



PUBLIC RELATIONS ARE PERISHABLE



This article is a reprint of an address given at the IRWA Region 4 Seminar in New York City in October 1969; the address was also previously printed in February 1970 edition of Right of Way Magazine. Bruce Harriman, who was the vice president of public relations for the New England Telephone Company at the time, observed the right of way industry and what he predicted the 1970s would bring. As we welcome in the new year with many infrastructure developments, projects and cutting technology on the horizon, let's take a trip back in time, see what wisdom Harriman had to offer us and how we can apply his advice to the challenges and exciting opportunities we face today.

BY BRUCE HARRIMAN

You can prevent a lot of problems in public relations from ever developing. In your contacts with the public you have — in many cases — the first opportunity to create new or continuing friends for the company.

Perhaps I can stimulate your thinking along the lines of improving your public contacts with some observations based on my public relations experiences.

My listed topic “Public Relations are Perishable” should really be titled “Good Public Relations are Perishable.” Unfortunately, the reverse is equally true. Poor public relations seem to be remembered forever.

For example, some Americans today draw their image of a right of way agent from the stories of how Jesse James happened to get into the banking business. A railroad right of way agent tried to force Jesse's mother to sell her land. When she refused to yield to increasing pressure, the agent burned the old homestead. In turn, Jesse shot the right of way agent and went on to a famous career that amazed the banking world.

You agents don't go around threatening widows and burning homesteads. But I do know some people who are very wary when they are approached by a right of way agent.

I am convinced that for all of us — right of way agents and business in general — there is a need for greater understanding of the public point of view.

No subject presents us with a bigger challenge. No requirement is more urgent. In the days ahead, nothing we do will be as vital as our responsiveness to the public. Unless we listen, learn and respond better than ever before, then inevitably, we are going to suffer the high cost of doing business our way alone.

Here is one marketing expert's view of what we are in for:

“Sophistication is stiffening the public's spine. A fifth freedom is just emerging — the freedom of independent thought.

“We will have a still more discriminating public. They will be less docile. They will tend to resist regimentation — in thought as well as merchandise. One of the vital ingredients of such a sophisticated society is self-expression.

“The basic profile of the new public will be shaped by 1) Higher education for all 2) Higher discretionary purchasing power for all 3) More leisure time for all. These three in combination will lead to a cultural explosion that may rival that achieved by Greece at its pinnacle.”

Let's take a look at your own area of right of way work and see what the '70s might bring.

Gas, oil, power, telephone, transportation carriers, airports, highways, urban development — all will increase in size as more people populate the United States and as earnings continue to rise. Desirable living space will become more precious.

By the end of 1970, it is expected that we will have about 1 million miles of gas pipeline, 230 thousand miles of oil pipelines, 519 million miles of telephone wire in cable and about one-half million miles of power transmission lines.

Highways, streets and roads will total close to 5 million miles.

All of this by the end of the decade. And your job, as right of way people, will be to smooth the way for this growth.

In discussing some of the ways we might be effective representatives for our companies as right of way people, I want to draw briefly on some of our experiences in the Telephone Company.

Telephone people got into the right of way activity at the very start of the business. At first, most phones were installed in city areas, and we stretched our wires from rooftop to rooftop. Then, we started putting wires on poles located along the streets. Then, we traveled the highway to connect cities and towns, and finally, we started to bury our cable underground and out of sight.

As we put our wires over and under these public and private properties, we had to get someone's permission. Here is where our right of way agent was borne, and she or he has become increasingly necessary to growth of our business — not only acquiring vital rights of way but also in accomplishing this assignment in such a way as to contribute to a favorable impression for the Telephone Company.

A typical recent case was in western Massachusetts, where a \$300,000 job of 55 miles of buried cable involving four towns preceded smoothly because of better local understanding and resolution of problems in advance.

Officials of all four towns — selectmen and road superintendents — were invited to a meeting where Telephone Company representatives showed movies of typical buried cable placing, explained the details of the jobs to be done (with all maps and slides) and outlined problems involved in contacting all the abutting property owners.

Reaction to the meeting was excellent. The officials volunteered valuable information on local soil conditions and underground obstacles — and one selectman offered his assistance in making abutter contracts.



As a result, we got the job done on schedule and right of on the nose from a budget standpoint.

Good liaison, advance planning, open and frank discussions led to a favorable atmosphere, facilitated operations and saved considerable money.

Contrast this with one of our projects of a few years ago. Then, we moved into a community without any advance notice. Before the flap was over, seven pieces had been written in the local paper — two of them editorials, one with pictures — and a temporary injunction against our further work had been issued.

In many cases, we have gone to the local news media and have told our plans — emphasizing that we were fully cooperating with municipal officials to protect public interest.

Does the property owner know how to reach you or a responsible person in your organization if he has problems?

We have tried to make it easier for others to get their work done when we may be involved. The Springfield, Mass., newspaper reported our efforts in that area last July. Let me quote a paragraph from that story:

“New England Telephone has simplified calling by contractors, public works superintendents and other public utilities to obtain information about excavation near telephone equipment. One number calling is provided throughout New England.”

In other words, we have set up a central information bureau which is intended to save anyone building near our facilities any entanglement with our facilities, and of course, it protects our plant from damage.

So much right of way work is on a local basis — lot by lot, mile by mile, owner by owner. And it is important that we design our public relations activities in the same manner if they are to be effective.



This means treating each case individually. It means listening to individual problems, agreeing to reasonable requests for restoring his property to its original state as much as possible, keeping commitments and always being available for further discussions when the property owner experiences unforeseen developments.

Through all of our dealings with the public runs a tremendously important theme — be a friendly, concerned, responsive representative of your company. I have found that many times, it is not so much *what* we say as company representatives as *how* we say it — the impression we create of being individually concerned for the individual customer.

Let me give you an example:

I went into a shoe store to buy a pair of shoes. I told the salesman I wanted another pair just like the ones I was wearing. He said that he had the shoe in stock, and he'd get it for me in a few minutes. He was busy, and he said it in a way that let me know that he wasn't interested in whether I got the shoes today, tomorrow or ever. Then, he carried a long conversation with another clerk about inventory problems, what they were going to do that weekend and what a lousy business selling shoes was anyway.

Finally, he walked out and eventually came back with my shoes. I bought them and went out fuming that never again would I go back to that store.

The next time I needed a pair of shoes, I went to another store selling the same brand. The salesman was friendly, helpful and interested in me. He apologized for not having the exact shoe I wanted, but he took my measurements, said that he would put an order immediately into the warehouse and make certain that they were delivered to me by messenger just as soon as they came in.

I walked out thinking what a wonderful salesman, what a wonderful store. And you know what? I didn't have my shoes.

How we talk to the public means a lot. It will mean even more in the world of the '70s when technological marvels are commonplace and expected. People will still count — the people who bring the marvels to the customer in a human, helpful way.

What I have tried to stress today is the tremendous opportunities for creating good will that I am convinced all right of way agents have.

To capitalize on that opportunity, you must gain a very clear understanding of the public point of view.

Just how do we pin down what the public is thinking in a given community what the major concerns are that will affect us, and what the current sensitive areas might be?

First, we must turn to our own company for information. Most companies with right of way agents have operating and public relations departments which should be familiar with the local situation.

Then, there are the company employees who might live in the community.

Next, we should make a few personal interviews with some of the influential people in town — in business, in government, in service clubs and so forth. Interview with news editors are always a source of excellent, up-to-date information.

There are newspaper clipping services to which you department should subscribe. These services will furnish you with specific types of stories on specific communities in which you will be working.

There are just a few ways that you can begin to get a "feel" for the people with whom you will be working and the communities in which they live.

You must not only do your job with more sensitivity, but you must tell your story better and aim it at public attitudes and needs. You must seek out public officials, consumer groups and neighborhood associations before they have to seek you out and in this way, secure public understanding and support.

In short, you must not only gain land rights, but you must acquire public good will for your company if you are to be a fully successful public relations agent in the decade we are about to enter. ☼



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