

AND ANOTHER THING...

...About Public Relations

After writing – and rereading – the foregoing article, I got to thinking about some of the things I learned in my old days at Ruder & Finn. I had the privilege of working with and for Bill Ruder and Dick Weiner in the 1960s. (Bill, a superb human being and a consummate public relations practitioner, passed away recently, leaving the profession palpably poorer.)

When everybody thought that public relations was simply a matter of press relations, Bill and Dick and others at R&F were developing new techniques – practices now considered standard today – designed to be newsworthy on their own. Press relations after that were just a matter of reporting the news. And the more original the activity, the greater the likelihood of getting great press. To this day, even though public relations alone is only the smallest part of what good professional services marketer do today. This is why I still call Dick – then my long-suffering boss at R&F – my mentor. He taught me not only technique, but how to understand the market, and the role of public relations in marketing. As the old song goes, “You made me what I am today – I hope you’re satisfied.”

Bill, of cherished memory, would occasionally take me along on sales calls. While his selling at first scandalized the Old Guard white-shoe public relations firms, he was a major and significant contributor to turning public relations into a standard technique for all sized companies, not just the giants. Vivid in my memory is Bill’s technique of rolling his fingers together like cogs in a gear, to explain how what we do meshes with what they do.

Dick pioneered in pure inventiveness. When we got the Parker pen account, Dick invented The Handwriting Institute. When we got the Crane paper account, Dick invented The Letter Writing Institute. These and other such activities garnered not only space, but increased sales for the client. Dick continued doing it when he started his own firm. When the orange drink, Tang, was losing sales, he invented a Tang road race which, among other things, led to Tang’s becoming a vibrant and successful company.

When we got the Wise Potato Chip account, we hired a food expert to develop recipes for cooking with potato chips as an ingredient. Not many public relations firms thought like that back then.

My favorite, of course, was the Vicks-Care Crusade, for which I won a Silver Anvil Award from the Public Relations Society of America, the Oscar of the profession. It was a national contest, in conjunction with CARE (the post-World War II relief organization), in which every drugstore in America had applications which asked. "I support CARE

Because...". There were two winners in each state. What they won was a trip to visit post-war CARE facilities in France, Greece, Turkey and Italy. I squired the trip. The program dealt with both national and local press in the United States and each of the four countries.

And so it went, and to a great extent so it goes today.

We were not press agents, we were not flacks. We were serious, thoughtful practitioners of an art form. Press relations were the tools – the public relations were the art of making sensible, useful newsworthy ideas come to life. And when we wrote press releases then – and even now – they got published, because they were written skillfully enough to compete with staff reporters for space.

There are still many greats in the public relations business, including a few big names that don't deserve the title. But the great ones now include the sons of the greats of the 1960s. Something for today's public relations practitioners to live up to.

Bill Ruder said it right. "Public relations" he said, "is an art form. And so long as I don't lose the art, I'll have a career."

Amen.

HOME