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Feature Article

Former radio reporter makes his mark in government communications

By Terry Beeler

Like many of his peers in the news media, Ed Greenberg left journalism to accept a position in public relations. In 1992, Greenberg left a radio-reporting job in Calgary to join the Manitoba government of Gary Filmon, as Director of Communications for the government caucus. He stayed there till 1999, when he accepted a position with the Department of Education (now Alberta Learning), moving to Government Services and finally to Finance where he was spokesman for Finance Minister Pat Nelson. Earlier this year, he left the provincial government to head the Communications Department for the Alberta Forest Products Association, which represents more than 60 Alberta companies involved in the manufacture of lumber, plywood, pulp and paper, and secondary wood products.

Greenberg says he experienced a culture shock in changing from asking to answering the questions. "I guess one of the biggest changes was getting used to the speed of turning information around for a reporter...I came from an environment of hourly deadlines and turning things around very quickly and went into a situation where it took up to two hours to track down information for a reporter. I thought that was unacceptable."

Greenberg acknowledges that often there's a good reason why information has to go through so many channels before being released to the media. But bureaucrats often don't appreciate the reporters' challenges and deadlines. Greenberg sought to educate government program people on the news media's needs.

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CPRS Member Profile

Janet Willson, APR

By Heather Johnston

Over the past 30 years, Janet Willson has amassed a wide variety of professional experiences. She was drawn to the field of communications in high school, where she edited the school newsletter. And in grade eleven she was chosen for a special program at Northwestern University for high-school students who were also interested in journalism. After secondary school Willson attended the University of Minnesota, where she majored in journalism. She chose public relations as her area of specialization and minored in Spanish. On graduating, Willson was offered a job at a newspaper in Argentina, but a Canadian suitor had stolen her heart, so she turned the offer down and moved to Canada instead.

Willson's first job was as a public relations assistant for the City of Edmonton. She describes this job as a "wonderful start" where she gained an invaluable understanding of the role of a public relations practitioner. It was at this time that Willson joined the local CPRS chapter. She found that the organization offered her networking opportunities, and she was able to share, grow, and learn through the many workshops that she attended. Willson has also given back much to CPRS, judging the Town Crier Awards, serving as an accreditation examiner, and most notably as President for the CPRS Calgary Chapter.

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Ed Greenberg... *(cont. from page 1)*

There are advantages to moving into a government-spokesperson role from the news media, according to Greenberg. For one thing, he says, people with his background understand and appreciate the pressures and deadlines of reporters. The media-turned-government spokesperson knows the sort of angles or questions a reporter is after. A media background also helps a government communications professional maintain a working relationship with fellow reporters.

In his role as government spokesperson, there have been times when Greenberg couldn't release information because of timing, such as budget-related information, or in cases where it would have breached confidentiality. But he has never been told to "keep a lid" on information that might be damaging to an official or a department.


If embarrassing information were to make it into the media, Greenberg would take a systematic approach: "First of all, determine if the story is correct. Get more information and determine who should be responding to it, and what can be said. If it's before the courts, it's pretty difficult to make a comment to satisfy reporters, if it's a legal matter. Every situation is different...you have to determine the facts, not necessarily what's being reported...and then go from there."

As at least one prominent government spokesperson in Ottawa discovered recently, sometimes a careless comment will not be taken "off the record". Greenberg says the approach he takes with the media depends on the situation. "You develop a very close relationship (with reporters) and you know what you can and can't say. I think it's an instinct you develop with each reporter; when are you talking as friends and when are you talking as professionals? In theory everything is on the record, but in the industry of newsmaking, there are some unwritten rules you can develop with each reporter. You just have to know what the arrangement is."

Taking the term 'media relations' quite seriously, Greenberg made a point of visiting media contacts in Calgary and Edmonton to keep in touch and find out if there were any beefs, grumbles, or suggestions to improve communications between his department and the media. It was a move he made on his own to make the department more "client friendly". He also made regular stops in Red Deer to see reporters in that city. Last summer, in his new role with the Alberta Forest Products Association, he visited rural radio and newspaper reporters in Sundre, Edson, Hinton, and Stony Plain, and other communities. He also has frequent phone call sessions with reporters in other communities to see how things are going, with intentions to visit these locations as well.

"Has it always resulted in positive coverage for the department I was with? Not always, but I view media relations as a marathon, not a sprint. This is part of relationship-building and developing a trust between a reporter and a communications person."

Reflecting on his experiences, Greenberg says he would encourage anyone contemplating a career in government communications. He advises newcomers to develop a media-relations style that works, and enjoy the experience.



Check out
www.cprscalgary.org!

Janet Willson, APR*cont. from page 1*

Throughout her career, Willson found that she was often hired by organizations that did not previously have a communications department. She describes these experiences as challenging but rewarding as she developed her role in these organizations while educating those around her about the function of public relations. She also learned a great deal about marketing communications through these experiences, and this expertise has served her well in her consulting work.

In 1978, in the midst of a promising career, Willson and her husband decided to take a 'sabbatical' in Fiji. Friends warned the couple that the 'mid-career' timing was all wrong, but Willson recalls the experience as very positive. She says it was a chance to assess personal and professional priorities, and highly recommends such a career break to others. She and her husband lived in Fiji for six months and travelled for another two. They considered settling in Fiji, but found the lifestyle "too laid back", and so returned to Canada.

Willson spent sixteen years working for the Calgary Board of Education, and describes it as an amazing place to grow, learn and make a contribution: "It was a rich opportunity to experiment and innovate and do amazing things." While at the CBE, Janet pioneered the development of a Business/School partnerships program involving more than 100 businesses and organizations, a system-wide Key Communicators Program involving 350 parents, and Canada's first workplace school. She also helped the organization to deal with the challenges and opportunities of constant media attention, and to deal with crises that included strikes and Canada's first school-yard murder. In 1998 Willson decided that she wanted to do something new, and took a term-specific position as a communications consultant and acting communications director for the University of Calgary Faculty of Management.

During this time, Willson and a former colleague from the Calgary Board of Education, Jennifer Stack, started a communications consulting firm called In Sight Communications. They work primarily with small- and medium-sized organizations that do not have communications staff of their own, an environment Willson understands from experience. She enjoys being able to work out of a virtual office, and the opportunity to work with a variety of organizations and people.

In addition to running what has become a very busy consulting firm, Willson also serves on several not-for-profit boards and teaches a public relations course to SAIT marketing students. She feels that teaching is a natural extension of the presenting and media relations coaching that she has done over the years. Not one to rest on her laurels, Willson is also considering marrying her passions of motorcycle riding and writing to create a guidebook for fellow motorcyclists. She wrote a bicycle-touring book several years ago that sold 20,000 copies before it went out of print.

It seemed appropriate to ask a public relations professional with such a wealth of experience for some words of advice for others in the field. Here is what she suggests:

- Gather a diversity of experience early in your career, as that makes you more broadly marketable.
- Don't look only at jobs that are specifically PR-focused. Keep your eyes open for opportunities that use your diverse skill base but enable you to grow and spread your reach into other parts of organizational life, like human resources or operations.
- Find and benefit from a formal relationship with one or more mentors who can help you to grow and develop personally and professionally.
- Don't plan to spend your entire career in one organization. Set some goals for yourself when you begin a new job, and when you have achieved them consider whether or not it is time to move on. Your contributions will be far more significant if you refresh your sensibilities from time to time with new challenges and opportunities.
- Network constantly. This is of ongoing value to your organization and to you. Make sure your network extends beyond your public relations colleagues.
- Fear caution more than risk.

More than one mistake made in “moron” affair

By Sean French

Over the past month, much has been made of the “moron” controversy both in Canada and the United States. If you missed the details, Francoise Ducros was the director of communications for Prime Minister Jean Chretien. At a NATO summit in Prague, Ducros was in what she must have thought was private conversation with CBC radio reporter Chris Hall. Unfortunately for Ducros, and for Chretien, part of this conversation was overheard by National Post reporter Robert Fife. The fateful comment, uttered by Ducros about U.S. President George W. Bush, was, “What a moron.” It seems clear that Chris Hall would not have reported this “off the record” comment. After all, Ducros did not rise to such a high position by publicly denigrating the President of Canada’s largest trading partner. Her mistake, it seems, was that she was not fully cognisant of her surroundings.

A deconstruction of the events can be seen as a sort of primer on how not to accomplish damage control in the midst of a public relations disaster.

Maxim asked local media relations specialist Daryl Zerr for his take on the Ducros affair. Zerr is a media-relations trainer with 15 years’ service in the broadcast media, including eight years at CBC television and radio in Calgary. He said, “The big mistake she made was not knowing who was in the room.” Zerr figures that Fife, the reporter who broke the story, must have heard enough to conclude that it was a semi-official comment. Zerr also refers to the “human element” of the story, adding that we know nothing about any personal history between Ducros and Fife.

Regardless of the situation that led to the story breaking, once it hit the newsstands the comedy of errors continued. Zerr says that the Prime Minister’s cardinal mistake was to repeat the moron comment. Thus the headlines the next day read “Bush not a Moron”, which ensured the story additional coverage. Further compounding matters were Chretien’s attempts to explain away the moron comment. His assertion that “I’m sure she has used that word against me once or twice,” did nothing to

help his cause. It also ignored basic, tried-and-true public relations procedure for this situation: We made a mistake, we’re sorry, we’re working to make sure it doesn’t happen again, let’s move forward. As Zerr tells his clients, “You are judged in the court of public opinion. Everyone respects an apology – it’s the right thing to do.”

Of course there are two sides of media relations, so let’s consider the media side of the equation. We don’t know for certain if Fife gave Ducros a chance to respond. Zerr says that, as a reporter, “if you hear someone say something stupid, whether you write it or not, you should give them a chance to comment.”

One critical element of media relations is right in the job title: relations. Relationships are perhaps the most important but least quantifiable aspects of the often uneasy alliance between PR practitioners and the media. As PR people we know that there is no such thing as “off the record”. However, if we are to develop relationships with journalists, a certain amount of trust is required. In the news business information is the currency. Generally, we have it, they want it, and so the dance begins. The Ducros affair played out a little differently in that she was “dancing” with CBC reporter Chris Hall, when National Post reporter Robert Fife “cut in”. As for Fife, Zerr says, “He’s shown how far he’ll go to get a story.” Consequently, he may have trouble even getting into the dance in the future. Says Zerr, “You can’t live on a reputation like that in the media, people know where he stands now.”

Zerr sums up by saying, “Know the people you’re talking to,” or talking amongst in this case. “Know where the line is.” For PR practitioners, Zerr has a few tips on how to build that all-important relationship with journalists. Demystify the playing field and they love you. No lies, no fluff. If you have “soft news”, don’t try to dress it up as a major story. Always, always follow up press releases with a phonecall. As for the major players in the Ducros affair we can also learn from their experience.

“Know your audience. Don’t burn any bridges,” says Zerr. This is simple advice that could have averted the catastrophe for Ducros, and it is advice that we should all keep top of mind.

On the Shelf

Effective Public Relations**Author: Moi Ali**

By Darby Semeniuk

Effective Public Relations is a quick reference guide to public relations and organizational communication. The book's small size and paperback durability make for easy travel from meetings to business trips, and its short, segmented style means that the reader can quickly and easily find certain sections or topics.

Moi Ali has created this brief book to be illustrated and practical, yet broad for its length. It is an overview of the role of public relations in the workplace and attempts to cover many aspects from visual design to writing to media relations in less than one hundred graphically charged pages. Ali touches on many important functions of the public relations practitioner, but doesn't have the space to provide deeper explanation of any of them.

The style and coverage of *Effective Public Relations* is useful for professionals who provide basic communications support to their organization or has secondary PR responsibilities embedded within their job. It would also be useful to a student who needs quick access to information, tips, and quizzes in lieu of larger, more in-depth texts.

Carry this handy book around with you if you like a written guide to help generate ideas, or prefer checklists to improve your projects. But think twice before substituting it for more detailed references, organizational-specific needs, or personal creativity.

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Upcoming Events

PEOPLE, POLITICS AND PROPERTY***IMPERIAL OIL AND LYNNVIEW RIDGE***

Please join us on Thursday, January 30th, 2003 at the Petroleum Club to find out how Imperial Oil responded to soil sample results from Lynnview Ridge, a southeast Calgary residential community, which has been in the headlines for almost two years. Hart Searle and Shawn Howard will outline the issues in Lynnview Ridge, how Imperial has managed this issue and how they dealt with the City of Calgary, the Calgary Health Region and local and national media.

Registration begins at 11:30am with lunch being served at noon. The cost for members is \$30, non-members - \$42, student members are \$20 and student non-members are \$30. The Petroleum Club is located at 319 - 5th Ave SW. Remember, CPRS events sell out quickly. To ensure we have a seat for you, please register on line by noon on January 28, 2003.

Volunteer Opportunities

Co-Chair for CPRS Calgary Membership Committee

Are you interested in taking a more active role in CPRS? Would you like to have a positive impact on the direction of your Calgary Member Society?

The Membership Director is looking for a CPRS full member who is interested in the volunteer position of Co-Chair for the Membership Committee. The time commitment for this position is approximately five or more hours per week. This position involves sharing the Director's responsibilities in the following areas:

- Recruiting members and providing information for prospective members;
- Implementing strategies to improve benefits of membership;
- Recruiting volunteers to fill positions;
- Coordinating annual follow-up for membership renewals;
- Coordinating member communication;
- Attending board meetings when the Director is unavailable;
- Ensuring the membership list is maintained.

The Co-Chair will also be given the opportunity to join the Board as the Membership Director at the end of the current Director's term in July 2003. Any members interested in becoming involved with the Board of Directors by playing an integral role in the Membership Portfolio, please contact Shawn Kelly at shawnkelly@shaw.ca.

Other CPRS Calgary Volunteer Opportunities

If you are interested in volunteering for CPRS Calgary, please contact the appropriate committee chair listed on the CPRS Calgary Web site. Please note you must be a member of CPRS Calgary to volunteer on any committees.

Members on the move

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www.cprs.ca

maxim team

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