably needed to take a deep breath and just be more open and candid about me as a person. So Twitter’s perfect for that.”

However, since public relations is also about controlling the message, sometimes such communications appear without complete disclosure. Some PR firms have edited Wikipedia entries for their clients’ benefit, a practice Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales has repudiated as a conflict of interest. A growing number of companies also compensate bloggers to subtly promote their products, unbeknownst to most readers. Public relations firms and marketers are particularly
keen on working with “mom bloggers” such as thirty-two-year-old mom Jessica Smith (Jessi-caKnows.com), who appears to be an independent voice in her discussions about consumer products. Yet Smith receives gifts in exchange for her opinions. In 2009, the Federal Trade Commission instituted new rules requiring online product endorsers to disclose their connections to companies.

As noted earlier, Internet analytic tools enable organizations to monitor what is being said about them at any time. However, the immediacy of social media also means that public relations officials might be forced to quickly respond to a message or image once it goes viral. For example, when two Domino’s Pizza employees in North Carolina posted a YouTube video of themselves allegedly contaminating food in 2009, it spread like wildfire, much to the horror of the company. The traditional response of waiting for bad news to pass and quietly issuing a statement wasn’t sufficient to defuse the situation. Ultimately, Domino’s used the Internet to respond to the crisis; the company created a Twitter account to address customers’ concerns, and the CEO posted his own apology video.

Public Relations during a Crisis

Since the Ludlow strike, one important duty of PR is helping a corporation handle a public crisis or tragedy, especially if the public assumes the company is at fault. Disaster management may reveal the best and the worst attributes of the company and its PR firm. Let’s look at several significant examples of crisis management and the different ways they were handled.

One of the largest environmental disasters of the twentieth century occurred when, in 1989, the Exxon Valdez spilled eleven million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound, contaminating fifteen hundred miles of Alaskan coastline and killing countless birds, otters, seals, and fish. In one of the biggest PR blunders of that century, Exxon was slow to react to the crisis and even slower to accept responsibility. Although its PR advisers had encouraged a quick response, the corporation failed to send any of its chief officers immediately to the site. Many critics believed that Exxon was trying to duck responsibility by laying the burden of the crisis on the shoulders of the tanker’s captain. Despite changing the name of the tanker to Mediterranean and other image-salvaging strategies, the company’s outlay of $2 billion to clean up both its image and the spill was not a success.

The Exxon Valdez story became the benchmark against which the 2010 BP oil well disaster was measured, and the BP case was clearly worse. BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 10, 2010, killing eleven workers. The oil gushed from the ocean floor for months, spreading into a vast area of the Gulf of Mexico, killing wildlife, and washing tar balls onto beaches. Although the company, formerly British Petroleum, officially changed its name to BP in 2001, adopting the motto “Beyond Petroleum” and a sunny new yellow and green logo in an effort to appear more “green-friendly,” the disaster linked the company back to the hazards of its main business in oil. BP’s many public relations missteps included its multiple underestimations of the amount of oil leaking, the chairman’s reference to the...
“small people” of the Gulf region; the CEO’s wish that he could “get his life back”; and his attendance at an elite yacht race in England even as the oil leak persisted. In short, many people felt that BP failed to show enough remorse or compassion for the affected people and wildlife. BP tried to salvage its reputation by agreeing to establish a $20 billion fund to reimburse those economically affected by the spill, vowing to clean up the damaged areas, and creating a campaign of TV commercials to communicate its efforts. Nevertheless, harsh criticism persisted, and BP’s ads were overwhelmed by online parodies and satires of its efforts. (For more on the BP oil spill crisis, see “Extended Case Study: Analyzing the BP oil spill coverage” on p. 507.)

A decidedly different approach was taken in the 1982 tragedy involving Tylenol pain-relief capsules. Seven people died in the Chicago area after someone tampered with several bottles and laced them with poison. Discussions between the parent company, Johnson & Johnson, and its PR representatives focused on whether or not withdrawing all Tylenol capsules from store shelves might send a signal that corporations could be intimidated by a single deranged person. Nevertheless, Johnson & Johnson’s chairman, James E. Burke, and the company’s PR agency, Burson-Marsteller, opted for full disclosure to the media and the immediate recall of the capsules nationally, costing the company an estimated $100 million and cutting its market share in half. As part of its PR strategy to overcome the negative publicity and to restore Tylenol’s market share, Burson-Marsteller tracked public opinion nightly through telephone surveys and organized satellite press conferences to debrief the news media. In addition, emergency phone lines were set up to take calls from consumers and health-care providers. When the company reintroduced Tylenol three months later, it did so with tamper-resistant bottles that were soon copied by almost every major drug manufacturer. Burson-Marsteller, which received PRSA awards for its handling of the crisis, found that the public thought Johnson & Johnson had responded admirably to the crisis and did not hold Tylenol responsible for the deaths. In fewer than three years, Tylenol recaptured its former (and dominant) share of the market.
In 1932, Stanley Walker, an editor at the *New York Herald Tribune*, identified public relations agents as “mass-mind molders, fronts, mouthpieces, chisellers, moochers, and special assistants to the president.” Walker added that newspapers and PR firms would always remain enemies, even if PR professionals adopted a code of ethics (which they did in the 1950s) to “take them out of the red-light district of human relations.” Walker’s tone captures the spirit of one of the most mutually dependent—and antagonistic—relationships in all of mass media.

Much of this antagonism, directed at public relations from the journalism profession, is historical. Journalists have long considered themselves part of a public service profession, but some regard PR as having emerged as a pseudo-profession created to distort the facts that reporters work hard to gather. Over time, reporters and editors developed the derogatory term *flack* to refer to a PR agent. The term, derived from the military word *flak*, meaning an antiaircraft artillery shell or a protective military jacket, symbolizes for journalists the protective barrier PR agents insert between their clients and the press. Today, the Associated Press manual for editors defines flack simply as “slang for press agent.” Yet this antagonism belies journalism’s dependence on public relations. Many editors, for instance, admit that more than half of their story ideas each day originate with PR people. In this section, we take a closer look at the relationship between journalism and public relations, which can be both adversarial and symbiotic.

### Elements of Professional Friction

The relationship between journalism and PR is important and complex. Although journalism lays claim to independent traditions, the news media have become ever more reliant on public relations because of the increasing amount of information now available. Newspaper staff cutbacks, combined with television’s need for local news events, have expanded the news media’s need for PR story ideas.

Another cause of tension is that PR firms often raid the ranks of reporting for new talent. Because most press releases are written to imitate news reports, the PR profession has always sought good writers who are well connected to sources and savvy about the news business. For instance, the fashion industry likes to hire former style or fashion news writers for its PR staff, and university information offices seek reporters who once covered higher education. However, although reporters frequently move into PR, public relations practitioners seldom move into journalism; the news profession rarely accepts prodigal sons or daughters back into the fold once they have left reporting for public relations. Nevertheless, the professions remain co-dependent: PR needs journalists for publicity, and journalism needs PR for story ideas and access.

Public relations, by making reporters’ jobs easier, has often enabled reporters to become lazy. PR firms now supply what reporters used to gather for themselves. Instead of trying to get a scoop, many journalists have become content to wait for a PR handout or a good tip before following up on a story. Some members of the news media, grateful for the reduced workload that occurs when they are provided with handouts, may be hesitant to criticize a particular PR firm’s clients. Several issues shed light on this discord and on the ways in which different media professions interact.
Undermining Facts and Blocking Access

Journalism’s most prevalent criticism of public relations is that it works to counter the truths reporters seek to bring to the public. Modern public relations redefined and complicated the notion of what “facts” are. PR professionals demonstrated that the facts can be spun in a variety of ways, depending on what information is emphasized and what is downplayed. As Ivy Lee noted in 1925: “The effort to state an absolute fact is simply an attempt to achieve what is humanly impossible; all I can do is to give you my interpretation of the facts.” With practitioners like Lee showing the emerging PR profession how the truth could be interpreted, the journalist’s role as a custodian of accurate information became much more difficult.

Journalists have also objected that PR professionals block press access to key business leaders, political figures, and other newsworthy people. Before the prevalence of PR, reporters could talk to such leaders directly and obtain quotable information for their news stories. Now, however, journalists complain that PR agents insert themselves between the press and the newsworthy, thus disrupting the journalistic tradition in which reporters would vie for interviews with top government and business leaders. Journalists further argue that PR agents are now able to manipulate reporters by giving exclusives to journalists who are likely to cast a story in a favorable light or by cutting off a reporter’s access to a newsworthy figure altogether if that reporter has written unfavorably about the PR agency’s client in the past.

Promoting Publicity and Business as News

Another explanation for the professional friction between the press and PR involves simple economics. PR agents help companies “promote as news what otherwise would have been purchased in advertising.” As Ivy Lee wrote to John D. Rockefeller after he gave money to Johns Hopkins University: “In view of the fact that this was not really news, and that the newspapers gave so much attention to it, it would seem that this was wholly due to the manner in which the material was ‘dressed up’ for newspaper consumption. It seems to suggest very considerable possibilities along this line.” News critics worry that this type of PR is taking media space and time away from those who do not have the financial resources or the sophistication to become visible in the public eye. There is another issue: If public relations can secure news publicity for clients, the added credibility of a journalistic context gives clients a status that the purchase of advertising cannot offer.

Another criticism is that PR firms with abundant resources clearly get more client coverage from the news media than their lesser-known counterparts. For example, a business reporter at a large metro daily sometimes receives as many as a hundred press releases a day—far outnumbering the fraction of handouts generated by organized labor or grassroots organizations. Workers and union leaders have long argued that the money that corporations allocate to PR leads to more favorable coverage for management positions in labor disputes. Therefore, standard news reports may feature subtle language choices, with “rational, cool-headed management making offers” and “hot-headed workers making demands.” Walter Lippmann saw such differences in 1922 when he wrote: “If you study the way many a strike is reported in the press, you will find very often that [labor] issues are rarely in the headlines, barely in the leading paragraph, and sometimes not even mentioned anywhere.” This imbalance is particularly significant in that the great majority of workers are neither managers nor CEOs, and yet these workers receive little if any media coverage on a regular basis. Most newspapers now have business sections that focus on the work of various managers, but few have a labor, worker, or employee section.
Shaping the Image of Public Relations

Dealing with both a tainted past and journalism’s hostility has often preoccupied the public relations profession, leading to the development of several image-enhancing strategies. In 1948, the PR industry formed its own professional organization, the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America). The PRSA functions as an internal watchdog group that accredits PR agents and firms, maintains a code of ethics, and probes its own practices, especially those pertaining to its influence on the news media. Most PRSA local chapters and national conventions also routinely invite reporters and editors to speak to PR practitioners about the news media’s expectations of PR. In addition to the PRSA, independent agencies devoted to uncovering shady or unethical public relations activities publish their findings in publications like Public Relations Tactics, PR Week, and PR Watch. Ethical issues have become a major focus of the profession, with self-examination of these issues routinely appearing in public relations textbooks as well as in various professional newsletters (see Table 11.1).

Over the years, as PR has subdivided itself into specialized areas, it has used more positive phrases, such as institutional relations, corporate communications, and news and information services to describe what it does. Public relations’ best press strategy, however, may be the limitations of the journalism profession itself. For most of the twentieth century, many reporters and editors clung to the ideal that journalism is, at its best, an objective institution that gathers information on behalf of the public. Reporters have only occasionally turned their pens, computers, and cameras on themselves to examine their own practices or their vulnerability to manipulation. Thus, by not challenging PR’s more subtle strategies, many journalists have allowed PR professionals to interpret “facts” to their clients’ advantage.

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**TABLE 11.1**

**PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY OF AMERICA ETHICS CODE**

In 2000, the PRSA approved a completely revised Code of Ethics, which included core principles, guidelines, and examples of improper conduct. Here is one section of the code.


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**PRSA Member Statement of Professional Values**

| **ADVOCACY** | We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate. |
| **HONESTY** | We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public. |
| **EXPERTISE** | We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences. |
| **INDEPENDENCE** | We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions. |
| **LOYALTY** | We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest. |
| **FAIRNESS** | We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression. |
Alternative Voices

Because public relations professionals work so closely with the press, their practices are not often the subject of media reports or investigations. Indeed, the multibillion-dollar industry remains virtually invisible to the public, most of whom have never heard of Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton, or Ketchum. John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, who work for the Center for Media and Democracy in Madison, Wisconsin, are concerned about the invisibility of PR practices and have sought to expose the hidden activities of large PR firms. In PR Watch, a quarterly publication they launched in 1995, they publish investigative reports on the PR industry that never appear in mainstream mass media outlets. “PR Watch seeks to serve the public rather than PR,” they explain. “With the assistance of whistleblowers and a few sympathetic insiders, we report about the secretive activities of an industry which works behind the scenes to control government policy and shape public opinion.”22 (See “Media Literacy and the Critical Process: The Invisible Hand of PR” on page 382.)

Stauber and Rampton have also written books targeting public relations practices having to do with the Republican Party’s lobbying establishment (Banana Republicans), U.S. propaganda on the Iraq War (The Best War Ever), industrial waste (Toxic Sludge Is Good for You), mad cow disease (Mad Cow USA), and PR uses of scientific research (Trust Us, We’re Experts!). Their work helps bring an alternative angle to the well-moneyed battles over public opinion. “You know, we feel that in a democracy, it’s very, very critical that everyone knows who the players are, and what they’re up to,” Stauber says.23

Public Relations and Democracy

From the days of PR’s origins in the early 1900s, many people—especially journalists—have been skeptical of communications originating from public relations professionals. The bulk of the criticism leveled at public relations argues that the crush of information produced by
PR professionals overwhelms traditional journalism. However, PR’s most significant impact may be on the political process, especially when organizations hire spin doctors to favorably shape or reshape a candidate’s media image. In one example, former president Richard Nixon, who resigned from office in 1974 to avoid impeachment hearings regarding his role in the Watergate scandal, hired Hill & Knowlton to restore his post-presidency image. Through the firm’s guidance, Nixon’s writings, mostly on international politics, began appearing in Sunday op-ed pages. Nixon himself started showing up on television news programs like Nightline and spoke frequently before such groups as the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the Economic Club of New York. In 1984, after a media blitz by Nixon’s PR handlers, the New York Times announced, “After a decade, Nixon is gaining favor,” and USA Today trumpeted, “Richard Nixon is back.” Before his death in 1994, Nixon, who never publicly apologized for his role in Watergate, saw a large portion of his public image shift from that of an arrogant, disgraced politician to that of a revered elder statesman. Many media critics have charged that the press did not counterbalance this PR campaign and treated Nixon too reverently.

In terms of its immediate impact on democracy, the information crush delivered by public relations is at its height during national election campaigns. In 2008, some of the behind-the-scenes work of PR in presidential campaigns was revealed. First, Mark Penn, the chief strategist of Hillary Clinton’s campaign to be the Democratic nominee, became a news story himself when...
he resigned from her campaign over a conflict of interest. Penn worked for Clinton while he maintained his position as chief executive of Burson-Marsteller, where he lobbied on behalf of Colombia for a trade treaty opposed by Clinton. Second, Scott McClellan, President George W. Bush’s press secretary from 2003 to 2006, disclosed in his 2008 book that the White House had a “carefully orchestrated campaign to shape and manipulate sources of public approval” and decided to “turn away from honesty and candor” in the lead-up to and during the Iraq War. Both instances illustrate the centrality of public relations—and the temptation of stepping over ethical boundaries—in shaping politicians.

Though public relations often provides political information and story ideas, the PR profession bears only part of the responsibility for “spun” news; after all, it is the job of a PR agency to get favorable news coverage for the individual or group it represents. PR professionals police their own ranks for unethical or irresponsible practices, but the news media should also monitor the public relations industry, as they do other government and business activities. Journalism itself also needs to institute changes that will make it less dependent on PR and more conscious of how its own practices play into the hands of spin strategies. A positive example of change on this front is that many major newspapers and news networks now offer regular critiques of the facts and falsehoods contained in political advertising. This media vigilance should be on behalf of citizens, who are entitled to robust, well-rounded debates on important social and political issues.

Like advertising and other forms of commercial speech, PR campaigns that result in free media exposure raise a number of questions regarding democracy and the expression of ideas. Large companies and PR agencies, like well-financed politicians, have money to invest to figure out how to obtain favorable publicity. The question is not how to prevent that but how to ensure that other voices, less well financed and less commercial, also receive an adequate hearing. To that end, journalists need to become less willing conduits in the distribution of publicity. PR agencies, for their part, need to show clients that participating in the democratic process as responsible citizens can serve them well and enhance their image.

“In politics, image [has] replaced action.”
RANDALL ROTHENBERG, WHERE THE SUCKERS MOON, 1994
The goal of most public relations campaigns is to have communication gently seep into the mass media, causing a desired shift in attitudes and behaviors. But for media consumers who want to be media literate, we must understand and analyze the role of public relations in everyday life.

This is not easy. As noted in the “Media Literacy” exercise in this chapter, PR tends to operate with an invisible hand. There are hundreds of PR firms working for thousands of clients. Yet their public communication messages rarely reveal their PR origins, and sometimes they don’t even make clear who the beneficiary (the paying client) is.

The key may be, as the anonymous source in All the President’s Men famously said, to “follow the money.” As a media literacy student, you can do this through the critical process. First, describe a potential PR communication, which could come via the news or entertainment media, social networking sites, or public policy discussions.

Second, analyze patterns in communication and connect them with the originators of the ideas. Public records like lobbying reports, annual reports, organizational Web sites, and watchdog Web sites may also yield clues. Third, interpret the messages. Advocacy communication with transparent origins is likely to be more reliable than that which cannot be identified. Fourth, based on the transparency of the communication and additional fact-checking against other sources, determine the truthfulness of the information.

Fifth, share your findings with the public. Engage with your community by publicly supporting honest and accurate advocacy information and disclosing the facts behind advocacy communications that fall short of those ideals. None of this is easy work. But, through critical analysis, it is possible to have a positive impact on public debates influenced by public relations.

COMMON THREADS

One of the Common Threads discussed in Chapter 1 is about the need for critical analysis of the mass media. One key ethical contradiction that can emerge in PR is that (according to the PRSA Code of Ethics) PR should be honest and accurate in disclosing information while at the same time being loyal and faithful to clients and their requests for confidentiality and privacy. In this case, how does the general public know when public communications are the work of paid advocacy?

KEY TERMS

The definitions for the terms listed below can be found in the glossary at the end of the book. The page numbers listed with the terms indicate where the term is highlighted in the chapter.

- Public relations, 359
- Press agents, 360
- Publicity, 362
- Propaganda, 367
- Press releases, 368
- Video news releases (VNRs), 368
- Public service announcements (PSAs), 368
- Pseudo-event, 371
- Lobbying, 373
- Astroturf lobbying, 373
- Flack, 378
REVIEW QUESTIONS

Early Developments in Public Relations
1. What did people like P. T. Barnum and Buffalo Bill Cody contribute to the development of modern public relations in the twentieth century?
2. How did railroads and utility companies give the early forms of corporate public relations a bad name?
3. What contributions did Ivy Lee make toward the development of modern PR?
4. How did Edward Bernays affect public relations?

The Practice of Public Relations
5. What are two approaches to organizing a PR firm?
6. What are press releases, and why are they important to reporters?
7. What is the difference between a VNR and a PSA?
8. What is a pseudo-event? How does it relate to the manufacturing of news?
9. What special events might a PR firm sponsor to build stronger ties to its community?
10. Why have research and lobbying become increasingly important to the practice of PR?
11. How does the Internet change the way in which public relations communicates with an organization’s many publics?
12. What are some socially responsible strategies that a PR specialist can use during a crisis to help a client manage unfavorable publicity?

Tensions between Public Relations and the Press
13. Explain the historical background of the antagonism between journalism and public relations.
14. How did PR change old relationships between journalists and their sources?
15. In what ways is conventional news like public relations?
16. How does journalism as a profession contribute to its own manipulation at the hands of competent PR practitioners?

Public Relations and Democracy
17. In what ways does the profession of public relations serve the process of election campaigns? In what ways can it impede election campaigns?

QUESTIONING THE MEDIA

1. What do you think of when you hear the term public relations? What images come to mind? Where did these impressions come from?
2. What might a college or university do to improve public relations with homeowners on the edge of a campus who have to deal with noisy student parties and a shortage of parking spaces?
3. What steps can reporters and editors take to monitor PR agents who manipulate the news media?
4. Can and should the often hostile relationship between the journalism and PR professions be mended? Why or why not?
5. Considering the Exxon Valdez, BP, and Tylenol cases cited in this chapter, what are some key things an organization can do to respond effectively, once a crisis hits?