

Guerilla PR 2.0 Chapter 1

THE NATURE OF MEDIA

Thirty years ago, Marshall McLuhan, the father of modern communications, wrote the immortal words, "The medium is the message." Today I would amend that to, "The medium is the media." Our civilization is utterly dominated by the force of media. After our own families, no influence holds greater sway in shaping the text of our being than do the media that cloak us like an electronic membrane.

We all think of ourselves as unique, unlike any person past or present. Indeed, what gives human life its divine spark is the distinct quality of every individual. Yet in many ways we are all the same. The task of market analysts, pollsters, and demographers is to identify those characteristics we share, and group us accordingly. If you are in your early forties, male, Caucasian, a father of two, earn \$50,000 or more, and listen to a Top 40 radio station, there are total strangers out there who know an awful lot about you.

That's because they understand a lot about your upbringing. They know you watched "The Mickey Mouse Club" in the fifties, "The Man From U.N.C.L.E." in the sixties, "Saturday Night Live" in the seventies, became environmentally conscious in the eighties, and were probably sorry ABC canceled "Thirtysomething" in the nineties. They've got your number because they understand the role the media have played in your life from the moment you Boomed as a Baby.

Today, in America, we tune in to over 9,000 commercial radio stations, 1,100 television stations, 11,000 periodicals, and over 11,000 newspapers with a combined circulation of nearly seventy million. These are the sources of our opinions on everything from nuclear disarmament to Madonna's love life. Nobody likes to be told what to think, but all of us, every single day, are told precisely what to think about.

As Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson show in their insightful book, *Age of Propaganda*, the mass media are most effective in terms of persuading the public for two primary reasons. First, they teach new behavior and, second, they let us know that certain behaviors are legitimate and appropriate. So, if the media are encouraging certain buying patterns, fashion trends, modes of thinking, the unstated message we receive is "It's okay for me to like that, do that, feel that." In this way, our culture evolves, is accelerated, and disseminated.

Like the transcontinental railroad of the last century, the media link every city, gully, farmhouse, and mountaintop in North America. Regionalism is fading. The American accent is more uniform; our penchant for migration and blending in is like the smoothing out of a great national blanket. We are fast becoming one.

A common grammatical error occurs when people say "The media is" rather than "The media are" ("media" being the plural of medium"). Yet I sense people who say "the media is" are on to something. They perceive the many

arms of the media-TV, newspapers, radio, etc.-as part of one monstrously monolithic creature. The media are "one" too.

Consider "Baby Jessica" McClure, for whom my firm donated public relations services. Jessica was the toddler from Midland, Texas, who fell down a narrow pipe in her backyard in 1987. For thirty-six hours, America was mesmerized by press coverage of her rescue. Acting as a concerned neighbor, the media conveyed Jessica's plight to the nation. The private agony of the McClure family became the anguish of all America.

Think of it: the temporary suffering of one "insignificant" little girl stopped the world's most powerful country dead in its tracks. (Then, to canonize the experience, the TV movie version of Jessica's story made it to the small screen within a year.)

Without those cameras there to catch it, and those TV stations to broadcast it, Baby Jessica's ordeal would have made absolutely no impact on anyone other than her family and those who saved her. Because of the media, all of America for two days became part of Jessica's family.

CONTRACTION AND EXPANSION

Journalists and talk-show hosts like to claim they're in the information business or the news business. But you know and I know they're in the money business just like everyone else. Because practically all media are privately held profit-making ventures, they behave much like any other enterprise, looking for ways to increase the bottom line.

To do that they must expand their consumer base, that is, their audience. They must give the customer what he or she wants. So if your local news station runs a few too many five-part specials on the illicit sex lives of nuns during "Sweeps Month," remember they're only trying to please the viewers.

Creating a successful product means citizens may not always get the information they need. A Harvard researcher found the average network sound bite from presidential campaigns dropped from 41.5 seconds per broadcast in 1968 to just under 10 seconds in 1988. That translates into roughly sixteen words a night with which to make up our minds on who should run the country. We absorb more information, yet understand less than ever before.

This is a logical consequence of big media. Their existence depends on keeping the audience tuned in. If TV station "A" covers candidate "B" droning on about farm subsidies, most of the audience will probably switch to station "C" running a story about the stray cat raised by an affectionate pig. Station "A" would be wise to ditch candidate "B" and send a crew out to film Porky and Tabby.

Along with this contraction of information is a parallel expansion of media. Because social scientists have us so precisely categorized, outlets targeted to specific groups flourish. Lear's caters to mature, high-income women. Details appeals to middle-income, fast-tracker men. Essence aims for black women.

Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, and Mary, tells a great story in his stage show to illustrate how narrowly focused we've become as a society. In the 1940s and 1950s we had the all-encompassing Life magazine. Then, we cropped our vision down to People magazine in the seventies (all of Life wasn't good enough anymore). Things tightened up even more with Us. Now we have Self. Somewhere, there's just gotta be a magazine just for you. I can just imagine it: on sale now, "Fred Morganstern Monthly."

Not only do we see more media outlets, but the flow of information has likewise increased dramatically the past few years. Fax machines, cellular phones, modems, fiber-optic cables, Low Power TV, satellite down-links, all have reshaped the way we get our information, when we get it, and what we do with it.

During China's "Goddess of Democracy" protests in 1989, the students kept in touch with the outside world via fax. Instantly, China seemed to leap forward from feudal empire to modern nation. Vietnam was the first "we'll be right back after these messages" war. As napalm rained down on the jungle, we saw it live as it happened. We had no time to process information or analyze events as we were barraged by them. Because of improved communications, the Gulf War had the same effect, only with infinitely more drama.

The media may have accelerated the process of dissemination, but as we found out in the days of the first supersonic jets, breaking the sound barrier did not, as some scientists feared, cause planes to disintegrate. Likewise, instant news did not cause us to psychologically disintegrate.

There's no way to assess what this means to society. To be carpet-bombed by information must have far-reaching consequences to our civilization, but that's for future observers to sort out. Today, we face an intimidating media-driven culture. Anyone looking to succeed in business must first master the fundamentals of navigating the media. To reach customers, donors, or investors-to reach the public-one must rely on the media as the prime intermediary. The methodology to achieve this is known as Public Relations.

THE NATURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't, and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it.

-- Robert Frost

I'm often asked whether public relations is a science or an art. That's a valid question. In science, two plus two equals four. It will always equal four whether added by a Republican from Iowa, a shaman from New Guinea, or an alien from Planet X. However, in public relations, two plus two may equal four. It may equal five. It may equal zero today and fifty tomorrow.

Public relations is an art.

Like an art, there are rules of form, proven techniques, and standards of excellence. But, overall, it's a mercurial enterprise, where instinct is as legitimate as convention.

Public relations was once defined as the ability to provide the answers before the public knows enough to ask the questions. Another P.R. pundit once stated, "We don't persuade people. We simply offer them reasons to persuade themselves." I define what I do as gift-wrapping. If you package a bracelet in a Tiffany box, it will have a higher perceived value than if presented in a K Mart box. Same bracelet, different perception.

PERCEPTION IS REALITY

Don Burr, former CEO of People Express Airlines, once said, "In the airline industry, if passengers see coffee stains on the food tray, they assume the engine maintenance isn't done right." That may seem irrational, but in this game, perception, not the objective truth, matters most.

How one comprehends given information is all-important in public relations. For decades, baby harp seals were bludgeoned to death by fur hunters, but until the public saw the cute little critters up close and personal and perceived the hunt as unacceptable, the problem didn't exist. Before that, it was a matter of trappers preserving their hardy way of life. The seals ultimately hired the better publicist.

This also works in negative ways. The congressional check-bouncing scandal was a case in which individual congressmen's visibility skyrocketed, while their credibility plummeted. The Tobacco Institute, a Washington-based lobbying and P.R. outfit, spends its time and money claiming cigarettes are okay. Nothing they do or say will ever make that true, but they may go a long way in changing public perception of their product. A few years ago they sponsored subliminally that no-smoking regulations infringe on our basic liberties. How's that for a P.R. stretch?

Ultimately, the goal of any public relations campaign is to either reorient, or solidify, perception of a product, client, policy, or event. From there, nature takes its course. If the public perceives the product as good, the movie star as sexy, the pet rock as indispensable, then the public will fork over its money. As the brilliant business author Dr. Judith Bardwick explained, "To be perceived as visible increasingly means one is perceived as successful."

Some may charge that stressing perception as reality is tantamount to sanctioning falsehood. I disagree. As the great historian Max Dimont argued, it didn't matter if Moses really did have a chat with the Lord up on Mount Sinai or not. What matters is that the Jewish people believed it and carved their unique place in world civilizations because of it. Perception became reality.

Likewise, on a more mundane scale, one will succeed in a P.R. campaign only if the perception fostered truly resonates with the public. I do not believe people are easily duped. You may try everything in your bag of tricks to get the public to see things your way. You'll pull it off only if the perception you seek to convey fits the reality of the public, the reality of the times. As Pretkanis and Eronson argue, credibility today is manufactured, and not earned.

P.R. OR PUBLICITY?

Often, the terms “public relations” and “publicity” are used interchangeably. They shouldn’t be. Publicity is only one manifestation of P.R.-specifically, achieving notoriety through accumulated press exposure. A publicist knows newspapers, magazines, and TV talk shows. Public Relations is much more than that. The Public Relations expert is as well versed in human nature as in editorial and sound bytes.

P.R. can be as macro as a campaign to persuade foreign governments to buy U.S. soybeans, or as micro as a warm handshake. The notion that P.R. is simply a matter of mailing press releases is nuttier than a squirrel’s breakfast. As producer, manager, and publicist Jay Bernstein says, “P.R. is getting a front table at the right restaurant, getting you invited to the right party, and getting into first class with a tourist ticket.”

A man who has greatly affected my thinking, the esteemed business author and lecturer Tom Peters, tells the story of a visit to a neighborhood convenience store. “American Express was being a little user-unfriendly,” Tom recalls, “and it took a good three minutes for my AMEX card to clear. When it finally did, the cashier bagged my purchase, and as I turned to go reached into a jar of two-cent foil-wrapped mints. He pulled one out, dropped it in my bag, and said, ‘The delay you experienced was inexcusable. I apologize and hope it doesn’t happen again. Come back soon.’ For two cents, he bought my loyalty for life.”

This story is about one small business owner and only one customer, but it’s a perfect example of good P.R. But what about bad P.R.? I doubt there’s anyone on the scene who has mastered that dubious craft better than sometime-billionaire Donald Trump. This is a man who has lost control of his own gilded ship. His lurid infidelities, his profligate spending, his precipitous fall from fortune, and, worst of all, his attempt to exploit the Mike Tyson rape tragedy to promote a prize fight, collectively paint a portrait of a thoroughly vulgar mind.

The Donald doesn’t care what you say about him, as long as you spell his name right. True, whenever he opens his mouth or makes a move, the press is all over him. But his massive celebrity has made him only a famous fool. You are not likely to achieve the degree of fame that Mr. Trump has, but, given his shameful image, I would congratulate you on that.

P.R. VS. MARKETING

With Guerrilla P.R. (and P.R. in general), you do not tell the public that your new digital fish cleaner is the greatest invention since the dawn of time. You could easily do that in an ad. Your goal is to lead people to draw that same conclusion for themselves. Otherwise, you’re engaging in good old-fashioned- or is it new-fashioned?-marketing strategy.

Companies often relegate public relations to their marketing departments. That might make sense from a corporate point of view, but there’s a distinct difference between P.R. and marketing. Going back to the “science vs. art” analogy, whereas P.R. is the art, marketing is the science.

Bob Serling, President of the Stratford Marketing Group, an L.A.-based marketing firm, has written, “Marketing is everything you do to make sure

your customers find out about, and buy, your products and services.” That’s a tall order, and to go about filling it, marketing executives lug around a hefty bag of tricks.

To a large degree, they rely on surveys, demographic analyses and established sales and advertising procedures to accomplish their goals. But in Public Relations, intangibles play a far greater role. How do you measure a feeling? It’s not easy, but in P.R. we trade in the realm of feelings every day. We may use the media as the vehicle, but the landscape we traverse is contoured by human emotion.

Marketing often goes hand-in-hand with advertising. The undeniable advantage with advertising is that the advertiser retains full control. He knows exactly what his message will say and precisely when it will be seen. But remember this little fact of life: most top ad agencies consider a 1-2 percent response rate a triumph. That’s all it takes to make them happy. And, like it or not, most people don’t take ads as seriously as advertisers would like. Everybody knows they’re bought and paid for.

I prefer the odds with major media exposure. True, you do lose a large measure of control, and you never know for sure when or how your message will be conveyed. But the public is far likelier to accept what it gleans from the news media over what it sees in commercials. If Dan Rather says a new sports shoe is a daring innovation, people will give that more credence than if company spokesman Bo Jackson says it. The news, indeed the truth, is what Dan Rather says it is.

So who tells Dan Rather what’s news? The media like to boast they rely on ace newsgathering staffs; but in fact they depend a great deal on public relations people. That doesn’t mean the journalists of America are saps. They’re just looking for good stories. A hungry reporter and a smart publicist is a match made in heaven, and it’s been that way since the dawn of the Communication Age.

FROM THE GUERRILLA P.R. FILE

In Amarillo, Texas, you’ll find the Big Texan Steak Ranch, where the owner issues the following challenge:

If you can eat a seventy-two-ounce steak in an hour, you get it free. News of the deal traveled far and wide, even to the skies where I first read about it in an airline magazine.

GLORY DAYS: THE FOUNDING OF THE P.R. INDUSTRY

The public relations industry flourished with the growth of twentieth-century mass media, although sensitivity to public opinion on the part of public figures is nothing new. Even Abraham Lincoln got into the act, declaring once, “What kills a skunk is the publicity it gives itself.” The fathers of modern P.R. knew the value of simple images to convey powerful messages.

Edward Bernays, founder of modern P.R., defined his mission as the engineering of consent. He was a nephew of Sigmund Freud, and he strikes me as having been just as perceptive about human nature as his esteemed

uncle. Bernays displayed a genius for concocting indelible images, something good P.R. campaigns require. In one early triumph, he arranged for young debutantes to smoke Lucky Strikes while strolling in New York's 1929 Easter Parade. What Bernays sold to the press as a bold political statement on women's rights was no more than a gimmick to sell cigarettes.

Pioneers like publicist/film producer A.C. Lyles set the pace for generations of publicists to follow. Another innovator, Ivy Hill, is often credited with inventing the press release. Hill believed telling the "truth" in journalistic fashion would help shape public opinion. He sensed editors would not dismiss press releases as ads, but rather would perceive their real news value. He was right.

The publicist's ability to appeal to newspapers proved invaluable to captains of industry seeking to shore up their images. Back in the 1920s, Hill masterminded industrialist John D. Rockefeller's much-ridiculed habit of handing out dimes to every child he met. Ridiculous but effective in its time. (Imagine T. Boone Pickens trying that today.)

Occasionally, clients got less than they bargained for. In the late 1950s, the Ford Motor Company hired P.R. trail-blazer Ben Sonnenberg to help overcome the negative fallout from the Edsel fiasco. He charged Ford \$50,000 for a foolproof P.R. plan, and after three days submitted it in person. Sonnenberg looked the breathless executives in the eye and intoned, "Do nothing." With that, the dapper publicist pocketed his check and walked out, much to the slack-jawed shock of the Ford brain trust.

Even nations sometimes need help. During the 1970s, Argentina developed a little P.R. problem when its government kidnapped and murdered thousands of its own citizens. Buenos Aires hired the high-powered U.S. firm of Burson-Marsteller to tidy things up. For a cool \$1,000,000, the firm launched an extensive campaign involving opinion-makers from around the world: a stream of press releases stressed, among other things, the Argentine regime's record in fighting terrorism. Sometimes the truth can be stretched until it tears itself in half.

I don't wish to give the impression that P.R. is strictly a polite version of lying. That's not the case. As I said, P.R. is gift-wrapping. Whether delivered in fancy or plain paper, truth is truth, and the public ultimately comprehends it. The trick is packaging the truth on your own terms.

How often have you read about a big movie star storming off the set of a film because of "creative differences" with the director? We all know the two egomaniacs probably hated each other's guts. But if the papers printed that, we'd perceive the situation very differently. By our soft-pedaling the row with words like "creative differences," the movie star's reputation remains intact, even though intuition tells us he's "difficult."

MORE THAN ONE PUBLIC

Thus far, when referring to the public, I've generalized to mean the population at large: We the People. The sophisticated modern art of P.R. encompasses many more "publics" than that. In fact, selective targeting is a

primary tactic in sound P.R. strategies. As you will see, bigger is not always better.

Depending on the goals, a publicist could target any one of various business, consumer, or governmental communities. An investor seeking financial backing aims for the financial press and relevant trade publications. A rock musician zeroes in on the local music rags. A lobbyist might need nothing more than a friendly article in the Washington Post, a retailer only the residents of his immediate neighborhood.

Though I've found a few clients easily dazzled by quantity, in P.R. quality is what really counts. A seven-inch stack of press clippings means nothing unless the objectives of the campaign have been met. The scrapbook makes a great Mother's Day gift, but I'd rather see my clients' careers advanced in the right direction.

Figuring out which public to reach is one of the most critical decisions a publicist makes. My orientation-and, I hope, yours-is geared toward the most significant audience vis-à-vis your objectives, which is not necessarily the widest. You may want to target the people you buy from, the people you hope to sell to, the people you work for, the people that work for you, and so on. It's a big world full of little worlds when you look closely.

In most cases I spell out precisely who and what I'm going after, and then proceed aggressively. Don't go for the moon all at once. Set a goal, achieve it, then build on that base. Any good planner knows the advantages of thinking three steps ahead while proceeding one step at a time.