

that *PR!* makes no mention of Ivy Lee's simultaneous PR work for Standard Oil and for the notorious German chemical cartel, I.G. Farben, during the period of Nazi ascendancy—an omission which is particularly puzzling in light of the book's claim that it is "based on unexplored and often confidential sources from . . . Standard Oil and other major institutions."

Ewen notes in passing that Standard and Farben had "a series of patent and process-exchange agreements" that "persisted even after the United States had entered the war." This brief comment doesn't tell the best part of the story. In fact, Lee's work included meeting with Hitler himself, and advice to arrange prominent media placement for German General Joachim von Ribbentrop. Lee also recommended interpreting the Nazi rearmament program as a plea for "equality of rights" among nations and an effort at "preventing for all time the return of the Communist peril." Disclosure of his work prompted a 1934 story in the *New York Mirror* headlined "Rockefeller Aide Nazi Mastermind," and Lee's obituary in the *Jewish Daily Forward* described him as "an agent of the Nazi government"—a judgment later echoed by the Nuremberg Tribunal.

Ivy Lee's German involvement is of particular importance for a history of PR, because it foreshadows the subsequent growth of a literal dictators' lobby in Washington, which hustles on behalf of gross human rights violators such as Indonesia, Colombia, Guatemala, Kuwait and Nigeria. Moreover, the scandal surrounding Lee's activities led Congress to pass the Foreign

Agents Registration Act, which in theory is supposed to provide a mechanism for identifying propagandists engaged in work for foreign countries on U.S. soil. In practice, FARA is widely flouted, but it offers an interesting example of a strategy that uses democratic institutions to limit PR's ability to manipulate the public.

Finally, the book ignores another fascinating aspect of the "social history" of PR—its origins in the rough-and-tumble, Barnum-and-Bailey world of circus hawkers and publicists—"the only group of men proud of being called liars," according to one contemporary journalist. The PR industry has struggled mightily to overcome its unsavory reputation stemming from this legacy, but even today the industry is rife with practitioners who brag among themselves about exploits that would make most people blush with shame.

A social history that explored this face of PR might have included, for example, the story of Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clark ("Atlanta's P.T. Barnum"), whose Southern Publicity Association launched the "disgraceful albeit successful public relations campaign that gave birth to the modern Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s," according to Scott Cutlip, who devotes a chapter to the topic in *The Unseen Power*, his 1994 history of the PR industry.

Stories like this would have made an interesting counterpoint to Ewen's focus on the PR preoccupations of corporate America, and would also have helped liven up the book, which will undoubtedly interest academics but will have a hard time appealing to a wider audience. ■

SOUND BITES BACK

Bimbo vs. Bimbo

Merrie Spaeth, president of the Dallas-based Spaeth Communications, issues a "Bimbo Award" ridiculing news sources who make stupid denials that cause their audience to believe exactly the opposite of what they say.

"We had more 'bimbos' in 1995 than ever before," Spaeth said in giving out last year's award to Time Warner, whose "Jenny Jones" show invited a male guest to appear and meet his "secret admirer." After the admirer turned out to be another man, the enraged guest shot and killed him, prompting a Time Warner spokesperson to state, "No one was lied to. No one was misled."

Spaeth may want to give herself the award for 1996. In the February issue of *Public Relations Tactics*, she expressed annoyance at "pot shots taken by journalists at public relations people." As an example, she cited press coverage given to Nigeria's hiring of several PR firms in

an attempt to clean up its image after executing eight human rights and environmental activists.

"The article made clear that 'PR' meant fluff and cover-up without any real change," Spaeth complained. ■

THE BEST Policy

In a letter to *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report*, Ron Levy, president of the North American Precise Syndicate, dismissed as "baloney" fellow PR executive Howard Boasberg's advice that flacks should "always tell the truth."

"You better not do that if you're talking about inside information," Levy said, "or breaking your word to a journalist that no one would get the story before him or her . . . or if the truth could get your company sued for \$100 million and you simply have no obligation to reveal what you learned in confidence about who did what." ■

PR WATCH

PUBLIC INTEREST REPORTING ON THE PR/PUBLIC AFFAIRS INDUSTRY

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 4

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THE TRUTH HURTS

by Joel Bleifuss

Downtown St. Louis is a deserted hub of suburban sprawl: vacant, turn-of-the-century office blocks, a few hotels, a couple of office complexes, more than a couple riverboat casinos, a sports stadium and the Gateway Arch. On the weekend of November 10-12, 1996, this hub was home to public relations professionals from throughout the country, gathered to attend the annual conference of the Public Relations Society of America.

The theme of this year's PRSA conference was "Telling the Truth: Building Credibility in an Incredible World." The content of the workshops might lead you to imagine that telling the truth, for some, is an even more difficult balancing act than the feats of circus acrobats.

My first day of conference-going began in the foyer/dining room at the Adam's Mark, St. Louis' swankiest hostelry. Waiting for a bowl of oatmeal, I checked out other diners to figure out what the conference

FLACK ATTACK

"Telling the Truth." Hmmm. Sounds like a good idea to us.

The problem, of course, is that before anyone can tell the truth, they have to know where the truth lies. And these days, the truth seems to lie wherever (and whenever) the PR industry tells it to lie.

It is therefore more than a little ironic that the Public Relations Society of America chose to build its recent annual conference around the slogan, "Telling the Truth: Building Credibility in an Incredible World."

Having reported on the scams and scandals of the PR industry for several years now, we find it strange to see PR pros mouthing words like "truth" and "credibility"—strange, even surreal, like watching pantomime artists silently simulate a musical performance.

Joel Bleifuss attended the conference and wrote the reports that appear in this issue. As his stories make clear, the PR industry's approach to communications continues to consist of endless opinion polling to find out what the public already thinks, followed by strategic message-messaging to make its clients' vested interests sound like state-of-the-art popular prejudices.

In olden times, this approach to communications would have been called "pandering to the masses." But we can hardly expect better from an industry founded on the belief that people are fundamentally irrational, easily manipulated, and that "truth" can therefore be manipulated and "repositioned" for a price.

Richard Edelman, president of one of the world's largest PR firms, stated this philosophy succinctly in a recent *Esquire* magazine story: "There is no truth except the truth you create for yourself."

We saw this type of PR-created "truth" during last year's elections: the tightly-orchestrated, absolutely meaningless nomination conventions and the carefully stage-managed politicians whose every word seemed refined to eliminate even trace quantities of sincerity.

If the PRSA conference is any indication, we can expect more and ever-more-slick "truths" to descend upon our heads in the near future, as flacks mobilize to chip away at the credibility of consumer groups, environmentalists, health reformers and other critics of absolute corporate power.

These are unpleasant realities of life in the 1990s, but they are necessary truths that must be faced by anyone who values democracy and the general social welfare.



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September 1990. The Kuwaitis needed a war to liberate their country. It would be a hard sell. Vietnam had put Americans off war. But the Kuwaitis knew what they had to do. They hired Hill & Knowlton.

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This mock advertisement from the Spring 1996 issue of Adbusters magazine depicts what you might see if the Hill & Knowlton PR firm really started "telling the truth." H&K's role in instigating the Persian Gulf war has been detailed in the book, Toxic Sludge Is Good For You, and in other publications. Reprinted with permission from Adbusters Media Foundation, 1-800-663-1243.

planners meant by "casual business attire is recommended." My second-hand, pea-green cashmere sports coat was on the edge, but not the cutting one. And I lacked the requisite *USA Today*, which I was to discover is not only the nation's paper, but the PR industry's as well.

I scanned the workshop schedule. Should I check out "Telling the Truth Under Deadline Pressure?" A professor of public relations at Kent State promised to explain how "it's not as tough as you think" for the PR professional to fill the role of "corporate conscience." Or maybe I should stop in at "Labor/Employee Relations and Public Relations" for "the scoop on upcoming labor issues expected to set off corporate, legal and media hot buttons in the next few years."

PLAUSIBLE BELIEVABILITY

In the end, I settled for: "Being Believable: Credibility of the Press, Corporations, Politicians and the Judicial System." This "interactive workshop" led by Peter

Hirsh, Executive Vice President of Porter/Novelli, promised to "examine how, in an increasingly cynical world, companies can make themselves more credible."

Hirsh unveiled a Porter/Novelli survey demonstrating that 45 percent of respondents believed news from political reporters was less credible today than it was five years ago. Only 9 percent, however, said the same of radio news. To Hirsh this indicates that radio is "an under-exploited medium with respect to molding opinion."

"We have to do a better job of molding our responses so that they seem more responsive," Hirsh said with no apparent sense of irony.

Someone in the audience wondered if, given that people rate the credibility of political reporters so low, "should we [in PR] stop bothering with political reporters because we [the people] don't believe them?"

"It may not be worth the effort," Hirsh suggested tentatively.

"No, it should be done," said a woman who described herself as a six-year veteran of the Washington political press corps. "These are the people desperately in need of that education."

"Amen," said Hirsh.

CREDIBILITY IN CRISIS

The survey also showed that during a time of "corporate crisis," 89 percent of survey respondents said that "independent experts" are a "very or somewhat believable" source of information. So far this is good news for the PR industry, which specializes in finding and hiring a wide variety of "independent experts."

The *bad* news for the industry is that 69 percent of respondents said that consumer advocates are "very and somewhat believable."

Said Hirsh: "This is a difficult thing to deal with for many companies, because consumer advocates are more visible and more widespread in any field of business than they have been before."

Even without consumer advocates, corporations have problems. Only 19 percent of survey respondents believed that corporations "are totally truthful and open" when they deal with a crisis.

"We have to do a better job of molding our responses so that they seem more responsive," Hirsh said, with no apparent sense of irony. "Twenty-eight percent of the people feel that they are not."

The good news, he added, is that corporations rule. "There has never been a time in the U.S. when there has been more conformity of view as to the fact that private corporations and semi-private institutions are the things that are going to enable us to gain control and to change our lives."

Ready to *lose* control, I left that session and went to get a copy of *USA Today*, but the hotel news stand was sold out, and it was time for the next session. "Unchaining American Industry with the Truth" sounded interesting. Someone from Purina Mills was going to examine how corporate America can "use new technologies to feed, clothe, shelter, entertain and support" the additional billions of people who will inhabit the world in 2050, once the PR industry cures the public of its fear of technology.

PRACTITIONER, CHANGE THYSELF

Like grass growing through concrete, occasionally a glimmer of reality broke through the smooth sheen of PR jargon. One workshop, titled "Changing Behaviors by Managing Realities," described itself in the conference

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schedule using academic lingo out of a Skinner box: "This workshop gives you the tools you need to enhance constituents' learning experiences by managing the primary variables that contribute to those experiences."

Intrigued, I trucked over to the Marriott to hear the presentation by E.W. Brody, president of The Resource Group in Memphis, Tennessee. His presentation turned out actually to be a thoughtful argument urging people in public relations to stop thinking about PR in the traditional sense, and begin trying to affect public perceptions by changing how their clients treat the public.

"The handwriting is on the wall. Over the next several years we will change from a supply-driven information society to a demand-driven informational society," said Brody. In other words, instead of the media supplying people with information, people will pick and choose what information they gather from various media. And that means that the PR industry's time-worn strategy of influencing the press becomes obsolete.

"The traditional model of public relations is no longer going to work," Brody argued. "We have our own survival to think about. I would argue that if you are under 40 you are either going to change, or this machine will chew you up and spit you out."

A member of the audience asked: "If you were head of PR at Texaco, what would you do?"

"The first thing that Texaco has got to do is change the reality," Brody replied. "There is no substitute for doing what is individually or institutionally correct. There are times you've got to leave a little blood on the floor."

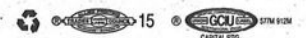
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THANKS FOR NOTHING

Then it was back to the Marriott, where I perused the exhibition rooms. At one booth, I played a quiz, matching the names of 20 newspapers with 20 states. I got 17 right, which according to the salesman was one of three highest scores for the conference. My reward: a month's free news clipping service. Actually, the "service" was free, but I would have to pay to receive any copies of the articles they clipped. I declined.

I grabbed a beer, courtesy of Anheuser Busch, and struck up a conversation with David Sweet, spokesman for Southern Air Transport, the air cargo company that at one time was created and owned by the CIA before being bought by one of the CIA's lawyers.

Southern Air was a favored conduit of guns to the Nicaraguan contras during the Reagan administration. These days Sweet says he is busy keeping tabs on various internet-based "conspiracy-oriented chat groups" that

discuss topics such as the recent series of stories in *San Jose Mercury News* documenting CIA complicity in cocaine smuggling using air cargo companies.

My final workshop—titled "Why Don't They Want to Hear the Truth?"—felt more like a pitchman's plaintive plea than a strategy session. The conference program said the panel would "discuss the ways in which the truth can be subverted" by "policymakers, advocacy groups and the media" who believe that the health care industry is "putting profits ahead of American health and that they can't be trusted."

I stayed long enough to hear Helen Ostrowski of Porter/Novelli, explain: "When you are being vilified in the media it is important to realize [that] as an institution the media is not the credible source it once was. And that is important to remember as you look at your communications program."

Nothing new *here*, I thought as I headed for the exit. ■

Sympathy for the Devil

If Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson are looking for some free advice on how to improve their images, they'll want to check out the November 1995 issue of *Public Relations Tactics*, a monthly tabloid published by the Public Relations Society of America. *Tactics* devoted its cover story and several accompanying pieces to answering the question, "What do you prescribe for a public relations client who's a world-class athlete, charged with a vicious crime, and forced to endure a protracted incarceration?"

The pros' advice to Tyson, currently rebuilding his heavyweight boxing career following a bout in prison for rape, included the following:

- "Tyson's handlers need to 'reinvent' him, similar to the way Richard Nixon was reinvented," said Steve Rivkin.
- "He ought to think seriously about cultivating a handful of journalists he can trust and then build on those few relationship," offered John Solberg, former director of media services and public relations for fight promoter Don King.

Simpson, who is widely believed to have escaped justice for the murder of his ex-wife and Ron Goldman, "has a lot of rebuilding to do," observed Tina Whitecotton, PR director for Rochester Rossiter &

Wall. But Run Fuhs, a PR manager for the Whirlpool Corporation, opined that "through some sort of public atonement process — he could probably serve as a celebrity spokesman in a limited situation."

For now, Simpson's best strategy is to "retreat for a time, say little, speak humbly, and become a nice guy," suggested Cynthia Hennig, PR director for ICE, Inc. "He'll have to feed himself back slowly. Public service would be a good start."

Public Relations Tactics editor Adam Shell agreed, weighing in with an editorial titled "Silence Is Golden," critiquing O.J.'s failure to take the advice of PR experts who recommend he "keep a low profile and don't say or do anything the public could misconstrue as being insensitive or boastful."

The issue prompted a critical letter to the editor from Howard Dresner, a PR consultant for Cigna Healthcare, who complained that the articles invite "justifiable public cynicism" and "reinforce everything that people deem to be shallow and sleazy about the practice of public relations."

Final footnote: Tyson recently paid an undisclosed sum to Phyllis Polander, a former publicist for Tyson's ex-wife Robin Givens, as an out-of-court settlement for Polander's claim that Tyson sexually assaulted and beat her in 1988.

Food Flacks Say: Skip the Science

by Joel Bleifuss

"The need to effectively manage any and all communications issues is driven by one common reality: the bottom line," says PR executive Pat Farrell.

Farrell currently guards the bottom line at Ralcorp Holdings, the human-feed company spinoff from Ralston Purina. His previous experience was managing the Nutrasweet image for chemical giant Monsanto. There was nothing artificially sweet, however, about his presentation at a PRSA conference workshop titled "Identifying trends and issues management in the food and beverage industry."

Farrell was one of several panelists at the workshop, which the conference program billed as an opportunity to hear about "big-company experiences with consumers," "media relations during campaigns against various food items," "crises management planning," and "consumer advocacy groups." The moderator introduced Farrell as a "veteran of food tamperings, one employee shooting—that I know of, strikes, you name it."

At the podium, Farrell corrected the record. It was "two fatal shootings in the workplace, not at the same time." He told the audience that he had "worked managing issues for 17 years"—issues like "restructuring, reengineering, downsizing, rightsizing, capital expansion, product improvement, technological advances, synergy, long-term plans, short-term outlook, new product introductions, cost-reduction initiatives, strategic alternatives and renewed focus." Said Farrell: "I've lived through all of these buzzwords and, more importantly, the real issues behind them."

SICKENINGLY SWEET

In a truly Orwellian presentation, Farrell spoke of his time at Monsanto/Nutrasweet, where under his leadership the company developed what he termed "sweetspeak."

Nutrasweet was having a public relations problem, he explained. "After many years of defending the ingredient using hard scientific facts" the company grew "frustrated by its inability to change the conversation."

An "artificial sweetener," Farrell said, "conjures up cancer, headaches, rat studies, laboratories, dueling scientists, allergies, epilepsy, you name it, none of which are very appetizing."

So Nutrasweet set out to discover "what's behind these emotional and seemingly illogical responses" to its chemical sugar substitute. "This was important to our company because we were seeking to grow our franchise outside the accepted context of diet," said Farrell. The "bottom line" was at stake, so Farrell hired a "psychological researcher" to help the company "address an issue that could potentially curtail further growth."

According to Farrell, the researcher discovered "that in the minds of many consumers Nutrasweet equates to fake food." The company had for years described

Toxic Sludge Is Good For You! LIES, DAMN LIES AND THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY

by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton

"A book that proves these flacks are hacks!"

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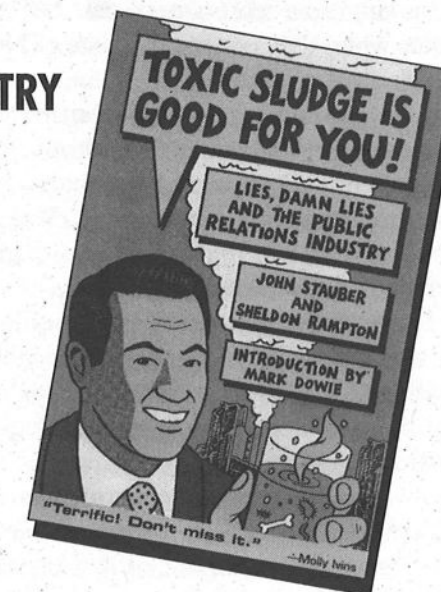
"Toxic Sludge should appear on the short list of anyone serious about the study of public relations in the United States."

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Nutrasweet as "an artificial sweetener." But artificial, said Farrell, "conjures up cancer, headaches, rat studies, laboratories, dueling scientists, allergies, epilepsy, you name it, none of which are very appetizing."

The company also referred to Nutrasweet as a sugar substitute, but the psychological researcher discovered that "people don't like it when you claim to be like sugar" because "memories of sugar take them back to their childhood, a simpler time when there was less to worry about and sugar was a sweet treat, a reward. . . . Our own words were defining our product in a manner that created thoughts of being unnatural, unsafe, unsweet and led people to conclude that we believed Nutrasweet was better than the most beloved food product in history."

The psychologist also helped the company understand that "the American public admires and takes great pride in discoveries and innovations gained through hard work."

Armed with this knowledge, Nutrasweet created "sweetspeak." Said Farrell, "Words such as 'substitute,' 'artificial,' 'chemical,' 'laboratory,' 'scientist' were removed forever from our lexicon and replaced with words such as 'discovered,' 'choice,' 'variety,' 'unique,' 'different,' 'new taste.'"

Using sweetspeak, Farrell gave an example of how Nutrasweet now responds to the question: How do you know aspartame is safe?

The answer: "Aspartame was discovered nearly 30 years ago. Since that time, hundreds of people in our company and elsewhere around the world—people with families like yours and mine—have devoted themselves to making sure consumers can be confident of their choice when they choose the taste of Nutrasweet. People have looked at our ingredient in every which way possible and we encourage that because we want consumers to be comfortable when they choose Nutrasweet. That has been our commitment for nearly three decades, and it will always be our commitment. You can feel confident choosing products that contain our ingredient, but if you don't, you have other choices."

Psychological research is also being deployed to help the biotechnology industry sell the public on the benefits of bioengineered foods. Once again, the bottom line is at stake as corporate America struggles to counteract consumer advocacy groups which, according to Farrell, are "willing to hold corporations hostage."

As with Nutrasweet, Farrell acknowledges that corporations cannot win their PR war with scientific arguments in defense of bioengineering. "People will never be comfortable with the transplanting of genetic mate-

rials," Farrell said. However, the public *can* relate to the "specific food benefits" of food products that are currently in the bioengineering pipeline, such as tomatoes, squash, sweet potatoes, rice, potatoes, corn, bananas, cooking oil and wine.

"Words such as 'substitute,' 'artificial,' 'chemical,' 'laboratory,' 'scientist' were removed forever from our lexicon and replaced with words such as 'discovered,' 'choice,' 'variety,' 'unique,' 'different,' 'new taste.'"

"We know that food biotechnology, when presented in its full and proper context, will include a rich history of plant breeding and development that goes back over a century and is responsible for the dependable and abundant food supply we currently enjoy," says Farrell. "Food biotechnology is about benefiting the food supply. There is no negative, there is no dark side. . . . You can fight and lose the scientific debate or you can present the benefit to be gained by further advances in American agriculture, advances not unlike those that have been occurring for the past 100 years on American farms."

COME OVER TO THE DARK SIDE

For panelist Jeff Prince, guarding the bottom line sometimes means that the public relations professional must both "sweetspeak" and carry a big stick. There comes a time, he said, when a PR pro must strike back.

Prince, a veteran of the National Restaurant Association, is now a private industry consultant in Washington. As the panel moderator observed, Prince has spent many years "battling" the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

Prince began his talk with a four-minute video on CSPI "for those of you who have missed the megabeast of science hype." The video, consisting of news clips, chronicled CSPI's campaign to raise public awareness about the nutritional dark sides of many commonly-enjoyed restaurant meals. One clip, for example, was based on a CSPI study showing that a mushroom cheeseburger with fried onion rings like the ones at TGI Fridays contains about 1800 calories and the same amount of fat as five strips of bacon, four chocolate frosted donuts, three slices of pepperoni pizza, two banana splits, and a Big Mac.

"The restaurant industry needs to be concerned," said Prince, because eventually CSPI's nutritional information will lead to "a decline in consumer confidence,

a growing sense of guilt about eating out." He explained that the National Restaurant Association has "developed three different themes" that are stressed to counteract the CSPI message.

First and foremost, said Prince, the industry has stressed "variety and choice—arguing that studies show that only 31 percent of restaurant-goers are not concerned about nutrition when they eat out, and restaurants cater to customers by offering low fat items.

"The second thing the restaurants have pushed, of course, is the 'food police' line, and they push that as far as possible," Prince said. "The idea is simply that people . . . don't need a third party interfering and making those choices for them especially when this third party seems inhuman, inflexible, puritanical, rigid."

The third tactic employed by the restaurant industry is to raise questions about CSPI's science, its accuracy and its procedures. So far this has been underutilized, Prince said, urging "a concerted effort to make the case against CSPI's science and to raise the whole question of how and when and where you report scientific studies."

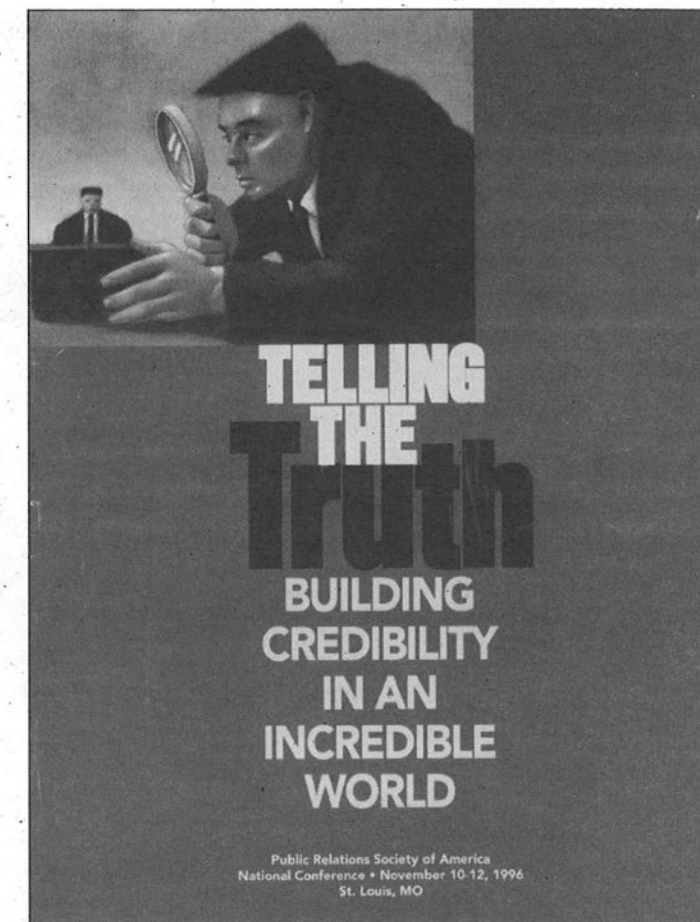
FREE ADVICE

"If I were advising the restaurateurs today, I would tell them first to clean up their own house," said Prince. Then, "put out the money it will take to beat CSPI on its own ground which is science. I would then advise them to look for allies. It's not enough to fend off this attack or that allegation. A concerted effort has to be made to make the media understand how CSPI abuses science."

Prince went on to detail what he sees as examples of CSPI scientific misdeeds, which he proposed making "the core of a case that we take to the media" in order to "raise the question of proper use of science and to begin to chip away, as you do that, at CSPI's credibility."

Rather than attacking CSPI directly, however, Prince recommended that interested companies employ the common PR strategy of creating or funding a seemingly independent "third party" to do their dirty work for them. "If it is the National Restaurant Association and Proctor & Gamble [which markets the fat substitute Olestra] out there making the case, nobody is going to believe them. Their ox has been gored. . . . What I am talking about is doing briefings behind the scenes to educate the media, and you would have to distance it from interested companies. . . . and you would have to get the scientific community involved," said Prince.

"The companies and industries that wish to undermine [CSPI's] credibility can best do so working together to make a case that is partially removed from their own immediate interests," said Prince. "The whole project



This artwork announced the 1996 annual meeting of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).

would, I think, require considerable scientific expertise, it would require considerable skill in media management and almost infinite tact, but through a concerted effort I think it could be done, because the press no longer wants to believe CSPI. They would like to find an excuse not to carry those stories, but we haven't given it to them yet. It may well be a job for some currently underfunded organization, or perhaps for some new organization, but it seems to me the food industry ought to get together and get this job done soon."

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, Prince went on to detail what would be needed to get the job done: "We would need well written objective backgrounders. We would need expert testimony, perhaps even a panel. We would need to win the support of media critics such as Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post*. Those writers, and often they don't have names, who criticize media performance, we'd need their support and I think we could get it."

So far said Prince, the restaurant industry has kept on top of the situation. "The way we have been able to respond [to CSPI] is that we have inside information. You have to. Otherwise you can't respond." ■

ETHICS FOR BEGINNERS: PR FACES A SKEPTICAL PUBLIC

by Joel Bleifuss

Americans are in a cynical mood, according to the polling firm, Roper Starch Worldwide.

In a presentation to the PRSA annual convention, Roper Vice President Tom Miller reported survey results showing that the percentage of the population which believes business executives are less honest than other people has risen from 24 percent in 1984 to 33 percent in 1996. Meanwhile, the number of Americans who believe it is a *responsibility* of business to act honestly has dropped, from 84 percent to 65 percent.

"The bad news is Americans are much more cynical about business," said Miller. "The good news," he quipped, "is that Americans' expectations for honesty among businesses have gone down." The standing-room audience laughed appreciatively.

Miller's presentation was followed by a talk from Rand Corporation social scientist Francis Fukuyama, who contends that only those societies with a high degree of social trust "will be able to create the flexible, large-scale business organizations that are needed to compete in the new global economy."

"The bad news is Americans are much more cynical about business. The good news is that Americans' expectations for honesty among businesses have gone down."

During his talk, which was sponsored by large-scale business organization Monsanto, Fukuyama argued that there is a "marked change in American's willingness to trust each other and in their ability to trust one another." A "decline in trust is at the center of many of our problems," he said.

REACHING CONSUMERS IN A CYNICAL AGE

The theme of declining ethics and public trust ran through several conference workshops, including one titled "Watch Agency CEOs Play Ethics Jeopardy," described as an opportunity to "see your worst nightmares being played out in real time" by, among others, the CEOs of Ketchum Public Relations, Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller.

Another workshop, titled "Reaching Consumers in a Cynical Age," promised ways "to build 'authenticity' into public relations strategies and tactics" in order to reach "different segments of consumers," like "boomers, busters, genX, teens, boomlets, and the sandwich generation" all of whom "share a common cynicism."

In order to reach these groups, Porter/Novelli vice president Elizabeth England advised PR pros to "immerse ourselves in their world to get into their heads and their minds." After discovering the key to their thought processes, move quickly with the message. "It's like pitching the media; you've only got 30 seconds," she said.

As an example, England described work she had done to help promote the Lady Gillette razor. She studied the history of female shaving and used the information to "build a campaign in the press for stories about women shaving." The clincher was a story in *USA Today* about how "women used to shave their legs with stones" and today they do it in the shower.

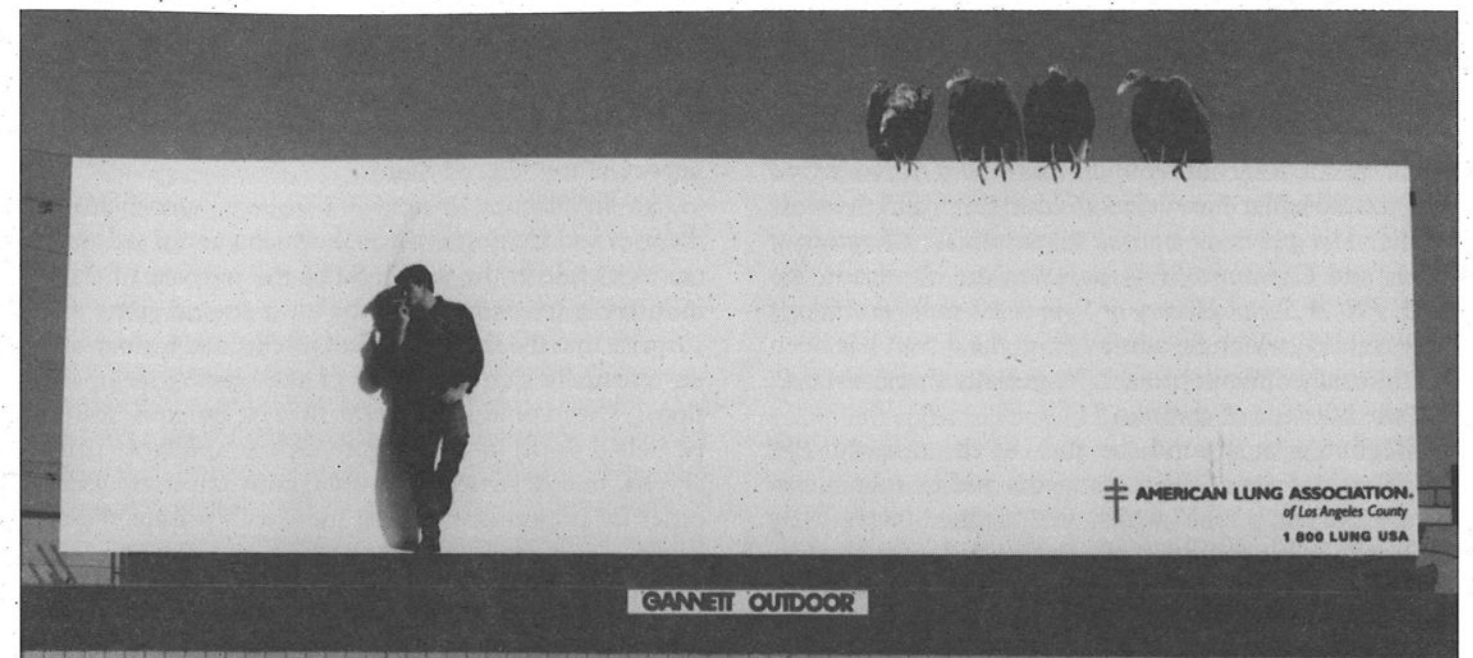
ENVIRONMENTAL SECTION DINNER AND A PRSA SCANDAL

In years past, environmentalism was a hot topic at PRSA conferences, but the attendance was sparse this year at a dinner event sponsored by PRSA's Environment Section. The dinner, however, turned out to be a gathering point for PR practitioners concerned with ethics and social responsibility.

Attendees included Janet Cannata, a public information officer at the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, one of the most modern sewage treatment plants in North America. As part of her job, Cannata has been following the sewer sludge controversy (covered previously in *PR Watch*, vol. 2, no. 3) and had interesting things to say, but wouldn't talk on the record. Suffice it to say that I agreed with her.

Peter Hidalgo, another dinner-goer, is in charge of public relations for Metrolink, southern California's regional rail authority. He has the unenviable job of promoting mass transit in the land of the automobile. Without mass transit, he says, freeway congestion in Los Angeles would be even worse. "If everyone who currently rides the train were to return to their drive-alone vehicle, rush hour traffic delays would increase 30 to 60 minutes along Los Angeles freeways," said Hidalgo. "We are literally converting people to leaving their cars."

Andy Weisser, spokesperson for the American Lung Association of Los Angeles County, has recently been busy battling tobacco. He was pleased with the national attention garnered by an anti-smoking billboard put up by his chapter which shows a young guy smoking with vultures perched behind his back. Weisser is now involved in an ongoing campaign to publicize air quality issues and help Angelenos understand the direct connection between air quality and public health.



This anti-smoking billboard for the American Lung Association is an example of the "socially responsible" face of public relations at its best.

Weisser cut his PR teeth working at AIDS Project Los Angeles. "It's important for me to help the public understand difficult issues and how their personal and direct involvement can effect positive change," he said.

He was impressed with the conference, and found the workshops helpful. "Directly addressing ethical issues was great. There is never enough discussion about ethics," said Weisser.

He expressed concern, however, at the trend among non-profit health associations to jump into "cause-related marketing without fully exploring the impact that implied endorsements can have on consumers."

The growing PR field of cause-related marketing, which seeks to link corporate goals with social responsibility, is currently epitomized in the American Express credit card ads that feature photographs of poor people against a soundtrack of John Lennon singing "imagine no possessions." The AmEx ads promise a sort of "two-for-one" deal—for every purchase you make on plastic, the company promises to set aside funds for fighting hunger.

Cause-related marketing was also the subject of a PRSA workshop titled: "Dow and Habitat: Build great things . . . together." According to the conference program, the session explored how "Dow Chemical consolidated charitable donations while gaining visibility by working with Habitat for Humanity, International."

IMAGINE NO INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Ethical questions were also on the mind of two late-comers to the Environment Section dinner, a couple of

public relations professors upset about PRSA's theft of their intellectual property rights.

The professors, who had spent the earlier part of the evening working with the Public Relations Student Society of America, were full of news about a simmering scandal within PRSA, and glad to talk to someone from *PR Watch*.

It seems the national organization was photocopying articles written by PR academics and then selling them through the mail for hefty fees—without permission. Copyright law was clearly violated. But PRSA management, rather than owning up to their mistake and making the best of a bad situation, as an ethical PR pro would do, denied any wrongdoing and hired a lawyer who flew in for the conference.

Dan Lattimore, chair of the University of Memphis Journalism Department, stopped by to join the conversation. He had discovered that PRSA had copied and sold two chapters of his book, *Public Relations Writing*. "If they had come and apologized at the beginning I would have probably said, 'just forget it,'" said Lattimore. "But they keep saying they were in the right."

Lynne Sallot, a PR professor at the University of Georgia, speculated that it must have cost PRSA at least \$5,000 to fly the lawyer into St. Louis. Adding insult to injury, PRSA's leadership refused to allow the matter to be brought to the floor of the PRSA Assembly, the meeting of the group's governing body that preceded the conference. "We may press the issue, whether we press it in the media or whether we do it in court," said Sallot. ■

BOOK REVIEW: STUART EWEN'S *PR! A Social History of Spin*

by Sheldon Rampton

Stuart Ewen, a New York professor of media studies, has earned a deserved reputation as one of the country's most astute leftist chroniclers of advertising and the mass media. His previous books, in particular *Channels of Desire* and *Captains of Consciousness*, are classics in the field. *PR! A Social History of Spin* is his most ambitious undertaking, which he admits from the outset has been an unusually difficult project, "especially characterized" by "the burdens of creation."

Beginning at around the turn of the century, *PR!* describes the rise of the mass media and its role in creating a "virtual public" which was "defined increasingly by its vulnerable condition of isolation and spectatorship. Readers of mass-circulation newspapers and magazines were witnesses to society, no longer within the public square, but from the sanctuary of their parlors." These "webs of communications" became "modern pipelines of persuasion," exploited first by Progressive reformers, then by corporate and government propagandists with the goal of managing an increasingly restive public.

Ewen is at his best in a fascinating chapter he devotes to George Creel, a reform-minded Progressive who later directed U.S. efforts to mobilize the public in support of World War I. Creel's Committee on Public Information served as a training-ground for many of the PR industry's early leaders, perfecting many of the techniques of mass manipulation that are commonplace today—mass distribution of news releases, sentimental appeals through advertising and motion pictures, targeted recruitment of local "opinion leaders," and even some of the tricks employed today as corporate America's astroturf version of "grassroots organizing."

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC TRUTHS

Ewen also offers intriguing insights into the relationship between PR concerns and corporate liberalism in an early chapter focusing on Theodore Vail, the CEO of AT&T in the early 1900s. Later chapters discuss the rise of corporate support for "welfare capitalism" designed to co-opt and combat rising public support for "collectivist" ideologies in the wake of the Great Depression. Academics will find a great deal of material worth pondering in Ewen's nuanced exegesis of the changing aesthetics of photography and cinema under the pressures of social activism and corporate imperatives.

Unfortunately, *PR!* offers an *incomplete* "social history of spin," in part because it ends around the year 1950. It would be more accurate to characterize it as an *intellectual* history of the public relations industry during that

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period, staged against the backdrop of a left-liberal social history of the United States.

An intellectual history, of course, chronicles the theories and ideologies through which a social group perceives its role in the world. Since the purpose of the PR industry is to *construct* ideologies, it should come as no surprise that the industry's own intellectual history offers an unusually rich catalogue of self-serving rationalizations. They come in different flavors, but can basically be boiled down into two mutually contradictory propositions, one designed for public consumption, and the other for presentation to the industry's private clients:

- *The public rationale:* "We always tell our clients that honesty is the best policy," a theme most famously articulated by early PR practitioner Ivy Lee in a 1906 "statement of principles" which is frequently quoted in PR textbooks: "All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. . . . Our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and the public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about." These pious sentiments are, of course, calculated bullshit. In the service of his clients, which included the hated Rockefeller empire, Lee didn't hesitate to label Mother Jones "a prostitute and the keeper of a house of prostitution." And when company thugs killed striking workers, women and children at the infamous Ludlow Massacre, Lee "frankly and openly" circulated the false claim that they had died in a self-inflicted accident.
- *The private pitch:* "Public opinion must be scientifically engineered from above in order to control the rabble." This assertion is rarely aired in public, but PR firms have found it marvelously useful as a tool for marketing their services to anxious corporate executives. Its chief theoretician was PR counselor Edward Bernays, regarded today as "the father of public relations," although Ivy Lee properly deserves the title. (Bernays outlived Lee and, in keeping with his aspiration to serve as a role model for the profession, stole the honor through decades of incessant self-promotion.)

BOOSTING BERNAYS

Ewen gives short shrift to Lee, and devotes a good portion of *PR!* to tracing the theoretical lineage of Bernays' more Machiavellian position. The book literally begins and ends with Bernays, opening with Ewen's first-person and rather star-struck account of the day he actually *met* the man, and concluding with Bernays' death at the age of 103 "as this book neared completion."

In between, Ewen traces an intellectual thread beginning with William James and the American tradition of philosophical pragmatism, winding through the Progressive era and its belief in engineered solutions to social problems, and incorporating French social philosopher Gustave Le Bon's fear that "the divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings."

MANAGING THE HUMAN HERD

These influences culminate with Bernays, who happened to be a double nephew of Sigmund Freud. (His mother was Freud's sister; his father was Freud's wife's brother.) Bernays combined Le Bon's fear of the masses with the theories of Freud and others regarding the subconscious, irrational motivations of human behavior. In books titled *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, *Engineering Consent* and *Propaganda*, he defined public relations as an "applied social science" which society's masters could use to manage the human herd. "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind," he argued, it would be possible to "control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it. . . . Theory and practice have combined with sufficient success to permit us to know that in certain cases we can effect some change in public opinion with a fair degree of accuracy by operating a certain mechanism, just as the motorist can regulate the speed of his car by manipulating the flow of gasoline."

This is scary stuff, and required reading if you want to understand what motivates U.S. businesses to spend over \$10 billion a year on PR. But it should be read for what it is—marketing hype, using reverent technocratic imagery to package Bernays' services to his corporate clients as the latest shiny new must-have gizmo.

Lee's "statement of principles" was designed to create the public myth that PR is natural, honorable and honest—part of the "two-way street" process of democratic communications between businesses and their "publics." Bernays' created an equal and opposite corporate myth—that public opinion could be manufactured for a price, bought and sold like any other commodity. Ewen easily debunks Lee's mythology, and he properly deplores the elitism in Bernays. He fails, however, to deal with or even mention the fact that Bernays was a controversial and frequently disliked figure within the PR industry—a man who was not invited to parties, who was deliberately excluded from professional associations, and who had a problem keeping clients.

Bernays was disliked by his peers in part because they considered him a pushy braggart and in part because his books contributed to PR's bad reputation. In addition, his theories of mass psychology sometimes inspired

bizarre schemes that led clients to write him off as a hare-brained eccentric. The maker of Lucky brand cigarettes, for example, fired him after he spent \$30,000 organizing a "green fashions ball" in the hope that it would stimulate women across the country to color-coordinate with Lucky's green packaging.

None of this negates the fact that Bernays was a significant contributor to the evolution of PR, but a more complete appraisal would have shown the limitations to his notion that corporations can "scientifically" manipulate the public. In fact, PR is as notable for its failures as for its successes. Its ability to dominate the public agenda stems more from its boundless corporate resources than the mechanistic certainty of its methods.

For a book that bills itself a "social history of spin," *PR!* offers surprisingly few details about the other personalities and inner workings of the PR industry. Aside from Bernays, leading figures like Hill & Knowlton or Carl Byoir & Associates make only fleeting appearances. The people who *do* receive sustained treatment are bridge figures—people from *outside* the PR industry whose efforts to mold public opinion inspired or goaded corporate America to gin up its own propaganda mills. These include Edward Bellamy, Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, Jacob Riis and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Ivy Lee's work included meeting with Hitler himself, and foreshadows the subsequent growth of a literal dictators' lobby in Washington.

Unfortunately, discussions of these personalities frequently turn into long digressions that are only indirectly related to the public relations industry. For the most part, I found these history lessons derivative but on target—with one disappointing exception. Somewhere around page 215, *PR!* detours into a long discourse on the New Deal that reads more like hagiography than historiography, painting Roosevelt in particular as the patron saint of the downtrodden, whose "oratory assailed the money changers in the temple" and whose "Promethean capacity to mix Jeffersonian ideals of democracy with modern media know-how" created "a moment when American political life was, for a time, energized by the ideal of an informed and conscious citizenry."

The 50 pages or so that Ewen devotes to this idealized portrait of FDR could have been better spent delving into some of the fascinating details of the PR industry's own history, through a closer examination of figures other than Bernays. It is surprising, for example,