

# Lobbyists, public relations people fulfill similar worthwhile functions

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**THURSDAY**, The Oregonian's Business section carried a story about William W. Marsh of Portland being honored by his colleagues as an outstanding practitioner in the field of public relations.

It makes this an appropriate occasion to write about the relationship between newspaper people and public relations people, because Bill Marsh's career is an example of the way the public relations job ought to be done.

Like "lobbyist," the title "public relations man" has an undeservedly unfavorable connotation. Every experienced legislator will say that the Legislature could not do its job without the help of the men and women whom companies and associations send to Salem to represent them.

Those people are called lobbyists, and they survive and gain respect only as legislators learn they can depend on them for accurate information on specialized subjects legislators otherwise would have a difficult time learning about on their own.

People in the public relations business perform a similar function for newspaper reporters and others in the news business. Often, in fact, the same practitioner will represent a company or other interest both to government agencies and the press.

A reporter's job is to collect clear, accurate information, usually in a hurry. When the subject involves a big

institution — a corporation with layers of officers or a university with dozens of departments, for example — the very size of the target can become an obstacle.

Who has the information? the reporter needs to know. Who can talk authoritatively about it? Where can that person be found? What's the right telephone number? What are the background facts to the current story?

A good public relations person stands ready to answer questions like these. He or she acts as a guide to the mysteries of the company or other institution for a reporter approaching it from the outside.

Good public relations people don't act as screens to fend off the inquiring press; they see that the questions get to the right place to be answered and that the answers get back. Sometimes, if they are well-informed and the press trusts them, they can speak for the institution. Ideally, though, they put the reporter and the source directly together.

Of course, neither the public relations practitioner nor the press ever forgets whom the practitioner is working for: It's the institution, not the newspaper. Some, like Marsh, are independents with a string of clients. Others are on the payroll of a particular company, government department, trade association, person or organization.

That relationship warns the reporter on a controversial story to go to more sources than just the ones the public relations representative recommends. It does not, however, necessarily undermine the value of the information the public relations person provides.

Marsh described the job this way in his interview last week with The Oregonian's Ken Hamburg: "To help a

person or a company or an association to talk with the people who are important to them, to convince the public of the truth concerning that person or corporation or association."

Since the truth is what the reporter also wants, in behalf of his readers, the public relations person serves the public as well as his client in seeing that it gets out.

But what if the truth hurts? What if the client has been doing something the public is not likely to approve of; selling toilet seats to the military for \$600 apiece in the case of a company, let's say, or carrying on with a strip-tease dancer, as a nationally prominent politician was found to be doing a few years ago?

Obviously a public relations representative has responsibilities to his client that go far beyond merely fielding questions from the press. One of them may be damage control. It would be naive to say that even the best of the public relations people don't at least engage in a little discreet silence from time to time, hoping an uncomfortable situation will pass unnoticed.

It should be left to a public relations professional — maybe Marsh — to say what a client should do when the news is bad. A good rule of thumb, though, is that it probably is better to tell the truth, laying out the relevant facts and the reasons behind them, rather than pro-



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long the story as they are dragged out day after painful day.

A good public relations adviser also helps his client anticipate a touchy situation and look for ways to take as much sting out of it as possible. His best, if unpublished, work may be in getting a client to clean up its own act.

Marsh told Hamburg his most difficult assignment had been representing the Portland Development Commission as it carried out Portland's first urban renewal project, in which the city condemned many blocks of mainly run-down houses and stores south of the Civic Auditorium to build what is now the Portland Center area of apartments, offices and restaurants.

Marsh did not review what specifically he did on that job, but one of its widely publicized aspects at the time was the efforts to find new homes for the people whose houses were being destroyed.

A good public relations representative also knows who is who in the news media, which also can look confusing and formidable to an outsider. He or she knows how to deliver information on time, to the right desk, in a form the newspaper or broadcaster finds easy to use. In that way he helps both his client and the news medium.

All of these things Marsh has done in Portland for more than 30 years. He has done them with an air as jaunty as the straw boater he has been known to sport in sunny summers. When the Columbia River chapter of the Public Relations Society of America last week gave him its first "Billy" award, named in honor of Marsh himself, many news people knew why and applauded.