

Publicist Vs. Counselor

by
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Who is a PR practitioner? It seems the answer is becoming a young, good-looking woman handling booth duties at trade shows and grinding out press releases hyping products she knows little about. This description is unfair but a census of students entering PR is skewed female while large communications combines, in which PR is just another media service, fight for big-budget marketing accounts.

One difficulty in defining a PR practitioner seems to be self-created distinctions. One of the most common is between publicists and counselors. Many of us in the business, like it or not, think this way: A publicist does down-and-dirty marketing work. A counselor talks to a CEO about world-class challenges. A publicist belongs to the Public Relations Society of America and discusses how to pitch the media. A counselor belongs to the Arthur W. Page Society and discusses America in the World: Listening from Outside In, the topic of the Society's Spring 2004 seminar. Publicists are salespersons. Counselors are consultants and problem solvers.

The problem with these distinctions is that they are artificial. Both counselors and publicists execute, although they may do so at different levels. Both publicists and counselors advise, although to different departments. Does that make one better than the other? Good counselors and publicists do much the same work and can learn a lot from each other, if they pay attention. Although there may be a division between execution-oriented PR and counseling, the only thing a CEO or marketing head cares about is whether one solves a business problem effectively. And by doing that, one gains credibility to do more.

Divide

There are several variations of distinctions that counselors and publicists make about what they do. They are worth reviewing if only to dispatch them. One is that counselors are communications managers while publicists are communications doers. This can be true but only in the largest departments where there is need for manager(s) of functions such as a Web site, TV studio, employee publication, design and media relations, but this is rare. Most PR practitioners work in smaller venues and have execution duties along with budget management. Counselors might focus on a CEO's communications needs, but they are on the hook for getting the CEO's speeches written and interviews coordinated.

Publicists can be -- and often, are -- managers because they command marketing budgets with goals for increasing awareness and are held to increasingly sophisticated metrics. Large publicity budgets on average are marketing oriented and part of product and service marketing. Publicity programs are tied to bottom line business, but they are frequently perceived to be a commodity service. Purchasing departments with a strong interest in cost control let some publicity contracts. Publicists have been forced to manage bottom lines while counselors serving CEOs are not as stressed because what a CEO wants, a CEO gets, irrespective of an expense statement.

In small organizations and nonprofits, there is no manager and doer. The organizations want jacks-of-all-trades who can be manager, budgeter, Webmaster, writer, media placement specialist and event planner. Organizations need practitioners who understand and contribute to the business side. These are places for generalists who enjoy tackling communications tasks and getting them done without reference to what they might be called.

A second distinction is that publicists are at the bottom of an organization while counselors report to the top. This is manifestly false. Great publicists counsel CEOs on how to announce a story or handle a crisis issue. Counselors are often involved in petty organizational issues. A CEO asks, "Who can solve my problem?" The CEO doesn't care whether the individual is publicist or counselor.

A third distinction is that publicists are youngsters in the business, some of whom grow into counselors. This is false. Some of the finest publicists are mature adults who know how to generate news coverage for dull and unexciting topics. Most of the best old-style entertainment publicists are long retired, but they were geniuses in concocting stunts that created news. Counselors, particularly in the political environment, have often been young and made their reputations well before 40. There is no age criterion that defines publicist from counselor.

A fourth distinction is in the work itself. A publicist deals with media. A counselor handles issues that may or may not involve media. This isn't true either. Many self-described counselors work with journalists throughout their careers. Many publicists scarcely deal with the media. They fill media requests but they don't interact with reporters. This is particularly true in venues where journalists cover beats and companies have established pipelines for media information. The publicist knows x-hundred reporters will ask for a press kit that describes the company's latest products and services. The publicist's job is to write, produce and distribute the press kit. Actual contact with reporters is limited because the reporters will depend on information they are given. For some publicists, a reporter is a name on a list.

Yet another distinction is that counselors deal with reputation issues while publicists deal with selling products and services. It is true that every organization needs a reputation that allows it to survive and succeed as a

legitimate economic organization. If the organization doesn't care whether it is legitimate, it can survive and succeed by faithfully completing economic transactions. A cocaine dealer has credibility if the dealer has a supply when an addict calls. Most organizations, however, do not want to be associated with a Columbian cartel, and investor, consumer and governmental goodwill is important to accomplish their objectives. But, a company gains credibility primarily through products and services, although its business practices can subject it to criticism. A publicist cannot communicate effectively about a product or service unless it works as advertised, nor can a publicist effectively market products and services if a company is heavily criticized, under indictment or convicted for misdeeds. Positive publicity had no value once Arthur Andersen, the now-defunct accounting firm, was hauled into court. The distance between a counselor managing reputation and a publicist is not far. Moreover, when a company defends itself against environmental, labor or other charges, the first concern is how charges might affect business.

A sixth distinction is that counselors develop communications policies while publicists execute them. Actually, both publicists and counselors develop communications policies even if they do so at different levels of the organization with different target audiences. How to roll out a new product or service is as much a matter of policy as how to describe the corporation to investors and business media.

An Answer

Many PR practitioners use publicist and counselor interchangeably and that is as it should be, but nevertheless, there is a distinction that has to do with neither publicist nor counselor. There are practitioners who learn the businesses they are in and those who don't. There are practitioners who view skills as a specialty to be executed and those who see PR as a tool to further an organization's aims. There are practitioners who connect communications concepts to bottom-line realities and those who offer communications products that may or may not serve a client's need. There are more PR practitioners who cannot digest complex issues and give simple communications answers than those who can. There are fewer practitioners who contribute effectively at the highest levels of business than those who don't. There are more PR practitioners who do not have credibility with organizational leaders than those who do.

Whether publicist or counselor, credibility in an organization is earned, not given. Whether one is a self-described counselor or publicist makes little difference to a CEO with a problem. The CEO has to believe in you enough to let you fix a situation rather than calling in another department to handle it.

Personal credibility comes from performance. If one produces effective business solutions time and again, one gets more problems to tackle. If one proposes an innovative way to transform a problem to corporate advantage that is better still.

Many counselors have Big Ideas. The trouble is that many do not get an opportunity to implement Big Ideas because they can't show the business value of them. Many publicists have creative solutions for challenges. They too have to fight for the credibility to implement them. Credibility is incremental and that is the key. Success begets success and failure removes one from the game. Whether counselor or publicist focus on being effective.

Summary

As in most disciplines, public relations practitioners make far too many distinctions about who they are and what they do. There is only one distinction that counts. Is one a businessperson or not? Is one focused on the key drivers that move an organization forward or distracted by creative possibilities of a specialty? The irony of many awards shows in communications is that they are focused on creativity and design. One gathers trophies for good-looking media rather than for effective media. Sometimes the most effective medium can be a hand-written note, as long as that note is from the right source – say, the President of the United States. Sometimes, the medium has to be on the bleeding edge of creativity and display. A bias toward image over effectiveness comes from the fact that awards are given by creatives judging creatives. If CEOs gave awards, the results would be different.

Insularity is a hallmark of all self-described professions. They develop a language of their own followed by a code of what is successful and what isn't. The codes may or may not have relevance to business. It is assumed they do, or it is not even considered. Some of the finest counselors and publicists I know have never put in for awards of any kind. Their work speaks for itself, and their reputations among the CEOs who hire them repeatedly is enough to keep them occupied for years.

Publicist or counselor? It makes no difference in the end, nor should it make a difference to anyone working in PR or contracting the service of practitioners.

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