

The Management Series

Volume 3

The Public Relations Series
The Marketing Series
The Admin Know-How Series

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Published in the USA by
Bridge Publications, Inc.
4751 Fountain Avenue
Los Angeles, California 90029

ISBN 0-88404-674-5

Published in all other countries by
NEW ERA Publications International ApS
Store Kongensgade 55
Copenhagen K, Denmark

ISBN 87-7336-760-5

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Printed in the United States of America

PR Series 6

OPINION LEADERS

An "opinion leader" is that being to whom others look for interpretation of publicity or events. Through wisdom, proximity to data sources, personality or other factors including popularity itself, certain members of the group, company, community or nation are looked to by others for evaluation.

In the teething days of public relations, George Creel, who conducted the massive Liberty Loan drives for the US government, considered that it was enough to batter avalanches of publicity down on the heads of the "general public." Given enough money, enough media of communication and no real opposition this proved successful enough.

But as time unreeled, some unsung PR man recognized the fact that the "general" public was made up of smaller groups. Churches, social clubs, factories, and thousands of other large or small groupings of the population were what made up the "general" public.

Each of these groups had its own "opinion leader" and within each group there were smaller groups who each in turn had its own opinion leader.

"To whom do they listen?" "Whose opinion do they accept?" "Whom do they trust?" "On whom do they depend?" are the questions, which, answered, identify the opinion leader of the group, large or small.

Further, the opinion leader of a very large group, in turn, is interpreted by the opinion leaders of the smaller units which go to make up the larger group.

As an example, government spokesman X puts out Bulletin A on the radio and TV and into the press. He is NOT talking to masses of people. He is in reality talking to opinion leaders. On a crucial question there will not be a reaction to X until the listeners have heard what their opinion leaders have to say about Bulletin A.

If there have been other issuances like Bulletin A, the opinion leaders will have voiced their own opinions. Their groups will then know the attitude. In this case Bulletin A will receive an apparent "general public" reaction. In short, the opinion about Bulletin A's will have been preformed by the opinion leaders. This makes it look like there is mass public opinion without opinion leaders.

One of the great dangers of PR practice comes from not really knowing the subject well enough or in twisting it or in losing bits of it.

Having discovered the principle that “opinion leaders” form public opinion, not the “general” public, many PR people forgot it, or didn’t give it enough importance or even in some cases chose to be willfully destructive of their employers.

It should be very obvious that if general public reaction to an event is dependent upon the reaction and interpretation of opinion leaders, then a PR action’s success depends upon favorably influencing the opinion leaders of that part of the population one is trying to reach and calculating what opinion leaders one can neglect or even offend.

This would be almost mathematical in computation. Spokesman X issuing a Bulletin A that offended 55 percent of the opinion leaders would get, roughly, a 55 percent opposing reaction from the whole public.

Surveys for the identities of opinion leaders would then become a MAJOR activity of PR in any area and for any type of message or event.

Even a rough estimation, which is easily done, would serve better than no thought of it at all.

PR men go for Very Important People. PR wears this out beyond belief. But it is an alter-is. VIPs to PR are only opinion leaders. A government minister is tagged automatically by PR people as a VIP because his car has flags and he is a minister. Yet he may be a drunken nephew whose opinion is about as welcome to his colleagues as a hangover. So he may be a VIP but he is not an opinion leader. When he says “blue,” his colleagues think “black” and the opinion leaders in the public think “red.” The only PR use of this minister would be to get him to embrace and speak up for someone you wanted shot or some cause you wanted opposed!

There is such a situation currently in a man called Goodrich or some such name, head of FDA in Washington. Thirty-two years in that agency, big record. Head of it = VIP. All he has to do is open his mouth and his staff writhes, Congress spits and opinion leaders say no-no-no. So he could only be used to oppose something you wanted popular.

So it’s very lazy PR to assume that a “VIP” is worth knowing or using. Sometimes VIPs are also opinion leaders.

Celebrities are more often opinion leaders as they arrive at their role by popular acclaim. But even here one has to operate with good sense. Paul Robeson, the great American singer, was used by communists in the 1930s to popularize their cause. It did not achieve this. Paul Robeson championing his own race probably would have advanced civil-rights legislation greatly. The misuse brought anti-communists to believe that all the Negroes would now become a communist fifth column and brought about strong opposition to Negroes and to communists.

The rule that should not be violated is to use an opinion leader only to further an opinion he could have visibly. The equation must add up with all factors of a kind, not a strange factor interjected into the sequence. Like music, you don’t introduce a wrong note in the scale if you want harmonious rendition. Robeson

(black singer)—opinion leader of blacks—communism. Too odd a sequence. Robeson (black singer)—opinion leader of blacks—black relief. Obvious sequence.

The equation:

Bertrand Russell (British philosopher)—academic opinion leader—communism: caused a strengthening of the communist cause because he was a thought symbol and “anybody was free to think” and “they’re always forming odd ideas in the halls of learning.” His statement “Better red than dead” was a classic PR caper. It was widely quoted. Helped Russell, of whom few ever would have heard, and possibly helped communism, at least to be talked about, and obviously was picked up by the group in which Russell existed. To the rest of us this may have sounded like naked atomic war threat and war-mongering. But it was the proper use of a foreign opinion leader by a large group.

Now if the paragraph above jarred on you in any way or seemed to espouse a strange cause, etc., etc., you will have the reason why PR men cannot always see clearly and objectively. They themselves are too involved in causes and pros and cons to remain pan-determined (viewing or handling all sides).

By permitting prejudice to get in the way of handling opinions, a PR man loses control of his subject. He becomes so violently partisan that many of his stable data become blurred or abused.

Thus the subject of opinion leaders can become abandoned. Disagreement with the views of some of them remove not only the opinion leaders but the whole subject of opinion leaders out of use.

While conducting themselves like status-mad prima donnas, seeking to exist mainly by PR techniques, most people in government power positions are remarkably badly served by their PR men and by their own prejudices or jealousies.

Essentially, a person *in* power is not the same person seeking power.

Maintaining power is a different subject than attaining power.

A politician by definition is someone who handles people. Even the word means “people.” Thus the subject of “public relations” does a natural closure with government.

Yet the alteration of the subject of PR and its misuse, neglect or abuse by government PR men could be in itself a considerable study.

The vast majority of population unrest stems from the misuse, neglect or abuse of PR technology by governments, even those governments that consider themselves experts.

A politician commonly is boosted to power by opinion leaders. This could be called the “will of the people.” Once he has attained power, the garden-variety politician of this age finds himself committed to special interests that have little to do with the “will of the people.” Few are the politicians who have the integrity to continue to look to the people—the opinion leaders—who put them there. Thus, now apparently serving other masters, they appear to have been false in

their earlier pretensions. Not remaining true to their opinion leaders, politicians as a general subject acquires a cynical reputation with the “people.”

A Labor leader in England, put into power by opinion leaders, then spends his time in office talking about bankers, banking, deficits and all that mumbo jumbo of modern government, speaks hostilely about unions, seeks to restrain shop stewards and union bosses, puts on a tax to penalize any company that hires someone and then has the dullness to wonder why he took a beating at the polls eventually and lost. He turned on his opinion leaders. Where were his vaunted PR experts?

The US government routinely achieves the impossible of turning the bulk of the population against it on most issues. Its politicians are regularly forced to maintain their positions by huge avalanches of public funds.

Hiring more and more police and spies for more and more government police agencies, the government is becoming less and less popular. “Patriotism” and “idealism” are now considered dirty words.

Why? How did this get this bad?

Well, one reason is that government PR is continually recoiling on the government. Either they don't hire good PR men, or if they do, they don't take their advice. Or their PR men don't know their subject or aren't permitted to practice it.

The general unrest and unpopularity is largely traceable to a violent disregard of the subject of *opinion leaders*.

Attaining power is done usually by the consent of or with the help of the opinion leaders. Arrival in a position of power too often causes the person to shift the basis of his operation. He is now associating with different people in a power strata. It would require quite an effort of will to not be seduced. Having achieved power by opinion leaders, the person may forget them and seek to maintain power by other means or by force. This is essentially a violation of the Power Formula which indicates one should not disconnect. By disconnecting from the previous opinion leaders, the person begins his own demise.

This is terribly easy to do in the case of government. It is so easy for a government to use FORCE that a disregard of previous opinion leaders can occur.

Money power is usually available to persons who rise to positions of leadership and can be, like force, a substitute.

Thus a truly suborned leader would desert “opinion leader” as a basis of power and begin to use FORCE and MONEY to hold his position.

But when one assumes a position of power, regard for opinion leaders should *broaden*, not be dropped.

The astute leader on his way up may tread heavily on the opinion leaders of the opposition. This has its benefits in reinforcing the favor of opinion leaders for him. But it also has its liabilities for, now in power, he may have serious enemies who are all the more perturbed now that they, too, have him as a leader.

Few politicians—indeed few men who move into any kind of power—ever satisfactorily solve this problem. The *very* able ones do solve it and become far more powerful as a result since they do not violate the Power Formula.

Not only does the brilliant leader refuse to disconnect from the opinion leaders who put him there through “public approval,” he also connects with the previously opposing opinion leaders. If truly magnificent, he gains the good opinion of former hostile opinion leaders without decreasing the goodwill of the opinion leaders who put him there. This actually defines the difference between a second-rate politician and a real statesman. The genius required to arrive at such solutions cannot be underestimated, but the formula of achieving it is elementary PR.

The leader of the “blues” (supported of course by the opinion leaders of the “blues”) rises to power in the teeth of “green” opposition. Now in power, he has sway over both the blues and the greens. The blue’s opinion is that this should signal a panorama of dead greens. But unless this rule is to be just one long bloodbath it is now necessary to cool off tempers all around, preserve blue support and *win* green support. That is an elementary equation.

Attilas and Huns and Genghis Khans solved this by simply murdering all imagined hostile elements. They may be known in history but politically they built nothing that endured. Even the pyramids of skulls vanished.

Men like Hitler went so far in reverse in handling this problem as to finally slaughter even their adherents.

In the general field of human activities every different or specialized group can be considered a political unit. It elects with a wide variety of formalities, or lack of them, its leaders, and when different agencies than themselves elect them (inheritance, appointments from without), the group at least elects its opinion leaders if only by listening.

And people strive to *be* opinion leaders and also back down or otherwise react when someone else is so “elected.”

So being an opinion leader involves the responsibility of maintaining the position by remaining well informed or personable or whatever else seems to be required.

One has to decide in some degree what he is an opinion leader for or against or at least about. And one has to set a zone or have one set for him in which he operates.

A usual example is the family. Often someone in it is the opinion leader. It is not necessarily the one with the money or the force. Where one member or clique has the money or force and uses these and the opinion leader is someone else, strife and domestic upset may result.

All the children may look to an aunt for their styles, thoughts and approval. Where this runs counter to the money-force persons, somebody is going to have a broken home or a horrible old age.

Such is human prejudice—or ignorance—that the money-force persons almost never dream of winning the support of the opinion leader aunt by sound but popular policy based on consultation.

The right answer of course is for the money-force power to operate in consultation with the opinion leader.

This is true all the way on up to government-sized groups.

Money-force may bribe and break necks but it really never does become the leader in the absence of the approval of a majority of opinion leaders.

Prosperity and an easy rule depend utterly upon the cooperation of opinion leaders.

The US government in the last few decades has seemed obsessed with the antagonizing or destruction of opinion leaders.

Using the broad mass approach long since found faulty in PR activities, the US government has lately sought to reach the “public” without that annoying step of reaching and getting the approval of opinion leaders.

Instead, an army of spies from every agency (according to the Committee of Senator Ervin), descend upon any and every popular leader, hound him, annoy him, discredit him. Even managers of businesses are so plagued by government they can hardly do their work. This is also true of England and other countries.

The unrest in the United States and some other countries is traceable directly to this fantastic omission in their PR technical expertise. They not only do not seek the favor of opinion leaders, they actively harass and seek to destroy them.

In return the opinion leaders feel endangered and have and state opinions accordingly. The power of the government drops back on money and force only. Governmental survival is thus greatly impaired.

The so-called “mass news media,” by which is meant newspapers, TV, radio and magazines, has the fault built into its title. It cannot and never will reach any masses directly. It reaches only through opinion leaders. It has to quote this one and that one which it fancies as an opinion leader. But it never finds out WHO the opinion leaders are.

Newspaper editorials are a direct effort to force opinion. They quote the opinions of other papers just as though these were opinion leaders.

They believe they “mold public opinion” but PR men long since have given up this idea and even greet it with raucous laughter.

Newspapers have ceased to wonder about their rapid demise. They are getting fewer fast. They thought it was radio. Then TV. It wasn't.

Willy Hearst's 1890 yellow journalism and scandal mongering began to dig the grave of the newspaper that many decades ago.

Hear this: While seeking to control public opinion, newspapers began to strike viciously at opinion leaders. Name him, sooner or later any really important opinion leader in the area would be hit with scandal. It happened so often that opinion leaders automatically began to say, "Don't believe the newspapers."

The day of the newspaper is dead. The not-mourned *London Daily Mail* hit one too many opinion leaders one too many times. And nobody believed it anymore and nobody bought it. And it folded.

So government or newspaper or church or hockey club, the same rule applies. The goodwill of the opinion leaders is necessary for survival. *Not* the good opinion of the masses! Since that cannot be reached.

The Russian state talks down about individualism. The "cult of the individual" is a bad thing.

Their internal police is vital to them. They have forgotten that the Czar's Okhrana destroyed the Czar by destroying every opinion leader amongst the people whom they could seize or slay.

Almost amusingly, the US government has taken over the exact operational pattern of the Okhrana. You can hardly get to your desk through the government forms and mobs of spies urging the staff to commit crimes so they can be arrested or holding out bribes to falsify the tax reports. All one has to do is mention the US government in a pop program and he'll have three army sergeants from G-2 pushing the band out of the way. That's the way it was in pre-1917 Russia just before the opinion leaders decided NO in one final bloodbath.

So as I said earlier in this series, PR is dangerous stuff if one doesn't really know it and if one only applies half of it.

Omitting the opinion leader is bad enough. Seeking to destroy him is far, far worse.

Yes, one says, but how about the violent opposition? How about that fellow?

Well, he's a problem. But he *is* an opinion leader.

One has to decide how much of an opinion leader he is.

If you don't handle a would-be opinion leader who is anti but who is NOT an opinion leader, people get cross.

The decision here stems from:

- a. Is he talking about actual abuses? or
- b. Is he just lying?

In either case one has certain courses of action. If the abuses are actual, work to remedy them. If he is just lying, lay out the truth. If he really isn't an opinion leader, ignore him.

But one can only interfere with him or remove him if many, many are getting cross because you don't. But that's a risky business.

As a rule, only that dissident person should be removed who is speaking in your name and on your lines and using your power to do you down. And then he can only be removed off your lines as you are under no obligation to finance or empower your own opposition. That's suicide. He is not an opinion leader but a traitor, for he owes his power to you.

Usually anti-opinion leaders are *made by neglect*.

PR-wise, one has to catch them early and handle.

Abuses by those in charge are never put right by force. They are only worsened.

Perhaps there is no excuse whatever to use force to enforce an opinion. Wars are notorious for failing to solve. You can always find a point years or decades before the war when a point existed that PR and cooperative rule could have solved.

PR imperfectly known or unknown as a subject leads to big trouble.

PR is powerless when it doesn't know.

PR loses when it neglects.

Early enough, PR alone does it.

Later, PR with concessions is needed.

Then, PR is out and only force is thought to serve.

This would be a DETERIORATING SITUATION.

The longer PR takes to catch it up, the more imminent loss or force becomes.

From this, technically adept PR could be seen to have too limited a role in the affairs of nations or groups.

The way to attain a more dominant role with PR is first to know it well, next to be sure others, who should, understand it and then to use it effectively.

As it is a subject which is meant to reach masses, remember that it must reach them through opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders may or may not be VIPs. But they are, whoever they are, barber or king, VIPs to the PR.

Thus surveys for opinion leaders are necessary. And the opinions of opinion leaders must be known.

And for heaven's sake restrain the boss from shooting opinion leaders no matter how just his wrath.

But also don't tell him Dr. Kutzbrain is an opinion leader just because he talks to two nurses and his wife.

Peace is not necessarily a target of PR. Survival is. And survival requires some control of opinion.

When this becomes control of numbers of people, PR is only accomplished through opinion leaders.

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