

Where Are We Going?

By Robert Kingdon (Bob) Berry, APR, Fellow

Last year the global PR community celebrated the 100th anniversary of the press release (sorry if some of you missed it). The crash of a Pennsylvania Railroad train prompted Ivy Lee, considered by some to be the father of modern PR, to convince the railroad to distribute a press release to journalists before they heard rumors about what had happened, he also invited reporters and photographers to the scene of the accident and provided a special train to get them there. It worked, and has been working to one degree or another, ever since.



Also last year, Time magazine put you and me in charge of our own "press releases" by naming us "Person of the Year." The reason, they say, is that we have entered into a "... story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes."

And every time you press www.something you know Time is right.

But I couldn't help wonder about the ramifications of that for my peers in public relations. Being Time's "Person of the Year" carries huge responsibilities and I'm not sure I want them. For one, it means that I am in charge of making my own decisions about what to buy or not, how to vote, where to invest, how to behave, and yes, even to decide to argue with Dear Abby.

The public relations/media dance, while not always as smooth as Emmitt Smith on Dancing with the Stars, guaranteed an information flow, albeit filtered by editors and program managers. They, the gatekeepers, decided what would be printed or aired. I trusted that, for the most part, they did it within a framework of intelligence and responsibility.

But now, the gatekeepers are you and me. We are the experts. And, guess what? I'm not that smart! I want to trust the sources of the information I need, but how can I do that when I'm in charge?

Last year Google spent about a billion and a half dollars to buy YouTube – maybe with the idea of it replacing the evening news? McClatchy bought Knight-Ridder for about 4.3 billion dollars, making it the second largest newspaper publisher in the US. But, the first thing they are proposing is to sell just under half of Knight-Ridder's newspapers. So what did they buy? A huge network of Internet assets.

IBM is making connections with the Second Life community, to see how to adopt business, marketing and communication models to this new 3-D online environment.

Borrowing from my friend PR Counselor Jim Lukaszewski's example of perception – "you put four people on four corners where an accident occurs and there will be four perspectives of the truth." Up to now, however, there have traditionally been two witnesses, or two perspectives – that of the media, and that of the PR person on behalf of his/her organization. It's a check and balance system that has worked pretty well. But now we not only have the two (or four) perspectives on the "corner incident" we have dozens, hundreds, all of whom have an opinion about the event and the means to disseminate it. The trick for PR people is to be the most trusted truth among all of those opinions; to be the "go to" source.

I'm grateful that the method of becoming that source and remaining there has not changed since Ivy Lee's first press release. The only change is the tools. He summed it up a century ago. "In brief, our plan is frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about."

As Time's Person of the Year, I'm in charge, and I can do that.

Robert Kingdon (Bob) Berry, APR, Fellow PRSA is President of the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and owner of Kingdon-Nichols LLC, a PR Consulting firm in Marana.