

A Short History of Public Relations

Kirk Hallahan

Colorado State University

Before 1800

- 1800 BCE – Earliest example of educational materials--a farm bulletin produced in ancient Sumeria telling farmers how to grow crops
- 5th Century BCE – First democracy established in Greece, with forums for public debate and decision-making about issues.
- 1st Century BCE – Romans coined the phrase *Vox populi; vox Dei*, "the voice of the people is the voice of God." Underscored the emerging importance of public opinion.
- 59 BCE-222 CE – Roman officials posted daily notices and news on the *Acta Diurnal* (*Daily Acts*). Information was etched in stone or metal and displayed on public message boards in the city – a newspaper of sorts for Roman citizens.
- 1455 – Following Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press using movable type, handbills and broadsides began to be printed to promote ideas, causes and events.
- 1517-1530 – Martin Luther and his follower launched the Protestant Reformation with small-group meetings, printed tracts, illustrated handbills and broadsides, and eventually Bibles translated into the everyday languages spoken by people.
- 1623 – Pope Gregory XV created the Catholic Church's College for Propagating the Faith in an effort to retain followers and solicit converts in the aftermath of the Reformation. Origin of the term *propaganda*.
- 1641 – Harvard College launched first systematic fundraising effort in the United States.
- 1748 – King's College (now Columbia University) used first news release to solicit press coverage
- 1773 – Colonists staged Boston Tea Party, a pseudo-event that helped crystalize public opinion against British rule.
- 1787-88 – *The Federalist Papers*, a series of 85 pamphlets (also reprinted in newspapers) generated support for the formal creation of the United States and passage of its Constitution.

1800s

- 1820s – Amos Kendall, a member of Andrew Jackson's kitchen cabinet, served *de facto* as the first U.S. presidential press secretary.
- 1840s – P.T. Barnum pioneered press agency by promoting local appearances by his touring circus using parades, handbills, posters, and notices arranged in local newspapers.
- 1850s – American railroads used publicity, advertising and printed materials to attract tourists and settlers to the American West.
- 1889 – First corporate public relations department established by Westinghouse (a year after the Mutual Life Insurance Company had created a "literary bureau" to coordinate advertising and publicity). The German industrial firm Krupp established the first corporate news bureau in Europe in 1893.

- 1889-1892 – Competing publicity campaigns ensued during the “battle of the currents” between George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison to determine whether alternating current (AC) or direct current (DC) would become the standard for the transmission of electricity in the country. Westinghouse’s AC system proved superior and won.
- 1895 – First magazine for customers published – John Deere Co.’s *The Furrow*.
- 1896 – Modern publicity became a part of political campaigns with the presidential election between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan.

1900-1949

- 1900 – The first publicity firm established, forerunner to the modern PR agency. (The Publicity Bureau, Boston, owned by George V. S. Michaelis, Thomas Marvin and Herbert Small)
- 1902 – H.S. Adam’s article, “What is publicity?” in *American Review* is believed to be the first article about public relations.
- 1900s – Corporations started to use a variety of techniques to promote positive relationships with customer. Ford pioneered press product previews (1895), used as automobile racing to promote interest in cars (1903), and published a magazine for owners (*Ford Times*, 1908). Chicago Edison published an external magazine (1903) and was the first to use films (1909), and stuffers inserted in bills of utilities customers (1912).
- 1906 – Ivy Lee issued his "Declaration of Principles," considered to be the birth of modern public relations counseling.
- 1915 – Hearings conducted by the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations investigated the response to the 1913-14 Colorado Coal Strike and the “Ludlow Massacre” by investor John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the work of Ivy Lee for him and the coal operators -- the first time the workings of publicity agents were detailed for the American public.
- 1916-18 – The Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel, promoted public support of American involvement in World War I.
- 1920 – First course in publicity taught by Josef F. Wright at the University of Illinois. (In 1923, Edward L. Bernays taught the first course in “public relations” at New York University.)
- 1922 – First use of commercial radio for promotional purposes (interviews, news reports)
- 1923 – Edward L. Bernays published *Crystalizing Public Opinion* and popularized the term "public relations counsel." The first textbook also was published: Robert Holman Wilder and Katharine Loving Buell’s *Publicity: A Manual for the Use of Business, Civic and Social Service Organizations*.
- 1927 – Bernays staged his now-classic publicity stunt by inviting stylish women and men to walk in New York City’s Easter Parade while smoking cigarettes – part of his “Torches of Freedom” campaign to promote the acceptability of women smoking in public.
- 1927 – Arthur W. Page accepted the position as vice president-public relations at AT&T under the condition would be involved in policy-making. Page is considered the father of corporate public relations for his emphasis on cooperating with the public, engaging employees, and disclosing information about company activities.
- 1929 – "The Golden Jubilee of Light," also staged by Edward Bernays, was a probably the largest staged event of the century – a worldwide celebration of the 50th anniversary of the invention of the electric light bulb (for General Electric).
- 1932 – Scientific public opinion polling began (George Gallup)
- 1933 – First political PR consulting firm founded and pioneered modern electioneering (Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter in California). In Nazi Germany, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was established under Josef Goebbels.
- 1933-1936 – Franklin Delano Roosevelt used his famous "fireside chats" over the radio to instill confidence in the American people during the New Deal.

- 1939 – First use of commercial television to promote an event (New York World’s Fair and unveiling of NBC/RCA’s electronic television system).
- 1939 – First full-time public relations educator (Rex Harlow, Stanford)
- 1942-1945 –Office of War Information, headed by Elmer Davis, promoted public support and involvement of Americans in World War II.
- 1942 –The Voice of America founded to disseminate news about America to audiences in countries outside the U.S. (now operates under the U.S. Agency for Global Media).
- 1944 – First periodical devoted to covering the field (*PR News*).
- 1944 – Moss Kendrix established the first agency owned by a black practitioner and demonstrated the importance of reaching minority of minority communities. (In 1961, Inez Kaiser became the first black woman to operate her own firm with national accounts.)
- 1945 – The Advertising Council (now the Ad Council, formerly the War Advertising Council) was organized by the industry to create public service campaigns for valuable social causes.
- 1946 – First widespread use of commercial television for publicity.
- 1947 – First national organization of professionals in the field: the Public Relations Society of America (followed by the U.K.’s Chartered Institute of Public Relations in 1950.)

1950-Present

- 1950 – First code of public relations ethics: PRSA’s Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations. (Revised in a 2000 as a list of “aspirational standards.”)
- 1952 – First political commercials on television (for Dwight Eisenhower).
- 1952 – First multi-city media tour to generate local press, TV and radio coverage for a company or product (By Daniel J. Edelman for Toni home-care products featuring “Toni Twins”).
- 1953 – The United States Information Agency (USIA) was created to disseminate news and cultural information abroad (continues as part of public diplomacy by U.S. State Dept.)
- 1954 – First news release distribution service to send news releases by wire directly into newsrooms via telecommunications lines and teleprinters (PR Newswire)
- 1965 – PRSA Accreditation program established.
- 1973 – Carl Byoir & Associates become the first of several major PR agencies to be acquired by an advertising agency holding company.
- 1975 – First academic research journal (*Public Relations Review*)
- 1976 – Issues management identified as a distinct specialty by W. Howard Chase.
- 1982 – Crisis communication emerged as a field with Johnson & Johnson’s adept response to seven deaths following the tampering with of bottles of Tylenol in Chicago retail stores.
- 1980s –Prior to the commercialization of the Internet, practitioners experimented with the use of computer-mediated communication tools using dial-up telephone services (email, electronic bulletin boards and forums, chatrooms and multi-user dungeons).
- 1993 – First organizational websites created following emergence of the World Wide Web, leading to widespread reliance on the Internet to deliver text, images, audio and video.
- 1997 – First electronic multimedia news releases distributed to news organizations containing text and images, later audio and video (Business Wire).
- 2000s – Organizations embraced various social networking and other social media maintain relationships with followers.
- 2007 – Strategic communication recognized as an alternative conceptual framework for defining and examining public relations.

This timeline of key events and people focuses on public relations in the United States. Numerous other innovations and important milestones occurred elsewhere in the world.

Updated March 2024