



## Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Waddington, S. 2016. What is Public Relations?, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 4(1), 1-3

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## What is Public Relations?

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### INTRODUCTION

A Description of Modern Public Relations Practice and a Vision for the Future. Public relations is the practice of understanding the purpose of an organisation and its relationships within society. It is a management discipline that relates to planned and sustained engagement designed to influence behaviour change, and build mutual understanding and trust. Engagement between an organisation and its publics is the core of public relations practice. It is a two-way process by which an organisation communicates with its publics, and vice versa. Helping organisations get to grips with this as media changes is my day job.

### History Lesson: Two-Way Street

In my view the public relations industry took a wrong turn in the 1950s or early 1960s. The leadership and vision – and opportunity – provided by early professionals throughout the first half of the twentieth century was squandered. In *Two-Way Street*, published in 1948, early public relations practitioner Eric Goldman describes the three stages of the development of corporate communication during the period from 1900 to the publication of his book. Goldman's contention is that communication between an organisation and its audiences developed through three stages during the first half of the twentieth century:

1. Initially, spin aimed at duping the audience;
2. Secondly, publicity that aimed to build awareness through hype, and;
3. Thirdly, two-way communication aimed at building engagement.

It's uncanny how these same stages can just as easily be applied to public relations in the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century: spin, publicity or media relations, and most recently direct public engagement.

A decade after the publication of Goldman's book, public relations reverted to spin and publicity. It grabbed the opportunity created by the explosion of broadcast and print. Media relations and public relations became synonymous.

The journey back to the future is a work in progress but the way ahead is clearly marked.

#### #1 Modern media relations

There is no barrier to entry for media relations. Sloppy practice is commonplace as a result. Journalists frequently complain about being spammed. Much of the business has more in common with direct mail than public relations, based around databases and wire services. But denying the relationship between media relations and public relations is intellectual snobbery. Media relations is modernising as media fragments from print and broadcast. In 2016 all media must be social. This doesn't require radical change to the workflow, systems or processes within an agency or communication team. Instead technology is used to enable practitioners to work smarter and offer new services.

#### #2 Branded Media

Organisations have always created their own media as a way of engaging with publics. In the past these might have been posters for employees, leaflets for prospects, newsletters for partners, or letters for customers. Now all brands have access to the same internet-fuelled media armoury as everyone else, meaning they too can be broadcasters and publishers of their own content. Modern corporate communications has shifted to private and public areas of the web in the form of corporate apps, intranets and websites. Brands can become influencers by aligning their core values, authenticity and by generating content which answers questions and generates curiosity about the brand.

#### #3 Influencer relations

Media relations is a form of influencer relations whereby we persuade journalists to write favourable articles about our clients and organisations. The output is third party validation via the journalist's media outlet. The intended outcome is to reach and influence a far greater audience or public than we are able to alone. Influencers aren't just journalists. They can be anyone with a blog, network or community of their own on platforms from Instagram to YouTube, and from SnapChat to Twitter. The market is complicated by the fact that some influencers require payment while others are prepared to work on an earned basis. Disclosure and good governance is critical.

#### #4 Community

In my view the development of communities around an organisation in a two-way form of engagement is the most significant opportunity for modern public relations practice that we've had in more than a generation. In this way an organisation seeks to build reputation and engagement not only through third-party influence but also directly via its own media and social forms of media. This shift to participating in a community is the biggest communication change that organisations face.

An added complication is the need for an element of paid media. News feed algorithms from Google to Facebook, and from Instagram to Twitter, require investment to optimize the reach of content.

#### #5 Social business

Whenever an organisation creates a new channel it will very quickly be discovered by publics or audiences as a means to engage with the organisation. Social channels used solely for broadcast purposes can very quickly become hijacked by unhappy customers with complaints. Any gap between the expectation of a product or service, and the reality, will generate a conversation on the social web. Organisations are shifting beyond the promotional use of social media to embed it into every area, from customer service through to and improving operations from the data captured. This is open business and it is impacting every area of organisational design. It's the future of public relations. It requires communication, collaboration and in depth insight into customer, employee, supplier and partner behaviour.