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Then and Now: The Changing PR Landscape

By Grace Leong



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Fifty years ago, in 1968, Barbara Hunter, the eventual Founder of Hunter Public Relations, was setting her sights on taking over Dudley-Anderson-Yutzy. She achieved this ambitious goal in 1970 when she and her sister, Jean Schoonover, purchased the firm and became the first women to own and run a PR agency. D-A-Y remained the only female-run agency in the top 25 for many years to come, until Barbara eventually sold the firm to Ogilvy and Mather where she served as Chairwoman until striking back out on her own with the founding of her eponymous firm.

We're fortunate to have her legacy and perspective as our foundation at Hunter PR, but the agency of today bears little resemblance to the agency of 50 years ago, when desk essentials included little more than a telephone, a rolodex, and for many a PR pro, an ashtray. Since that time, the Digital Revolution fundamentally altered the channels, speed, direction, measurement, and format of brand to consumer communications. Your "Rolodex" and phone still matter, but now they're held in the palm of our hands from where we control the dissemination of information, often in 140 characters or less.

In considering the changing PR landscape over the past 50 years, seven areas of evolution come to mind:

From journalists to (informally-credentialed) influencers: The power of the third-party endorsement, editorial or otherwise, endures. But with the rise of social media as consumers' primary source of information and inspiration, those endorsements come not just from the credentialed media, but from the lifestyle trend setters these consumers admire and aspire to be. Individual Instagram follower counts for skilled content creators from every vertical from food to fashion, beauty and travel are surpassing the circulation of even the largest consumer lifestyle media. The best of the best maintain credibility by carefully integrating branded content into their

storytelling in a way that is authentic and transparent, and their followers have come to expect and appreciate partnerships between these influencers and the brands that support them.

From publicists to content creators: As the mediums have evolved, so has the tool box and necessary skill set of the PR pro. At our core, we are still facilitators of an exchange of information between our clients and various influential third parties. But well beyond crafting messaging and arranging access, interviews and photo shoots for news media, today's PR pro is often charged with developing the storylines and the reams of visual and written content necessary to continually feed the digital needs of our clients' owned social and digital channels. As a result of our clients becoming publishers, we now have a lead role in communicating directly to consumers on behalf of the brands and products we represent.

From one-way communications to two-way conversations: Those consumers sometimes communicate back! One of the many reasons that the PR discipline was well positioned to step into the role of social media community management on behalf of our clients is our comfort with uncontrolled mediums and nuanced, on-going conversations. Relating to the public is, after all, at our core. Today's consumers expect to be able to share their feelings, joys and frustrations with the companies and brands they let into their lives, which has created a slew of new opportunities and challenges for us and our clients.

From long lead to micro-lead: Much has been written about the relentlessness of the 24/7 news cycle, and reporters are being asked to juggle multiple deadlines and wear numerous hats. Entertainment weeklies, for example, have to grapple with not just the weekly close, and hourly breaking news online, but also minute-by-minute commentary on Twitter and elsewhere in the social sphere. Many reporters/editors are cultivating vast social followings of their own, and wielding influence beyond the mastheads of their employers. Another boon for PR: media events and "desk sides" have taken on a new life as fodder for in-the-moment content generation, so that new product you're promoting could land on Instagram, online, and in print as a result of one good meeting.

From measuring outputs to outcomes: Do impressions still matter? Of course they do. Before you can engage consumers, you have to reach them, and impressions give us the ability to calculate other valuable measures such as CPM and competitive SOV. But the digital and social outputs of our efforts now allow for tracking of much more than the potential number of consumers who have been exposed to our content, including their engagement with that content and the actions taken as a result. The previously elusive "buzz factor" can now

actually be measured, and new analytics technology that demonstrates the powerful impact of our efforts on consumer behavior has helped to elevate PR's role in the marketing mix.

From clear lines of responsibility to a marketing communications land

grab: Who is winning the lion's share of the PR Lions at Cannes? Advertising agencies. Why? Because a breakthrough campaign today is at its very core, a PR campaign. In a world where consumers are touching their phones 200 times a day on average, there is a battle raging for their attention. As we say at Hunter, you can't own that attention, and you can't buy it. You have to earn it. The best marketing ideas today are platform agnostic, and travel fluidly between owned, earned and paid media as the consumer does, with a consistent, values-based message that connects on a deeper level. Makes a statement. Stands for something. Marketers can't just talk the talk. To connect with consumers today, perhaps more than ever, they need to walk the walk. Advertising agencies are presenting PR ideas to our clients more than ever before, and digital agencies are fighting it out with us for community management and content creation roles. We'll keep fighting the good fight, and demonstrating that an "earned" POV improves the work and resulting consumer response.

From homogenous to diverse: One area where our industry is making strides in "walking the walk" is on the diversity front. The corporate communications and PR agency practitioner of Barbara Hunter's day was predominantly white and male. Today, our makeup is beginning to look a little more like the population we're speaking to, and that's a good thing, but there's more to be done. Hunter is proud to be a women-run agency with many bi-lingual staff on our roster, and to have recently been named to the first annual PRSA-NY President's Diversity Honor Roll. We're encouraged and inspired by the work of our industry and peers to improve diversity among our ranks.

What hasn't changed? Ultimately, our fundamental roles — communicators, facilitators, fact and gut checkers, truth keepers, writers, creators and connection makers — these have stayed the same. It all just happens a lot faster, with more scrutiny and competition than ever before. But that's OK. We can handle it. We're PR pros, after all.

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