

Speech to the Bell Telephone System's General Operating Conference
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Page, A. W. (1927, May). What publicity and advertising can do to help operation. Speech includes a general discussion with Mr. Page. Speech presented at the Bell Telephone System's General Operating Conference.

Summary

Page addresses the benefits of the publicity department. He talks about his experience preparing propaganda for World War I and outlines how to effectively conduct public relations and communicate a memorable company message.

The greatest limitation to public relations is the inability to change the facts. The publicity department is responsible for managing relationships with the press, getting information to the public, and monitoring public opinion. Effective public relations requires more than sending a message, it requires getting people to listen. The best way to communicate with your audience is through simple, repetitious messages; the public does not need to understand your whole business.

Key topics

Advertising
Public Relations, the message - creating your PR message, simplifying your message
Public Relations - effective public relations, challenges/limitations, PR functions, value of Public Relations
Propoganda
Public Opinion
Publicity

Page Principles

Listen to the customer
Manage for tomorrow

What publicity and advertising can do to help operation

Speech Includes a General Discussion with Mr. Page

I am in a very humble spirit this morning after Mr. Hosford's explanation last night of how the Western Electric Company can take any raw material and automatically turn it into any desired shape, perfectly, rapidly, certainly and at a reasonable cost.

In contrast to that, our operation is an effort to make a small dent in the raw material of the public consciousness, and we have no machine for doing that automatically, perfectly, certainly or rapidly. The only thing we can guarantee is a reasonable cost. Now, perhaps, public relations belong in the category of those activities

described by General Carty as an exact science about which very little is known. I regret to say that most of what little knowledge we have of this science is knowledge of its limitations. The first and greatest limitation is that it cannot change the facts. It can act as a kind of loud speaker to broadcast the good service that you people provide, but its effectiveness has a very fading quality if there is any bad service. In other words, it will not act as a substitute for service if you should ever need such a substitute.

I was very much impressed with that during the war. I had a job preparing propaganda to drop over the lines on the Germans. By the time we got there, things were going very well, and we dropped quite a lot of these little leaflets on the German soldiers. On one side of the leaflet, we explained to the Germans how many soldiers and guns and kilometers they had lost to the Allies the week before. On the other side of the American edition of this leaflet, we put down the menu, which the regulations provided that we should give German prisoners if they came in. Quite a lot of these fellows when they surrendered used to have these little leaflets and bring them in, one hand up and in the other the menu. I got the impression that this propaganda business was quite successful, and we did pretty well.

Then I got to talking with the French and the British with whom we were cooperating and I said, "How do you get on when the tide is going the other way? Two or three months ago, after the Fifth British Army break and the French defeat at the Chemin des Dames, what did you tell the Germans then?"

They said, "We didn't tell them anything. Nobody had time to drop paper on them. Guns and bombs and soldiers didn't stop them, and we didn't bother with the minor horrors of war."

I don't think when we come into difficulties or bad situations in the Bell System we need be as completely out of the picture as we propaganda fellows were in the war under similar circumstances, but the truth is we can't change the facts. Yet in spite of these limitations that we can't change the facts, that the propaganda works least well when you most want it, and that what it does accomplish is not easily susceptible to proof or measurement, I think from outside observation before I came into the Bell System; that the publicity in the Bell System has been immensely useful.

I am going to try to outline a few of what it seems to me are its functions and objectives, merely for the purpose of discussion. This is an ante, which I hope will lead you all into this discussion. That is what it is for.

The obvious function, which the Publicity Department has, is contact with the press for the purpose of giving it news stories, advertising, moving pictures—incidentally in that connection there were two years ago about a million people who saw moving pictures of the Bell System. Last year, there were something over twenty million. There were three hundred and thirty-one thousand showings of the Bell System movies.

Then there are billboards and all similar additional methods of reaching the public. Having had nothing to do with setting up this organization, I can say it is an extremely efficient one for getting material to the public.

Now in this field, it seems to me the next step is to further develop the idea that the whole system is a field laboratory. What we want to get is fuller information of what

is tried, here, there and everywhere, and get that into 195 in such shape that it can be codified and understood and filed so that if a similar problem comes up anywhere else in the System, we will have ready a certain amount of data. Whether that data is exact or inexact it will anyhow be the best experience that the System has had up to that time. We may be able by that process to keep some one man from repeating the mistakes some other man has made and maybe help to work out something approaching exact knowledge of how to proceed in various kinds of situations.

If these facts are not subject to being measured, sometimes the majority or unanimity of opinion may serve as a fact. I think, probably opinion serves in this capacity in most things. By the accumulation of this data, we shall at least have the best information that the System has had at any point. When service changes, rate cases or anything of that kind come up, we will have something to draw on and be prepared to serve anybody that wants to get such service.

I don't know how accurate that can get to be, but there is one thing I am certain of, that there is no other organization in the United States, which is so well and happily situated with what amounts to headquarters all over the country, to acquire a fairly exact knowledge of public relations. If we use this organization, which we have as a laboratory to its fullest extent, we ought to know more about that aspect of our business than any other company in this country can know about that aspect of their business.

In doing this, there is one principle I would like to mention. In publicity, as in other matters, I believe simplicity is a sign of greatness. The Bell System has this extraordinary machine for putting things in the papers and reels in the movie houses and lectures on the platform, and even printed books in the schools. To make the best use of this machinery, I think we ought to have our message just as simple as we can possibly make it.

If you had one boy on the seat in front of you and he couldn't get away, you could get quite a lot in his head in a given time. If you get about twenty boys in the room, the percentage that you get into their heads is less. The larger the audience the harder it is to instruct. Now you follow that idea out. We are talking to 120,000,000 people. What is more, they don't have to stay in a classroom and they don't have to listen, they don't have to read, unless they would like what they read, and they don't have to pay any attention to you unless what you say interests them, and the percentage of effectiveness that you can hope for under those circumstances is fairly small. The shots that hit are going to be very few compared to those that you shoot. The only way you can be sure of making a reasonable dent in the public consciousness is to have what you say so simple that it is easy to understand, and then say it over and over and over again.

If we spend the amount of money that we do, or any amount that is reasonable at all, we can't possibly tell them many things. The consequence is we have got to, if we want to be sure of getting something in their minds, simplify our own thought as to what are the essential things to tell them and then stick to telling them those things and forget the rest. We can't possibly hope to explain the whole telephone business so that the public thoroughly understands it.

We can put our material in the paper in two ways: one free and the other advertising. There used to be a good deal of objection on the part of the press to free publicity, handouts, and so forth, as they call it. And the press still, from time to time,

passes resolutions against that kind of activity. But they don't mean it, and for this reason, the information which they print is so various that they haven't got the staff to collect it. You take any paper, you take this morning's Times, for instance, and you go through it. You will find that about 50 percent of it or more is material which has been given to the paper. They didn't originate it. The reporting staff of the paper did not create it. It does some collecting, but it does not originate it. It is prepared in one form or another by some person who has the facts and wants to get them into the paper, and within certain more or less definitely recognized limits, the papers take that material. What they actually collect themselves is of a different kind.

The material that is given them is the record of the ordinary, orderly progress of our civilized activities in business and affairs of that kind. What the newspapers chiefly collect for themselves are the unusual things, abnormalities of life, murders and accidents, etc.

I think within proper limits, there is no objection and there is no difficulty in using that free space.

So far, I have been talking about the direct service of the publicity department to the Bell System, that is essentially giving the facts to the public which the Bell System wants the public to get. Now, the other side of the job, and perhaps both more intangible and more important, is to take to the Bell System the facts which the public wants it to get.

Professor Ripley in his book called, "Wall Street and Main Street," suggested that the corporations have public representatives on the Boards of Directors. With all respect to those distinguished bodies, I believe a more effective plan is to have representatives of the public in the management, and that is the job of the publicity department.

The publicity department ought to be in a position to know as nearly as humanly possible what is going on in the company and what is going on outside. It ought to be so constituted that it would automatically, even like Mr. Hosford's machine, check each proposal for its immediate and future effect on the public mind and from the public point of view. In that side of its business, it ought to act all the time from the public point of view, even when that seems in conflict with the operating point of view. It ought to bring to the management at all times what it thinks the public is going to feel about a thing.

In this capacity, the publicity department isn't hampered by the necessity of making the business pay, meeting a budget, and seeing that the daily operations keep up. It is free to study what the public wants.

For instance, it would have been a most proper thing for the publicity department to raise the question that Mr. Gherardi raised yesterday about the poles. The question having been raised, the publicity department ought to find out what it can about the probable public attitude on this subject, whether, for instance, the organizations that are fighting roadside billboards when they get further along with that fight won't include the pole lines with it, and whether if they do they are likely to be able to get laws passed against pole lines as they did against billboards in Florida. Let's take a case in the Chesapeake and Potomac territory. The publicity department down there might well know just how serious is the objection of the owner of the two largest papers in Virginia to the pole line which I must say lacks in grace what it contributes in utility to the new

highway between Norfolk and Virginia Beach. At Virginia Beach is the new hotel which that newspaper owner owns and the tourist traffic is what they are all interested in down there, and that pole line sticks up rather as a sore question in their minds.

When that question was raised about the pole lines yesterday, Mr. Barnard immediately said, "Well now, you have to remember in that connection that taking pole lines down is expensive, it costs money and putting cable under ground costs money." That is his business, to know what it will cost to take the poles down. It is the publicity department's business to know what it will cost to have them up.

Of course, the real problem in that question as in the other side of the question is to endeavor to get more nearly accurate diagnosis. We can't just go in on a hunch and say, "I don't think the public is going to like this thing," but we must get as nearly as we possibly can some kind of data to judge by.

Now going a step further in the program. Suppose it turns out that the poles in some place are to be taken down. Then the publicity department ought to be prepared a long way ahead on how it was going to break that news to the public. Perhaps the better plan is not to tell the public. Perhaps it is better to do it without saying anything about it; perhaps on the other hand, a situation arises so that if you don't tell these organizations that are working against the poles beforehand, they will start a public agitation and if you do tell them beforehand that you are going at it as fast as reasonable, they will aid in a friendly way. The main point is we ought never to be caught making explanations overnight, in a hurry, trying to think up excuses. We ought to keep ahead of the game and see what is coming in the public mind sufficiently to have a plan ready on whatever is coming up.

Then I think the publicity department ought to sit up nights to figure out things the Telephone Company can do for the public outside of regular business. I don't mean only providing good service. I will give you an example: When the Ohio Company made the industrial survey for Ohio a year or two ago, that probably was worth more in good will than any amount of the ordinary material that went into the press. The Telephone Company was in position to make that more accurately and effectively than anybody else. It is the sort of extra thing they could do, and the more of those things we can do, the better I think the position we are in will be.

Now these are some of the things, which seem to me to belong within the publicity department's orbit. They can't be done without the conviction by the rest of the organization that they are worthwhile.

Now these remarks are but marks for you to shoot at. It is the open season. I got some wholesome truths at Briarcliff recently and I hope I get many more here now. No matter what you say, you can't hurt my feelings. I borrowed these things I have been telling you around the shop in the last two or three months. If they don't stand up under fire, I will give them back where I got them and just take the new ones.

DISCUSSION

MR. BICKELHAUPT: I don't know whether I am in order, after this talk about poles. We have poles on the road and we probably will have for a good many years. I always think as I ride along and see the poles, if only in some way it was called to the attention of the people who see them that this is part of the speech highway, national

highway system, and that it is part of the Bell System, we would be utilizing some of the publicity value of our own plant and always wondered if there wasn't any way we could do that.

MR. PAGE: Well, I don't know. I haven't any collected facts about that, but it may be that the public mind is such that it would be just as well if it didn't know the poles were ours. But I agree with your philosophy that the utilization of our plant to tell our story is a good thing. There are lots of places where we might watch that. For instance, somebody came in and offered Mr. Gherardi a large sum of money for the right to advertise in the telephone booths where people are shut up and can't get out, and there is nothing to do but either read what is in front of them or draw pictures. It would probably save the company property, and provide a chance to tell people something you want to tell them if we put something up in the booths for them to read. There may be other places on the company property that we could use to get ideas to the people.

MR. DRESSER: It may not be a good question, but it seems to me we are always telling the public such things. Why don't we tell them something about the limitations of the business and educate them that way a little bit?

MR. PAGE: I think we must limit ourselves to a few simple things that we want them to know which we think are the most important. I don't know what those things are. I am trying to find out.

CHAIRMAN GHERARDI: You have probably seen that little story that Mr. Gifford suggested we get up some time ago, and Mr. Waterson or some of his people wrote it, about cut-offs, with the thought that it might be a good idea in the Bell Quarterly, (and it would be copied) to tell about some of those service difficulties, not overemphasizing them, but explaining how they occur and why they occur, and let the people understand the cause of some of the difficulties of the service.

MR. PAGE: There is this differentiation I should have made before: For instance, I think there are probably not over half a million people who decide what the United States does, prime movers, so to speak, in thinking. Now, if you could get a majority of those people (and you can talk a little longer to them if you happen to get them in a place, where they are interested) you can give them a little more philosophy than in that simple message that you have to present to the big crowd. If these key people are thoroughly persuaded they will effect the result on the rest of the crowd sooner or later. How sooner or later it is depends upon whether the rest of the crowd is subject to ignorance and agitation on the other side of the question.

If you have this group really convinced of your philosophy, and the rest of the crowd more or less with you in general, then your program can go along pretty rapidly. There is a very distinct differentiation between the problem of teaching those people who control opinion and trying to explain something a little more in detail to them, and the problem of reaching the great mass with a few simple fundamental things.

MR. STRYKER: When the Virginia Beach Boulevard was to be built, the pole line was close to the edge, about three feet. Of our own accord, without any suggestion on the part of any one, we felt that there might be some accidents unless the line was moved back. I think we missed a bet right there, from getting your idea. If we had said in the papers that the Chesapeake and Potomac, in order to keep the poles away from the

highway, were going to acquire some private right of way, which we did by the way (we got the pole line back in some places ten feet), we might have then got a good deal of credit for spending the money and building that line through there. I will admit it does stand out. If we had to do it over again, we would probably build it the same way, unless public opinion was so strong against it that we might put through a cable on a low pole line.

MR. PAGE: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

CHAIRMAN GHERARDI: There is one thing which I don't remember whether Mr. Page mentioned or not, but I want to emphasize, and that is the proposition that while we can look for a great deal of help from the publicity department, they also rightly can look to the operating department for much help. I want to tell you gentlemen that I found it real helpful to go in and discuss with Mr. Page many operating questions that were of a nature that in one way or another affect the public, although one might easily say that the method of running a trouble desk or something like that was hardly a matter in which the publicity department were very much concerned. We can only get our publicity people familiar with the problems of the business if we take every opportunity to take that kind of thing up with our publicity people and get them into the game. It is pretty hard for anybody to get into the operating game if the operating people want to build a fence around it and keep them out of it. It is a hard fence to break through. Now, nobody has the desire to do that, but I think we have got to go further than not having a fence there. I think every now and then we have got to go to them and take them by the hand and lead them into the operating field, so that they will feel perfectly at home there, and while perhaps not knowing everything that is in there, at least they will feel perfectly free to go in and look at what there is, and talk to the operating people about it.

MR. PAGE: I am exceedingly glad you said that for we can't serve effectively without that knowledge and cooperation.