

ALEX SINGLETON

THE PR MASTERCLASS

HOW TO DEVELOP A PUBLIC
RELATIONS STRATEGY
THAT WORKS!



WILEY

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FOREWORD

By Francis Ingham

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Crudely speaking, there are two types of books on PR, carrying with them two types of uses. The first type is the pseudo-academic book, probably written by somebody with little or no knowledge of PR. You've probably never heard of the author. That book's primary use is to light your fire, line your cat's litter tray or prop open a door. Good trees died in vain so that it might live.

The second book is by somebody who actually understands PR, because they work in it. That book has a completely different use – it's there to educate, guide and inform. It is a good thing. You should read it.

I'm delighted to say that Alex Singleton's book is most definitely in the latter category – which is why I'm delighted to be writing its foreword.

Ours is a vibrant, growing industry. It informs and inspires the majority of what you hear about from the media. And, in so doing, it moulds choices, opinions and visions. Because of that fact, it plays a fundamental role in shaping our world. Obviously, that role can be for good or for ill. But its power is undeniable.

Yet it is also an industry of contrasts. The majority of practitioners in our industry are not members of professional bodies, and probably aren't eligible to be so. The code of conduct that distinguishes PRCA members from the others, for example, is valuable not least because of the contrast it draws between those willing and able to subscribe to rules and sanctions – and those who are neither willing nor able.

Our industry prides itself on professional skills and relationship building, yet all too often fails to invest in either. For a trade of such power, we spend remarkably little time focused on honing the power we exercise. That needs to change.

Our industry all too often strives after the ephemeral and intangible at the expense of the important. Its biggest failure is a propensity to – how should I put it? – be rather up itself. That is, to fail to see the reality of our craft, rather than somebody's artificial representation of it.

This book falls into none of those traps. It is practical, direct, correct and insightful. It recognises, for example, that we should of course talk about how digital is changing our industry. And we absolutely must explain why PR should have a strategic as well as a tactical function. And, for that matter, why reputation management is vital.

But it recognises that the bread and butter of PR continues to be about relationships with journalists, colleagues and clients. Good writing skills; the ability to spell (all too often lacking in new recruits to our industry); a capacity not just to tolerate the company of clients and journalists, but actually to enjoy it; and the ability instinctively to see the angle and to know the nascent story – all of these remain vital to PR.

It's all too easy to lose sight of these basic facts. I have sat through dozens of talks about Grunig,¹ and new paradigms, and symbiotic relationships, and all of that stuff. It all has a place, and I do genuinely respect that place. But it is far from the being the entirety – or indeed the mainstay – of our industry. And sometimes when people seek so very, very hard to create an artificial intellectual construct with which they can frame our industry's work, they serve only to obscure what it does, and to confuse us all.

The glory of this book is that it doesn't make any of those mistakes. And there is an obvious reason why not. It is written by a poacher-turned-gamekeeper – by a former and respected journalist who moved to PR. Because of that background, he knows what journalists are looking for. He knows the things that annoy them – like calling on deadline “just to check you received our release”. Like poorly written copy. Like spamming journos. Like failing to realise that the journalists' role isn't to serve your clients' interests. All of that insight is of incredible value.

Over the past few years, our industry has grown considerably. It has done so despite the strongest economic headwinds in living memory. It is a career of choice, offering good pay, intelligent colleagues and excellent prospects. And if that is true of the UK, it is even more valid outside of it. A recent magazine front cover described how “spin doctors” were taking over the world. Its language was rather over the top, and its term of choice – spin doctor – was an unfortunate throwback to a time when our

¹“The Importance of the Four Models of Public Relations”, <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall99/westbrook/models.htm> (accessed March 4, 2013)

industry foolishly embraced that sobriquet. But the message was clear and right – that ours in an industry of the future.

But every industry of the future needs a route map for its practitioners. Otherwise, they're likely to get lost. And that is why I welcome wholeheartedly this book – an accurate, accessible and powerful atlas for anyone seeking their way through the PR jungle.

PREFACE

There is a golden rule in media relations, but one that most people forget. Give journalists what they want. And what do journalists want? Well, more money mostly – but offering that would be unethical. What they actually need from you are story ideas that *interest* their readers.

If you provide this effectively, you get a lot of coverage. But, until now, it has been difficult to find practical information on how to do this well. This book, for the first time, gives an insider's view on getting press coverage.

I started writing for newsstand consumer magazines in 1994, was a staff journalist at *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, and have also written for *The Guardian*, the *Daily Express*, *CityAM* and, online, for the *Daily Mail*. Intermingled with that press experience, I have also worked trying to secure coverage in the media – and I've lived and worked in three countries: the United Kingdom, the United States and Belgium. In this book I'd like to share with you what I learned from all the mistakes, experiments and successes I've made along the way.

These days I have a pretty accurate gut instinct of what will get good coverage. But this was not always the case – and it is difficult to acquire. Rarely do journalists properly explain their

thinking. They say: “I’m sorry but there wasn’t space.” This, I’m afraid, just means the proposal wasn’t good enough. After all, if it had been brilliant, they would have made space. Other journalists avoid these conversations. They recognise an unwanted PR pitch from the caller display and just don’t pick up the phone.

What I’ve realised is that, despite the impression some people have that public relations is easy, there’s actually a huge amount to learn. That is why, in this book, you’ll occasionally hear me bemoaning the failure of some PR practitioners to grow their skills. Despite lots of media experience, it was only when actually I joined the staff of a national newspaper that I was able to soak up what people at the very top of the journalistic trade really thought about PR pitches. The experience radically transformed my understanding of what is newsworthy and what is not.

A note about terminology

This book focuses on media relations. Public relations is undoubtedly broader than just trying to generate media coverage – including everything from event management, to internal staff communications, to advising executives on what to say to regulators. But it is worth noting the central position that Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy (who lecture in public relations at the University of Westminster) give to media coverage within public relations. They describe PR as: “the planned persuasion of people to behave in ways that further its sponsor’s objectives. It works primarily through the use of media relations and other forms of third party endorsement.”²

²Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy, *PR: A Persuasive Industry? Spin, Public Relations and the Shaping of the Modern Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 102.

Some in the PR industry would prefer a definition that saw PR as giving strategic, board-level advice to the biggest listed companies. But that is to confuse what the most senior practitioners are doing with the majority of the work. Indeed, it's a bit like saying house-building is about structural engineering and is nothing to do with brick-laying or plumbing. As Morris and Goldsworthy go on to say: "Few modern PR campaigns lack a media element and most have media coverage at their heart. Indeed, the PR industry's reluctance to admit to the centrality of media relations . . . flies in the face of the understanding of PR in wider society. To most outsiders PR is forever, and overwhelmingly, associated with journalism and the media."³

Anyway, I tried to imagine what a normal person sitting in front of Amazon's search function would think to look for. It struck me that the target audience for this book would almost exclusively say that they need something on "public relations".

This concurred with my experience hosting workshops teaching similar sessions, in which I found that internet users searching for "media training" were really executives nervous about imminent television appearances, while "PR training" was used by people wanting to sell products or ideas through the press.

Why conventional media still matters

Some people – especially, I'm afraid to say, those who are unskilled at securing press coverage – assert that the conventional media no longer matters. What is important, they claim, is social media

³Ibid, p. 105.

– sites like Twitter and Facebook. And, for sure, engaging with social media is an important part of public relations. But these people are wrong if they believe that the conventional media is dead. What is actually happening is that much of it – especially the trade press and daily news – is moving online. That is not death: it is a change of format.

Many of the conventional media publications have transformed, or are in the process of changing, into hugely popular destinations online. Newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* now have a global readership that, on a daily basis, dwarfs what they ever achieved in print. Martin Clarke, the publisher of the *Daily Mail*'s website, says of his site: "People are addicted to it. It's like journalism crack."⁴ Meanwhile, there are no signs that viewers are rejecting quality broadcasters. The BBC's global audience hit 239 million people a week in 2012, up 6 per cent from the previous year.⁵ And it is worth noting what happened during the mindless riots in the UK in August 2011. Social media was given credit both for helping rioters to mobilise⁶ and also for assisting community minded citizens to clear up the damage.⁷ But when the public wanted authoritatively to know what was happening, conventional media played a massive role. On August 9, 13.1 million people turned to the BBC News Channel, while a 10pm bulletin on BBC

⁴<http://www.mediaweek.co.uk/news/1174031/Mail-Online-journalism-crack-says-editor/> (accessed March 12, 2013).

⁵http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2012/06/new_audience_figures_for_bbc_g.html (accessed March 8, 2013).

⁶<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/nov/08/two-thirds-support-social-media-blackout> (accessed March 8, 2013).

⁷http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/12/08/twitter-did-not-incite-uk-riots_n_1136306.html (accessed March 8, 2013).

One got 7.6 million viewers. ITV's *News at Ten* was watched by 2.9 million people, and in one 15-minute segment Sky News pulled in 9.28 million. So much for the death of the conventional media.

Two things have changed. First, some of the barriers to entry have been removed. Expensive printing presses are not necessary for web publishing. YouTube lets anyone with a smartphone record and share footage, and give their own video reports of the news.

Second, the media is globalising. That is particularly savage for American city newspapers which once practically had local monopolies. They now find their readers logging on to read not just internet-only news sites, such as *The Huffington Post*, but also to what the British, Irish, Australian and New Zealand media think.

Television stations in the UK now face competition from the heavily resourced American-owned Netflix internet service, which spent \$100 million on the hit TV show *House of Cards*.⁸ And the BBC – ITN duopoly on national and international TV news was shattered, first with introduction of Sky News (major shareholder: News Corporation, headquartered in New York), then with cable and satellite services beaming in countless international news programmes (from France 24 to Al Jazeera), and now with the commonplace use of video on news websites.

Does this increased competition mean that the conventional media is doomed? Well, not in my view. It is clearly painful to

⁸<http://money.cnn.com/2013/02/01/technology/innovation/netflix-house-of-cards/index.html> (accessed March 8, 2013).

many media companies. Many more will go to the wall. But there will still be mass media, and – contrary to the doom-filled whining of some – plenty of it will be high quality.

You see, there are lots of markets where the barriers to entry seem low, but where some of the big players have huge market shares. Anyone can make a cup of coffee, yet consumers flock to brands such as Starbucks. In 2012, the global coffee giant turned over \$13.3 billion and traded in 61 countries.⁹ Professor Priya Raghubir of New York University's Stern School of Business talks of "the enduring brand loyalty" of the chain. "Starbucks stands for coffee; it's converted that into an experience . . . I think they [the customers] value the convenience, they value the welcome, they value the fact that they can find the Starbucks anywhere . . . and offerings are uniform."¹⁰ In other words, using Starbucks is extremely reliable – and this is information its brand communicates to us.

Similarly, anyone can broadcast news over the internet, but not everyone has a strong news brand. In war, in particular, I don't just want to watch five-second YouTube clips that supposedly show one side behaving badly, or to merely read a view expressed in 140 characters on Twitter. I rely upon brands such as the BBC or CNN to bring a researched perspective that I trust.

Moreover, the boundaries between the conventional media and social media have blurred. Blogs, once regarded as a rival to

⁹Starbucks 2012 Annual Report, <http://investor.starbucks.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=99518&p=irol-reportsAnnual> (accessed March 12, 2013).

¹⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/07/starbucks-brand-loyalty_n_2830372.html (accessed March 12, 2013).

big media, have been adopted wholeheartedly by newspaper and magazine websites, from *The Atlantic* to *The Telegraph*. Nowadays, reader comments at the bottom of articles are providing writers with instant feedback, while Twitter – with its messages limited to 140 characters – is inevitably pointing us in the direction of worthwhile journalism, wherever it appears in the world. In 2010 the *Daily Mail* revealed that 10 per cent of its UK traffic came from Facebook. Martin Clarke, publisher of the *Daily Mail*'s website, said that: "Facebook isn't a threat or a parasite but a gigantic free marketing engine."

The biggest stars of the blogosphere also became stars of the conventional media: Guido Fawkes, a political gossip blogger, got a column in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, Tim Montgomerie, who launched the ConservativeHome blog, became Comment Editor of *The Times* and Iain Dale, who was one of Britain's earliest political bloggers, became a top radio presenter. On the BBC's *Question Time* programme, it has almost become an integrated part of the show that viewers tweet their views of the show's guests and the annoyingness of the studio audience. And finally, when ITV News announced a relaunch of its website in 2012,¹¹ it started displaying stories in a "live stream", with older stories flowing down the page, just as you would expect on Twitter.

As I see it, the written and broadcast media is principally about *content*, while social media is principally about *contact* (that is to say, the online interaction with others we like). In fact, social media's other name, social networking, is often more apt. Both

¹¹ <http://madebymany.com/blog/striding-with-itv-into-the-future-of-news> (accessed November 19, 2013).

types of media are useful. But those who pretend that the conventional media no longer counts are promoting a fantasy, which is not borne out by the readership and viewer figures. After all, the invention of the telephone – an early social network – didn't stop people wanting to read journalism. Neither will social media.

And with that out of the way, let's get started.

Chapter 1

Why Public Relations
Campaigns Fail – and
How to Make Them
Succeed