

# When Journalists Become PR Men

by NORMAN HILL

Last year an *SR* communications editorial commented on new statistics showing that the percentage of journalism graduates entering public relations jobs had tripled in the past five years. The same editorial reported that "newspapermen of quality and excellence have in recent years found themselves distressingly vulnerable to the disappearing paper, the suddenly merging paper, the foundering paper."

An inevitable result of the past decade's contraction in the newspaper business has been the movement into public relations of career journalists, impelled by better pay or the need for a job when papers folded. Most newspapermen, especially those who have worked in the field for a number of years, develop attitudes of distrust or hostility toward pr work. They also acquire strong feelings of pride as working newspapermen and a sense of status and public esteem. Nearly everybody respects and admires a newspaperman. Hardly anybody understands or sympathizes with a pr man's work and few admire him, least of all most working journalists.

How, then, does a veteran journalist adjust to pr? How does he deal with his long-smoldering prejudice against what he has perceived to be the commercial demands, the unprofessional practices, the unglamorous anonymity of pr work? How do his colleagues react?

That newspapermen generally share deep prejudices against the pr field and pr men was borne out unanimously in interviews with a number of former reporters, editors, and columnists who are now working as pr executives. Their news experience ranged from fifteen to thirty-six years, except for one who had written a daily by-lined advertising news column in New York for three years when he left the field. All had reached top writing or editorial positions at newspapers or wire services. Some were attracted to pr by job offers while they were employed. Some were forced out of their jobs by the demise of their newspapers and seized

upon the best available opportunities.

Alfred R. Zipser, fifty-one, now Eastern public relations head for Xerox Corporation, has been in his job for nine years. He says unhesitatingly that during his twenty-one years as a newspaperman, eighteen of them as a *New York Times* financial writer, he was acknowledged among pr people to be the "most feared, most prejudiced" of newspapermen. ("Always chompin' on pr guys," says another former newspaperman.) Zipser explains that "for years I got all kinds of run-arounds. I would ask a pr man a direct question: 'Are sales up or down?' and get the company's pr policy read to me."

Zipser says he still feels that "a substantial number of pr men don't know what they are doing." He finds "appalling and incredible the ignorance of pr men" about press relations, deadlines, and newspaper requirements. He deplores pr men's "amazement when their copy is changed by the paper" and protests the practice by many of "requesting of respectable publications the right to review, and even change, stories before publication," not just for accuracy but to alter the sense. While

Zipser says the intensity of his prejudice has been "mitigated by 50 per cent" since he left the *Times* ("I have changed quite a bit, obviously"), he still feels that "there are a good number of pr men who don't know a goddamn about press relations. They downgrade press relations as very unimportant and oversell management on other functions such as counseling on corporate image."

Zipser recalled two incidents that illuminate the general attitude of newspapermen. Before leaving the *Times*, he had been invited to a party at the home of a colleague at the newspaper. When the host learned Zipser had accepted a pr job, he canceled the invitation. Another newspaperman commented on Zipser's move into pr work: "I would rather you had decided to hand out towels in a Hackensack whorehouse."

John N. Fallon left United Press International last January after twenty-two years as a writer, radio bureau manager, cables editor, Southwestern division news manager, and finally foreign editor, to join the New York Telephone Company as a pr assistant vice president. He remembers having had "a sort of resentment toward pr work. I think this is a fairly common feeling."

Fallon hastens to explain that he is "not talking about corporate pr. I'm talking about the drumbeater type, trying to bamboozle you." He points to "the silly things they do, like mail a release to you two days after the event, inundate you with paper." Echoing Al Zipser, Fallon complains that



*"It started out as a suicide note. Then I corrected the spelling of a few words; rearranged a sentence or two; became interested in the style; developed plot lines and added suspense; inserted a few flashbacks to my miserable childhood and, of course, many bedroom episodes from my formative and adult years. Never once did I dream I would wind up talking to you about subsidiary rights."*

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"largely these guys don't know what they're doing. I didn't want to deal with these people," he recalls. "I always felt they were trying to put something over, just to get something on the wires." But some corporate pr men, "certain great exceptions," were quite a different matter. "People like the airlines pr people or pr guys for big corporations. Very helpful. Knew what you wanted and got it for you."

Thus, Fallon explains, he was able to decide to move into pr for the telephone company because "I wasn't getting into something that was going to be a bamboozle-type job. It was a big outfit with big responsibilities, big problems. Here we're not trying to make up a lot of stories about things. We are a story."

Another leading newsman who moved into pr work for the New York Telephone Company is Cortland Anderson, assistant vice president, pr, for the company's huge Brooklyn-Long Island division. Anderson started in newspaper work at the age of fourteen. His career as a reporter and editor spanned twenty years, the last three as founding editor of the Cowles family's ill-fated *Suffolk Sun* ("I was its editor from start to finish"), and included three years as managing editor of the St. Petersburg, Florida, *Times*. He turned to pr last December, after the *Sun* folded.

Anderson describes friends' reactions when he took the job as "surprise, bewilderment." He says he had to overcome a "deep reluctance" to move into pr. "I had a cynicism about pr. Once, at the age of twenty-six, as a brand new managing editor, I told a man, 'You're nothing but a pr man.' That's the attitude of many newsmen.

You're on a white horse, protecting the interest of the public." He cites editorial caution as a reason. "Distrust of any news source is healthy in the news business. You ought to challenge a pr man in any field. A reporter has to determine whether he's telling the truth or trying to cover up."

George Auerbach, forty-six, a leading executive in the pr agency field, confirms the newsman's instinctive wariness of pr sources. Now executive vice president of Wyle Associates in New York, Auerbach worked for *The New York Times* for fifteen years, mostly in financial news. He remembers being "skeptical of pr men. I questioned whether they really had the confidence of the client. Or were they just out to make the client look good?"

He justifies such skepticism, saying "a reporter should get to the news source," generally a top company official. But a company head "frequently turns green, white, and yellow when he hears the newspapers are calling to talk to him. As his pr representative, I'll find out the area for discussion and help prepare him."

Henry J. Bechtold, forty-one, left UPI nine years ago to become a pr man at RCA, where for the past three years he has been director of news and information. During his fifteen-year career at UPI, Bechtold rose to financial editor. He had considerable dealings with pr people, got "hundreds of news releases every day," and remembers his pr contacts in those days as "people like myself." However, he does want it noted that "pr is not running around with releases, like a press agent—pushing, pushing, pushing. We suggest stories, and keep the press posted on a continuous basis on what we're doing."

Robert Morgan, former advertising news columnist, now a partner in his own pr agency, Davis and Morgan, says candidly, "Certain of the pr men I dealt with were idiots, but the majority were a great help. God help us if we didn't have them to help us as newsmen. I'd hate to have to write a daily column and depend on getting to the top management of companies to get all my information." Morgan, thirty-nine, wrote his column in the *New York World Telegram & Sun* for three years before turning to pr in 1959. He contends that newsmen have an edge as pr converts. They have a better understanding of what editors do and do not want and know how to find a proper news peg to interest an editor. They stumble less in presenting a story to an editor."

When the *New York World-Journal-Tribune* folded in 1967, Charles Sievert found himself out of a job after thirty-six years with the organization. He

moved through a series of freelance pr assignments before joining the McCann-Erickson advertising agency, where he is Eastern pr representative for the Buick division of General Motors. He remembers that at first he "felt like a fish out of water. A lot of newspapermen used to call pr guys pimps, flacks, the usual jargon."

Sievert now declares that pr is "just common sense and good taste, not like being a press agent for a politician, where you really learn how dirty you can get. Some guys who can't get along in the newspaper business make good pr men. A lot of pr guys for celebrities can't write English. At the paper we had all the pr men indexed. One phony thing and we never opened their mail again."

Another *World-Journal-Tribune* veteran set adrift in 1967 was Joseph Kaselow, who had been an ad news columnist with the *Herald Tribune* for many years. Kaselow, now pr director of Cunningham & Walsh, reports that, while he was "somewhat surprised" to find himself in pr work, he was "not at all uneasy. I was working with the same guys as when I did my column. And I report to the top man at the agency, which helps."

Most converted journalists felt that the switch from news writing to public relations writing presented no great problem. Some claimed that there was objectivity in their current work; others pointed a finger at what they termed lack of objectivity in news writing. A few said pr writing was, by necessity, biased.

Fallon contended "this theory of objectivity is belabored. Just how objective do you find the press today, or the average reporter? They all pay lip service to objectivity. But the reporter injects himself into every story.

"If you mean objectivity in the sense of the telephone company, what can we say after we say we're sorry?"

"When we put out our release on the Public Service Commission's interim approval of our rate rise we included, in the fourth paragraph, reference to their tying the approval to improved telephone service. We can't hide under a mattress. In telling a company story I don't think you bury anything or hide anything. Sure there probably are some corporate things better left unsaid, because the inner workings are not necessarily public knowledge."

Fallon says that "newspaper correspondents sometimes overdo things. They tend to try to snow the editor in their zeal to produce a story. You find the same thing here. An individual, in his zeal to tell you how he's breaking his back to get the job done, may present it in a distorted way.

"The element of distortion that af-

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*The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.*

Although the \_\_\_\_\_  
fought defection,  
Rebels planned controlled disorder,  
\_\_\_\_\_ calls to insurrection,  
Blew up \_\_\_\_\_ at the border.

—A.S.

(Answer on page 62)