

Public Relations: Art or science?

by Paul Furiga

It began as a joke. Or more accurately, as a dare.

A skeptic, the kind who accepts only what he or she can touch, challenged me in one of those dank, dark places that p.r. types often gravitate toward after hours. The kind of place with mixed drinks and an affinity for payment by plastic.

"If public relations is more than just spin, some made-up idea that passes for a profession, then prove it," my skeptical friend said.

"Public relations is every bit a profession that delivers results," I responded, "one that can be measured and that proves its value in tangible terms. It's a science."

"Sure," my friend retorted. "Like voodoo."

"No," I said, "like a real science."

"Like what?" he demanded.

Uh-oh. Now I had to think. Who says desperation isn't the mother of invention? "Like physics," I answered.

Now he laughed. "Like physics!" he snorted. "You mean like Newton and falling apples and other rotten fruit?"

"No," I said. "Like for every action, there is an equal and opposition reaction. Like the Bernoulli effect, you know, where in physics the disrupted airflow over a wing makes an airplane fly. The flow of public relations can lift a company's image above others in its industry, even if its financials and other data wouldn't suggest that it merits so much positive attention."

Now my friendly skeptic was listening.

"You mean, like, the answer to why one of my competitors gets more attention from the media could be the scientific application of p.r.?"

"Exactly," I said.

My listener was now more of a friend than a skeptic. He wasn't convinced. But he did pay the bar tab.

Over the weeks and months since that conversation, I've thought about it a great deal.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in public relations is consistently demonstrating measurable, tangible results from our activities, whether it's an analyst tour for a tech company, a media relations effort, or an internal branding effort touching tens of thousands of employees.

For decades, scholars have chased this elusive Holy Grail of p.r., the scientific, measurable justification for what we do.

Agencies have concocted and patented a wide variety of tools that claim to prove that public relations merits serious consideration (i.e. real financial budgets) from clients. And clients have pushed back.

Many clients, schooled in advertising and wowed by the application of often meaningless statistics (what does a "hit" on an Internet banner ad really measure? How impressed is someone by an "impression"?) have blithely spent millions to fire 30-second shotgun blasts at a multi-million-dollar clip on TV. At the same time, they've ignored public relations costing a tenth as much because p.r. lacks the "scientific" or "measurable" proof that it works ("like advertising").

This book will not deliver the Holy Grail of public relations.

But it is my hope that it will steer the quest for it in a fruitful direction, one that aligns the practice of public relations with sound scientific principles that demonstrate the power of p.r. to deliver results that can be replicated and measured in a variety of environments.

I hope this book turns more of the friendly skeptics in corporate boardrooms into friends who understand the application of public relations as well as they do so many other tools of running an effective organization.

At a minimum, I hope it pays a few more bar tabs.