

image: "Dutch playing cards from 1920-1927: Jack of Diamonds" found/scanned by Michiel
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PAUL SEAMAN

What is Public Relations about in the 21st Century?

Paul Seaman

Part I: Definitions of PR: keeping it honest

“Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest.”

The Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) recently adopted this definition of PR. It throws up a whole host of issues about what PR is about. Not least that it fails the honesty test.

Part II PR should help leaders lead, not listen

A manifesto in favour of decent topdown adult leadership rather than the febrile fashions of the crowd

Part III: PR to marry and lead marketing?

What's the difference between marketing and PR in the post-Credit Crunch era and with the advent of social media?

Part I: Definitions of PR: keeping it honest

The Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) recently adopted a modern definition of PR. It throws up a whole host of issues about what PR is about. Here's my take on the business PR professionals are in.

First, here's the CPRS National Board definition of PR, which it endorsed in February 2009, in Fredericton, New Brunswick:

Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest.

Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008

As detailed in a post to *PR Conversations*, *Introducing a new, maple-infused definition of public relations*¹ by Canadian Judy Gombita, a member of CPRS, the definition is being discussed by the "defining" architects, other contributors and frequent commentators to PRC, plus academics at *PR Conversations*.

Some of their comments have expressed a wish that other PR bodies in other countries should endorse the CPRS line. Without wanting to be a party-pooper for the sake of it, here's why I hope they will not be successful.

Who do PRs represent?

The problem PR professionals (let's just call them 'PRs') confront is the following. We have to decide whether our first duty as PR

advisers is to our clients or to the public. Do we swear allegiance to both on equal terms even though it is our clients, rather than the public, which pay for our services? Would it be ethical to treat both responsibilities equally?

Now let's examine some of the problems with this latest attempt at a reconciliation of this conundrum.

Proposition A ("realise organizational goals") is scuppered by Proposition B ("and serve the public interest"), unless we are to have a rather strained oxymoron.

PRs are paid to promote the interests of their employers. They promote A within the bounds of decency and the law. They do this – if they do it properly – professionally in the best sense of the word. That is in the public interest (B) in the sense that having one-sided advocacy is a part of free society since freedom is not merely the right to speak but the understanding that truth and good sense emerge from competing arguments.



photo: "Stack O' Money" by doctor wonder
<http://goo.gl/rmvBv>

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¹ <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=561>

In other words, the defence advocate is serving the public interest almost whatever the merit of his or her client. Almost all the time, the job of PR is to persuade the public that A equals B. But unless these two propositions are simply supposed to be coterminous (which is a stretch) there is often an important tension between propositions A and B. In reality, PRs have to favour A under the cover of espousing B.

The honest PR would admit that PRs dress up A as B. They would insist that his or her professionalism dictates that they should warn the public about the threat of “deception” (or at the very least, one-sidedness) which lies therein. This is why it is so unprofessional and sad and demeaning that PRs should (often do) pretend that A and B are always, or even should or must be, a good match.

It has always been a comfort to me and to colleagues that doing A is clearly defensible (within limits) and doable whilst achieving B is as hard to achieve as it is to define.

Public interest is hard to define

It is the impossibility of defining public interest (B) which has reinforced our civilisation’s conviction that lots of A (“realise organizational goals”), done competitively but within limits, is really the best way of achieving B. I say this in the spirit of how markets, democracies and debates are organised in the free world and how they actually behave in practice.

None of this is to deny that a PR may want

to enrich an employer’s view of what A is, and do it by framing a view of B which could be promoted. A good example of this is corporate responsibility (CR) and a commitment to sustainability.

Hence, the honest PR needs to make a distinction between espousing B as an instrumental matter for pursuing A, and as a goal in its own right. He or she also must distinguish between pretending to know what B really is, and adopting a popular view of B, or a view of B which was plausible but also suited A.

Obviously the more B is bent out of shape so as to fit A the less the PR can claim a real moral power for his use of B, or for his employer as it claims to adopt B. Therein lies the accusation of greenwash and much more, as the rift between reality and practice produces a credibility gap.

It is my view that authenticity, truthfulness and being aligned with reality will nearly always and in the long run trump fluff, flannel and puff (spin) when it comes to winning long-term public trust; even if the case put is uncomfortable and unpopular. That’s to say: the long-term “organizational goals” will usually be best met with honest PR. With any luck, being honest will usually strike the public as having been in the public interest too.

The notion of the public interest is somewhat loose. We all have our own wildly differing definitions of what it is; even if sometimes it is also clear to all (most) of us what it is not. Being honest – and prizing honesty – is a principle that has stood up pretty well.

That is why it may be best to leave the public interest out of it. The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) *Gold Paper N°6* seems on safer ground when it notes² that:

'[According to the Dutch PR association] Public relations is the systematic promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its public'. Or, as the British express it: 'Public relations is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public'.

Of these, I have a fairly decent quibble with the British definition. To “maintain goodwill” might involve a good deal of deception or systematic lack of frankness. “Mutual understanding” is nice because to understand something includes the idea that what one is learning is not untrue. (The English language does not allow that one can “know” or “understand” an untruth.)

Is PR related to propaganda?

By the way, *Gold Paper N° 6* gets muddled when it tries to explain why PR and propaganda are different. It describes propaganda as a one-way process wherein the public (or a particular section of it) is a nominated target and the objective is to change public thinking or prompt public responsive action.

But perhaps the most successful propaganda campaign ever devised was based on two-way communication. It was also grand in

scale and viral in nature.

The Four-Minute Men³ campaign launched by The Committee on Public Information⁴ contained many of the founders of the PR industry. During the First World War it rallied community-based opinion-formers who made speeches in favour of the war, interactively and face-to-face, to millions of people gathered in small audiences across the length and breadth of the United States of America.

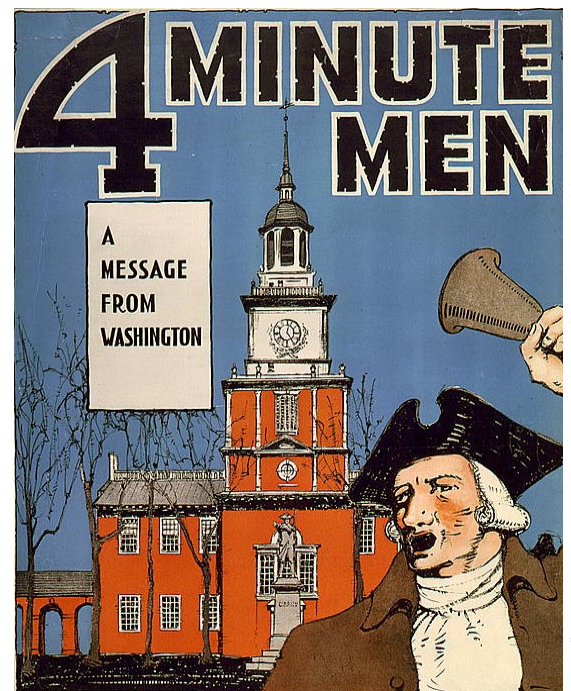


image: "4 Minute men - A message from Washington" by H. Devitt Welsh
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93517441/

2 <http://www.ipra.org/detail.asp?articleid=68>

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Minute_Men

4 <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/063.html>

What's my view of a working description of PR?

I like to say – as Bill Huey did⁵ – that PR is defined by its practice. Or, as an Hegelian might say: the spirit of PR is involved in self-realization by the process of movement, development, evolution and progress. If I had to pick one word that captures its essence it would be “advocacy”: the act of pleading or arguing for something to influence an outcome on behalf of clients, preferably by using two-way communication techniques. That is to stress that I am not all that interested in PR which persuades people to think a certain thing unless the PR has invited and accepted and met informed challenge by the target audience.

At the end of the day, PRs have to acknowledge that they are not in business to push their own varied agendas on to their clients. Rather they represent – advocate – their employers' interests. PRs are more like barristers than priests. True, they can – like doctors or management consultants – help fix their employers' problems. True, they can – like diplomats – bring the wider world to their employers and sensitise their employers to the wider world's needs. Be they however sophisticated, flacks are hacks – they are for

hire. That does not mean they leave decency or professionalism behind when they go to work.

Indeed, the definitions I recommend for them may be more rigorous and personally costly than swimming with the tide of fashionable nostrums, which is my beloved trade's commonest activity right now.

⁵ <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=561#comment-87935>



image: still from "Shaun of the Dead" a romantic zombie comedy directed by Edgar Wright

Part II: PR should help leaders lead, not listen

Here's a manifesto in favour of decent top-down adult leadership rather than the febrile fashions of the crowd.

My profession seems to be obsessing on stakeholder relationship management. I see why. When the angry mob is howling at the gates, it seems sensible to pretend that crowds have wisdom. Like politicians, media and most bosses in the West, public relations professionals (let's just call them 'PRs') are terrified of seeming elitist. They believe that leadership is no longer possible, or is toxic.

I have often banged-on about how PRs fear that corporations are seen as evil, so now mistakenly believe they must wear a bleeding heart on their sleeve. That's not my point today. I want to stress here that it is a profound problem that PRs and many organisations – from firms to political parties – dread leadership and responsibility.

There's a shortage of adulthood

What I'm on about today is related to a wider social problem. I think it's time the grown-ups behaved like adults.

We live in a society in which people strut about in a macho culture of bullying, slap-head, hyper-fit, scowling aggression, but at the slightest set-back everyone's weeping and in therapy.

Big cars, sharp suits and watches the size of dinner plates don't confer anything worthwhile on a person. Aren't you struck by how fragile the self-esteem of so many modern pseudo-adults seems to be?

We have watched stars, CEOs and politicians behave like greedy, petulant, hysterical teenagers rather than heroes, but what is striking about many of them is that they have so little fortitude. Most CEOs disappeared from view when the credit crunch struck. We just heard how the British Prime Minister's inner circle phones bullying help-lines⁶ to complain about him. Their confidence is wafer thin.

At this year's Davos we were told that profit, shareholder value and shareholders are no longer priorities. All stakeholders are now equal. Such talk came from Western leaders. The bosses in the East held their nerve.

⁶ <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/8217/>

We need corporations rooted in a solid culture

It's this bifurcation I'm after. I want to try to make it understood that ordinary decency, a workable sense of fairness, a sellable ideal of enlightened self-interest - proper trust between firms and employees and customers and wider society - has to flow from a far deeper sense of corporate culture than can ever be achieved by becoming a weather vane.

Today I want to try to get a proper handle on this particular concern: that our clients cannot afford to aim to become whatever the ether-mob, the gobby bloggers, the placard-wavers fancy. They can't pick up a self-definition by triangulating the top three or four messages they get from a consultant. Even if they did, they'd have to live it and that involves sticking with it and that involves ignoring the next fashion which hurtles into view out of the mists.

I am tolerably sure that floating along on public opinion is never good. It sometimes leads to rushing weirs and crashing Niagras, but more often to long dreary shoals where no-one's boat floats.

The public says it wants to humble corporations and corporate bosses, just like it says it wants to humble political parties and politicians. So it has created the risk that firms, parties and institutions become rudderless (sorry, I couldn't resist another water analogy).

In fact though, if there's one thing the public

fears and distrusts more than strong, mean, unaccountable and self-serving public bodies and leaders, it's bodies which are too weak to do their job.

Before we can have listening and flexible firms, we need to have firms which are quite strong and quite clear about what they actually want to be.

So the perpetual self-abnegation involved in stakeholder relationship management is a folly. I believe it is a chronic abdication of responsibility. It also constitutes a surrender to short-term market and social instrumentalism.

It is a myth that the best reputations must be sustained by stakeholder management crowd sourcing. Good reputations are not based on living within limits set by consumer or voter research and stakeholder engagement, but on breaking down barriers and achieving something significant.

Reputations, trust and success

The best reputations arise from doing things and from keeping promises and delivering results and sometimes from managing failures well. Reputations that endure do so because they inspire.

Great companies and governments transform the world by creating demand and conditions that didn't exist before. They often do so at great risk in the face of fierce opposition.

There's more for PR to do than to get their clients to reflect what audiences say they expect or claim that they will accept. There's more for PR to do than to try to forge consensus before advising firms to make decisions. Good PR acknowledges that what's wanted in society is not fixed. Great PR helps society transform the prevailing perceptions of sustainability on business, cultural and environmental matters.

Successful countries from the democratic UK and America to today's China and India were not built on the back of listening, engagement and consensus, but on the back of courageous leadership and innovation. Let's review a few examples.

According to Edelman's trust survey⁷, trust in business and government is strongest where stakeholder relationship management matters least and among the weakest where it seemingly matters most. By a significant margin, China leads the world in both categories. India and Indonesia score highly. While Russia records higher trust levels than do France and Germany.

Moreover, the PC, the internet and Google's search engine are all examples of top-down disruptive innovations, not ones driven by bottom-up demand-led engagement-based consultation. They did not arise from listening to the market or to stakeholder groups.

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⁷ <http://www.edelman.com/trust/2010/>

I'm Feeling Lucky

Google

Google's search engine was an innovative marriage between algorithms and computing power. Google created its own demand.

The motto of Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin was "question everything". As this review of recent books on Google⁸ explains, they were like *postindustrial Henry Fords, using digital technology to eliminate all inefficiencies in traditional economies*.

Ironically, Google's Eric Schmidt's recent *Washington Post* piece, *Erasing our Innovation Deficit*⁹, advocates bottom up crowd-sourced innovation. It under-estimates the risk-taking top down investment and leadership which helped Google succeed, the internet take-off and the US put a man on the moon¹⁰. However, that weakness should not detract too much from the mostly timely, insightful points Schmidt makes.

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⁸ <http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Reviews-Essays/Googled/ba-p/1676>

⁹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/09/AR2010020901191.html?wpisrc=nl_tech

¹⁰ <http://futures-diagnosis.com/2010/02/11/eric-schmidts-innovation-deficit-recipe-deficient/>



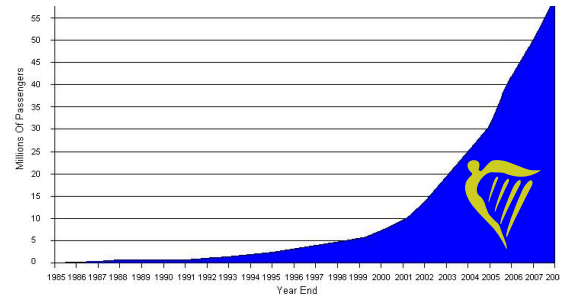
Unloved Microsoft and lovable Apple

Microsoft at its peak never won our empathy. Microsoft never engaged with stakeholders. It hardly consulted anybody. Bill Gates wielded Microsoft's power like a blunt instrument against all comers, including customers and partners. But if Microsoft was always unlovable, Apple is its polar opposite. Its fans adore it, believing it to represent an anti-corporate, culturally-fresh, arty sort of an entity. That's mostly nonsense, but in any case Apple achieves this myth-making with top-down communication and command and control management.



Rock 'n' Roll

The electric guitar transformed music. It created new possibilities by creating new sounds. It helped spawn Rock 'n' Roll, including Punk, that outraged public opinion. But its hall of fame contains some of the greatest reputations of the last century. But as Simon Cowell shows, even this grass-roots business is managed from the top, even if it draws inspiration and talent from the bottom.



Ryanair: nobody's friend

Last, Michael O'Leary's Ryanair's low-cost digitally-networked business model revolutionised the airline industry. It was an achievement of an aggressive innovative genius, not of stakeholder collaboration, which he despises.

These examples provide evidence of Joseph Schumpeter's law of creative destruction that drives the capitalist market. They support my argument that PRs who think our trade is all about aligning values, listening, engagement and relationships need a reality check; though I'm very pro using those techniques in the right context.

Key manifesto messages

In contrast, I say PRs should be more prepared to defend, advocate and promote risk taking. They should be less concerned about what's acceptable and what's popular. They should be more willing to celebrate elitism and success. They should be less concerned with the crowd as it is currently constituted or inclined to emote and opine.

PRs should be more willing to celebrate the arrogance of the change-makers who bring innovation to society. We should be less concerned with bad headlines and with tyranny of media produced crises.

Instead we should focus our campaigns on achieving positive outcomes and on getting things done. We should be the torch bearers honing the narratives and messages of the people and forces which challenge or ignore society's constraints. In that game PR plays a transformative role.

The blog which got me going

The *PR Conversations* article that inspired this manifesto was *To listen, to engage: empty buzzwords? Let's discuss*¹¹. It sums up the risk adverse stakeholder relationship management approach of mainstream academic PR. According to this school of thought progress depends on winning the public's trust by establishing empathy. For them it is all about connecting with stakeholders by gathering sense:

*"The **consequences** of the interpretation-of the comprehension-of the gathered sense need to be explicitly related to the listener's decision making process and are inherently fuzzy, non linear and situational. The competencies are creativity, feasibility, and time framing with their respective tools."*

This piece of gobbledygook is typical of current PR thinking. It springs from a misplaced faith in Grunig's¹² two-way symmetrical model of PR. Amusingly the author is so sure of his ground that he asks

*What comes after Grunig?*¹³ and replies, "the answer to that looming question is that after Grunig...comes Grunig."

The danger here is that Grunig's supporters have ended up trying religiously to make reality fit the theory. That's the trap, if I'm any judge of PR-related text, that the Stockholm Accords¹⁴, arising from the Global Alliance's World Public Relations Forum debate, is falling into right now.

In summary, my point is that PR is a multi-faceted, flexible profession. Sometimes it is top-down and one-sided. Sometime it is a two-way interactive real-time force. In whichever way it does its job, however, PR is an objectives-driven art rather than a science that's reducible to orthodox formulas. My take home message is that PR makes its most useful contribution to society when it advocates transformative risk-taking on which great reputations are built.

11 <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=657>

12 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_E._Grunig

13 <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=592>

14 <http://www.prconversations.com/?p=656>

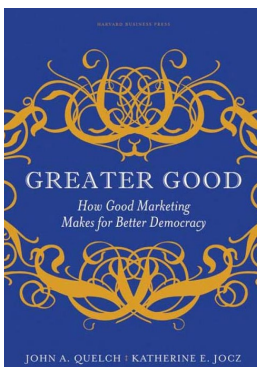
Part III: PR to marry and lead marketing?

What's the difference between marketing and PR? That's a good question, particularly when the likes of Lord Chadlington and Lord Bell are, rightly, calling for more integration between the two disciplines.

One person who thinks she knows the difference is Echo Research's Group CEO, Sandra MacLeod, who asserts in *PRWeek*:

"Where marketing loves command and control, PR thrives on influence and relationships. The concepts of customer, employer and global citizen brands are merging. This, if ever there was one, is surely PR's time."

I think Ms MacLeod is wrong to say that the difference between the two disciplines is one of approach. I disparage her tacit implication that marketing is a blunter, more clumsy instrument than the deliciously professional and nuanced, human, PR. Her view reflects a popular misconception that needs dispelling. So here goes.



It so happens that I read her thoughts while midway through re-reading *Greater Good: How good marketing makes for better democracy*, by John A. Quelch and Katherine E. Jocz (Harvard Business

Press, 2007)¹⁵. So let me review its wisdom a little.

At the core of *Greater Good* is how marketing not only exists to sell goods and communicate ideas (just as PR does), but also mediates between consumers and suppliers to ensure the market gets – from feedback – what it desires. Or as the book puts it on page 3, the economic function of marketing “is the interface between supply and demand”.

Hence, two-way engagement, interaction, dialogue and feedback are the essence of good marketing practice (just as it is the essence of good sales practice). As the book says:

"Consumers are engaged and involved with marketing and the consumer marketplace. They relish expressing their identity, being part of community, and exercising their creativity – not through every purchase decision they make but through those in which they have chosen to be involved."

Moreover, a marketing-led company such as Apple, which is closely bonded to its customers, is a command and control-led body at the level of management. The two concepts are not contradictory, as anybody can testify who has studied Professor

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¹⁵ <http://harvardbusiness.org/product/greater-good-how-good-marketing-makes-for-better-d/an/1735-HBK-ENG>

Theodore Levitt's – of Harvard Business School – explanation of Henry Ford's innovative use of production line techniques.

The authors of *Greater Good* also interestingly point out that a testimony to the power of marketing to forge relationships with consumers is how many of today's top brands have their origins in the 1800s: Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, H.J. Heinz, Ivory Soap, Coca-Cola, Cadbury's, Nestlé, Unilever, Siemens and many more.

Perhaps one should also remember that a successful brand is as much in the hands of consumers as of its shareholders; let's never forget what happened to New Coke¹⁶.

BTW: I intend to review *Greater Good* in more detail at another time. There's much to be said about what politics and marketing have in common and what differentiates them. There's much good insight in *Greater Good*, but I shall make the case that the authors overstate the synergies between marketing and democracy, because politics is about power first and foremost, and marketing is not.

But, meanwhile, I recommend *Greater Good* to anybody in the PR industry who wishes to read a contemporary account of what marketing does and how it is responding to new technology and societal challenges.

Now it is back to today's subject matter: the relationship in future between PR and

marketing. Here's what Lord Bell said when he echoed earlier remarks from Lord Chadlington:

"Integration is the new buzz word, but it is not about lowest common denominators: it is about being channel-neutral, it is about ensuring the whole is stronger than the sum of the parts."

"For the PR industry, it is not about the old battle for a share of advertising dollars, but how to work collectively, with all the other disciplines, to a common strategy so that wherever the message appears, it contributes to the overall reputation objectives. Everything must be complementary, not contradictory. There also looms an obsession with new compliance procedures and new regulation across the world, an inevitable but wrong reaction to a collapse of trust."

Coordination, integration and alignment of messages and objectives, then, is the aim of the "new" game. But, of course, it has always been the case that much PR has been marketing – selling – by other means, rather than developing reputational strategy. PR is at its unique, necessary, useful and amusing best in that latter role. But it always did wide work. Edward Bernays, for instance, pioneered issues management as a tool to flog more product whether he was running soap competitions or inspiring women to light Torches For Freedom¹⁷.

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¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Coke

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¹⁷ <http://www.culturewars.com/CultureWars/1999/torches.html>



image: "Empty Billboard" by West McGowan
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/westm/3379293362/>

We know that advertising is having to adopt what were once thought to be PR strategies. That's because firms are having to be more and more clever in hunting down their audience members, and catching their attention.

Moreover, the recession has resulted in a much stricter regime of cost control and increasing demands for return on investment. And, as Lord Bell points out, there's an obsession with new compliance procedures and new regulation across the world.

Doing away with silos and antiquated departmental demarcations that often produce contradictory messaging makes sense. It is a price both marketing and PR are going to have to pay as we all move on in the post-Credit Crunch environment.

I believe that PR is going to do well where it can prove (or convince) that it can do better than marketing and, in particular, advertising. To what degree advertising is going to become more expensive per eyeball, or less persuasive per dollar on social and

mainstream media, I wouldn't like to say. But I acknowledge that advertising has a proven track record and role that are hard to dismiss, which explains why its budgets far exceed those allocated to PR.

But overall, we might well see PR emerging (or merging) as a major vehicle of marketing: an innovative way of selling stuff and ideas in the digitally networked world. But we will also see plenty of PR professionals still engaged in their traditional roles as advocates in the courts of public opinion and as burnishers of reputations.

So yes, PR and marketing functions will increasingly integrate. Moreover, I maintain that just as PR can *do* marketing, marketing can *do* PR, but only up to a point. While neither discipline is inherently superior, there will always be a difference – although not always a clear one – between defending, say, a political policy or corporate reputation and licence to operate, and marketing, say, a chocolate bar.



In countries as diverse as Switzerland and Nigeria, I have worked in environments ranging from multinational boardrooms to environmental disaster zones.

I've managed corporate, crisis and product PR. I have dealt with every kind of media. I've counselled at the highest levels and have sorted things out at street level. I live and work near Zurich, Switzerland.

A little more detail of a campaign life

In the 1970s I campaigned for a socialist Britain (and for various health and transport causes later). In the 1980s I did PR for a union in the finance sector. I suppose that's when I switched sides and started working on PR for the finance industry – just as it went into its late 80s meltdown. But Britain is a robust as well as an argumentative place, and it was surprisingly easy to make my case that mortgages had always been advertised as coming with risk.

Perhaps with a nose for the unpopular, I then went into PR for the nuclear industry – then a pariah. This culminated in 1996 with the life-changing experience of fronting the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. I worked from the site itself, exploding media myths and lapping up close encounters with nuclear heroes.

For the next ten years I did PR for the IT sector, both product and corporate. So I was getting the media to flog our kit for us. And then getting them to buy into my bosses' M&A strategy. There was much less blood on the carpet but I had fun and learned a lot.

Enthused by my IT experience, I started a trading firm a few years ago. I cashed-in quite profitably. And again, I'd learned a lot.

More recently, I have taken this varied experience to work for a Ukrainian "oligarch" who was flirting (quite well) with CSR and then for a burgeoning indigenous PR house in Nigeria as it helped a huge range of firms produce world-class messages. These were vivid experiences, to say the least, and not to be missed.

What does this tell you? I love the challenge of advocacy, whatever the case, product or place. I love a scrap. I am proud of my portfolio CV. It doesn't begin to tell you how much I love team-work. It may be an age thing, but I've also loved mentoring youngsters.

Here's a conclusion. I have learned to respect people who run things, invent things, make things happen – especially when the chips are down.

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