Publicity is one type of PR communication: messages that spread information about a person, corporation, issue, or policy in various media. Public relations today, however, involves many communication strategies besides publicity.

Because it involves multiple forms of communication, public relations is difficult to define precisely. It covers a wide array of actions, such as shaping the image of a politician or celebrity, repairing the image of a major corporation, establishing two-way communication between consumers and companies, and molding wartime propaganda. Broadly defined, public relations refers to the entire range of efforts by an individual, an agency, or any organization attempting to reach or persuade audiences.

Early Developments in Public Relations

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 potential of these early PR techniques soon became obvious to business executives and to politicians.

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 heroic exploits was also involved in the massacre of Native Americans.

“Public relations developed in the early part of the twentieth century as a profession which responded to, and helped shape, the public; newly defined as irrational, not reasoning; spectator, not participant; consuming, not productive.”

–Michael Schudson, Discovering the News 1978
P. T. Barnum, Buffalo Bill, and the Railroads

- The most notorious theatrical 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.

- From 1883 to 1916, former army scout William F. Cody, who once killed buffalo for the railroads, promoted himself in his “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World” traveling show.

During the 1800s, America’s largest industrial companies, particularly the railroads, also employed press agents to win favor in the court of public opinion.

- In terms of power and influence, companies like Illinois Central and the Pennsylvania Railroad in the late 1800s were comparable to American automakers in the 1950s. Having obtained construction subsidies, the larger rail companies turned their attention to bigger game—lobbying the government to control rates and reduce competition, especially from smaller, aggressive regional lines.

“Poison Ivy” 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 the undercurrents of social change. He counseled clients that honesty and directness were better PR devices than the deceptive corporate practices of the 1800s, which had fostered suspicion and an anti-big-business sentiment.

The Modern Public Relations Agent

- As the promotional agendas of many companies escalated in the late 1800s, a number of reporters and muckraking journalists began investigating these practices. By the early 1900s, with an informed citizenry paying more attention, it became more difficult for large firms to fool the press and mislead the public.

Edward Bernays

- The nephew of Sigmund Freud, former reporter Edward Bernays inherited the public relations mantle from Ivy Lee and dressed it up with modern social science.

- For many years, his definition of PR was a standard: “Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution.”
“Since crowds do not reason, they can only be organized and stimulated through symbols and phrases.”
—Ivy Lee, 1917

Through much of his writing, Bernays suggested that emerging forms of social democracy threatened the established hierarchical order. He thought it was important for experts and leaders to keep business and society pointed in the right direction. “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.”

Walter Lippmann, the newspaper columnist who wrote Public Opinion in 1922, also believed in the importance of an expert class to direct the more irrational twists and turns of public opinion.

But he saw the development of public relations as “a clear sign that the facts of modern life [did] not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known.”

Pseudo-Events and Manufacturing News

In his influential book The Image, historian Daniel Boorstin coined the term pseudo-event to refer to one of the key contributions of PR and advertising in the twentieth century. Basically, a pseudo-event is any circumstance created for the purpose of gaining coverage in the media. In other words, if no news media show up, there is no event.

During the 1960s, antiwar and civil rights protesters sometimes 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?”

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.

Approaches to Organized Public Relations

Public Relations Agencies

About twenty-two hundred U.S. companies identify themselves as public relations counseling firms. Many large ones are owned by, or affiliated with, such multinational communications holding companies as WPP, Omnicom, and Interpublic.

In-House Services

“PR expands the public discourse, helps provide a wide assortment of news, and is essential in explaining the pluralism of our total communication system.”

—John C. Merrill, Media Debates 1991

In contrast to external agencies, the most common type of public relations is done in-house by companies and organizations. Although America’s largest companies typically retain

Company owned in a manufacturing or service industry has an in-house department.
Performing Public Relations

- Public relations involves a multitude of practices and techniques. The PRSA identifies a number of general activities associated with PR: publicity, communication, public affairs, issues management, government relations, financial PR, community relations, industry relations, minority relations, advertising, press agency, promotion, media relations, and propaganda.
- This last activity, propaganda, which often uses emotional appeals, 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.

Writing and Editing

- One of the chief day-to-day functions in public relations is composing press releases, or press 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, often called handouts by the news media, PR agents hope that their client information will be picked up and transformed into news.

In addition to issuing press releases, nonprofit groups also produce public service announcements (PSAs): fifteen- to sixty-second reports or announcements for radio and television 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 6:00 a.m., a less commercially valuable time slot with relatively few viewers or listeners.

Public relations professionals often create brochures and catalogues as well as company newsletters and annual reports for shareholders in addition to writing or editing speeches. Today, the Internet is used for internal communications (such as a human resources newsletter) and external communications, including press release distribution and archives, press kit downloads, and campaign-related Web sites.

News reporters can be heavily dependent on public relations for story ideas. At right below is a press release written by the News & Public Information Office at Miami University about students who started a finance business, and the magazine and newspaper articles inspired by the release (at left and at bottom).
Media Relations
Through publicity, PR managers specializing in media relations promote a client or organization by securing favorable coverage in the news media. Media specialization often requires an in-house PR person to speak on behalf of an organization or to direct reporters to experts who can provide sources of information.
- Media-relations specialists also perform damage control or crisis management when negative publicity occurs.

Special Events
Another public relations specialty involves coordinating special events.
- More typical of special events publicly is the corporate sponsor that aligns its company image with a cause or an organization that has positive stature among the general public.

Research
Just as advertising is driven today by demographic and psychographic research, PR uses similar strategies to project a client’s image to the appropriate audience.

Community and Consumer Relations
Two other PR activities involve building relationships between companies and their communities. Companies have learned that sustaining close ties with their neighbors not only enhances their image but also promotes the idea that the companies are good citizens. Such ties expose a business to potential customers through various community activities, including plant tours, open houses, participation in town parades, and special events—such as a company’s anniversary.

Government Relations and Lobbying
Public relations also entails maintaining connections with government agencies that have some say in how companies operate in a particular community, state, or nation. The PR divisions of major firms are especially interested in making sure that government regulation neither becomes burdensome nor reduces their control over their businesses.

In many firms, government relations has developed into lobbying: the process of attempting to influence the voting of lawmakers to support an organization’s or an industry’s best interests. In seeking favorable legislation, some PR agents lobby government officials on a daily basis. In Washington, D.C., alone, there are more than 34,000 registered lobbyists—at least sixty-three lobbyists for each member of Congress. Lobbying in the U.S. capital has grown rapidly in the past decade, up from 11,000 lobbyists in 1995.
Tensions between Public Relations and the Press

- In 1932, Stanley Walker, an editor at the New York Herald Tribune, identified public relations agents and publicity advisers as “mass-mind molders, fronts, mouthpieces, chislers, moochers, and special assistants to the president.”
  - Walker added that newspapers and public relations agencies 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.”

- Flack: a derogatory term that journalists use to refer to a public relations agent.
  - This description, however, 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. Today, the AP manual defines flack simply as “slang for press agent.”

Elements of Professional Friction

- Undermining Facts and Blocking Access
  - Modern public relations redeployed and complicated the notion of facts. PR professionals demonstrated that the same set of facts can be spun in a variety of ways, depending on what information is emphasized and what is downplayed.

- Promoting Publicity and Business as News
  - PR agents help companies “promote as news what otherwise would have been purchased in advertising.”
  - Beyond this lies another issue: If public relations can secure publicity for clients in the news, the added credibility of a journalistic context gives clients a status that the purchase of advertising cannot confer.

- Influencing the Press
  - Public relations, by making reporters’ jobs easier, has often enabled reporters to become lazy. PR firms often supply what reporters used to work hard to gather for themselves. Instead of going out to beat the competition, some 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.

PRSA Member Statement of Professional Values

- Advocacy
  - We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We should be vigilant 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.

- Openness
  - 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. Source.

Public Relations, Social Responsibility, and Democracy

- Although the image of public relations professionals may not be as negative as that of advertisers, a cynical view of the profession nonetheless exists beyond the field of journalism. Given the history of corporate public relations, many concerned citizens believe that when a company or an individual makes a mistake or misleads the public, too often a PR counsel is hired to alter the image rather than to admit the misdeed and correct the problem.

- In terms of its immediate impact on democracy, the information crush delivered by public relations is at its height during national election campaigns. In fact, PR’s most significant impact may be on the political process, especially when organizations hire spin doctors to shape or reshape a candidate’s media image.

- Like advertising and other forms of commercial speech, publicity campaigns that result in free media exposure raise a number of questions regarding democracy and the expression of ideas.