

GIBBS & SOELL

# Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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## R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Find Out What It Means To Media

Robert Fulghum got it right in his famous book "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Share, be kind to one another, and respect each other. We respect each other at work, in business partnerships, in dealing with customers, and when communicating with media. But, these days the media environment requires some new rules of respect.

Once upon a time journalists and public relations executives would gather in local watering holes to forge relationships over highballs and unfiltered cigarettes. Reporters needed to cultivate good sources. Companies needed good publicity. Although news was far from a gentleman's sport, this was an era when embargoes were honored and exclusives were earned.

Disrupted by social media, journalism is today experiencing a renaissance marked by a different level of accessibility between reporters and news makers. We can now follow and converse with our favorite reporters on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. Their ideas flow freely, liberated from copy editors, untethered by producers' deadlines and distanced from legal eyes.

However, there are signs the familiarity is breeding contempt.

### The Rules

As companies and organizations are still learning how to engage with stakeholders and customers through social media, so, too, are journalists learning how to engage their public. Some of the journalists' days are now spent learning and implementing a whole new skill set, and they don't have as much time to chat on the phone with their public relations sources.

For example, although reporters want more visuals for their stories, as more content is placed on the Web, they consider it disrespectful for a PR practitioner to attach a large file to an email without requesting permission first.

Such an inconvenience may be forgiven if there's a genuinely newsworthy pitch involved. However, clemency may not be granted when certain lines are crossed.

Media furor erupted in June 2011 over the publicity surrounding the much anticipated release of the Duke Nukem Forever video game by publisher 2K Games. The title had been in development for nearly 15 years and the long wait by the Duke Nukem franchise's fans contributed to the massive hype surrounding the launch. When the game failed to impress reviewers, the angry publicist took to Twitter in apparent retaliation to announce that the harshest critics would be blacklisted from future title releases. "Bad scores are fine. Venom filled reviews... that's completely different," one tweet read.

The gaming press lashed out in print, on blogs and social networks. Eventually the publicist apologized but ultimately parted ways with 2K Games because the damage to the client relationship had been done.

Ben Kuchera, a reporter for Ars Technica website, observed: "A large part of my job is dealing with people who work in public relations. The vast majority of those whose do PR for video game companies are

polite, well-intentioned, and extremely professional. They need us to get their games coverage, and we need them for access to the developers and early code to



review games in a timely manner. The press and PR relationship may sometimes be strained, but it's rarely adversarial."

## When Media Becomes the News

PR communicators aren't the only ones who have faced trouble in the uncharted waters of social media. In May 2011 Mediabistro published a feature on eight journalists who were punished for misuse of Twitter. Among them was Octavia Nasr, former CNN senior editor for Middle Eastern affairs, who was fired by the news organization because her public expression of sadness on Twitter over the death of a Shiite cleric was found to be a transgression of objectivity.

Another one listed was Markos Moulitsas, founder of the liberal blog Daily Kos, who was banned from MSNBC appearances for a year following his nasty Twitter exchange in 2010 with the cable network's conservative host Joe Scarborough. Their debate over media attention on a controversial hire by President Obama escalated into a public battle when Moulitsas made a side reference to the mysterious death in 2001 of an intern in then-Florida-Congressman Scarborough's office.

Social media forces those who participate to recognize they are public figures each time they hit the "send" button. Even though Twitter beat the *New York Times* in reporting both Michael Jackson's and Osama Bin Laden's deaths, there is still the need for credibility and the peace of mind the public gets when knowing the news is reported by dispassionate observers with a single objective: the truth. Studies show that, although the public still widely criticizes the press, news organizations are still trusted more than other sources of information.

There will always be the need for accountability.

## Big Brother


Even in the heat of the moment, the media and their corporate sources must recall their commitment to their audiences. If found errant in their mission, it can lead to a significant loss of audience trust.

Nestle experienced a PR nightmare in a matter of minutes when the administrator of its Facebook fan page posted a request to the public not to use an altered version of the company's logo as a personal profile photo. The unofficial logos were being used by Facebook protestors in a campaign led by Greenpeace against the food giant's use of palm oil, which the organization claims contributes to the destruction of rainforests. When the company stated that those who ran afoul of Nestle's intellectual property rights would have their comments deleted from the Facebook page, it came across to fans as "Big Brother" censoring what they could do or say.

To make matters even worse, as comments about freedom of speech and expression started appearing, the Nestle page administrator's responses to posters took on sarcastic and antagonistic tones. One of the reply comments by Nestle stated: "Thanks for the lesson in manners. Consider yourself embraced. But it's our page, we set the rules, it was ever thus."

The exchanges ended finally with an apology on Facebook from the Nestle representative. Eight weeks later, Nestle announced a partnership with The Forest Trust to advance the company's "zero deforestation" policy, which would immediately look into its purchases of palm oil.

## Peace in Sandbox, Fewer Timeouts

No matter how fast or how much technology changes, some things still hold true. As long as people are not replaced by robots, communication, relationships and respect are at the core of business success. The news business is still a business, always seeking its own success. The best outcomes are achieved when PR practitioners, their clients, and the media all work as partners toward that success. And maybe, just maybe, there will be some peace in the sandbox and fewer timeouts for bad behavior. 

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