

The future of public relations is back in high school.

It's the human condition to resist change. As familiar systems disappear, we instinctively clamp down on them, making the process of adopting new systems all the more painful and protracted. Welcome to life in the PR industry.

New media has turned the decades old profession of PR on its head. If you're like me (old enough to remember the Cold War), you've spent many a sleepless night trying to crack the code for advancing ideas, influencing people, and forging reputations amidst the utter madness that is TwitterBook, the Blogosphere, citizen journalism, and an imploding traditional media universe. Not only have the rules changed, it often feels as if there aren't any rules.

A mere fifteen years ago, things were much easier. Organizations could feed carefully crafted messages through the narrow but powerful media funnel, which in turn would pump messages out to audiences infused with gobs of third-party

credibility. Consumers saw the media as their primary source of information, thus the old PR model afforded companies a great deal of control in dictating how they were perceived and gaining an edge over the competition.

But as we know, new media has forever done away with the traditional media filter by exponentially expanding the sources and nature of information flow. At some point in the last five years, every person on the Web was granted amateur media status, meaning an organization's ideas could no longer be funneled and amplified by traditional media alone. Instead, those carefully crafted messages are being interpreted, dissected, skewed, altered, and then re-broadcast (if you're lucky) by the masses in a manner that would appeal to literature's famed chaos-theorist, Ian Malcolm.

So does this mean that PR is losing its relevance? Hardly. In a world where organizations have seemingly little control building and sustaining reputations, it becomes even more important to have a strategy for doing so. Define yourself, lest ye be defined by the masses! But instead of rethinking the fundamentals of PR to accommodate a brave new world, most PR professionals are desperately clinging to the conventions of yesteryear – churning out press release after press release, and touting utterly uninteresting achievements in the hopes that someone somewhere realizes they are

a “leading _____.” So what is the future of PR? How do we once again find our bearings?

As I developed my theory for PR change, I began by asking myself this: Was there ever a time when I personally felt helpless to dictate and affect the way I was perceived by the community around me? I had to go back a ways...

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In fact, I went all the way back to high school; that period of wondrous development and horrid social turbulence, when we struggled to understand who we were and what we believed. A time when we allowed the opinions of others to not only color, but actually dictate our own self-image. In high school, we had not yet formed our own personal mission statements, and thus we experimented with personalities, belief systems, and actions.

Often, we became what we thought our “community” wanted us to be – an athlete, a brainiac, a creative, a rebel. It was a normal process of growth, but an extremely trying process nonetheless. It was also the period when we learned about the importance and implications of having a reputation.

Like the contemporary PR practitioner, hoping to influence audiences in a shifting cultural and technological landscape, high school students are thrust into a new world of social connections where opinions are formed virally and affecting one’s own reputation can be a Herculean labor. Is it surprising that the early adopters of social media were teenagers? It’s a medium that maps perfectly to the complex social dynamics already at play during that stage of life; a dynamic in which gossip, sensationalism, “cool” factors, and popularity are the laws of the land.

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As the parallels between my high school social scene and the new realities of organizational reputation management came into focus, I asked myself this: Who were the winners during our high school years and what might be gleaned from them?

To clarify, I don’t mean “winners” in the sense that we might have meant when we were teenagers. Every high school has the popular kids and the unpopular ones. Back then, a “winner” supposedly ran with the in-crowd. That’s not what I am talking about. I also don’t mean “winner” in the academic sense.

Within every high school ecosystem, there exists a small handful of kids who rise above the frivolity and competitiveness of cliques. These are the students

who will simultaneously interact with the jocks and the geeks – yet are ridiculed by neither. The students who would run for Class President, and win. The students who will play varsity sports, lead the school play, and do well academically (think Chris ‘Oz’ Ostreicher from the American Pie movies). What did they know that we didn’t? What allowed them to transcend the pettiness of their surroundings and succeed to such a high degree?

My rudimentary analysis of the situation yielded a host of character attributes that distinguishes these individuals from the typical teenager (too many to explore in this short piece). But at the highest level, all of these attributes coalesced into one overarching approach to life: “I am who I want to be.”

Just think about that statement for a moment. The typical teenager orchestrates his/her social life around what they think they’re expected to do. “I need to be at this party.” “I can’t be seen in this outfit.” “I can’t be seen socializing with this other kid.” In essence, their actions are based on validating or affecting the perceptions others have of them. In stark contrast, winning students use an internal compass to dictate their actions. They wear the clothing that they want for no one other than themselves.

While most high schoolers are complaining about why life sucks so much, the “winning” students are sucking the marrow out of life. They make no apologies for their pursuits or interests. They are less concerned with what others think and instead focus on the task at hand. In general, their disposition is positive: “It’s all good.” Other people are drawn to them as a result.

The irony is that most high school students desperately want to be seen in a particular way by their peers. So they exert tremendous amounts of time and energy in the pursuit of establishing their desired reputation – often to no avail. Yet the kids who are comfortable in their own shoes,

who focus on developing their own brand so to speak, aren’t attempting to architect their reputation. It grows organically. Whether by design or not, these students have cracked the code for reputation development in the chaotic world of high school.

Most organizations today still approach PR like the typical high schooler. “I want you to think I’m cooler than everyone else.” So to get you to see how cool I am, I’m going to tell you by way of press release, by trying to convince the media that I’m cool (who can then also tell you), and by telling bloggers (who can blog about how cool I am). It’s bragging essentially. And where did bragging ever get you in high school? A more evolved sentiment, but still misguided, is the “I’m going to show you how cool I am.” While demonstrating with actions is certainly more effective than telling with words, the result is still damaging if, for example, the sole purpose for the display is to demonstrate one’s superiority over the competition. It’s not bragging — now it’s just showing off.

In today’s new media environment, winning organizations need to ditch the “aren’t we cool” attitude, and assume a disposition that says “we are who we want to be.” Let’s go back to school and see what that might look like:

9th Grade PR – Communications

In high school, we knew who the winners were. They didn’t have to tell us. Talk to anyone in the world, and ask them what characteristics they respect in people. You will hear things like integrity, modesty, strong work ethic, respectfulness, inclusivity, empathy, and so forth. Organizations are spending billions to demonstrate their integrity by adopting causes, talking about corporate citizenship, and working to reduce carbon footprints. Yet, for all the talk about integrity, our press releases still begin with “we’re the LEADING blah blah blah?” Who speaks like that? More to the point, who speaks like that and expects audiences to think anything other than,

“What a loser?” News flash: virtually no media outlet or blogger pays attention to self-aggrandizing language. At best, they tune it out, at worst it annoys them and colors the way they feel about an organization. A critical first step to adopting the we-are-who-we-want-to-be attitude is to infuse your communications with a dose of humanity. Instead of saying:

Louder Than Words, a leading communications agency that...

Try saying:

Louder Than Words, a communications agency that...

It's that simple.

10th Grade PR – Journalism

No one likes a bully. In high school, the bully was able to corner the lunch money market, but he didn't exactly win friends and influence people in the process. Most PR agencies today still approach media relations (and blogger relations by extension) in the same manner as that high school bully trying to gain lunch money. Blast press releases, emails, follow-up call after follow-up call. Is it any wonder that we've earned the nickname “flak?” It's time to stop the madness. The new PR professional will cultivate a powerful network of media relationships organically and over time by 1) understanding their needs as journalists, 2) addressing their needs as journalists, and 3) treating them with the same amount of respect as their clients.

If you think it is hard being a PR professional, try being a journalist for a week. Low job security, increased pressures and deadlines, fewer quality controls, and 1,000 emails a day from people who neither understand their business nor know anything about what they cover. Rule of thumb: unless you're a Fortune 500 company or a movie star, reporters do not want to cover what you are doing. They want to

tell stories. Stories that have protagonists and antagonists, a diversity of viewpoints, multiple sources, and third-party data to provide context. We need to give it to them. Instead of writing one-dimensional press releases that offer none of the elements listed above, tailor pitches for specific reporters that imply “I know who you are and understand what you need.”

Focus pitches around issues instead of accomplishments and don't be afraid to suggest outside sources, even if they might not see eye to eye with your company. A person comfortable in his own skin is not concerned about those who might disagree with him. It's normal. The same applies in organizational life. Is it better landing a high-visibility story that includes myriad voices including your CEO's, or to land no story at all?

PR must also become part of an organization's DNA. And this will only happen if we turn our attention inward. How can we do this?

11th Grade PR – Management

In most mid-sized organizations, the PR Director reports to a Marketing Director, who in turn reports to the CMO, CEO or Executive Director. It's the PR Director's job to manage the PR agency. This dynamic essentially removes PR from the decision making process. Then, almost as an afterthought, the PR Director charges the agency to go out and leverage X, Y, and Z for publicity. PR is a commodity in the old-world model, based on taking inputs and creating outputs. It's not a fundamental business process. Winning high school students are successful because of their disposition, values, and personality (among other things). It's stuff that is hardwired in their DNA. While most high schoolers work hard to convince others of their coolness, the winning students focus their energies

on developing themselves. Their peers are drawn to them as a byproduct. PR must also become part of an organization's DNA. And this will only happen if we turn our attention inward. How can we do this?

For starters, PR needs a voice at the decision making table. It will be the CMO or Marketing Director's responsibility to make this happen. Then (hold on to your hats), you should agree that for the next 12 months, 80% of PR resources will be invested in developing strategic programs that advance the brand and business, while only 20% of PR resources will be spent on external communications to media, bloggers, and the like. Feel free to play around with these percentages.

Over the next year, use PR resources to articulate answers to big questions such as: What is the purpose of our organization? What are the conditions in this world that make us necessary? Who are the audiences that really matter to us, now and in the future? Then, build out original and creative programs that support your newly clarified purpose and engage those audiences directly. If you manufacture and sell high-end yachts, host a regatta and donate 50% of the purse to an organization supporting clean oceans. If you're a Boston nonprofit that promotes healthy eating in low-income neighborhoods, engage local, high-profile chefs to contribute easy, affordable signature recipes. Then compile them into a cookbook and underwrite the costs by corporate sponsors in the food industry.

The bottom line is that creating these kinds of programs and deliverables is a valuable use of the PR professional's time and talent. Not only does it advance your organization's brand purposefully, not only does it engage audiences directly and grow the potential for future business, but it says to the world “we know who we are and we are who we want to be.” In so doing, you will find that media and bloggers will be drawn to you as never before.

12th Grade PR – Civics

Collaboration is the most over-used term in the PR world. It rings hollow. Nobody is actually interested in working together, coordinating efforts, or supporting their prospective competitors. But while so many PR professionals, and their clients, waste their time trying to out-gun each other, the public is simply tuning out. Collaboration is the opportunity staring us all in the face, yet most of us choose to ignore it.

The new PR will be grounded by collaboration, not competition.

Like the winning high school student who draws her community from a wide range of social circles, so too must businesses that want to advance a reputation within their industry and at large. Host industry gathering events and give your competitors an opportunity to share the sponsorship. I can assure you, an event that is sponsored by multiple organizations within a given field will be more newsworthy and will feel more credible, than one sponsored by your business alone.

Apply this approach to your media relations efforts. With your new enlightened

mindset, a tier-one story is no longer about regurgitating a press release, but about advancing a dialogue around an issue. In the same manner that an organizer reaches out to adversaries to find common ground, invite a detractor to speak with a reporter on a story that is of importance to you both. It might seem counter intuitive, but it will endear you to the reporter, it will make for a better story, and it will show that you can take the high road, it might also ease tensions between you and your adversary.

The new PR will be grounded by collaboration, not competition. Engaging stakeholders in dialogue and advancing issues as a collective voice (it's an approach that worked wonders for the Obama campaign).

To be clear, this approach to PR and reputation management says nothing about actual business performance (one could again point to Obama to make this point), but it will allow companies to operate from a position of reputational strength.

For the PR profession to evolve with the times, we need to focus our energies not on strategies that convince, but on strategies that encourage and invite. We want our key audiences to feel that they've reached their own conclusions about us, and if we've gone about it in the right way, those feelings will be genuine. They may even want to take us to the prom. ♦

Rich Polt is President of Louder Than Words, a Boston-based PR agency serving foundations, nonprofits, and mission-driven businesses. Earlier in his career, he worked with Schwartz Communications, the nation's second largest independent PR agency focused on high-tech and medical technology companies. Rich is an outspoken proponent of revamping PR to keep pace with the times and has written at length on the topic. Outside of the office, he is passionate about road cycling, yoga, and crossword puzzles. He lives in Needham, Massachusetts with his wife, Jennifer and son, Samuel. Follow Rich on his blog, Communicate Good or on Twitter @communicategood.