

Reporter's interview transcript: Jim Lukaszewski

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IB: Why does PR have a PR problem?

JL: Simply because of what it is. We're speaking for others; we're generating information as third parties. If you really simplify things, as for example a reporter does, and say, "Well look, what do you need a public relations person for anyway? Just tell me the truth and I'll convey that to the public," and we'll probably talk about that in a little bit, but there's some issues with something as simple as that, 'cause many ideas that matter have some complexity and need some explanation. So, I think public relations will always be there doing some form of it and the ideas to establish some sort of set of behavioural norms that people can have touchstones to guide them as they do this as individuals every day.



Jim Lukaszewski

IB: You use the word truth.

JL: Yes.

IB: Do public relations practitioners tell the truth?

JL: Well, I think you have to look at, truth actually is about the person who receives more than about the person who sends it, because basically you know, this is maybe too long a story for a broadcast, but when I talk about truth, truth is really — I define it as 15 per cent facts and 85 per cent perception. And every day we see this happen. The example I tend to use when I talk about truth is a car accident where the police come on the scene of a car accident very quickly, they interview four witnesses, one who is standing on each of the four corners of the accident. Every person, each of the four people, agree on some things and disagree on some things, but they all believe they're telling the truth, and so you say to yourself, well, if they're telling the truth, every one of them, 'cause they have no reason to lie, then why are their accounts of the accident so different? And the answer is their point of reference. You know they can agree on the number of vehicles, they can agree on the traffic signal, they can agree on the weather, but everything else looks different.

And this is a problem with both eyewitness testimony and getting to the truth. For every person in a room there is a different perception of what's going on. Some factual, but mostly perception. So the public relations person's job, it seems to me, is always to lay out as best they can the facts of the matter from the perspective they're representing, and then that's going to filter through the perceptions of those who are receiving the information. And the result of that is going to be the truth from the perception of those who receive the information, and it will clearly be different from that of the person who sent it.

IB: But the truth from the perspective of the person they are representing might not be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

JL: Well that's, yeah, but you see that phrase in and of itself is, by my definition, impossible to achieve — nothing but the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth. And the reason that's true is because, you know, there's this thing called human perception. The way we receive information, whether we're hearing things well or not. Typically the more agitated a situation is, the more poorly people listen. Even in — I do a lot of lecturing and teaching and I believe that in every circumstance — even when I'm at my, you know, my best presentational level of energy, the people listening to me are getting only every third word. How can you get the truth if you're getting only every third word?

You know we teach in public speaking and in communications that if it's really important you want to say it three times to the same audience, hopefully at the same setting. So people are always getting fragmentary information, and because we read so little these days, we miss that opportunity, because you know in a written document you can't repeat the same paragraph three times because it's important. Some editor somewhere will

either ask what school you went to or just not let it happen, but in speaking we can actually do that. So, the truth is really subject to what the receiver actually gets, and typically it's far less than what the sender is sending.

IB: Is there any client that you would not represent?

JL: This is actually the most common question I get and I get it from ... a lot of grown-ups are kind of embarrassed to ask me this question directly, but they want to know, but every college kid I ever talk to says, 'cause they think it's the best question, the killer question, "Are there clients you won't work for?" Actually, as it turns out, it's far more likely that clients will not hire me than my unwillingness to work with them, and the reason is this: My approach really is about resolving the issues they face, resolving the problems they have, and if they are looking to talk a good game but not do that stuff, then they won't hire me.

I also have learned over the years that it's best for me, rather than to surprise people with my philosophy, that's why I write so much, is, you can look me up and you'll see exactly what I'm going to tell people to do. And when people call me, for example, I was working with a company in the Midwest who had a problem with the SCC and a problem with a couple of other regulatory agencies, and I had their management team on the telephone. And I went through with them the 19 predicate behaviours identified in the federal sentencing guidelines of 1991 and asked them to listen carefully to this list, and then I wanted to talk about how many of these they were actually carrying out in their company, OK. This begins with cutting corners and it ends with essentially firing whistleblowers, OK. It's really a devastating list. These are not criminal behaviours, but they're clearly unethical, and the government looks for these as predicate behaviours to criminality. And before I'd even gotten through four items in the list people had spoken up and said, "We do that today." This company actually hired me, but they knew walking in the door that this was going to be a situation where they were going to actually fix this problem. Generally speaking when I do that with prospective clients, once they begin to hear this list they'll hang up or never call back. Long answer, but it's an interesting question.

IB: Let's talk a bit about the press. You have described today's journalism as relentlessly competitive, amoral, negative and aggressive.

JL: That's right.

IB: OK, so let's assume for a moment that's true. How did it get that way?

JL: I think it's the nature of what journalism is. I mean their job is, I describe a journalist as a person who gets up in the morning, looks in the mirror and says to themselves, often even out loud maybe, "You're going to save the world from something today." I really admire this, frankly. I work with military organizations, I work with religions, I work with organizations who you think would have enormous personal dedication, but there's only one profession I'm aware of — well there's one other too — that gets up in the morning with this level of commitment to what they do every day. The other one, by the way, is a prosecutor. Now they get up in the morning, look in the mirror and say, "I'm going to take somebody down today." But this is a remarkable level of commitment to doing something that I think is fundamentally good. So it comes with the territory — this aggressiveness, this sense of relentlessness, it's a part of what they do and who they are every day.

IB: Most journalists that I know get up every day and say, "I hope I get a good story today."

JL: Actually though, you can say that and I believe that, but I do think there is far more to it than that, and if you talk to journalists about why they leave journalism or what thing that was most personally satisfying about it, it was getting up every day and doing something from their perspective that mattered, and I encourage all the people I talk to to talk to journalists and ask them why they became journalists, and generally when they're asked this question I get a response that includes something like "I want to do something that matters with my life." Something like "I'm a communicator and I want to communicate about what matters is ... and frankly I'd like to be the first one to do that communicating." That's what I mean when I say get up in the morning and save the world from something. I think these are very laudable motivations and most reporters will tell you when they left the business, I mean the day they decided to leave, it was a very difficult day for them emotionally.

IB: OK then, if it's a laudable objective, then how come it's gone wrong? Clearly you find the press to be dysfunctional.

JL: Actually what I said was very clear. I said they are relentless, they are amoral and they are negative. This is the truth. This is who they are every day. You're the one that said "wrong." Let's use my language, 'cause my language is far more accurate.

IB: Amoral is generally — it's hard to put a positive spin on amoral.

JL: Why? why not? Let's put a neutral spin on it.

IB: OK.

JL: It's a neutral. They're amoral. It says essentially that they steer this incredibly neutral course on everything. Let me turn it back to you and say I heard, I don't know whether it was Dan Rather or one of the major U.S. journalists ... he was asked on a program one time, let's go back to World War II and, no it was Phil Donohue, and what would have been the best program you could have done in World War II? Phil Donohue without blinking an eye said, "I want to have Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini on the same stage for 45 minutes." You say, "Well, wait a minute, those are enemies, they're killing us today." That's what I mean by amoral. They are able to look past things that the rest of us would say, "Well there's a line there you shouldn't cross." So I'm describing how they behave without judging what that behaviour means. You're judging it, I'm not.

JL: Actually I go back to what I said before - it's behaviour then it's communication. All media training is about behaviour first before it's about messaging or it's just an exercise in spin management and spin training. And I do believe, frankly, that a lot of that goes on. I would say, I get the view - unlike most practitioners - I get to see many practitioners do this and one of my greatest concerns about media training is that it's far more about what we call non-verbal communication than it's about actually the content of what people are talking about. It's more about how you sit, what you look like, whether we have a female spokesperson or a male spokesperson. My belief is that the issue is the content that you're talking about and it's relevance to the problem you're addressing that matters and that's what I teach and I think that's what the serious people in this business really are about. But it really goes back again to what are we doing that we're going to be talking about - essentially matching behaviour with communication.

IB: Let's talk about media training. Can you understand where from the perspective of many journalists who see that the whole point of media training is not to give information, but to withhold information, not to answer a question, but to avoid answering a question...

JL: Well actually let's talk about what media training is. Media training has two fundamental purposes. The first is to answer the questions that they're asked or to be responsive if they can be. And second in my judgment to get across something they think is important that the audience should hear. I call those communications objectives in my particular lexicon. Okay. Those are the two reasons we do it. One is to be responsive, because honorable companies and people are responsive, and secondly to get some other message across that matters from our perspective.

IB: You use the word answer and then you used the word respond. There's a difference between answering a question and responding to it.

JL: Actually I think, again we talk about what questions matter. The reporter says because she asks or he asks the question, that's the question that matters. There might be a more important question to respond to than the one that was asked. Many times reporters have very little information and in fact the way they develop their stories is because they have limited information, they get it from the people they interview. This is probably the way it should actually work. So, if there's a more important question that should be responded to, in my judgment, part of the coaching is let's get to the really important question: I want you to go back and get the question you were asked but maybe something you know is more important than the one that's asked. And the problem with the reporter is if, and to some extent the public is, if the person doesn't respond directly to the question asked, then there's something that is inherently wrong with that picture, okay? A boss' mother would call him and say, "hey, you're not the boy I raised, you know, 'cause I taught you to answer the question

directly. I'd slap you on the head if you didn't do this better." But you have to look back and say what is the purpose of communicating. Is it just to be responsive to reporters? Someone who does not know, who does not care, who doesn't really need to know or have to care, that's the measure by which a spokesperson is being judged and I'm saying the spokesperson has a greater responsibility - not just to answer the question to be responsive where they can be but to also convey other messages that matter to the audiences they're trying to reach.

IB: But when I ask a question and someone says "here's what I think is important", often it's not a question of it being more important, it is "I would rather talk about this because if I talk about what you want me to talk about that is going to be more troublesome for me. what they are really saying is.

JL: See this is the inherent negativity I keep talking about. You illustrated this throughout this entire interview. It's inherently negative. What's wrong, you know, you won't talk about it. Just your language illustrates the mentality of the reporter. What I'm telling you is that a) the spokesperson has more than one responsibility - being responsive is one of those responsibilities. Another responsibility is, an even bigger one, it seems to me is to convey information that will help the audience understand or respond to or benefit from whatever it is they're supposed to be there talking about. I think also, frankly, a lot of questions have very simple answers and they turned out to be less than satisfying to a reporter which is why the reporters often ask the same question four, five, six, seven times from different, slightly different wordings. We teach clients that if that's the question, and you've an answer that's responsive, use the answer again and use it again and use it again. What happens if you keep changing the words - well two things happen? One is the audience gets confused if they get to hear it - like which is the right answer and the report will say, "were you lying then or are you lying now, because of this negative approach." So seems to me you are far better off if you want to build understanding and really communicate, simplify what you're saying, eradicate the negativism, so in other words say it directly and positively, and then say it repeatedly.

IB: But if it doesn't directly answer the question...

JL: It's a problem.

IB: The reporter is going to get frustrated...

JL: Yes, I agree. I think a spokesperson does that and it's obvious they're doing it, I mean when we get to this part of media coaching and we talk about this - this is what we call the bridging segment where you learn the bridging phrase [inaudible] used the bridging phrase before - when you said, "what is more important," that's a bridging phrase - this is the part where I tell where I tell people now this the smarmy part of media training because this is the thing we hate about politicians. Every time you ask a person about something happening in British Columbia, they're suddenly talking about Toronto and you guys are going "well how did we get across the country?" The answer is "we bridge across," with four or five words. From the politicians point of view, their communicating almost exclusively through the news media. And time is precious to them and they got to talk about what they got to talk about. The spokesperson for a private industry, a crown corporation, an organization has another responsibility and another pathway to do that so they're going to have to say more and say it more directly. They're still going to use these techniques because we have to get forward - we have to get to where we're going to be in accomplishing our objectives as spokespersons. Again, what I've learned is that reporters basically, you know in a sense, are unhappy people. I mean they're never satisfied and so the job of the spokesperson, the last job, in fact it's impossible, is to make them happy people. When we talk with clients about these massive problems, you know one thing we know for sure is we're going to have angry people at us when we're done. We're going to have angry, not angry; we should have upset reporters when we're done. The press coverage might be quite negative but you can get things accomplished in today's world without all that being happy. The idea is to be relentlessly positive, to be focused on things that matter and get the job done.