Public Relations, Integrated Marketing Communications, and Professional Development in PR

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I've been asked to speak today about public relations and integrated marketing communications (IMC), more specifically how the two disciplines fit together and how such synergies provide opportunities and challenges for all practitioners—especially students currently studying public relations at the undergraduate or graduate levels who plan to seek positions in the field after they complete their studies. I'll certainly deliver on that promise, as well as what I consider to be a far more important one: those areas and related skillsets new practitioners ought to master if they intend to flourish in their public relations careers.

To begin, let me share some personal history. I started working in public relations in the late 1980s, initially at a Silicon Valley agency. I found my position by networking (i.e., a colleague in Toastmaster worked at the agency and introduced me). I was hired because I presented myself well, and quickly assumed major responsibilities for pitching stories to reporters and editors for a range of clients. It was hard work, and I learned a lot. I have fond memories of that agency stint, and to this day remain in touch with many of the individuals I worked with back then.

I subsequently moved to an in-house position and, about a year and a half later, began consulting. I didn't really have a plan or an entrepreneurial bent, just the conviction that I could
practice what I understood then to be public relations far more effectively and profitably by working for clients of my choosing as opposed to another agency or organization. And so I did, reaching out to my network (including many of the people I worked with at the agency) to cultivate a diverse mix of clients to whom I provided publicity and, increasingly, related education and training services. I also began to teach public relations and related courses at universities located throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

While I loved the teaching and training aspects of my work, I grew increasingly restless with my public relations consulting as it largely meant publicity. Granted, I loved the thrill of the pitch in the beginning and more importantly the opportunity to see my hard work result in media coverage that my clients relished. Yet the thrill subsided for several reasons. First, I saw my activities increasingly removed from the success or failure of organizations. That is, I could generate tons of coverage on products only to see my efforts flounder (and in some cases even result in the loss of the account) because the client couldn't secure distribution of its product through traditional channels (these were the days before the Internet) or because of any one of a number of issues related to the individuals or organizations with whom I was working.

Second, I saw what I was doing becoming a commodity. When I started my business in 1992, very few people were self-employed public relations practitioners. The market was slowly becoming more crowded, and with it the demand for my services among clients I found appealing tapered off.

Expanding my marketing efforts didn't seem to work, as I observed that when organizations thought of public relations they thought of publicity. I had pretty much decided I didn't want to do that kind of work anymore. More significantly, my efforts to make a case for a broader definition of public relations as I understood it hit a wall as I didn't have either the
language, education, training, experience, or, most importantly, the persistence to see this challenge through to the point where I was generating results in terms of new clients and more interesting and challenging projects.

Yet within the seeds of this frustration I was slowly able to broaden my horizons and, when relevant, practice in terms of what constitutes public relations—or at the very least, what practitioners can be expected to do. That leads me to the first subject of my talk today, integrated marketing communications, or what is often referred to as IMC.

In his October 1, 2012 blog post The History (and Future) of PR, Richard Edelman argues that, among other behavioral changes, public relations practitioners need to “aim to have the dominant creative idea. The stranglehold of advertising on the marketer is now loosened.” This perspective, which made sense to me in light of experiences I’ve had over the years as an independent consultant who often participated on project teams charged with executing plans across a range of functions including but not limited to publicity, demands that professionals gain new skills and experiences that fall under the broader realms of marketing and promotions. For our purposes, we’ll group these experiences under IMC.

We’ll begin by defining IMC. Simply put, it’s a cross functional process to develop relationships with customers and other stakeholders by controlling or influencing messages sent to them. There are three key concepts here that demand further explanation. First, cross functional means that different departments and agencies work together; second, it’s vital to plan and monitor different messages; and third, communication is actually dialogue between the company and the consumer. Optimally, all three components are present in an IMC campaign.

Marketing communication refers to all communications functions used in marketing a product. These include advertising, marketing, public relations, direct response marketing, events
and sponsorships, sales promotion, and even personal sales and customer service. In IMC these functions are integrated, along with areas such as employees, customers and business partners, databases, and corporate culture and mission.

Consider what’s behind the growth of IMC and you’ll understand why it’s so important in today’s business landscape—and attractive to firms as well as professionals looking to expand their skills base (and with it work and corresponding revenue). Growing diversity among products, consumers, and media make for an increasingly competitive marketplace that challenges organizations to use a wide range of tools to achieve core marketing objectives, and to do so effectively and efficiently. That’s where IMC comes into play.

I think of examples during my career where the different IMC functions were not coordinated, like the time when the advertisement for a new product ran a week before the press release was issued. Such lack of coordination is even less acceptable today than it was then, which makes it critical for the savvy public relations practitioner to understand IMC and incorporate practices into their professional toolkit if they are to increase their value to organizations that wish to engage their services.

IMC competencies can be learned on the job in some cases, and through formal study via classes, certificates, or degree programs. Having taught for the M.S. degree program in IMC offered by West Virginia University, I can vouch for the value of such formal study in terms of increased skills and opportunities to assume new, challenging roles in public relations, IMC, and/or marketing, depending on individual interests.

Underlying this focus on IMC and the decision to ask me to speak about it today lies a more fundamental conversation—which you might even call a debate—about what public
relations is and whether or not the orientation towards marketing (consistent with a focus on IMC) best serves the needs of the function and with that professional practice as a whole.

PRSA’s recent effort to crowsource a definition of public relations certainly makes this topic timely and relevant, but the concerns it raised are much deeper and more longstanding than you may realize. To start, as my brief discussion of my career in public relations suggests, there’s the widespread perception that public relations is publicity. In other words, as many seem to believe, the sole value of the function is to generate positive press coverage on behalf of a product, organization, or cause. If you were to scan tweets and blog postings on public relations, as I have done, you’d see ample evidence in support of this position. Let me offer one example. One unnamed individual I follow on Twitter acknowledged that they understood public relations is more than publicity but nonetheless used the two terms synonymously because "that's the way people understand it."

In fact, as I’ve argued previously, publicity is not public relations. And I’ve offered related principles that correspond to such a perspective.

Now, that’s not to say that publicity isn’t important. It is. I admire the accomplishments of skilled publicists, as I can appreciate their achievements and value to organizations based on my work earlier in my career. It’s just that publicity by itself is not the same as public relations.

More broadly, I’ve seen public relations used to describe a melange of practices that collectively offer little by way of consistency or clarity in terms of what exactly we do. To make matters worse, there's no body to ensure compliance with any one definition leaving us each seemingly to fend for ourselves even with the new PRSA definition (not to mention all the definitions you probably encountered in your public relations courses).
As a result, it seems public relations is whatever the user wants it to be. And I’m not confident that there’s any consensus towards collective action in support of one definition as opposed to another. Here I think back to a conversation I had with the owner of a San Francisco-based firm several years ago where I voiced my frustration with this apparent disconnect between public relations as defined in the literature and actual practice. He responded flippantly to my concerns with the following statement: "I don't care what you call it, as long as my clients pay their bills." My sense is that many in the industry share his perspective.

In response to the widespread perception, or misperception, of public relations, some practitioners I know have stopped using public relations to describe what they do. Some say they're in strategic communications; others say marketing. The bottom line here is to speak in terms that are understandable to those in a position to engage us, whether that’s when we work for an agency, as an independent consultant, or in house for any organization. If “public relations” doesn’t make sense to these prospective clients, therefore, there doesn’t seem to be much reason to use it and the term continues to lose whatever standing it might have had in the marketplace.

I can be as cynical as those aforementioned practitioners who’ve thrown up their hands in despair over the challenges of working in a field that suffers from a lack of understanding and in some quarters respect. But I haven't given up hope. And that brings me back to my decision to return to school to complete my doctorate, which I completed in 2011.

In committing to the study of organizational behavior and leadership, I began to gain an understanding of the broader frameworks within which public relations practitioners function—and in the process, the frustration I had encountered during the latter phase of my consulting career began to melt away.
More importantly, I returned to the study of public relations through a new lens that inspired not only my research on leadership development among club officers in PRSSA but a framework for professional development and the standing of public relations in the community at large, not to mention a perspective that threatens to shatter hegemony of the media relations paradigm upon which the public relations-publicity equation is based.

What I’m talking about here is the theory of excellent leadership in public relations. You may recall studying in your classes Grunig’s (1992) landmark IABC Excellence Study, which included leadership as one of 12 characteristics of excellent organizations. The theory of excellent leadership in public relations derives from that study. In other words, what we encounter here is insight related to what leaders in public relations do and what makes them excellent. These are critical questions for every professional to ask and ponder as they plot the course of their continuing education in IMC and other areas, not to mention the overall arc of their development as public relations professionals.

Let’s consider how scholars have defined excellent leadership in public relations based on their research, which has focused largely on the experiences of senior-level practitioners. Excellent leadership in public relations has been defined as “a dynamic process that encompasses public relations executives’ personal attributes and efforts in leading the team to facilitate mutual relationships inside and outside of organizations, to participate in the organization’s strategic decision making processes, and to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members” (Meng, Berger, & Gower, 2009).

Moreover, strategic decision-making capability, problem-solving ability, and communication knowledge and expertise are the top three important qualities of excellent leaders (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012). Other attributes and competencies include self-
Given this definition and related explanation, we need to consider what elements are critical for the successful realization of leadership among public relations professionals in today’s organizations. In other words, what do public relations professionals need to do to become excellent leaders?

First and most important, professionals need access to the dominant coalition—those senior level executives who run an organization. The goal here is to influence decision making; such an orientation, in other words, is fundamental to the perspective on public relations embedded in the definition and no doubt in many of the works you’ve studied. You have to earn the right to contribute to an organization in this fashion, as it’s not automatically granted to you. To this end, public relations leaders need to participate in the power dynamics of an organization, in the process learning how to wield influence, work across the organization, and act as a change agent when needed.

I believe that the way to achieve this leadership role in public relations, whether you’re working internally in an organization, with an agency, or independently, is to aspire to be what David Maister calls “a trusted advisor.” In this role, “virtually all issues, personal and professional, are open to discussion and exploration. The trusted advisor is the person the client turns to when an issue first arises, often in times of great urgency: a crisis, a change, a triumph, or a defeat” (Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000).

Being a trusted advisor, moreover, requires the ability to focus on the other person’s needs while minimizing focus on ourselves; curiosity; reliability, credibility; and the ability to establish an intimate relationship with internal or external clients.
These concepts of leadership in public relations and trusted advisor might seem beyond the reach to newcomers to the profession like you, as they require you to not simply work on your skills but yourself. In other words, the role is as much about who you are as what you do. Rest assured, researchers have explored how professionals typically cultivate these aptitudes and skills. Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman (2012) argued that working experiences, individual initiative and desire, and the examples set by role models are the three most valuable sources for leadership skill development—and, I’d argue, being a trusted advisor by extension. That would seem to make it incumbent on your employers to help you get there; that said, I’ve seen that such support and assistance is often lacking. It’s therefore up to you to determine whether or not this path is relevant to you. If so, and I can help you in some way in your journey to realize your potential as a leader in public relations, please let me know.
References


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Dr. Mitchell Friedman is Associate Dean, Career Development and Student Affairs at Presidio Graduate School. Founded in 2003, Presidio Graduate School educates and inspires a new generation of skilled, visionary and enterprising leaders to transform business and public policy and create a more just, prosperous and sustainable world. Through innovative MBA, MPA, Dual Degree and Executive Certificate programs in Sustainable Management, Presidio activates students and professionals across a range of disciplines, industries and sectors to bridge the gap between commerce and the common good.

Dr. Friedman brings to his role at Presidio more than two decades of experience as a professional development consultant, which includes the development and delivery of training programs for organizations that helped to increase the retention of valued employees. More importantly, as an educator and administrator in higher education over the past 14 years, he evolved into a skilled advisor and coach to students enrolled in numerous academic degree programs offered by institutions such as the University of San Francisco. He also has received outstanding evaluations as an instructor in traditional classroom and online environments and has earned the reputation as an engaged, enthusiastic, and rigorously learner centered educator.

Dr. Friedman currently teaches Crisis Communications and Reputation Management for West Virginia University’s M.S. program in Integrated Marketing Communications. He’s also taught for MBA programs at the University of California, Davis and the University of San Francisco. Other courses Dr. Friedman has developed and/or taught include Articulation and Critical Thinking; Group Process and Decision Making; Integrated Marketing Communications; Management and Organizational Dynamics; Management Communications; Organizational
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Dr. Friedman also has more than two decades of experience as a public relations practitioner, including in-house, agency, and independent consulting positions serving technology, financial services, real estate, and nonprofit clients.

Mitchell Friedman earned an Ed.D. in Organization and Leadership from the University of San Francisco; an M.A. in Modern European History from Stanford University; and a B.A. in History from Brandeis University. He also is Accredited in Public Relations (APR).

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