

Art, Science, History and Future of Public Relations

The recent event in our country has nearly maligned the PR department as if it has become a synonym for lobbying where lobbyist or at best, spin doctors have a field day. PR has become a part of propaganda. Is PR man a master manipulator? Is he/her a devil's advocate or is he a benign bridge builder between the corporate world and the public?

I was always been intrigued by the penetration of PR department i.e. its elaborate vertical structure and horizontal spread in the Railways. PR department has a platoon of PR personnels such as PRIs, PROs and a CPRO located at various cities of the Railways including Western Railway. The chance stumble of few crumpled paper of a Press Release of 1952 which was wrapped in dirty polythene, kindled my desire to know the PR department better. It was further inflamed after knowing IBM and Diajeo has PR men seated at the executive top table.

I was shocked and overwhelmed to know the first appearance of the term 'Public Relations' appeared in 1887 of Railway Literature. Even the first "Press Release" was given (1906) for a Railway Company about an accident which occurred in Pennsylvania, USA. Now I was compelled to understand PR.

Is PR, an art, science or something else? I always believed that the best way to understand any subject, Art or Science, is through learning its history and evolution. I have studied my own subject Physics in the same way and not through Mathematics as it is traditionally done. Historical perspective gives the person better understanding of the subject. I wish all "so called" difficult subject including Mathematics, etc., are taught in the same way.

★**History:** PR started with the growth of newspapers in 1880s. Growth of newspapers led to so called "Public opinion", "a shared consciousness and conversation across the country". At that time, the newspapers were anti capitalist and the industrialists were worried about negative publicity. They felt it was essential for businesses to counter ante messages and that same conduit i.e. newspaper shall be used to spread pro-business sentiments. They relied on PR to foster good relations with newspapermen. The PR department conducted extended campaigns to influence public opinion. The major industries which used PR were Mining, Railways and later Tobacco. The founding fathers of PR were -

●**The artist:** Ivy Ledbetter Lee who was also nicknamed as "Poison Ivy" (as he lied and spread wrong information for Rock Feller Company regarding the massacre of its striking miners) was a journalist. Many historians regard Ivy Lee as the first real practitioner of Public Relations. He has been credited with developing the modern "Press Release". He was hired by mining industry to counter anti-campaign against them. He used to send 'news desk' the stream of statements putting the mining bosses case and rebutting allegations against them. In 1906, after an accident of a Railway Company, he issued what is often considered to be the very first "Press Release" counselling the company to



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openly disclose information to journalists before they could hear information from elsewhere. Lee's strategy of giving prompt and accurate information worked. The public relations consultant had been born. Lee was the first Public Relations person placed in an executive level position, the modern day version of VP corporate communication.

●**The scientist/theorist:** Edward Louis Bernays alongwith Ivy Lee is referred as father of Public Relations. Born to Jewish parents, Bernays was a double nephew of the great philosopher, Sigmund Freud. His mother was Freud's sister and father was Freud's wife's brother. He combined the idea of crowd psychology with psycho-analytical idea of his uncle Freud. He felt that manipulation of public opinion is necessary as humans are irrational and they follow herd instinct.

Bernays was the first theorist and he saw Public Relations as an applied social science that uses insights from psychology, sociology and other disciplines to scientifically manage and manipulate the behavior of irrational and herd like public. He called scientific technique of "opinion molding" - an engineering of consent. He started his career as a journalist and later he became the key advisor to US President, Woodrow Wilson. He believed that the public's first impulse is usually to follow a trusted leader rather than consider the facts for itself. He used the same principle to garner support for WWI for President Wilson by recruiting local figures such as bank managers to drum support for war efforts to the skeptical public.

He started the first PR course in the university. He published the first ground breaking book of Public Relations called "Crystallizing Public Opinion" 1923. Bernays was named as one of the 100 most influential American of the 20th century by Life magazine.

★**What is PR?** PR is a field concerned with maintaining a public image for a business/ organisation. It can also be defined as a practice of maintaining communication between an organization and its publics. Public Relations and publicity are not synonymous and many PR campaigns include provisions for publicity. It aims to supply positive information and rebut the negative publicity to press and proactive citizens on behalf of the organisation.

★**Tools of PR:** The traditional tools of PR include Press Releases and media kits which are sent to generate positive press on behalf of organisation. Other widely used tools include brochures, news letters, annual reports and photographs with captions. Non-traditional tools are public speaking, talk shows, books and other writing, advertisements, Radio, TV, heritage galleries/ museums, theme parks, scholarships, cinema slides, dramas, charity and cinema shoots.

★**New technological tools:** Nowadays, organisations are increasingly utilising interactive social media outlets such as website, blogs, twitter and facebook. Unlike the traditional tools which are allowed for only one way communication, social media outlets allows the organization to engage in two way communication and receive immediate feedback.



★ **The future:** The PR industry which took a quantum leap after the World War-I, has since grown into enormous (indeed, perhaps excessive) size and global reach. The earlier PR practitioners were and still are recruited from the ranks of journalism.

The PR officers have been locked into an antagonist symbiotic relationship with journalists with mutual contempt tempered by mutual dependency. The main stream media - a traditional gate-keeper of news and the bane of PR man's life are becoming less important. Meanwhile, social networking with its cacophony of bloggers, facebookers and twitterers is becoming more than influential. It is also confusing and hard to control.

The public is becoming deafened and confused by a barrage of contradictory messages. We need to adapt to new sciences and find ways to use technological change to improve our organization.

PR men have also fought for influence within big corporation against their arch rivals in the marketing department.

Their benign desires are to be more than just be press release peddlers and excuse makers, PR fellows want to be at the strategic heart of an organization, helping to make big decisions. Bernay's maxim that the public needs trusted "influence" to tell them what is the truth, is therefore becoming truer than ever.

Special Feature on Diamond Jubilee

The Personnel Department, during the last six decades, has witnessed dynamic changes in all spheres. To oversee the changes taking place, let us have a comparison of present Personnel Department with that of 1950s. In 1950s, the Railways were purely considered as a labour intensive organisation, as the system was totally dependent upon manual labourers. Recruitment being one of the primary responsibilities of Personnel Department, recruiting employees with requisite expertise was a challenging job at that point of time. The open advertisements in newspapers never reached the job aspirants, especially those who reside in rural areas, as the media coverage was limited to main cities only. Thus, communication was a major hurdle. Moreover, because of limited development of colleges of good standards and technical institutes etc. getting skilled and professionally equipped candidates from open market was a big challenge. Now, with the introduction of technological inputs, there is a radical change in the so-called 'labour intensive organization', as most of the works, which were once performed by men, are now being discharged by machines. Personnel Department is also not an exception, as it has witnessed substantial reduction in manpower requirements with the advent of information technology. Thus, the department which was once in the fore for creating posts and recruiting staff is now in the process of effective reduction and rationalizing the manpower with the help of various tools like work-study, manpower planning, right sizing, benchmarking etc. Now the system demands bare minimum staff as compared to 1950s; whereas the output in terms of number of trains and tonnage carried etc. has vastly increased resulting in a quantum jump in productivity. The abundance of skilled and highly qualified persons in the market has given rise to cut-throat competition, which has resulted into availability of the best material out of the candidates appearing for the recruitments conducted by the Railway Recruitment Boards etc. Till 1980s the Personnel Department was regarded merely a department that recruits staff, maintains establishment rules, arranges salary and deals with Promotion, Reversion and Transfer issues only. The 1980s had witnessed a sea-change in the Human Resource concept, which led to the idea of specialized personnel



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Personnel Department... Then & Now!

officers to deal with personnel matters effectively. This has resulted in introduction of Indian Railway Personnel Services (IRPS). Since the first batch of IRPS officers had taken over the charge, there was no looking back and the department started showing its presence everywhere and now it stands in the forefront of other departments. The role of Personnel Department has now become wide and varied as it performs multiple activities such as ensuring organizational efficiency, streamlining the manpower requirements of the system through work-study, benchmarking, rightsizing etc., arranging training - refresher courses/periodical courses, organising welfare measures for staff etc. Staff size has also increased substantially as most of the staff are well educated - graduates/post-graduates/law graduates are available now in the clerical fields, which is a bonanza to Personnel Department. With the introduction of Right To Information Act, now the system has become more transparent and the Personnel Department has become more customer friendly as it provides information on time bound manner. The concept of Annual Confidential Reports has also changed now and the employee reported upon can have details of his CRs on demand, so that he can understand how his performance is evaluated. Another remarkable change is, IRPS officers have now taken over the charge of the post of Chief Personnel Officers and Senior Divisional Personnel Officers etc., which were once occupied by SAG & JAG officers of other streams for short tenures.

This has led to greater expertise and commitment in dealing with staff matters. Now, the Personnel Department of Western Railway is all set to kickoff a 'Karmik Gyan Kendra' at HQ office, which aims not only to disseminate staff related data through kiosks, but also to create a paperless environment by sending and receiving all correspondences through web to the extent possible. There will be a separate wing in the 'Karmik Gyan Kendra' to redress staff grievances. Another landmark the Personnel Department of Western Railway HQ office has achieved is that it has obtained the prestigious ISO certification - ISO 9001:2000. Let us hope, things will move in the right earnest and we would witness many such positive changes sooner than later.

