

**Arthur W. Page**  
**A Man of Vision, Valor, and Values**

By Pamela Jo Brubaker

*This essay discusses each of the seven principles of public relations management identified throughout the Arthur W. Page speeches. The messages highlighted here offer a timeless reminder and call to action for how organizations should responsibly conduct business. Organizations will find the philosophy of public relations management as Page advocated are as true and applicable to business operations today as they were when Page delivered these messages while working and consulting for AT&T from 1927 to 1955.*

**Tell the Truth**

*Let the public know what's happening and provide an accurate picture of the company's character, ideals and practices.*

*Tell the truth* is often recognized as a key principle of public relations that Arthur W. Page advocated for and taught management during his time with AT&T. However, for Page, telling the truth involved more than the organization's need to accurately communicate information to both internal and external publics. It required a deliberate attempt to make information available about the company's operations, regardless of whether or not the nature of the information framed the organization in a positive light. In truth, his philosophy of public relations centered on what many in the industry now refer to as transparency—"the deliberate attempt to make available all legally reasonable information—weather positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 75).

Page encouraged management to not only conduct operations with the public's interest in mind, but he continually advocated for and asked management to communicate with the public as openly and candidly as possible. The time Page spent working as editor of his father's

magazine, *The World's Work*, prior to his employment with AT&T, made him acutely aware that secrecy was one of the public's biggest complaints regarding large companies. Negative perceptions of businesses—particularly large, powerful businesses—resulted from the public's fear of too much power and their distaste for arrogance. Suspicion, he would say, arises from things people do not understand. Therefore, businesses must demonstrate that their interests serve those of the public, particularly when it is large. Private business enterprises, he argued, do not have a right to keep their affairs private; the public has a right to know about the company's operations. Ultimately, Page taught that the public's apprehension, suspicion, and fear of large, successful businesses could be squelched through more transparent communications:

People are very quick to suspect that there may be something against the public interest in the methods by which even competitive businesses become successful. Size and power breed fear and dislike, especially when surrounded by secrecy or mystery.

I believe then that it is always good counsel to tell the public the facts about business. But this is difficult for the public is quite busy about its own business and not much prone to listen about yours unless perchance some one accuses you of having prospered by unfair methods or grown rich and arrogant, or you are hit by the kind of attack which may well make the headlines. Then you will be asked to tell your story, but on the defensive, which is a poor way to start (speech 35).

Making a deliberate attempt to truthfully communicate business affairs to the public is not a pick-and-choose game; it requires “frankness” from the beginning, even when the nature of the information itself depicts the weaknesses or failings of the organization. Organizations are not only accountable to the public in good times, but they are accountable to the public in difficult times. Such was the case when AT&T chose to temporarily degrade service to current customers in order to expand its service to more people across the country. During this time, when the company's message was less than positive, Page advocated hard work ethics, constant vigilance, and repeatedly admonished the company to provide a “full explanation of what the

facts are” (speech 34). By exposing the company’s weaknesses and justifying its behavior before the court of public opinion—opposed to hiding the company’s failings—the company was more likely to demonstrate its customer commitment and engender goodwill and loyalty.

As part of this management philosophy, Page considered it important for businesses, particularly large enterprises, to remain accountable to the public. Communicating openly and honestly with the public was therefore a means of answering to them. The following sentiment is therefore indicative of how Page viewed corporate responsibility: “Business in a democratic country begins with public permission and exists by public approval. Businesses should be cheerfully willing to tell the public what its policies are, what it is doing, and what it hopes to do” (speech 29).

### **Prove it with Action**

*Public perception of an organization is determined 90 percent by what it does and 10 percent by what it says.*

Page believed how businesses conducted itself “consists of 90 per cent of what is done and 10 per cent or thereabouts in explaining it” (speech 25, 29). As this statement demonstrates, Page was not an advocate for publicity alone. He felt that merely telling the public what it wants to hear is meaningless if the company’s actions don’t match its message. Therefore, he considered how the company conducted its operations and actually what it did for the public as being just as important—if not more so—than what it told the public. Words were just that, words; Page wanted the organization to demonstrate its commitment to the public through action, not words alone.

Publicity is an important part of public relations, but in business as in most human affairs, what you do is more important than what you say. It is always possible to make a good statement on a good set of facts, but no more in business than in politics can you fool all

the people all the time, and if you expect to stay in business long, an attempt to fool even some of the people some of the time will end in disaster (speech 22).

Page considered it the responsibility of the public relations department, or what was then called the information department, to do more than focus its efforts on publicity. He depended upon those who operated in this capacity to monitor the company's activities and determine whether or not the company should adjust its operations so that what the company said it was doing was indeed in line with what it was doing. Essentially, Page's public relations philosophy was based on the notion that "what you do for the public and how you do it is far more important than what you tell the public" (speech 35). He stated, "A company's reputation is chiefly dependent upon what it does and in a lesser degree on what it says and this lesser degree becomes very small indeed if what it says and what it does do not jibe" (speech 38).

### **Listen to the Customer**

*To serve the company well, understand what the public wants and needs. Keep top decision makers and other employees informed about public reaction to company products, policies and practices.*

Page did more than merely advocate for more transparency in business communications and encourage the company to back up its words with actions, he wanted the company to listen to the customers' sentiments, reactions and desires and do its part to operate in the public interest. Page believed that public relations required taking into account the legitimate concerns of corporate stakeholders. He considered it a necessity to study, observe, and analyze the impact of businesses conduct on the public mind in order to know how to better serve the public interest.

Page recognized that listening to and monitoring public opinion requires maintaining pulse on both internal and external publics, as well as "a system of getting employee and public questions and criticisms back up through the organization so that management may know what

the public thinks of the business” (speech 29). Page understood the value of monitoring what the press, the public, and even employees were saying. Listening to these various publics allows the company to adapt business practices to what the public wants opposed to merely what the company thinks it wants. However, the ideal for which Page sought was ultimately being able to anticipate public opinion in such a way that the company could give the public what it wanted before they ever knew they wanted it.

I think it is a wise thing, therefore, for the public relations department to question everything that goes on in the company to see whether there is anything that is done or anything that is left undone that they couldn't explain to the public. Then we ought to go a step further, and see if we can figure out what the public will want to know next, and begin telling the public what that is even before it knows what it is going to want (speech 3).

### **Manage for Tomorrow**

*Anticipate public reaction and eliminate practices that create difficulties. Generate goodwill.*

Effective public relations that will produce lasting results requires addressing relevant challenges today and conducting business in such a manner so as to prevent further issues in the future. As part of this philosophy, Page believed that how challenges were addressed in the past resulted in the reputation of today, and how challenges are addressed today directly influences the company's reputation tomorrow. Establishing a reputable reputation requires more than focusing on present circumstances, it requires actively managing for the future.

Page understood that effectively managing public relations and curbing public opinion is not a result of reacting to every expression of public dissent or dislike. It's taking a proactive opposed to a reactive position and managing business affairs so as to prevent bad publicity or poor public reactions. A defensive and reactive strategy to public relations does not produce lasting results that will ensure long-term success. Page deemed it a “hopeless endeavor to correct the troubles that arise in our public relations by running around trying to put salve on each

manifestation of public displeasure” (speech 5). Instead of reacting to every form of public displeasure, “and being continually and all the time on the defensive” (speech 5), Page’s philosophy was to take a proactive approach and take corrective action immediately when it appears trouble is ahead. Regarding this public relations strategy he said, “This is a preventive kind of publicity, and to my mind exceedingly effective, because you can’t run around and put salve on every sore that appears in the world. You have to find some way of correcting the thing before it breaks out” (speech 6).

### **Conduct Public Relations as if the Whole Company Depends on It**

*Corporate relations is a management function. No corporate strategy should be implemented without considering its impact on the public. The public relations professional is a policy maker capable of handling a wide range of corporate communications activities.*

Not only did Page indicate the importance of studying the public and making course corrections when needed, but Page believed that it was management who set the pace for how the company should conduct itself with the public and thereby conduct public relations. As the impact of management’s policies and decisions directly and indirectly influence public perceptions, management should therefore take care to consider the effect of each decision they make on the public. Regarding this important responsibility Page said the following:

The public relations job of the president, therefore, is first to have the company intend to do the right thing by the public. ...Then he has to get everyone in the company to do his part in carrying out the policy effectively, reasonably and politely. This is a real test of management. Thirdly, the president has to set the pace for the talking and writing the company does (speech 38).

As Page suggests, being able to carry out or implement effective public relations policy requires the help of more than just top management. Essentially, Page advocated for establishing a culture where everyone affiliated with the organization, beginning with top management, realized the

impact of their communications with the public. Additionally, effectively managing public relations requires the help of those specifically responsible for this function to handle a variety of corporate communications activities and assist in the implementation of these policies.

### **Remain Calm, Patient and Good-Humored**

*Lay the groundwork for public relations miracles with consistent, calm and reasoned attention to information and contacts. When a crisis arises, remember that cool heads communicate best.*

In order to serve the public interest, Page's public relations philosophy addresses more than how the company should conduct business operations; it takes into consideration how those within the company should conduct themselves. In order to serve the public's interest, Page believed that it was necessary for organizations to work effectively with the public and use good manners. "What are a company's manners?" Page both questions and replies. "They are the manners of every employee that comes in contact with the public on and off the job" (speech 38). Therefore, the manner in which public relations is handled requires a need for people to remain calm, patient, and good-humored.

Adjusting a big business to a democracy is operating it in the public interest with good humor, reasonableness and politeness. If this is done with some skill and some luck it ought to work out. There are hazards enough to make it exciting, rewards enough to make it worth while, and always the chance that if it succeeds we may be helping to make a little better country to live in, as well as a more satisfactory life for ourselves, for after all one of the great satisfactions of life is to serve the public of one's time and generation in a way that commands its respect and liking (speech 25).

How individuals within the organization conducted themselves when they were gainfully representing the company was of such importance to the Page philosophy of public relations that he made it a point of discussing this topic regularly with the employees themselves. He wanted employees to understand the importance of their interactions with the public. Therefore, as part

of his public relations policy he recommended “giving contact employees the knowledge they need to be reasonable and polite, and the incentive of knowing that those qualities count in pay and promotion” (speech 29).

When we recognize Page’s emphasis on how those affiliated with the company should conduct themselves, the vital role employees make in establishing and maintaining good relations with the public becomes evident. Therefore, it is to the seventh and last principle that we now turn.

### **Realize the Company’s True Character is Expressed by its People**

*The strongest opinions -- good or bad -- about a company are shaped by the words and deeds of its employees. As a result, every employee -- active or retired -- is involved with public relations. It is the responsibility of corporate communications to support each employee's capability and desire to be an honest, knowledgeable ambassador to customers, friends, shareowners and public officials.*

According to Page, the task of ensuring good relations between an organization and the public resides with more than just a few individuals within the company, or a specific department or agency—it is the responsibility of every individual within the organization. Essentially, a company’s true character is expressed by its people. Perceptions of those individuals affiliated with the organization directly influence perceptions of the company. Demonstrating good character as advocated in the sixth principle is therefore imperative to how the company’s character is expressed by employees at varying levels.

Page reiterated this principle frequently during his career when addressing both employees and non-employees at a variety of conferences. Page believed that each employee, ranging from the telephone installer to top management should understand the company’s business: “The laboratory for research of public relations is in the hands of everybody in the [Bell] System, and the work is done at the point of contact between the telephone employees and



the public” (speech 18). The actions and words of those people who work for the company have the ability to create either a positive or negative perception on the company itself.

If everybody in the telephone business were trying to sell the services of the company you wouldn't have very much trouble with the public. If every telephone company employee acted toward the public in every public contact as if he were the owner of a small business and the person he was dealing with were his best customer, nearly all the problems would be done (speech 6).

Recognizing the employee's role in building and establishing good relations with others, Page sought to ensure that all employees have an understanding of the organization itself. Therefore, constant communication with employees about the organization was seen as a vital necessity:

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. But while a little knowledge is dangerous, less knowledge is still more dangerous. Our people will have to answer questions about price and quality. I am quite certain that the general body of our employees can be trained to represent the company effectively even on complicated subjects (speech 14).

Page did not only communicate this philosophy to those affiliated with AT&T, but he reiterated the following while speaking at an annual meeting of the Association of Life Insurance Presidents:

The employees and agents are walkie-talkies all the time and they talk about the business they are in. If they know a lot about it and believe in it, they talk one way. If they know little and have little faith, they talk another way. If they don't know much about the management and its policies, they think one way. If they do know about the management and its policies they think another. What the employee and agent think and know and say are the bases of what the public thinks and knows about the business, for to 99% of the public they are the medium that depicts the insurance company. In a sense they are the company—if they think they are. But often they are not the company, for their neighbors can and often do think well of them and ill of the company that employs them (speech 31).

By suggesting that each individual who represents the organization is responsible for public relations, Page in no way intended to belittle the importance of those specifically tasked with this responsibility. Instead, he was merely concerned about the image employees portray. By reiterating this philosophy, his intention was to helping management recognize the impact of employee conduct both inside and outside the organization, and the need to communicate as effectively with this public as those individuals unaffiliated with the company. Additionally, employees need to recognize the value of their interactions with people and how this contribution affects the bottom line. Ultimately, Page taught that “Public relations, therefore, is not publicity only, not management only; it is what everybody in the business from top to bottom says and does when in contact with the public. Anybody in the business can help sell his livelihood” (speech 25).

## References

Rawlins, B. (2009). Give the emperor a mirror: Toward developing a stakeholder measurement of organizational transparency. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(2), 71-99.