

**2007 Atlas Award Presentation
on International Public Relations**

*International PR:
Reflections on a Profession in a Shrinking World*

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***International PR:
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When I began my career some 40 years ago, it was tough to practice true international public relations. The media had good international coverage, with networks of bureaus more extensive than today. But public relations practitioners lacked the technology to provide the proximity and interactivity necessary for building relationships with the media and other publics internationally, and the common language to nurture those relationships.

My first career assignment was in Germany, and, for three years, I never had direct contact with the United States, not one phone call, not one trip home. For me and my American colleagues in the military in Europe, the only affordable means of maintaining relationships with family and friends was by mail. I also experienced firsthand the difficulties of communicating across the Babel of languages spoken throughout Europe. Ten years later, I encountered the same obstacles when living in Asia. Looking back, I question how international PR could ever have existed in those conditions.

Today, English has become the international language and technology has enabled practical, affordable and instantaneous interactive communications and easy international travel. Each week, I have at least 25 international telephone conversations and more than 100 international e-mail exchanges. I travel overseas 8–10 times a year for face-to-face meetings. I find that I can build and nurture working relationships with colleagues and journalists in Europe almost as easily as with those here in the U.S.

Besides a common language, geography has been the major barrier to the development of international public relations. The Internet has made the biggest impact on overcoming the two major impacts of that geographical obstacle — space and time. In cyberspace, those two barriers disappear. We can carry on a dialogue in real time or our communications can transcend differing time zones. Each evening, I leave messages for my colleagues in Europe knowing that, by the time I awake, those messages will be acted upon and I will have feedback to guide my working day. There's an efficiency in such international work that doesn't exist when working with colleagues in the same time zone.

Drawing on my personal experience working in public relations in three different sectors — government, corporate and agency — I'll offer my views on how PR has become internationalized.

Government Public Relations — Winning Hearts and Minds

Thomas Paine was the first public relations practitioner in the United States. With the backing of the Continental Congress, he authored *Common Sense*, *The Crisis* and many other pamphlets and op-eds to persuade American colonists to rise up against the British. Besides influencing public opinion, his writings were also used as classic internal communications. To motivate the colonial troops, General Washington made it standard policy for officers to read excerpts from *The Crisis* before they went into battle against the British.

In the Vietnam conflict and the war in Iraq, the government has tried to use public relations to explain America's rationale for military engagement. In Vietnam the audience was mainly domestic and the objective was to build patience among citizens who felt the war was dragging on too long, hence, the infamous "we see the light at the end of the tunnel" quote of General Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam. The goal is similar with the Iraq conflict, but the audience is both domestic and international. The public relations campaign to explain America's perspective to the Islamic world is called "public diplomacy."

One of the successful tactics of military public relations in Iraq was the assignment of reporters to combat units. The practice, which is called "embedding," resulted in a personal, and often sympathetic, view of the military that never happened on a consistent basis in Vietnam. In my personal experience in combat units in Vietnam, we saw reporters only when they were flown in by helicopter after a battle, they rarely shared the chaos of conflict or the terror of a nighttime patrol. The public affairs officers assigned to us had a challenging time interpreting the conflict for the media.

Later, as a speechwriter for the secretary of defense, I saw firsthand how international public relations could be used to obtain both foreign and domestic support for American policy. In those days, our strategy was to avoid nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union through deterrence, or as some liked to call it, "mutually assured destruction" or MAD. The premise of the doctrine was that if we had enough nukes to survive a preemptive attack and strike back in a massive way, then the adversary wouldn't attack. Because it was so apocalyptic, it was hard to explain or defend, particularly to our allies. So Secretary of Defense Weinberger offered to debate the strategy with a noted British pacifist at the famous Oxford Union on the campus of Oxford University. To help prepare Mr. Weinberger, we threw all the tough questions we could at him. He did a magnificent job, and at the end of the debate when the audience was asked to vote by standing up for each debater, he had the most standing for him.

The nuclear deterrence issue was also hotly debated in the U.S., with very strong opposition from religious groups. When the Catholic bishops came out publicly against the deterrence strategy, Secretary Weinberger agreed to a public debate again. Unfortunately, he had to cancel at the last minute, and his speechwriter — me — replaced him. As a graduate of a parochial school, it was intimidating to debate a Catholic bishop, but I survived.

In 1983, our Pentagon speechwriting team got the mission to write a speech for President Reagan on national security topics. It was one of several that the president gave to explain his defense buildup. But in this one, he inserted a section that he himself drafted to make the case for building a missile defense shield in space. The “Star Wars” speech received lots of criticism from American scientists and politicians who argued that the U.S. was militarizing space. It became a political football in the U.S. Our strategy for countering this domestic political criticism was to take our case to our allies, showing how our plans included protecting them from nuclear attack along with the American homeland and inviting them to bring their technologies to the noble cause of “making nuclear weapons obsolete.” After Secretary Weinberger wrote op-eds in papers in Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom and Japan, the international media took an interest in our perspective and the administration was able to move the debate from politics to policy.

Corporate Public Relations — Building Reputations and Brands

While government public relations helps drive support for policy, corporate PR builds and sustains the support of a company’s many stakeholders. My perspective is shaped by personal experience in strategic PR roles at GE, Westinghouse and Siemens. Each founded by a 19th century inventor — Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse and Werner von Siemens — the three companies grew to become huge industrial electronics conglomerates.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, “shareholder value” became the byword in most American companies. The stock price drove the market cap, which, in turn, provided the financial resources for growth through M&A, rewarded investors and gained big bonuses and stock options for CEOs and their executives. As a result, one audience — the financial community — dominated over all other stakeholders.

Only recently has there been more of a balance among the various communications functions that build relationships with different stakeholders. As head of communications at Westinghouse and later at CBS, I had the ideal situation of responsibility for investor relations, government affairs and public relations. I saw firsthand the power of a multi-stakeholder approach and used integrated communications as much as possible.

The strong focus on investors during the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of diminishing the importance of international communications at many corporate headquarters. Since most shareholders of American companies live in the U.S., the corporate public relations focus was principally domestic. It took some high-profile crises and difficulties with cross-border mergers for sufficient attention to be paid to international public relations — Dow Chemical’s deadly Bhopal accident, product quality problems for Coca Cola in Europe and Pepsi in India, and the EU’s rejection of GE’s merger with Honeywell. Some say that the political outcry in the case of both Coca Cola and GE was due to the failure to build relationships in Europe in prior years.

The increase in global issues, particularly climate change, is also driving the need for international public relations. American business executives are increasingly participating in global forums like the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and the Clinton

Global Initiative in New York. The Internet has also brought a global immediacy of news, whether it's happening in board rooms in Munich, Mumbai or Miami.

Another reason for the recent rise in international public relations has been the growing presence of foreign subsidiaries in the United States. My own company, Siemens, has purchased \$18 billion in U.S. businesses in the past three years; with more than \$25 billion in sales, it is a top-100 U.S. business. Sony is a ubiquitous brand in the U.S.; Phillips has its name on an Atlanta stadium; and Toyota is outselling its American competitors. To solidify relationships in the U.S., these growing European and Japanese companies are increasingly turning to public relations.

In earlier times, American subsidiary headquarters of foreign companies were simply legal entities with little operational responsibility and few external relationships to cultivate. The media could find no corporate news to report, customers looked only to the divisions with whom they worked, and investors and the financial community dealt directly with headquarters in the parent company's homeland. American managers followed policies developed in the home country and worked for foreign executives who saw the U.S. as a stopping off place in their career or a pre-retirement reward. Without stakeholders to build relationships with and with all the action happening back at headquarters, U.S. subsidiaries of foreign companies were backwaters with little to offer an ambitious PR professional.

Today, the backwaters are benchmarks. Because the U.S. is, by far, the largest market in the world, the region has become one of the most important and profitable for many foreign companies. With that growth, the stakes rose for the enterprise's success in the U.S. market. Building relationships with stakeholders could no longer be ignored. And as English has become the international language of business, it's become much easier for American practitioners to step into PR positions that previously were reserved for native speakers in the language of the parent company.

As a result, there's more opportunity to practice leading edge PR today at U.S. subsidiaries than at company headquarters. Lacking the visibility and pressures at the home office, particularly from the financial community, subsidiaries often have more freedom to try innovative PR approaches. Siemens USA has become the benchmark within our global company for several new techniques and technologies — leadership communications, Internet marketing, thought leadership strategies and education initiatives. In other disciplines, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from our colleagues at headquarters or other Siemens subsidiaries.

Public Relations Agencies — Extending the Reach of Governments and Corporations

Organizations without well-integrated international staffs and processes turn to multinational PR agencies. At Hill and Knowlton, one of our major practices was international M&A public relations. When a company has an acquisition target with headquarters and operations in countries where it has little presence, it needs to build instant awareness and support among all stakeholders very quickly. We helped U.S.

companies purchasing businesses overseas and foreign companies investing in the United States. Those clients needed agencies like ours with international networks that could mobilize quickly to support their transactions. Longer term, they turned to us to build acceptance with local media, politicians and communities.

Nations and international agencies also engage public relations firms to assist them to project their influence. When I became CEO of GCI Group, my largest client was a Turkish foundation formed to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the immigration of Jews fleeing the Inquisition to Turkey where they found refuge. Soon after I arrived, the agency got the assignment from the International Olympic Committee to build the value of IOC sponsorships with business in all 34 countries where we had an office or affiliate. Many major nations — and all smaller nations that want to be perceived as major — use agencies to promote trade and investment.

In my experience, the biggest challenge for international agencies is the management of multinational account budgets. There never seems to be enough funding to pay the lead office for all the strategic and creative programming and administration, and still have enough to provide the local agencies around the world enough fees to assign their best staff to the account team.

Conclusion

As international reputation and influence grows in importance, the value of international public relations will grow for government, companies and agencies. Corporate and government international staffs will grow, clients will invest the necessary funding in their agencies and associations like PRSA will increase their focus on development of practitioners with international interests and skills. The future is bright for international public relations; the opportunities are many for talented PR professionals.

About the 2007 Atlas Award Winner – John D. Bergen

Jack Bergen's career has spanned all aspects of the public relations profession. From working as a speechwriter to Caspar Weinberger, the former U.S. secretary of defense, to handling public relations for giant global corporations and international PR agencies, to teaching U.S. best practices on a global, multi-cultural scale, Mr. Bergen's contributions to the profession are felt far and wide.

At Siemens, Mr. Bergen served as the only American on the global CEO's Munich-based strategy team, and represents the German corporation with the U.S.-based international media. He also frequently shares his knowledge by teaching leadership communications to the company's top executives.

Mr. Bergen held the position of senior vice president for corporate relations at Westinghouse Electric Corporation and was on the leadership team responsible for the successful transformation of Westinghouse into a media company — the CBS Corporation. At CBS, he directed corporate communications with investors, customers, employees, government and the media.

In addition, he served as president and CEO of GCI Group, leading GCI through a major expansion that doubled U.S. revenues in two years, and earlier as president of Hill and Knowlton. He also was vice president of corporate affairs of RCA and director of strategic communications of The General Electric Company. A speechwriter during the Reagan administration and strategic planner in the Pentagon, he authored *A Test for Technology*, a book on electronic warfare and technology in the Vietnam War.

Well-known in Europe among top communicators, Mr. Bergen served as the president of the Council of Public Relations Firms; has spoken at numerous PRSA and PRSSA events and is actively involved with the Arthur W. Page Society and its Globalization Task Force. In 2004, Mr. Bergen was chosen by the Business Marketing Association as the "Marketer of the Year."

Mr. Bergen graduated from West Point and received a master's in English from Indiana University.

The Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations

Established in 1995 by the International Section of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations recognizes individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the practice and profession of public relations on a global scale. Through a substantial body of their work, recipients have demonstrated leadership in international public relations for employees, clients, institutions, governments, agencies or other organizations. The Atlas Award is presented during the annual PRSA International Conference. As part of the Award recognition, each winner is invited to prepare a White Paper on a specific aspect of international public relations practice.

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