**Part I: Evolution**

**Chapter 1: Defining Public Relations**

# Teaching Perspective—Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 explains and clarifies the function of public relations. It demonstrates that there is no one generally accepted definition, but rather many approaches to defining public relations. It explains that because of this fractured identity, the practice of public relations is often misunderstood. At the same time, in the first two decades of the 21st century, the power and value of public relations have never been greater. Indeed, it is clearly a growth industry.

But—and here is the key *but—*the chapter makes it clear that the essence of public relations lies in the ethical underpinnings of the field. Public relations, stated simply, come down to *doing the right thing*. And the chapter tries to reinforce to students, the importance of this thesis; that it is *telling the truth* that lies at the essence of public relations counsel. *Spin*, as the chapter suggests, is antithetical to that thesis. Spin, in other words, is the enemy of professional public relations professionals. Instructors should work hard to hammer home this concept. That’s why Chapter 1 and every other chapter in the text features ethical cases.

Chapter 1 also stresses the importance of public relations as a *planned process to influence public opinion*—one that answers to top management and deals directly with the critical publics on whom an organization depends.

The importance of candid and truthful communications instead of product safety cover-ups lies at the heart of the GM “Switchgate” Case Study at the end of Chapter 1. The subject of the *From the Top* Interview at the chapter end is Harold Burson, arguably the most revered public relations practitioner in the world today.

Among topics discussed in Chapter 1 are:

Prominence of public relations

What is public relations?

Influencing public opinion

Management interpreter

Public interpreter

Public relations publics

Public relations functions

The sin of “spin”

What manner of man or woman?

#### A Question of Ethics: Repping the Russian Lion

Ever since the first time he became president of Russia in 2000, Vladimir Putin “the lion of Russia”—has been a constant thorn in the side of the United States.

That’s why in 2006 when one of the world’s most respected public relations agencies, Ketchum, agreed to represent Russia and its president to influence public opinion, many wondered if the agency had done the right thing.

Things soon started going downhill for Ketchum and its client, as critics of the Russian government began turning up dead and Russia became entangled in a series of controversial military actions around the globe.

From 2006 to 2012, Ketchum was reportedly paid almost $23 million in fees and expenses on its Russia account. Although the company defended the Russian relationship, some public relations professionals argue that representing a controversial nation and its president is akin to representing a company that sells arms or cigarettes.

As this case illustrates, public relations can be used for many purposes – some ethical and others unethical. The final decision rests in the hands and hearts of public relations practitioners.

**Possible Answers:**

1. In some cases, yes. The public relations profession operates in the world’s marketplace of ideas. Some of these ideas may be consistent with the United States’ worldview, while others may clash with it. As disagreeable as this may sound, Ketchum is a private international public relations agency that is free to take on clients it deems acceptable.
2. The prudent approach here would have been for Ketchum to sever ties with Russia after it invaded Ukraine. Russia’s actions sparked an international incident that drew worldwide criticism from many nations including the United States. Clearly, the court of public opinion was no longer on Russia’s side.
3. Actions are more important than words. When a client begins to act in ways that violate, or could violate, the human rights of individuals, communities, and societies, they should not be entitled to public relations representation. For their part, agencies must consider the value of their reputation. Losing money is much less costly than sacrificing one’s reputation for ethical performance.

## Discussion Starters

1. Public relations has never been more prominent. In a world linked by satellites, social media, the Internet, and cellular technology, how one communicates becomes increasingly more critical.
2. According to PRSA’s 2012 definition, “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Public relations can also be defined as a planned process to influence public opinion, through sound character and proper performance, based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication.
3. Public relations means different things to different people. It is a confusing term to most, who are unfamiliar with its functions.
4. Planning is an essential factor in effective public relations. The success of a public relations program depends on knowing the goals for which communications are intended.
5. Action, or performance, is the most critical component. You cannot create effective communications without proper performance.
6. Advertising and marketing promote products and services. Public relations promotes an entire institution.
7. Among the United Way’s most important publics are its donors, its employees, and the recipients of its charity.
8. The seven functions of public relations practice are: 1) writing, 2) planning, 3) researching, 4) publicity, 5) media relations, 6) consumer relations, and 7) government relations.
9. Professional, effective public relations is about truth, honesty, and integrity. “Spin” is the enemy, and is to be avoided at all costs.
10. Technically, public relations professionals must have knowledge of a) the public relations field, b) communications, c) technology, d) current events, e) business and f) management. Attitudinally, public relations professionals must a) be pro-communications, b) be advocates for their organizations, c) be oriented toward counseling, d) be ethical, e) be willing to take risks, and f) be positive.

# Case Study: The New CEO’s Trial by “Switchgate” Fire

At the start of 2014, Mary Barra made history as the first woman in the 106-year history of the General Motors Corporation to be named chief executive officer. Her honeymoon lasted exactly two months.

In March, the new CEO found herself confronting the most damaging safety/cover-up scandal in General Motors’ history. The company was slapped with a dozen charges of GM car drivers dying as a result of faulty ignition switches. Reports indicated that GM management had known about the ignition switch problem for a decade, but never corrected it or divulged the problem publicly.

“Switchgate” would dominate the headlines and consume CEO Barra’s life for the next year. She took these time-honored approaches to managing the crisis:

* Fix the problem.
* Get the bad news out.
* Find out why what happened, happened.
* Bridle the lawyers.
* Be visible and human.

Barra was quick to apologize on behalf of her company. “I’m truly sorry for your loss,” she repeated as she met with victims at GM’s Washington D.C. office. By the summer of 2015, General Motors and its new CEO were ready to get back to producing quality American cars, as “Switchgate” faded in the rear view mirror.

**Answers:**

1. CEO Barra handled the “Switchgate” crisis like a true public relations professional, following the above five crisis management steps. Best of all, she put a human face on GM as a company and apologized to victims’ family members. Although it is a symbolic gesture, an apology carries great weight in a crisis.
2. From the standpoints of both fairness and public perception, this was a wise move. In this crisis, it was essential to establish an environment of neutrality and trust, which this move accomplished.
3. While GM could have retained its own legal counsel to attempt a win in the court of law, hiring Kenneth Feinberg was a much wiser move to win in the court of public opinion, which counted for so much in this case. This decision was also likely to bolster the company’s reputation and future sales figures.
4. One approach: Going forward, GM should redouble its dedication to product safety, and extensively promote that dedication through its public relations programs. In addition, the company should take a human-centered, relationship-based approach in its sales and marketing programs to repair some of the damage done in the “Switchgate” crisis.

**Chapter 1 Review Quiz (\* Indicates Correct Answer)**

1. Public relations can be defined as:
   1. Marketing a firm’s products.
   2. Management of communications between a firm and its publics. \*
   3. Publicizing the products of a firm.
   4. Advertising to sell products.
2. A valid definition of public relations is the following:
   1. An organization’s efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people.
   2. Persuasive communications designed to influence specific publics.
   3. The art of analyzing trends, predicting their outcomes, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs to serve both the organization’s and the public’s interest.
   4. All of the above. \*
3. The job of a public relations professional is very much that of a/an:
   1. Interpreter. \*
   2. Mouthpiece.
   3. Shill.
   4. Advertising agent.
4. The “essence” of the practice of public relations is:
   1. Promotion.
   2. Marketing.
   3. Truth. \*
   4. Publicity.
5. The Internet has had \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ impact on public relations.
6. Minimal
7. Some
8. Negligible
9. Significant \*
10. Often in a political campaign, the vote of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is critical.
11. Traditional
12. Marginal
13. Uncommitted \*
14. Active
15. Effective public relations means practicing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
16. Proper product packaging.
17. Obfuscation and subterfuge.
18. Aggressively posturing a difficult point of view.
19. Ethics, truth, and credibility. \*
20. The key element of the R-A-C-E process of public relations is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
21. Action. \*
22. Audience.
23. Analysis.
24. Attention.
25. Winning goodwill for an organization can be done relatively quickly.
26. True.
27. False. \*
28. The key to public relations today is product publicity, impressive tours, and a smile at the teller’s counter.
29. True.
30. False. \*
31. Two leading pubic relations organizations are the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators.
32. True. \*
33. False.
34. Public relations is effective as a temporary, defensive measure to compensate for management misjudgment.
    * 1. True.
      2. False. \*
35. Supervisors, clerks, managers, stockholders, and the board of directors are examples of “external” publics.
    * + 1. True.
        2. False. \*
36. In the early 21st century, public relations has been used for both good and evil, as we have seen in the activities of the “Islamic State” or ISIS. Describe some of these public relations activities.

ISIS used an aggressive social media campaign to release statements of its conquests and major battles. It staged elaborate events, particularly parades, to showcase the weapons it captured. ISIS posted chilling high-quality videos of torture and beheadings of prisoners, including American journalists, to underscore its brutality.

As ISIS used its public relations power in seizing parts of Iraq and Syria, it replaced the equally demonic Al Qaeda as terrorist enemy number one.

1. If you were the head of the Democratic/Republican Party and learned that a lobbyist had subsidized a congressman’s trips and lifestyle, in violation of congressional ethics rules, what would you recommend?

Take immediate action and announce it to the American public. The key to proper public relations is full disclosure of all facts. Integrity and credibility, particularly of the people’s chosen representatives, cannot be compromised.

**Chapter 1: Essay Examinations**

1. Describe the practice of public relations.

Public relations is a process that “harmonizes” long-term relationships among individuals and institutions. There is no one definition. But the proper practice of public relations involves: 1) researching the attitudes of the public about an organization, idea, product, or individual, 2) identifying action within the organization that answers the public need, 3) communicating to the public about that action, and 4) evaluating the results of that communications program.

1. Discuss the concept of “spin.”

“Spin” means defending your client or employer—right or wrong, truthful or untruthful, honest or dishonest. It also means covering up their unethical performance by “spinning” a story or the facts behind an issue. Spin is anathema to the proper practice of public relations, and should be dismissed and disdained by any practitioner. True public relations professionals don’t spin. Instead, they communicate truth.