

Presidential Address: GEOTEL - a Public Relations Plan for Geology

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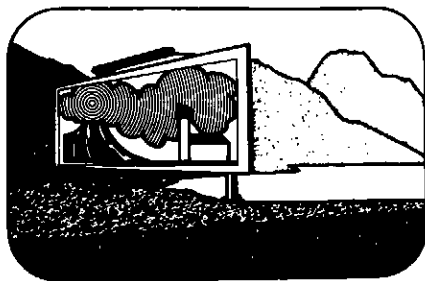
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Presidential Address

GEOTEL - a Public Relations Plan for Geology

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Introduction

Geologists have a story to tell, and we're not telling it. We are exceptionally fortunate in this country because of the wealth of mineral resources we do possess. Canada owes much to its mining and petroleum industries, yet those same industries, despite the major role they play in the economy, have a generally poor image in the eyes of the public. To a certain extent the industries have brought this image upon themselves, through their limited attempts to tell the Canadian public what they do contribute to our way of life. There is an increasing awareness of this today, however, and attempts are being made to rectify the situation, for example, through national advertising campaigns, and through the provision of speakers to local groups.

If I say the mining and oil industries have a bad press, the geology profession almost seems to have *no* press at all.

In view of the role the geologist plays, whether it be in research or exploration, that is most unfortunate. After all, and I don't really need to tell this audience, without highly skilled geologists, there would be no mining or petroleum industries in Canada. With all due respect, accountants, lawyers and MBAs don't come up with mines and oil wells. Despite this primary importance to the industries, the role of the geologist is for the most part unappreciated, if not unknown.

It seems to me that in addition to being geologists, contributing to knowledge in our field or to the development of specific resources, we as a profession must become more active as communicators, as advocates of our own profession and the industries we serve. No more can we enjoy complaining to each other - we have to go beyond preaching to the converted.

Public Relations Defined

It used to be that the phrase "public relations" conjured up an image of a smooth talking, back slapping, nattily dressed, real guy with a limitless expense account. Today the phrase public relations (P.R.) has taken on new meaning. It requires an almost scientific approach. One definition is "Public relations is good performance publicly appreciated because it is adequately communicated." The P.R. function is essentially one of communication, of communication with the groups or publics which have some actual or potential bearing on, in our instance, the science of geology and its advancement.

The P.R. handbook of the American Institute of Professional Geologists describes public relations as the process of effective communication with every group that may have an impact on our profession.

Too, public relations activities should be designed to maintain a two-way flow of information, both providing information to the various publics while being aware of the perceptions and wants of those publics, and any changes in them. You can take a horse to water but you can't necessarily make it drink - you have to find out something about the horse's drinking habits, preferences and, if you can believe this, its lifestyle.

Seriously, to carry out a public relations project, one must be aware of the perceptions and wants of the people to whom your message is being conveyed, to be able to present your case in terms which will appeal to them, and strike a responsive chord.

By way of illustration, one news item can be described in many different ways, depending on an editor's perceptions of his or her readers' interests. Take the sinking of the Titanic and how such a story might be covered across this country. In Toronto the *Globe and Mail* would probably report "Cargo from Europe delayed". Not to be outdone, the *Toronto Star* would have a headline that reads "Star reporter saves dog as thousands die". In an effort to capture everyone's attention, the *Toronto Sun* would no doubt report "Crew demands sex for lifeboats". In Montreal *Le Devoir* would probably report "Sinking of Titanic will

not affect constitution". In Calgary, the *Herald* will have a banner headline which reads "National Energy Policy sinks mighty Titanic". In Vancouver, three days after the event, a one column headline would be read in the *Vancouver Sun* that simply says "Local man lost at sea".

In developing a communications project or program, the identification of one's various audiences or publics is a key step. The key publics for a mineral resource company, for example, are probably shareholders, the financial and business communities, governments at various levels, the media, the purchasers of the company's products, suppliers, the general public, including students and educators, and, frequently forgotten, employees.

As a geologist our publics include, not necessarily in order of importance: our *employers* in university, government and industry, the *media* - particularly science writers, the *communities* in which we are seen plying our trade, *students* - at all levels, from kindergarten up, *governments*, the *general public*, from the folks next door to the faceless masses, and our *colleagues*. Doubtless you will be able to come up with other audiences. The point I wish to make is, once we have identified and understand the perceptions of our various publics, it is easier to link a particular P.R. project to the correct audience; or alternatively, when faced with a P.R. problem, to zero in on the group to which a response should be directed. No P.R. project can be all things to all people. It is far better and much more effective to tackle one audience, or one problem, at a time.

Write Simply and Clearly

Central to any public relations effort is the ability to write well. That means writing simply and clearly, with one's audience in mind. Remember the KISS rule which, if you'll pardon the expression, means "Keep it simple, stupid".

To illustrate this, I can repeat a story which some of you may have already heard, but it does bring the point home. Someone once wrote to a government department asking whether hydrochloric acid could be used to clean the tubes in his steam boiler. He received this reply: "Uncertainties of reactive processes make the use of hydrochloric acid undesirable where alkalinity is involved." To which the man wrote back: "Thanks for the advice, I'll start using it immediately." Back from the department came this urgent message: "Regrettable decision involves uncertainties. Hydrochloric acid will produce sublimate invalidating reactions." The Telex reply was: "Thanks again, glad to know its OK." This time

there came the following urgent but very clear message. "Don't use the hydrochloric acid. It will eat the hell out of your tubes."

There are various ways of measuring the readability of anything you write. One which is somewhat enlightening is the FOG test, which basically involves giving points to any word with three or more syllables. The higher the score, the fogger the writing. If you want to try this out select a paragraph, any old paragraph in a written passage. Count the number of words. Count the number of sentences. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences to obtain the number of words per sentence. Then count the number of words with three or more syllables. Add that to the number of words per sentence, and divide the result by four. That will give you the approximate grade level of the passage.

For your information, I tried that out with a couple of the abstracts in this year's annual meeting *Program with Abstracts*. With one, the contents were aimed at someone who had reached the equivalent of grade 12, with another the contents were aimed at someone who had reached grade 14. Some may well argue that it is the university level with which we aim to communicate at our annual meetings. However, if you ever wonder why these meetings don't receive much press coverage remember that most newspapers are written for a grade of 10 or less. Also, your average reporter these days, often with a university degree, nevertheless didn't take that degree in geology so is at a disadvantage when ploughing through our abstracts.

Inverted Pyramid

Public relations writing derives from newspaper writing, which is the exact opposite of what is generally taught at school. An essay, story or novel builds gradually up to a climax which comes at its end. The climax of a newspaper article comes at the beginning. Consider for a moment how you read a newspaper. If the headline of an article catches your eye, you'll probably read at least part of the first sentence. Depending on the content of that sentence, you'll read on, or look for another article. If you continue to read the article you may give up after a few paragraphs, especially if you have to turn to another page.

Thus, if the writer wants to convey the most important facts of the story they should be expressed in the first sentence, which shouldn't be much longer than 20 words. Subsequent sentences or paragraphs are written in descending order of importance, with fewer important paragraphs as the article continues, hence

the term inverted pyramid for this mode of writing. Perhaps some abstracts might benefit from this style.

In addition, right up front, one should have answered the six key questions: who? what? why? when? where? and how? If you are wondering what to put in a piece of P.R. writing, you won't go far wrong by merely answering those questions.

This inverted pyramid style of writing forms the basis for the most fundamental of all P.R. communications vehicles, the news release. Note I say *news* release, not press release - generally a news release must represent news. Quality rather than quantity is more effective. Rarely will a news release be used verbatim, but it does serve to alert an editor to a potential story.

A news release should follow a certain format. Do give the name of a contact who can provide further information. Remember to proofread, preferably the day after something has been written. If you're too familiar with the text, try reading it backwards, from back to front. Be aware of deadlines. Direct releases to specific people rather than "the editor". Do have some idea of the content of the newspaper or programming of the radio or TV station before you send something off.

Some Successes

Over the last year or so it has been interesting to note several efforts, on the part of individuals and groups, to tell the geology story and attempts by various media to increase their science coverage, although I think in one quarter anyway there is too much reliance on U.S. news-wire features. I recall an article in *Maclean's* about a year ago describing Steve Scott's work. Derek York is a frequent contributor to the *Globe and Mail's* weekly science section. The *Wall St. Journal* last September had the ultimate, a front page story, on the life of a modern day prospector, geologist Bob Blakestad, and his search for gold on behalf of a mining company. Can we achieve such a front page story in one of our Canadian newspapers?

For the younger set, Placer Development has produced two booklets, one the "What's a mine" colouring book, the other "It comes from a mine". Initially these were published for employees' children and have been distributed to school systems in communities where the company has operations. The Newfoundland section of GAC presents awards to local journalists who produce the best features on geological topics. In Victoria, B.C., public lectures have attracted capacity crowds. In Saskatoon,

on Logan Day, the geology department bulges at the seams as the public flocks in.

So, many geologists are communicating with our publics, but we can do more. Should we, for example, be doing more with our field trip guide books? Should we be sending *Geolog* to the Canadian Science Writers Association?

It's Up to Us

Remember - geologists have a story to tell - hence GEOTEL. Identify your publics. Identify your problems. Identify your potential projects. Keep it simple - benthic microorganisms are basically bugs at the bottom of the water. And if at first you don't succeed, keep trying.

It is incumbent upon all of us to be communicators, to tell Canadians about what we do, about the importance of the things we do in terms of the Canadian economy, and about the need for a higher level of research within our university and government communities.

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