

ESSAYS ON 21ST-CENTURY PR ISSUES



A NEW MORAL AGENDA FOR PR

UPDATED 18/07/2012



PAUL SEAMAN

A new moral agenda for PR

Paul Seaman

“Provocative, theoretically astute, a must read”

Josh Greenberg

Associate Professor in the School of Journalism & Communication
at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

“Good read for PR professionals”

Karthik Srinivasan

Head of Digital Strategy, Edelman India

In the late 20th century PR had to manage an increasing number of controversial issues. It became part of the corporate story: the spotlight was turned on its own activities. Firms were invited – rather forcefully – to address their reputations the way they once addressed profits.

This essay interrogates the response of leading academics, especially Jim Grunig, as they aimed to build an idea of PR fit for the post-modern, reflexive, inter-active, wisdom-of-crowds, stakeholder society environment they studied.



photo: "WTO protests 10" by Steve Kaiser
<http://goo.gl/mu09Y>

In the late 20th century PR had to manage an increasing number of controversial issues. It became part of the corporate story: the spotlight was turned on its own activities. Firms were invited – rather forcefully – to address their reputations the way they once addressed profits.

This essay interrogates the response of leading academics, especially Jim Grunig, as they aimed to build an idea of PR fit for the post-modern, reflexive, inter-active, wisdom-of-crowds, stakeholder society environment they studied.

As the post Second World War euphoria fizzled out into new-age angst, the late 60s and 70s saw optimism turned into scepticism about progress and industrial development. Protest movements arose that questioned the “military-industrial” complex of white-coated experts motivated by profit. Capitalism, they claimed, was destroying the planet.

Their sentiments were reinforced in works that examined the consequences of economic growth critically, such as

John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1957); Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957); Ralph Nader's 1959 savaging of an American icon and dream in 'The Safe Car You Can't Buy' in *The Nation*; *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (1961); and not least, E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973). Other books, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), poured scorn on the environmental consequences of modern society, which helped ignite the passion behind Greenpeace (1971).

Real world events appeared to confirm the campaigners' pessimistic assessment of the world's and mankind's state. Major industrial accidents such as the Torrey Canyon (1969), Three Mile Island (1979), Bhopal (1984) and Chernobyl (1986) spooked the world. There was talk of peak oil and gas and other *natural limits* to economic growth and development. Later came the threat of global warming and much more. They became indelible symbols of man's folly; serving as proof points among anti-capitalist, anti-corporate, anti-technology campaigners, of the validity of their views.

Within the nascent environmental movement of the 1970s were the seeds of the new radical politics of the 1990s. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, anti-capitalist sentiment took on different dimensions. Communism, socialism, trade unions and the peace movement rapidly lost their credibility and relevance. New militant forces emerged in their place, consisting of politicised greens aligned with anti-globalisation protesters.

There was a feeling – one shared by protesters and serious thinkers – that major corporations had helped undermine the sense of community which held society together. The growth of shopping malls on city outskirts was denounced by campaigners for turning town centers into decrepit zones inhabited by criminals. The likes of the US's WalMart and the UK's Tesco became liberal *bête noires*. It was argued that the corporate and major institutions in society were suffering from a core values crisis and, as a result, a trust deficit.

In the 1990s, from global warming to globalisation, the PR trade's clients – particularly large multi-national companies – found themselves on the receiving end of a hostile crowd's anger. The aims of this diverse coalition of protesters were popularised in compelling best-selling books that struck a blow at brand value, consumerism and globalisation, such as Naomi Klein's *NoLogo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (1999) and Noreena Hertz's *The Silent Takeover: Global capitalism and the death of democracy* (2001).

The anti-globalisation protest peaked during the Battle of Seattle outside the World Trade Organisation's ministerial meeting in 1999.

In scenes reminiscent of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests of the 1960s, Seattle's air was filled with tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets as militant demonstrators clashed with police. Protesters chained themselves together at street crossings to block the way of arriving delegates. One group even managed to disrupt the opening ceremony. Elsewhere mobs roamed the city smashing windows, singling out Starbucks' coffee stores for special attention. A civil emergency was declared. The National Guard took control and enforced a curfew. More than 600 people were arrested from the 40,000 or so protesters.

Seattle was the most extreme of many such outbursts across the world. Similar riots took place outside major international conferences of bodies such as the World Economic Forum, the G8, EU and even the UN conferences on global warming. It was as if no international conference was safe from the mob.

It was feared that corporations and governments were losing their grip on public opinion because their ethics and morals were not the same as the audience's. But the anti-globalisation lobby became more subdued after 9/11 and more still after the global credit crunch was followed by a global recession.

Today what needs explaining by the anti-globalisation lobby is that globalisation is more in demand now than ever in the developing world. Indeed, the very fact that global economies boomed mostly from the 1980s onward suggests that the masses of the world embraced globalisation enthusiastically. They adopted new



photo: "Mambo": dance steps inlaid into the sidewalk of Broadway, Capitol Hill, Seattle, Washington by Joe Mabel

technologies such as mobile phones, IT, internet, CDs, DVDs, GMOs and bought more cheapened old ones such as air travel and cars etc.

Therefore, while the green anti-corporate and anti-growth sentiments we've just reviewed capture an important mood within society, it would be wrong to see them as reflecting the popular will. We must challenge whether the protesters ever deserved the attention they received, and whether they ever represented public opinion.

The problem has been, however, that the mass public has had little influence over the main debate, which, as a result, has been very one-sided and mostly in favour of the activists.

Meeting little resistance in the media, which largely shared the protesters' anti-establishment views, the prejudices directed against mass consumption, mass consumers and the merits of economic growth became increasingly ingrained within elite society.

Even boardrooms and (particularly) politicians began to fall under the spell of the onslaught. Here's just two examples of how this expresses itself today.

Ian Cheshire, CEO of Kingfisher, Europe's leading home improvement retailer, opined¹ at Davos 2012 that: "we have to get consumers in developing countries past wanting the "American Dream of more." Politicians in the West are increasingly keen to tell us that increasing gross domestic happiness (as defined by their gurus) is more important than increasing our gross domestic product.

So the protesters may not have convinced the public, whom they held in contempt for their backward aspirations, but they did gain considerable influence among the C-suite, academia, the media and politicians. Their gloomy middle class, risk adverse, anti-capitalist, green backlash acquired clout.

.....
¹ <http://paulseaman.eu/2012/02/pr-should-help-leaders-lead-not-listen/>

Dead-end search for models

Recognising the challenge in the 1980s and early 1990s were two PR academics, Jim Grunig, Professor Emeritus for the Department of Communication at University of Maryland, and Todd Hunt, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University School of Communication. They came together with their peers in an attempt to find the key to reconnect corporate America with its public, and on a more ambitious scale the American nation with world opinion. At the same time they sought to address the low esteem PR was held in. They believed PR required a model that would define it as a proper profession and explain its role and behaviour to both the public and clients.

In their view, the absence of a progressive model was holding PR back; a model being a simplified representation of reality. They reasoned that one was required to transform PR into an acknowledged ethical, credible, trustworthy profession. They thought this was required to help head off activist protests and to put public relations professionals (let's just call them 'PRs') at the head of the corporate pyramid with the C-suite.

The intention of Grunig and his supporters was to position public relations beyond advocacy. They felt that self-interest was not the exclusive motivation that PRs should focus on. They said it had to be combined with concern for others and for the impact an organisation's behaviour had on the environment. In short, they wanted to produce a model of PR that could be used to balance corporate self-interest with the public interest, or with the interest of others.

In their 1984 classic *Managing Public Relations*², Grunig and Hunt put forward four models of public relations which encompassed its historical and current practice:

The **first** was a one-way communication model based on media relations, or press agency, which seeks to get favourable coverage by either ethical or unethical means, depending on the practitioner's standards.

The **second** was the public information model which is a one-way communication process where the PR acts as a conduit for distributing the client's news.

The **third** was the asymmetrical model, which could be two-way or one-way, which uses persuasion and manipulation, backed by research, to bend the wills of an audience the client's way in a process.

The **fourth** (the preferred model) was two-way symmetrical communication in which PRs resolve conflict by promoting mutual understanding and respect between the organisation and their public(s). The objective here, according to Grunig, was to use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes of ideas, attitudes and behaviours of both audiences and organisations.

The two-way symmetrical model was, of course, an idealised model for PR practice that sought to separate it from its persuasive, propaganda and (supposedly) one-sided roots.

.....
² <http://www.amazon.com/Managing-Public-Relations-James-Grunig/dp/0030583373>

The preferred model was a very natural and legitimate attempt by PR practitioners to manage their own reputations. It was, though, not just mistaken, but a dangerous corrosive approach to engaging the public.

What's interesting is how Grunig defined the public, which, he said, "can be identified and classified in the context to which they are aware of the problem and the extent to which they do something about the problem." That effectively conflates the term public with activists, often militant anti-capitalist ones at that. Hence Grunig's style of PR accepts the terms of discussion – the symbols and stereotypes – from the activists. It ends up perverting institutions by urging them to develop their narratives in a way that is out of sync with the public opinion of the silent majority.

The two-way symmetrical model of PR rests on a number of assumptions that require interrogation. It positions PRs as mediators between their clients and their publics. Rather grandly it supposes that PRs are the moral keepers of their organisations. With this model PR gives the target audience equal status to the paymaster. The objective is to ensure that no side dominates the communication process and all sides' views are treated on level terms. To ensure fairness it assumes that both sides agree to abide by a set of rules which can be audited transparently to ensure compliance.

Its proponents claim that this approach is ethical because it empowers PRs to organise how the dialogue is conducted, or at least to negotiate the terms of engagement. Jim Grunig sums it up thus:

"To be successful, however, they [PRs] must be able to convince their client organizations and publics that a symmetrical approach will enhance their self-interests more than will an asymmetrical approach and, at the same time, that it will enhance their reputations as ethical, socially responsible organizations and publics."

[Two-way Symmetrical Public Relations, Past, Present and Future, Jim Grunig, page 18 in Public Relations Handbook.]

For the model to work, rigorous research of their target audiences' views is required. This information is then used by PRs. Ironically, knowledge is power and the more money one has the more research becomes possible. This fact clearly undermines Grunig's proposition that PRs could mediate effectively between their clients and their publics in an objective and neutral manner. It scuppers the stated intent that neither side should control the perception of the other side's ideas and viewpoints.

Hence Grunig has since been forced to revise his model representation of reality. To his credit, he accepted that his idealistic social perspective of PRs role in society took no account of the PR's motives (PR is paid for by only one side of the relationship). In response, he put forward a compromise that acknowledged mixed motive communication.

Professor Grunig re-cast his theory by arguing that two-way symmetry is a process not an outcome: as if he wishes to conflate means with ends.

The problem here is that Grunig's faith in processes risks encouraging PRs to produce formulaic procedures and conventions that actually restrict conversation and debate

(see my critique³ of the Stockholm Accords). He also seems not to grasp that means serve an end and that to devise the appropriate means we must first know what we want to achieve. The accusation has to be made, then, that Grunig's approach is in danger of obfuscating corporate ends in the process.

That said, there's no doubt that we PRs do, as Grunig suggests, sometimes (and would like to do so often) influence client and stakeholder behaviour for the better in the process of fulfilling objectives. So, yes, organisations must continually interrogate their objectives, values and behaviour in the light of real-world developments and readjust when necessary. But processes should follow and play second fiddle to objectives, not vice versa, partly for obvious reasons of logic, but also because it provides the only means for an organisation to retain any sense of direction. Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that leaderless companies and dictatorial societies both tend to become obsessed with bureaucracy and processes at the expense of reason.

Grunig's amended objective is not so much focused on reaching a consensus with activists (which is fine given how unrepresentative they mostly are) as on collaboration and conducting a dialogue. He defined his new take as a discourse designed to balance the private and public interest; which are two very difficult things to define objectively, particularly by PRs serving clients. Commenting on how the re-jigged models aligned, he wrote:

"Rather than placing the two-way asymmetrical model at one end of a continuum and the two-way symmetrical model at the other end... A public relations strategy at either end would favor the interests of either the organization or the public to the exclusion of the other... The middle of the continuum contains a symmetrical win-win zone where organizations and publics engage in mixed-motive communication."

"With this new model of combined two-way public relations, the difference between mixed motive and two-way symmetrical models disappears. In fact, describing the symmetrical model as a mixed motive games resolves the criticism that the symmetrical model forces the organization to sacrifice its interests to those of the public."

[Ibid, page 25]

Mixed motive communication then becomes a collaborative advocacy (the cooperative dance as Sandra Macleod likes to say⁴) that defines what Grunig describes as a cooperative antagonism (which he accepts involves two-way asymmetrical communication as being inherent to the process).

3 http://paulseaman.eu/2010/06/stockholm_accords_are_useless_for_prs_future/

4 <http://www.ipra.org/archivefrontlinedetail.asp?sue=February+2010&articleid=1446>



photo: East plant of the Texas City refinery
<http://bp.com>

Grunig's philosophical pretensions

The idea Grunig posits as being practical and ethical is that all the players retain their uniqueness and self-interest in the process of negotiation. In support of this notion, Grunig calls for help from a leading Marxist semiotics and structuralist theoretician by the name of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. He maintained that the essential quality of a dialogue is the simultaneous fusion or unity of multiple voices. However each voice retains its uniqueness and there's an ongoing dynamic tension with and differentiation from the Other. It is from this understanding that Jim Grunig comes to redefine what public relations is about, thus:

"Simultaneous fusion with the Other while retaining the uniqueness of one's self-interest seems to describe well the challenge of symmetrical public relations."

[Ibid, p28.]

This approach to PR supposedly draws on Kantian philosophy. This reminds us, in the tradition of humanism, that stakeholders (any humans, actually, rather than just those PRs define as being relevant to their purpose) are ends-in-themselves, rather than a means to an end. The views of the philosopher Jurgen Habermas are also cited in an attempt to give the model bottom. Habermas maintains that dialogue and not monologue is essential to mutual human understanding.

Grunig, in common with many PR thinkers, mistakenly believes that PR is about establishing mutual understanding between publics and their clients. Actually, PR is about advocacy on behalf of clients and achieving client objectives, something that achieving mutual understanding may or may not help. It isn't necessarily necessary, for instance, that firms understand campaigners

or campaigners understand firms. PR's customers usually hope that – one way or another – their activities come to be accepted. They are dealing with real life challenges; not in a seminar. Nor is it all that obvious that a self-improving firm, anxious to be a good world citizen, should assume that it only has to get into an understanding with its critics to achieve its goal.

Anyway, Grunig has proposed that PRs, their clients and their opponents, retain a get out of jail card. He says that if after dialogue one side cannot accommodate the other it can disengage ethically from the symmetrical process. Of course, failure and the perception of the other side's willingness to cooperate is a subjective matter. This joker in Grunig's pack rather suggests that persuasion and getting one's own way lie at the heart of his game-plan; at the end of the day by any means possible (within the law, of course). Indeed, Grunig tries to make a "virtue" of this motivation:

"...we have stated consistently that the symmetrical model serves the self-interest of the organization better than an asymmetrical model because 'organizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want.'"

[Ibid]

Where there's a clash of seemingly irreconcilable forces over issues, such as pro-versus anti-abortionist, ditto nuclear power, ditto GMOs, and so on, Grunig's symmetry runs aground. That's because there really are fundamental differences in the opposing cases: these are existential and can't be moderated away. Hence Grunig accepts that

two-way PR becomes virtually impossible (except at the margins) when negotiating between two publics with diametrically opposed moral viewpoints. This is so with pro and anti-abortionists, for instance, or when anti-trust laws prevent collusion. So it is unfair to say that he is totally idealistic.

It is in the murky space where deals can be made that Grunig's approach to PR becomes risky. Even when compromises can be reached, the obsession with engaging activists in a cooperative dance has very often eaten away at the values, self-confidence, self-belief, integrity and identity of organisations; as it did when BP said it had gone Beyond Petroleum (a change which was both skin-deep and corrosive).

Grunig rightly says that persuasion is indeed what PRs do but that the persuasion of PRs cuts two ways:

"If persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization management to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the public's attitude of behavior."

[Ibid]

Sure, we can all agree that compromise is part of life. Compromise is necessary, and perfectly normal, regardless of the form or model of communication an organisation chooses to adopt. But the premise Grunig advances allows protesters or activist publics to set agendas and risks persuading an organisation (our clients) to give up something that is perfectly legitimate. Arguably this happened when Shell was persuaded to abandon dumping its Brent

Spar oil platform deep at sea: the upshot was a less ecologically-sound solution. The regulator and the corporation had had the right idea in the first place and trust in both was eroded – not bolstered – by their giving in to emotionalism.

Contrary to what Grunig's supporters say, the asymmetrical models of PR are not awful, if they are good descriptions of how different sorts of PR actually work. But they are a rather clumsy way of arriving at one idea (or ideal) of what PR excellence might be like: a symmetrical two-way process in which power is equal between the two parties, and so is the flow of argument and respect.

This begs many questions. It is indeed often wise for negotiators (which is what PRs are in the symmetrical two way process) to assume that the other party's case is real and serious at least to the party which holds it. But that way lies relativism. It may be intellectually dishonest and dangerous in other ways too (for instance, assuming your opponent is rational and sincere may not be wise when she or he is idiotic, lying and or prone to terrorism). Such relativism, from left-wing critics of Grunig, led some PR academics to make excuses for terrorism, as if supposedly hegemonic asymmetrical PR were to blame:

"Yet we would also argue, in agreement with Deetz (1992) and Philo and Miller (2001), that Western corporate capitalism has succeeded in dominating the range of discourses, and indeed our material practices to such an extent that it is difficult for alternative discourses and practices to rise to any level of ascendancy without violence – as the 9/11 attack on the World trade Center demonstrated. Those attacks can be understood as an attempt to make America and Europe by attention to accumulated Muslim resentments against a history of western prejudice, exploitation, and anti-Muslim foreign policy in the Middle East"

[Source: "From propaganda to discourse", by Weaver, Motion and Roper in *Critical perspectives in public relations*; International Thomson Business Press, London, 2006]

The assumption here is that the "other side's" claims are legitimate. It is also worth noting that no rational explanation has been given for 9/11 and that those that have been provided have been totally contradictory. Terrorism is nihilistic. It is not prone to rational explanation or interpretation. Blaming the West for 9/11 says more about the prejudices, and keenness to denigrate our modern societies (and too often our clients as well), on the part of the PRs who make such comments, than it tells us about the motivation of terrorists.



photo: Vergaderruimte Boardroom Kromhout, Kazerne Uirrecht by Jannes Linders
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vergaderruimte_Boardroom_.jpg

Grunig is not the problem

I'm almost sorry to focus on Grunig. He is capable of nuance and anyway was not the instigator of the problem he is part of. Rather, he is the clearest in laying out his premises and arguments. His map of the PR dilemmas is the best we have. The kind of ideas which he outlines are indeed the kind which have become all too popular. The view that partisan PR – paid for by bosses of any sort – is unethical is widespread. Even critics of Grunig's theories such as Dr Jacquie L'Etang share his distaste for positioning PRs as advocates:

"Only if practitioners engage with such [ethical and political] issues can they avoid

the charges of superficiality and cynical exploitation of target audiences. The role of public relations itself is shown to be necessarily partisan and, furthermore, by operating on behalf of certain interests, intrinsically undemocratic..."

[L'Etang, J. "Corporate responsibility and public relations ethics", in J. L'Etang and M. Pieczka, eds., *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*; International Thomson Business Press, London, 1996, pages 82–105]

This stance from L'Etang highlights the major problem within PR circles. It displays an intrinsic dislike of what PR is about: advocacy on behalf of clients. It also reveals a complete failure to grasp what democracy is about and where PR fits in. Democracy is all about the pursuit of self-interest on the

part of certain interest groups. Democracy (which takes different forms) is merely the framework within which conflicts are resolved and different interests pursue their interests: it sets down the limits to how conflicts are fought. Democracy provides the means for settling differences politically, legally (constitutionally) in a manner that is ultimately accountable to and definable by the people.

L'Etang suggests PR hogs the available space for public debate in the public sphere, squeezing out alternative voices, and that's what makes it reactionary (page 98 *ibid*). Yet that space is potentially infinite because it is created by the participants. If the existing space for debate is narrow that just reflects the lack of mass public engagement in the battle of ideas. We should note that the public was not always so passive as it is today, and its mood might change as times change.

Meanwhile, in contrast to what L'Etang suggests, public debate in today's mainstream mass media favours (mostly unrepresentative) protesters far more than it does corporations such as Monsanto, McDonald's, Dow Chemical, BP, Barclays and the like.

None of the above should be taken as an inducement to firms to be anything other than morally alert. Contrariwise: my point is that firm should be more alert, not less. That's why I put such a high value on truth-telling. The Financial Times's Martin

Sandbu summed it up well in his recent piece (Aristotle – the banker's best friend):

"...moral philosophers have granted impunity to lazy thinking. And the result is a debate soaked in such inanities as "giving back to society" or putting "people before profit." Fine phrases, but they mean little and in practice will achieve even less. Most attacks on business immorality conjure up villains in corporate boardrooms plotting their next evil deed. The real problem is harder. Most business people are like most people everywhere: wanting to do the right thing but confused about what the right thing is in a complex world."

He goes on:

"... one may question whether corporate conduct must be justified by its social usefulness. Is business really responsible for the common good? Or is it enough to respect the rights of others while pursuing profits? To ask that question – surely a fundamental one – is to enter a big philosophical debate midstream, for which reading John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant is better preparation than any number of management books."

[see my: *Cant or Kant? PR-think gets heavy* (part 1⁵) and (part 2⁶)]

5 <http://paulseaman.eu/2011/03/cant-or-kant-pr-think-gets-heavy/>

6 <http://paulseaman.eu/2011/03/cant-or-kant-pr-think-gets-heavy-part-2/>

Setting higher expectations

The real problem is that PRs have endorsed many of Grunig's premises, even while rejecting his theories as being impractical. That's because too many PRs share the protesters' criticisms of modern society.

Over the years, the Grunig perspective (some call it a paradigm) on how to manage perceptions and reputations has been adapted subtly in PR circles. It has resurfaced as stakeholder doctrine⁷, CSR, sustainability and precautionary risk mantras, which emphasize listening (to placard wavers and other protesters etc.) over leadership. One can read the narrative in Edelman's Trust Barometer conclusions, and in initiatives such as the Stockholm Accords^{8, 9, 10, 11 & 12}. It is an outlook which pretends that all stakeholders are equal. It is an arm of PR which claims organisations don't serve their owners or founders or exist to fulfill their core purpose first and foremost.

My point is that PRs need to get beyond recommending to their clients that they outsource their reputations for NGO imprimatur. PRs should also stop advocating that firms and institutions redefine their social purpose to comply with ever-changing

NGO agendas (read soft-left, liberal and often anti-corporate activists). PRs should be helping firms and modern institutions establish their integrity and reputations based on their own merits. The challenge should be to define corporate aims and ambitions and to communicate what corporations exist to do. For example, instead of advising the likes of BP to rebrand themselves Beyond Petroleum, they should help them stand for something they really believe in, that reflects their core purpose, such as Better Petroleum.

Hence, PR's paymasters should ask some tough questions and set higher expectations. The role of PR should be to help corporations develop and communicate a solid corporate culture.

It is my contention that PRs have helped create the climate of cynicism and lack of confidence that so bedevils Western society. They have helped put it at a disadvantage to the BRICs by their failure to speak robustly and honestly to their publics. In other words, the PR industry's leading academics have in a sense deprived the industry of what it really needs to be taken seriously as a profession: self-esteem and self-respect for its own contribution and that of its clients.

For instance, it has hardly been remarked upon by PRs that supposedly, according to Edelman's Trust Barometer of 2010, China has the most trusted media and government on earth; its businesses are more trusted than the US's; Russian businesses are supposedly more trusted than France's and

.....
7 <http://paulseaman.eu/2010/04/wither-stakeholder-doctrine/>

8 <http://paulseaman.eu/2009/01/would-you-trust-a-trust-survey/>

9 <http://paulseaman.eu/2010/02/pr-should-help-leaders-lead-not-listen/>

10 <http://paulseaman.eu/2010/01/edelmans-trust-survey-interrogated/>

11 <http://paulseaman.eu/2010/07/wbcsds-vision-2050-is-myopic/>

12 <http://paulseaman.eu/tag/accords/>

Germany's; or that the Russian government is as trusted as the UK's (see also my *Reflections on Edelman's 2012 Trust Survey*¹³). The findings should serve as reality check: but right now they don't.

It is time Western PR got real. It is time it got beyond trying to construct trite idealised models. PRs should become less defensive and apologetic about managing the messy perceptions and realities that resound in our modern democracies. It is time that PR became part of the solution; a catalyst for economic growth, by advocating the benefits of risk, innovation and progress on behalf of clients. It is time our trade grew up.

Note: this essay was inspired by a review of the best of 2010 PR books by Richard Bailey on his useful *PR Studies* blog¹⁴.

Anybody wanting to know about my views on the issues above can read *A Sorry State: Self-denigration in British Culture*, edited by Peter Whittle, foreword by the historian Michael Burleigh, published by The New Culture Forum¹⁵, November 2010. My essay there is entitled, "How public relations sells western firms short" (available from Amazon¹⁶).

13 <http://paulseaman.eu/2012/01/reflections-on-edelmans-2012-trust-survey/>

14 <http://www.prstudies.com/weblog/2010/12/my-books-of-the-year.html#more>

15 <http://www.newcultureforum.org.uk/home/>

16 <http://www.amazon.de/Sorry-State-Self-Denigration-British-Culture/dp/0956741002>



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.

For more essays on 21st-century PR Issues, visit paulseaman.eu