

**An Overview of New Realities and Challenges  
For Building Credibility Abroad.**

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Bill Judkins

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## **Introduction**

American credibility in the public and private sectors will see increasing challenges. There will be an increasing need for culturally sensitive, public relations professionals skilled in the discipline to provide credible messages. An increased dialog, and improved relationship-building activity among a global organization's constituents has become important for several reasons: a) the criticisms of the US administration's preemptive action in Iraq as an example of the US divergence from the Vienna Framework, b) backlash to the globalization process and corporate selfishness, and c) global ideological clashes magnified by new concepts of proximity due to advances in technology. The new reality is that the US is scrutinized on intentions rather than results. The challenge is, therefore, based on speculation of bad intentions, in addition to actualization of bad intentions as defined by critics of US policies and private business activities abroad. This element of an unknown creates fear and contempt of the US that will require an increased dialog regarding intent, and substantial follow through in actuality. (Gvosdev)

Public relations professionals provide information as a business function. They are responsible to provide news worthy, relevant, out-bound communications to the constituents they serve designed to create third party endorsement and build credibility. Third-party endorsement as a strategy is becoming more and more necessary alongside other marketing efforts due the new realities of intent mentioned above. The new challenges are increasingly pointing to the need for a leadership role for public relations professionals in global business and foreign affairs. Even this process of providing news worthy, relevant information is under great scrutiny and will require professionals involved in the process to prove themselves over and over again to their organizations' constituents both domestically and abroad. Additionally, ever faster and ever more target systems of communication have affected global relations in both the public and private sector and proper use of these tools will require highly defined objectives based on cultural awareness. Fortunately, the world marketplace is not without culturally sensitive professionals, who, in this leadership role, can bring a global perspective to the messages they are producing.

## **Origins**

For decades, the US worked within the Vienna Framework of foreign relations. Prevailing attitudes focused on a strategy for allied countries working in concert through a governing body, and notions of sovereignty extended to every country. The US has often debated the framework – in particular with France, one of the stronger and more vocal allies – over notions of independent versus collective militaries in the NATO alliance. (Kissinger) The US preferred the idea that a member nation could break from the framework when necessary and use an independent military to protect itself. France maintained that a collective military unit made of all the member nations would be a preventative measure and render independent military units unnecessary. This fundamental difference in ideas regarding collective security has been exposed in the late twentieth century during two distinct events: The Cold War and the US preemptive action in Iraq. Both of these events have contributed to the rising challenge of building credibility in the public and private sectors due to mistrust on both sides.

The Cold War provided the foundation for much of Europe to remain allied with the US against a common enemy. The threat in post-WWII Europe of the encroaching communist system coupled with fear of overwhelming Soviet military capability required a unified front that the US and European countries actively supported. At that time, credibility building for the US was a process based largely in the private sector because the public sector widely maintained allied agreement for its objectives. Although there was much dialog in the public sector with other countries based on stemming the tide of the communist USSR, the discussions were not exposed to the general public in the 24-hour news climate that we currently have. Therefore, the dialog was predominantly within the realm of diplomats and not the media. This climate has migrated the dialog into the realm of the general public and diplomats are now asking, “What should I say?” rather than, “What should I do?” (Neuman citing Kissinger)

In the Wilsonian tradition, the US public and private sector sought to spread democracy and market economics. For the public sector, the critics were mostly other governments

and diplomats and prior to this news climate, credibility was manageable for the most part. However, for the private sector, the criticisms had only just begun and are fueled by the news climate. Credibility for the private sector was thought to be built-in because the democratic, market driven system was growing as the proven system that the rest of the world should “want to adopt”. However, this has proven false. Entering new markets has posed new, unforeseen challenges for US business. Cultural differences, fear of westernization, and a general questioning of US intentions have required a new perspective on exactly how to handle entering these markets. Since the Cold War ended in the late 1980’s and up to the present, both the public and the private sector face the similar challenge of building and maintaining credibility – all under the scrutiny of the 24-hour news climate.

Additionally, there seems to be a penchant to apply a narrative to news reporting – a trend that is troubling to building credibility (American Heritage). Neuman refutes the idea that public relations have replaced foreign relations and that is not what is being suggested here. She cites that political leaders have a responsibility to both professional diplomats and the public at large. This is true, and even more so, since the preemptive war in Iraq and an increasing lack of corporate governance. 24-hour news programming that applies a narrative needs to be assessed for its net effect on global affairs and business. It is the responsibility of every journalist and public relations professional to be sure that what is reported is accurate, responsible, and free from narrative. Narrative layers only seek to “sell” news, and if this is the case, who will report only facts? Clearly, the US faces a glaring reality check at this moment in time that presents challenges on numerous levels.

In short, the US administration has demonstrated a divergence from the Vienna framework demonstrated in the preemptive war in Iraq that has been criticized in the foreign media as an aggressive, illegal war with consequences well beyond the scope of previous conflicts. Additionally, the private sector’s globalization process has met overwhelming criticism from human rights and environmental activists as well as European countries that fear irrelevance and shrinking markets. This illustrates a growing

need for the tools applied in public relations practice. Public relations will not replace foreign relations, but an increased assessment of the impact of outbound messages from both the public and private sectors is a necessity. Fortunately, the trend toward globalization has, in general, opened a dialog amongst governments as well as the general public. Communications professionals with greater cultural sensitivities and a clear understanding of their responsibility and ethics will be a growing field of practice.

### **Social Implications**

When considering objectives of the public and private sector the discussion turns to an economic discussion that has social implications for everyone. The global population is wiser and more discerning in what they will and will not accept from the world's only "superpower" – the US.

One of the more common debates regarding a global village is the one between Fukayama and Huntington. The basic premise for Fukayama is that market economics and democracy, as proven systems will prevail across the planet and allow for peaceful market competition on a global scale. Huntington suggests that cultural ideologies, local tradition, and parochial institutions will prevail and ultimately resist the western market economic system. Barber's theories in *Jihad vs. McWorld* seem to support the Huntington perspective. An awareness of cultural identity, local tradition, and parochial systems is a critical part of the new public dialog and therefore a necessary tenet of the public relations practice in a leadership role.

Additionally, technology advances have changed people's perceptions of proximity (Dertouzos) and have raised new fears based on preconceived notions of "others". A shrinking proximity has augmented existing fears of external cultural influence as well as how enemies, perceived or otherwise, organize and facilitate their objectives. Inside the US, there is a substantial divide in opinion regarding the MNC's options to move

manufacturing sites offshore – this is a direct affect domestically of the globalization process.

The collective result of shrinking proximity through technology, overly ambitious market economics, and strengthening of parochial values is fear. Domestically there is a fear of unidentifiable enemies, and globally of political and economic irrelevance as well as an inability to protect oneself from cultural onslaught.

Better forums for dialog and communication can help alleviate and quell these tensions. This is the rising responsibility of the public relations professional. What form this forum takes is contingent upon technology and the ability for those who administer it to remain objective. (Dertouzos) Customized publication has already begun a process of maturation that will continue to seek new ways to disseminate messages. Direct mail campaigns in the US and abroad, for example, have had great success in combining market research with individualized communications. However, this process is not without social implications. Individualization can, in part, magnify generalizations about the individuals with whom it seeks to communicate and thereby deplete democratic ideals. This process can have a negative effect on credibility and it is the responsibility of the communications professionals to guard against this. Messages that are “tailored” are by nature not objective. In the selling process, tailored messages can be an effective tool in building brand loyalty, but when considering news reporting, tailoring can skew facts and misrepresent an event. It is the responsibility of the communications professionals to recognize this critical difference. Marketing and advertising professionals should be more interested in building the individual loyalty where public relations professionals should seek group credibility and third party endorsement.

Another important aspect of closer proximity is an awareness of the gap in what is perceived as truly necessary versus unnecessary based on various cultural norms worldwide. For example, Dertouzos’ example of mass individualization in production is scarcely relevant to a woman who has never owned shoes. Sensitivities to the realities of other cultures are absolutely critical for the public relations professional. Advanced

technology would want to seek ways to integrate agrarian, low GNP societies into the mix. Although the technology is interesting, is it really necessary? What other uses are there for this technology? How can this benefit a more global objective?

The discussion turns to one based on humanitarian versus selfish objectives, or perhaps secular versus temporal pursuits. US business is often criticized for its secular intent when dealing globally. This is not to say that public relations professionals will become global missionaries for humanitarian objectives, but rather that they understand the challenges to credibility for those outside their home culture. This increased cultural sensitivity must become the norm and the professional must seek ways to integrate cultural relevance into their activities. In the example of the virtual shoe store, could this technology be applied in a more relevant sense to people in Bosnia as a way to fit prosthetic devices for victims of land mines? Stylish, custom shoes would be irrelevant in that market. Additionally, it would be naïve to think that there would not be a negative response to such secular technological applications such as custom shoes. A cognizant, highly self-aware public relations professional would be able to understand this reality.

In short, the public relations professional bears a responsibility to the growing need for credible, culturally relevant information. Increased cultural challenges that are the result of technology advances and shrinking proximity will require a higher sense of self-awareness and impact. The widening gap between secular and temporal objectives is part of the new reality of global business.

### **Personal Impact**

The personal impact this has for me is increased opportunity that is not sheltered in the neat, predictable, and at times narrow western work model. As a communications professional I can pursue the public relations challenges mentioned above with perspective. I feel poised to make informed decisions based on the new realities of global affairs and business.

The news climate will not likely change, however, as part of the cycle that produces messages, I embrace the responsibility and challenges I'll face in providing credible, culturally sensitive information. Hopefully, in a leadership role, I would be able to teach and encourage colleagues and junior staff the same principles.

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