

Citizen Truths and Civic Principles: The Reformation of Public Relations

Robert Phillips

From persuasion to reform

The very nature of PR is undergoing important, understandable and necessary renewal. This should not come as a surprise. What started out in the immediate post-war years as a subtle adjunct to the advertising profession (and lived for the best part of half a century in its darkest shadow) is no longer relevant in its former construct.

The world of hidden persuasion is being usurped by a much-needed period of more open advocacy. This emergent transparency has been fuelled by the digital revolution and the onset of 'The Information Age'. 1960s lunches and 1970s parties gave way to 1980s stunts and 1990s spin – only to find a more thoughtful resting place in the consultative, engaged model which is still evolving today (and at rapid speed). In its past, PR leaves some questionable legacies. In its future, PR offers leadership for the wider world of communications and, with this, an immense power – not merely to persuade, but to engage, facilitate and reform.

The PR of tomorrow is one that speaks to the heart of transformative new truths and new responsibilities. And at the core of each lie the citizen and civic society.

ROBERT PHILLIPS

Reform from Within

A number of us within the PR industry have argued that the approach of the wider communications industry for the past fifty years or so has contributed, quite significantly, to the mess in which we now find ourselves – from the financial meltdown of 2008–9 to impending climate chaos. We see this manifest in the historical inversion of the ‘Wants and Needs’ relationship; the consumerization of everything, not least in politics; and a relentless drive towards super-consumption that is simply unsustainable, both for our own well-being and for the finite resources of the planet. These are some of the fundamental tenets of *Citizen Renaissance*, co-authored with Jules Peck, and published in the summer of 2008 (see www.citizen-renaissance.com).

Yet communications can be a powerful agent of change, especially in the post-crisis world. It is the lifeblood of a society that is now driven by information and data. However, no such change is possible if the communications industry itself does not get its house in order first. This reformation should be based on three fundamentally differentiating pillars and a return to citizen values and civic principles – beautifully articulated by Barack Obama at his inauguration as ‘a new era of citizenship and responsibility’.

The vitality of trust: Just as we now recognize (and can quantify – see Edelman Trust Barometer 2010) that, for both business leaders and politicians, trust is an effective line of business, we must understand that a PR industry without trust simply cannot function, let alone be a reforming force for good. PR professionals should take issue with those who say that ‘trust’ is only one small part of the communications equation or who happily apply the taxi rank principle when it comes to working with despots, tyrannies or organizations with dubious ethics. Instead, trust sits at the very core of PR principles.

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

A failure to understand both the nuances and the fragility of trust – and the relationship between trust and principled behaviour – can only lead to a cataclysmic failure of effort to properly communicate, inform and share. Trust is therefore not to be talked about in platitudes. It must be studied, respected and sensitively embedded to make sure that where it is needed, it is gained; and where it is lost, it is properly restored. This is now the first responsibility of the PR and communications professional, working with the institutions of government, business, NGOs and media alike.

The call for engagement: The world has evolved since Vance Packard's dystopia of *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) – making any navel-gazing discussions around 1950s, 1960s or 1970s definitions of 'public relations' simply redundant.

The belief that PR is merely the art of crafting messages and persuading others to fall into line and 'believe' is now part of a historic (and increasingly discredited) lexicon. The communications industry cannot afford to define (or, still worse, behave) like this any more. In an era of active engagement, the PR professional must not position him/herself either as kingmaker or communications serf, but instead as a true and substantive facilitator: bringing together networks and active partnerships that can share and advance interests for the common good, in line with the wider societal and behavioural changes at play.

Those who fail to recognize this seismic shift from broadcast models to engaged networks fail to understand the profession as it currently stands.

Digital has changed the game for ever (and will continue to do so): The – occasionally mischievously deliberate – misunderstanding of the democratizing and empowering force of digital is one of the greatest shortcomings of a number in the communications industry today. A digitally active citizenship drives transparency and accountability and itself becomes a reforming force for good. To belittle it as 'just another channel' or

ROBERT PHILLIPS

‘geeks who get excited about stuff like Twitter’ (as one industry luminary recently quipped) is as dangerous as it is patronizing and sometimes banal. The point is not the technology itself, but the permanent behavioural change that the technology has induced – driving us forward as a society that not only better understands our civic and societal responsibilities, but one that has found our collective voice – as evidenced by the proliferation of consumer boycotts and the emergence of citizen-centric political movements. That voice had previously been lost in a system that followed the dictates of the few, rather than embracing the wisdom of the many.

Properly understanding and embracing these changes (and the fact that PR people are no longer in control – indeed no one is) is absolutely key.

Furthermore, the emergence of new networks – a direct consequence of the digital revolution – heralds the re-emergence of the citizen as a central player, providing not only the opportunity for citizens to cluster and campaign around specific issues of either broad or narrow interest (from politics to knitting), but also inherently demanding transparency and fostering the direct accountability of business and governments to the citizens they are meant to serve. There is, therefore, a real chance to refresh democracy beyond politics – consumer democracy; the democracy of the workplace; citizen democracy in all its forms. To fail to grasp the significance of the citizen in society today is therefore to fail in the professional pursuit of public relations.

Four citizen truths

It is worrying that ‘citizen’ is fast becoming an over-used term. It has slipped into the easy language of everyday politics. Many seem to think that, simply by deploying the ‘c’ word, they will quickly be modernizing either their outlook or their institution.

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

The 'c' word needs to be used with both care and purpose in the context of public relations.

First, we need to stop thinking of citizens as consumers. The consumerization of civic society (including politics) – started in the inter-war years and accelerated by the marketing frenzies of the latter half of the twentieth century – generated the very imbalance between created wants and real needs which we are all now struggling to recalibrate.

We urgently need to change our language and to appreciate that citizenship is a more vital element of a healthy society than consumption without restraint. PR is no longer merely a sales tool. Citizen values must thus be prioritized over consumer desires. Until we properly understand this, we will never be able to break through and into, among other things, a low-carbon economy and to build a more value-rich, sustainable world conducive to our well-being.

If the PR professional is to act responsibly, then he/she must help drive reform from this starting point.

Second, we must appreciate that Citizens are equal partners in the drive for change. There is still too much loose talk about 'empowering consumers'. This somehow suggests that such empowerment remains in the gift of business and/or government – and that empowerment can only be secured through marketing initiative and (ironically) by effectively consumerizing issues of profound importance for citizens. It is as though 'empowerment' is to be granted by a (now redundant) elite. In this context, *Citizen Renaissance* called for a new tripartite contract between business, government and citizens – a recognition that everyday people now stand as equals within a refreshed democracy, with citizens holding business and governments properly in check.

Third, the power pyramid has been inverted. Today's citizen-consumer is of course an essential driver of change through his/her purchasing power and the ability to either boycott

ROBERT PHILLIPS

goods and services (and even political parties) or aggressively advocate them. While this of course holds true, the real drive for change will come through the new networks that are formed through digitally driven and digitally influenced behaviours – and the openness that accompanies this.

The implications for PR are this: rather than *selling to consumers*, we all need to *listen to citizens* and to root our listening and our thinking in true civic values – pride, prudence, courage, justice, respect and trust – to enable us to rebuild a real sense of community and society. These are the very values that consumerism has badly eroded over the past few decades.

For those people and corporations properly committed to the sustainability and well-being agenda, to give one example, putting the needs of the planet within this civic framework is an essential starting point for genuine reformation and substantive progress. Amartya Sen calls this ‘capabilities for flourishing’.

Fourth, realign power in the workplace, as well as the shopping mall. Citizen power does not start at the till. In the business context, employees must have a voice equal to and as powerful as those of customers and shareholders when it comes to critical issues – concerning, among other things, climate change, supply chain ethics, employee democracy and sustainability.

This trend is validated by recent Edelman Trust Barometer data, which confirms the shift from a shareholder to a stakeholder model. It is further supported by business leaders and organizations, including Charlie Mayfield at John Lewis Partnership and Paul Polman at Unilever, who are championing, *inter alia*, models of wider employee ownership and a focus on longer-term perspectives over short-term results and returns. Even Jack Welch, the former poster child of shareholder value, has recently called it ‘the dumbest idea in the world. Welcome not just to a new era of citizenship and responsibility, but to one of co-operative capitalism also.

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

The fight for everything from wider stakeholder involvement to carbon reduction can therefore start *within* an organization, long before a product or a service reaches the end customer. New business structures (based on co-operative and mutualized models) will most likely help enshrine active and positive citizen participation from the outset. Understanding this truthful shift is fundamental to comprehending the PR industry of tomorrow, which will otherwise be operating in isolation from macro-business trends.

In the wider context, the key word is ‘engagement’. We no longer live in a transmission society; nor is ‘the consumer’ a passive member of a benign audience group dreamed up by a marketing wonk. Engagement demands the (a) acknowledgement and (b) advancement of shared interests in a hyper-connected world of many stakeholders and interest groups. In very simple terms, nothing works in isolation any more. Just as it is essentially wrong to mislabel citizens as consumers, so it is equally dangerous to view ‘consumption’ as the end result of the working of governments, businesses or brands. Those consumers who are in fact citizens can drive the change and thus nail a pervasive and corrosive consumption myth.

The responsibilities of business

Where does the social responsibility of business (an often misappropriated term) sit within this new civic framework, and how should the PR industry today most usefully approach it?

Re-reading Milton Friedman’s seminal September 1970 article in the *New York Times Magazine* offers an affirmation to many that subsequent years of unfettered Thatcher–Reagan economics really were *that* destructive on the material well-being of the planet and its people.

The Gordon Gekko mantra that ‘Greed is good’ is now

ROBERT PHILLIPS

oft-repeated in casual conversational references to an era passed, but those who still cling to the Friedman obsession with free markets and the doctrine that the social responsibility of business is to maximize its profits appear about as relevant and convincing today as Nigel Lawson on the subject of Climate change.

Gekko of course provided the soundbite to enable us to avoid reading tomes of Friedman's economic theory, while Lawson famously claimed that environmental campaigners were forcing us all into an 'age of unreason'. However, like Friedman before him, it was Lawson's own adherence to a near-blind faith in the market mechanism that obfuscated the truth and a more reasoned approach to the world around us. Theirs is – and was – unreason without bounds: a determination that market principles must apply anywhere and everywhere; that there should be no limits for the individual; that companies (and governments) just get in the way.

Citizenship, however, demands *responsibilities* and, as Aristotle pointed out, *active participation* from individuals. And such responsibilities are rooted in principled and virtuous actions that protect collective well-being, not just personal advancement. Hence there is such a thing as society, and – through this prism – we are all very much part of it. Our first responsibility is to our fellow citizens and, by extension, to our one planet, north and south.

For some time now, I have been party to a wide-ranging discussion about whether (metaphorically, at least) Milton Friedman is dead. I took issue in February 2009 with the *FT*'s Stefan Stern when he wrote about 'the hot air of CSR' and while we should abhor the tick-box approach that certain companies now take to the responsibility agenda, we should also embrace the fact that corporations can – and must – become agents for change. In addition, most recent Trust Barometer data confirms that companies now need to consider the inter-

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

ests of their employees and those of their customers ahead of the interests of the shareholder – proof positive of the shift from a singular shareholder to a multiple stakeholder focus for business leaders today. This move, in itself, puts the Friedman doctrine to the sword. In a global economy, even those nations thrilled at their liberation from centralized economic control will yet need to find a new harmony between freer markets and responsible, corporate actions.

While Trust Barometer data may provide reasoned statistical support for the argument, though, there is also a point here about higher principle. Where is the moral justification for putting money before people; or corporate profit ahead of the customer that helps build success; or the interests of the company ahead of the finite resources of the planet? *The Economist* hailed Friedman as the most influential economist of the second half of the twentieth century, but his theories were essentially as transient of those of Keynes before him. Twenty-first century economists and thinkers – Stiglitz, Sen and Olstrom among them – are re-thinking the models. The concepts of co-operative ownership, mutual behaviours and active citizenship, which find greater historical precedent as well as greater modern relevance, are in play once again. Those who today advocate the economics of Friedman lack a historical perspective and shun their obligations to fellow citizens and to the environmental economics of mother earth. They are also not in tune with contemporary corporate thinking or, indeed, structure. For those offering sound and strategic corporate PR advice, these are the new truths, perspectives and principles.

In the post-crisis world, business leaders of course worry about ‘more regulation’ and many rush to agree on the preferable nature of ‘better regulation’ instead. But more principled (i.e. more adult) behaviour will transcend the need for such regulation altogether – a new and progressive consensus will

ROBERT PHILLIPS

understand new boundaries of principle, not just the parameters of scale. Markets may be informative, but civic virtue can speak to a higher moral order. In this context, jostling around how/whether to what scale regulation should contain the size of a banker's bonus (the scrap *du jour*) fundamentally misses the point. Regulation can be seen as a mere – and weak – manifestation of a rule-compliant culture, where we have to put (childish) boundaries in place to stop (childish) people offending. Responsibility and accountability – not regulation – need to be the watchwords of the stakeholder society. PR professionals would be wise to offer informed views around this new consensus.

The 'social responsibility' of business today must therefore be to address the new ecology of interests within business on a more balanced footing. Business must speak no longer only to the individual or the shareholder – but must embrace the customer as citizen; the employee as citizen; and the corporate entity as a collective citizen of the community and the planet which it serves. No one is trying to undermine the profit motive, per se – but profit without principle has no place in the new business ecology. Companies and brands including Quaker, Marks & Spencer and, of course, the Co-Op are mainstream, not maverick. Café Direct enjoys a 34 per cent share of the UK Fairtrade coffee market. Maybe the late Mr Friedman might disagree – but the PR professional and the firm he/she represents would be ill-advised to ignore this new truth.

The principles of leadership

Roger Steare's 'Ethicality' builds further on this inter-play between rule compliance and issues of higher principle. Steare considers the ascendancy from a childish ethos of rule compliance, through to more adult behaviours of social and principled conscience. He questions the misuse of the word

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

utilitarian (with a fundamental liberal belief in the greater good) and argues that utilitarianism may be offering those in authority a convenient smokescreen behind which poor decisions can be justified. The tougher choices are those which demand real considerations of moral principle – and therefore courage.

In the 2009 Reith Lectures, Professor Michael Sandel – in similar vein – observed prospects for the common good and called for a new citizenship. Much of what he says chimes with the central tenet of *Citizen Renaissance* and the thesis of this essay – namely a prevailing confusion between consumer and civic values and the urgent need for a reversal that places ‘civic’ ahead of ‘consumer’. Sandel called for a richer and more morally courageous public discourse to question what a good life should really look like. In so doing, he is challenging some of the rule-based dogma that has exacerbated many of the crises we currently face – economic, political and, of course, environmental. Again, these are the new truths that the PR professional must properly respect and embrace.

Some have understandably argued that the ‘West’ (at least, pre-Obama) is witnessing leadership vacuums of historic proportions – the result of following the rules of increasingly discredited hierarchical systems in both business and politics. How often have we heard, over the past eighteen months, that British MPs were ‘within the rules’ outlined by the Fees Office – whether in attempting to buy giant plasma screen TVs or flip their first and second homes for personal financial gain? How many among the political leadership of Britain had the moral courage to question the rules in the first instance, rather than lamely accepting that they existed for the common good?

In business, we see limited courage within the rules of what is deemed to be legal and compliant, rather than a willingness to assert true, moral leadership in moving beyond prevailing

ROBERT PHILLIPS

models which can, in turn, step-change us towards a low-carbon future and enhanced well-being. Ask many of those bankers in the firing line now, especially those who knowingly profited by hedging against sub-prime mortgages that they knew would fail.

Those PR professionals advising UK politicians need to help move the country towards an open and important debate on the shape and substance of democracy in Britain. The next British Prime Minister, well advised, needs to initiate a new leadership – and to encourage, as Sandel does, a fundamental reappraisal of our citizen values. Britain needs to look at itself now, as many Americans looked at themselves in the autumn of 2009. We need leadership that speaks to the values of principle, not the opportunism of politics. The opportunity cost is the further rise of political ‘others’ (the non-aligned and disaffected) and an increasingly institutionalized cynicism that will inevitably infect the relationship between the public and private sectors, business and the state.

Sandel’s thoughts on the role of the market within civic freedom are fascinating and deserve deep contemplation. Consumer and market values can undercut both civic freedom and, as we have seen, cause environmental meltdown. Self-interest – whether in business or in politics – cannot march unimpeded. What is needed now is precisely the richer and more morally courageous public discourse outlined by Sandel. Ordinary citizens must engage with questions on what is right and wrong within the context of a better, happier and more responsible life and society. The PR professional is, of course, the curator and facilitator of this new discourse – and the catalyst, perhaps, for a free market of ideas for a citizen-led revolution. Because the old economy and tired thinking are leading us nowhere but down.

CITIZEN TRUTHS AND CIVIC PRINCIPLES

**Rage against vested interests:
putting our own house in order**

A final point on the role of vested interests: always obstructive in the wider sense but increasingly so in the rapidly evolving world of communications. If you believe that communications can be a force for good, then you will also recognize the convergence of all the marketing disciplines into one interdependent sphere of cross-influence (an early version of this appeared in *Citizen Renaissance*).

Our world is no longer about the narrow channel of PR but about the wider construct of communications. PR, as the discipline that has always understood the government, business, investor/analyst, citizen/consumer and third sector agendas in equal measure, is uniquely placed to lead – and therefore to build both engagement and trust, in turn leading to reformation and ultimate societal benefit.

But the business models of many in the communications world – which force the separation of advertising, media, digital and PR etc. – remain forever in sales mode; in effect, propagating the silo approach for financial gain at the expense of societal interest (open disclosure: Edelman is family-owned and independent). At a stroke, they undermine the very essence of the PR of the future and what can properly be achieved.

In a February 2010 radio debate, (Lord) Tim Bell ridiculed my point on this, justifying his assertion by pointing out that the likes of WPP and Omnicom represent 85 per cent (his statistic) of the market power of communications. Yet principle cannot be sacrificed on the altar of market share. Our business models will need to change as rapidly as attitudes towards the new communications landscape.

The PR industry has to elevate itself beyond being the ‘joke butt’ differentiator between the rat and the squirrel. We have

ROBERT PHILLIPS

an important but not self-important role to play. We need to be able to advise on matters of policy and with insight, evidence and substance. The industry needs to dispel the myth that we are opaque deal-makers or the masters or mistresses of spin – this belittles the industry and sets us back decades at a time when we can ill afford such regressions. There are chimes of freedom sounding but now is the point at which we must look – and move – forward and not anchor ourselves in an unromantic and murky past. The future truth is clear: it is open, honest, principled, wise – and citizen-led.

2010.