

Arthur W. Page

The Legacy of Public Relations Excellence Behind the Name

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There really was a man named Arthur Page. He is not an invention. Every one currently engaged in the practice of corporate public relations owes their careers, in large measure, to his pioneering work.

A Brief Biography

Arthur Page was born September 10, 1883, in Aberdeen, North Carolina. That was only seven years after United States occupation forces withdrew from the South after the Civil War.

He was one of four offspring of Alou Wilson Page and Walter Hines Page.

His father, Walter Hines Page, was a journalist of exceptional distinction. He was editor of the *New York World* and, later, the *Atlantic Monthly*, which he is credited with saving. Still later in his career, he was a founder of Doubleday Page, the publishing company. He was an advisor to Woodrow Wilson. He was the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain from 1913 to 1918, the period of World War 1.

Arthur Page attended The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey and was graduated from Harvard College in 1905.

Following graduation, he took an entry level job at Doubleday Page. His career there spanned 22 years. He rose through the ranks to a vice presidency in charge of the company's magazine group. His special passion was a magazine titled *The World's Work*, a periodical devoted to commerce-manufacturing, agriculture and business in general. For *The World's Work*, which he personally edited, he wrote many powerful editorials describing and explaining the special obligations of corporations in a democratic society.

In 1927, about the time Mr. Page was considering a career change, he received a fortuitous telephone call from Walter Gifford, the chief executive of the AT&T company. Mr. Gifford invited him to come to New York City for a meeting. When the two met a few days later, Gifford asked Page if he would be interested in writing a book about AT&T. Page answered by saying "no." He explained that while a book might be a nice ego trip for top management, it wouldn't likely do the company any good. As their conversation came toward a conclusion, Gifford referred to the editorials Page had been publishing in *The World's Work*, and asked Page if he would be interested in going to work for AT&T and putting his ideas into practice. Page said "yes," but only if the position would be a policy-making job. He said he was not the least interested in being a publicity man. Gifford affirmed the responsibilities of the position-and on that day, corporate America gained its first-ever vice president in charge of what we call public relations.

Arthur Page remained a vice president of AT&T until his retirement at age 64 in 1946. He was elected to the board of directors of the company in 1931 and remained a director until 1948. During that span of time, he institutionalized public relations organizations throughout the Bell Telephone System. And as a consequence of his actions and example, as well as his many speeches, letters, and presentations, he fashioned a model of public relations and public relations performance that today remains the ideal to which all of us aspire.

Mr. Page's imprint extends well beyond the AT&T corporation. He was a member of the boards of directors of the Chase Bank, Westinghouse, Kennecott Copper, and Continental Oil. He was a trustee of Bennington College, Teachers College at Columbia University, the Carnegie Corporation, Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Morgan Library, the Southern Educational Foundation and Farmers Federal of Asheville, North Carolina. He was also a member of the board of overseers of Harvard University.

He was chairman of the Joint Army Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation, which, among other things, spawned the USO. Following World War II, he was a founder of the Free Europe Committee, which, among other things, created Radio Free Europe.

Throughout his life, he remained an unpaid consultant to U.S. Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Dwight Eisenhower, as well as to countless cabinet secretaries and to the State Department and the War Department.

When his father was Ambassador to Great Britain, he began the custom of writing periodic letters describing the mood-as well as the implications-of trends in public opinion in the U.S. These prescient observations were quickly recognized for their clarity and value and he continued the practice throughout his lifetime, at the invitation of many U.S. Ambassadors posted throughout the world.

He was summoned to Washington in 1945 by his friend, Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War. His task, as it turned out, was to prepare President Truman's announcement of the atomic bomb.

Following his retirement from AT&T, Arthur Page undertook a third career as counselor to corporations as well as the government. He had developed a warm and personal relationship with General Dwight D. Eisenhower during the war and there is much evidence that Page was particularly influential in encouraging "Ike" to accept the presidency of Columbia University and, subsequently, to enter the race for the Presidency of the United States.

Mr. Page died in New York City, on September 5, 1960.

The Page Principles

The Arthur Page Society, in its handbook for members and in other literature, has condensed some ideas that derive from Mr. Page's legacy and presented them as "principles" in a series of cryptic statements. These statements scarcely do justice to the rich legacy of a man whose body of work wrote the book, so to speak, on how to conduct corporate public relations. Notice, I say, his body of work wrote the book, Mr. Page did not write the book. Hence, it is left to us to sift

through an enormous accumulation of speeches, memoranda, letters and other materials that mark the trail- for us-of what he believed, what he thought and what he taught.

During his own lifetime, I'm certain Mr. Page would never have considered codifying his theories or labeling them as "principles." That the Arthur Page Society has done so decades after his death simply reflects a desire to emphasize some ideas that deserve to be preserved and to give the Society a unifying sense of mission.

The statements in our handbook are like notches on a few trees in a vast forest. They point the directions. They are not by any means the chapter headings in a "summa" of Mr. Page's work.

To find the value in what the Page Society has identified as "principles," you have to understand what corporate public relations is in the Page context. It is not about "communications," except at the margins. Mr. Page was an advisor, a counselor. He most certainly acknowledged the importance of communications and communications techniques. He was himself a gifted writer as well as an innovative communicator. He referred to the communications functions as "necessary" and said further, "... it seems a good idea to combine them in a single department or organization as a matter of administrative convenience."

However, the heart as well as the power of his ideas about effective corporate governance are to be found elsewhere in an altogether different context. His dictums are all about policy ... all about timely management action or intervention ... all about integrity over the long pull. This is the context in which the Page Society urges business leadership to embrace what we have come to call the Page Principles.

For example, here are a few of the "principles." "Tell the truth." This is not always easy to do. Even so, this first principle means what it says, no exceptions. Tell the truth all the time, every time to your customers, your employees and to all your stakeholders. It means get the truth when the truth, as so often happens, comes in different versions, differing perceptions, when management is thrashing about trying to find the right course of action, the right policy. To us, it means tell the truth to your boss and to the Chief Executive Officer and to your client. Truth is a habit of the mind, a basic building block of character and integrity in a business no less than in an individual. To my mind, that's a highly desirable working principle.

Mr. Page said over and over again that effective public relations is 90 percent doing and 10 percent talking about it. That's just another way of saying that actions speak louder than words. That proposition does not require further proof, explanation, or elaboration.

"Listen to the customer" and "Manage for tomorrow." The former means take account, carefully, of your stakeholders' legitimate entitlements and preferences, and adapt your business practices accordingly. The latter means do this continuously-and take corrective action right away when you see trouble ahead.

"Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends upon it." This "principle" does not refer to communications. Keep in mind the Page context. This is about policy, about action, about a way of life in conducting the affairs of a large enterprise. In today's parlance, this is

"culture," a state of mind, a combination of behaviors that lives the belief and walks the talk that all business in a democratic society begins with public permission and exists by public approval. You've heard that somewhere before, I hope.

Why would the Page Society choose to stress 11 principles" that appear so basic, perhaps even a bit too "goody-goody" for the cynical, hard-boiled, competitive world of business today? The most obvious reason, it seems to me, is that simple, clear cut principles like these appear to be unknown to much of today's corporate management.

Too many corporations don't tell the truth. Even a casual observer of the news of the day cannot fail to note how often they are caught dissembling or spinning half truths or telling outright lies.

Isn't it obvious that many corporations and corporate leaders time and again express their ideals and intentions in lofty rhetoric that is time and time again repudiated, not by the public, but by their own actions. Employees notice. Customers aren't fooled.

How many companies listen to their stakeholders diligently, patiently, with an open mind, and for the purpose of considering some modification of their policies, practices, or products? How many companies even bother to assign the responsibility for listening?

How many CEOs today genuinely believe that business in a Democratic society exists by the sufferance of the public? If any CEOs of Fortune 500 companies hold this belief today, they evidently belong to a secret society.

These appraisals may be harsh, at least in the rather blunt terms I have used. But if there is no basis in fact for this assessment, then the Arthur W. Page Society may as well fold its hand and go out of business.

The Arthur W. Page Society was created to undertake a mission. Our mission is to bolster, where it needs bolstering, and to restore, where it has been lost, the critical importance of some simple principles that long ago earned public relations a seat at top management's table.

An extension of that mission is to remind you that we may be able to retain that seat if we keep in mind what earned us that seat in the first place. And a further extension is to persistently ask why these simple principles are so often absent in the practice of corporate public relations as we find it today.

In His Own Words

How did Arthur W. Page himself explain the essence of public relations to his contemporaries in management? The following will give you just a whiff. It is a portion of a letter he wrote to one of the top executives of the Continental Oil Company. He had been invited to make a speech to the company's top management and in this letter he summarizes what he proposes to talk about. Please note how he demystifies public relations. His language is economical, uncluttered, unpretentious, his ideas so logical he leaves the reader no avenue of dissent. He speaks, not as a pompous wise man, but as a friend and colleague and he reveals a gracious, if mischievous,

sense of humor.

Here are a few passages from that letter, quoted verbatim:

"The Continental Oil Company was chartered by public authority on the assumption that it would serve the public's needs for petroleum products. The theory was that its self-interest would insure its activity and competition would keep its products and services and its prices satisfactory.

"That is still the main basis of Continental's relation to the public. It is still a fact that the company was set up under public authority to benefit the public, and public authority can at any time limit its functions, its methods or abolish it altogether.

"So we, like all other companies, live by public approval and roughly speaking, the more approval you have the better you live. This is the fundamental reason for seeking public approval. The fundamental way of getting it is to deserve it.

"For a long time, business men figured that if they produced goods at a price that the public would buy, that was ample evidence that they deserved and had public approval. But it turned out not to be as simple as that. Business found it could lose public approval by having trouble with labor, by being unpopular in its hometown, by using selling methods that didn't suit the government, and by an infinite number of other things, some of them seemingly quite harmless.

"So it has become generally accepted that a corporation must be a good citizen in all kinds of ways besides a good producer and distributor. Failing to meet an ever changing and sometimes whimsical definition by the public of what is a good corporate citizen may be the biggest hazard a company runs.

"So it is worthwhile to put some first-class effort on the somewhat nebulous job of being a good citizen. And having done this, it is just common sense to let your light shine where it can be seen. Publicity is the art of telling a good story well. If the story isn't good fundamentally, there is no one who can tell it well, and it is a waste of money to try.

"So our public relations are mostly what we do, but if what we do isn't exposed to view, we may not get the benefit of it." There you have it—a text book, a public relations primer in exactly 379 words.

As you can see, the theology of public relations, even the Page Principles, amount to nothing more complicated than plain, old-fashioned good business judgment.

It is, therefore, the mission of the Arthur W. Page Society to illuminate the path and, to the extent possible, create the necessary momentum to renew and reestablish some simple, proven principles that will always be a corner-stone of effective reputation management.

Isn't that a goal worth pursuing?