

Chapter One

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“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute.”

Abraham Lincoln

First Steps

§1.1 Introduction

On my first day as a press secretary, I walked into the office filled with enthusiasm, the intention to do the right thing, and a small amount of knowledge about the public relations profession. To me, the decision to work for a member of Congress was an easy progression. I was interested in government, I had a background in journalism with solid writing skills, and it seemed like a natural transition to translate these abilities into another form of communications work.

The office was a typical congressional environment in 1988. I had a desk, phone, computer, and maybe eight square feet of office real estate I could call my own. All my teenage and adult life I had watched and studied government. And five years as an intermittent radio and television reporter, a political science degree from a university, and two whole years in Washington made me feel that I was prepared for the job of press secretary.

As a new public relations professional, I did not fully understand the impact press secretaries could have on the content of the news. This is not to diminish the dominant role of the news media in communicating information to the public. Network television, major daily papers, Internet web sites, and a host of other avenues are the primary and correct filters for all information the public receives. However, public relations agents for corporate, political, and governmental figures also play a significant role in the

positioning and content of most of the news the American public hears about its government.

The public relations professionals who serve in government, a nonprofit organization, or any group that operates in the world of public affairs have the rare position of supporting a mission, a cause or individual, and advocating those ideas using their communications skills. Public relations specialists are a crucial link in the chain of communications between leaders and citizens, and our ability to translate those high ideals into language and images that impact people often makes the difference between the success and failure of those ideals.

§1.2 Matching Convictions with a Job

Trying to match up your personal beliefs to a cause or individual is usually the first major hurdle in any public relations career. As they enter the profession, most communications professionals dream of fighting the great fight for a cause or person they believe in, with all the best resources, and all the best people. The real world is a little more complicated, and public relations people often find themselves with either a shortage of resources or nobility in their cause. Nonetheless, it's best to find some healthy balance where you are given the tools to grow professionally, do an effective job for the organization or individual you represent, and feel that your work has some meaning.

There is a vast array of people and organizations that are in desperate need of good communications work, so there's likely to be something that you can connect with. Working in politics is one way to feel meaningful in a public relations job, but not the only way. Some of the happiest public relations professionals I know are doing sports information and entertainment press work. The important point is that you share some common beliefs with those whom you represent.

As a general rule, not just applicable to public relations professionals, you want to find a functional office—one that has good internal communications among staff and is solidly managed. It's often hard to get a clear picture of the internal politics of any organization until you're fully accepted as a member of the team. Still, there are warning signs to watch out for. If you get a really bad vibe from the supervisor you interviewed with—like he's one

of those “call-you-at-1:00-a.m.-with-stupid-stuff” bosses—you should probably go with your gut and pass on the position.

Most important, communications specialists succeed most often when they are working with leaders who understand the importance of communications. Some public figures are obsessed with the media. They love the camera, will never turn down interviews, and berate the press secretary if the headline is below the fold instead of above it. Others really don't care about the press and consider it an afterthought, not central to their mission. It's hard to say which one is more difficult, but I would rather try to slow down a moving train than get it going from a dead stop. Leaders who are shy of the media, or who just don't understand the impact, are not good candidates for sophisticated communications work. Employers don't all have to be perfect spokesmen, but they do have to think that it is important to communicate professionally and effectively.

Finally, when you attach yourself to an individual or organization, you're attaching your reputation as well. If the individual or organization succeeds, you succeed. If scandal or failure should envelop your employer, you will be painted with the same brush, at least temporarily. Finding yourself spokesperson for a corrupt or scandal-ridden politician doesn't necessarily have to destroy your career. Mike McCurry worked for a U.S. senator who resigned over a bribery scandal and a president who was impeached. Yet, McCurry's reputation as one of the best public relations practitioners ever remains intact. As you consider whom you will advocate for, the principal's character is probably one of the most important qualities to consider.

§1.3 Getting to Know the Principal

In many public affairs-related operations, there often is one person who will be the leader, and therefore the chief spokesperson for the organization. They may be called member of Congress, president of the association, executive director of the agency, Undersecretary of Something Important, Grand Poobah of the Ascension of Moose Antlers, or some other title that makes them worthy of quoting in the news media. This means that much of the communications that you're responsible for creating will have to flow through one person: the principal.

It's important that you get to know your boss on many levels. You must

develop a trust between one another, so that your principal has confidence in your ability to deliver the message, and you have confidence that your hard work to create the message will be advanced by a solid leader. You must identify the strengths and weaknesses of the principal, assessing which forums and public relations vehicles work best, and develop a strategy for improving his or her skills. And, you must appreciate that you're dealing with a human being, whose emotions will occasionally interfere with sound judgment when dealing with the media. Nothing creates more joy or despair among principals and organizations than media stories. Public relations professionals must be prepared to handle these roller coasters of emotions, recognizing the real problems and smoothing over the false ones. For more detail on "Dealing with the Principal," see Chapter 7.

(Federal agency public relations professionals may not have one, key principal, but many representatives who can speak to the media. This structure and the challenges associated with it are addressed in Chapter 11, "Communications in a Federal Agency.")

§1.4 Assessing Your Strategic Position and Historical Record

Early on in their tenure, new press secretaries should assess how the organization, candidate, or public official is positioned in the media's and target audience's opinion. In other words, before you determine where you're going, you must first figure out where you're at. For a candidate, this historical baggage is usually a resume, public statements, and a host of other details that make up her life. For some individuals and groups this history would fit in a single file; for others it could take up a library.

Regardless of the available material for review, new public relations professionals should do all that they can to learn about their new boss and organization. The best source is your predecessor. A candid conversation, best done outside the office environment, is probably the quickest path to clarifying the challenge ahead. Your predecessor can outline your new boss's strengths and weaknesses, tell you which reporters are smart and which ones are dangerous, and outline the basic terrain of the internal office politics. Hopefully, this conversation will not result in a later "what did I get myself into" conversation with yourself, but instead will be a helpful benchmark.

There is another selfish reason to get to know your predecessor: his or her work is one of the standards that you'll be judged by. Whether fair or not, all public relations professionals are measured, in part, by the person whose shoes they fill. While it may sound strange, it is often best to follow in the footsteps of someone with extremely small feet. You sometimes can look incredibly intelligent by doing the simplest things right if your predecessor screwed them up. On the other hand, following a professional has its advantages as well: good relations with the media; a seasoned team of colleagues who appreciate the importance of public relations; and an up-to-date press list.

New press secretaries also must become thoroughly knowledgeable about a principal's or organization's record. The easiest and most thorough way is by reading all past newspaper clippings. If the history is too extensive, perhaps a new colleague could give you the key highlights of recent events for you to peruse. Also, review any major television stories or recorded events on video. Watching candidate debates is one of the quickest ways to get an assessment of a member of Congress in one of the most challenging communications settings ever created.

Another one of the clearest ways to get a quick view of the terrain is through internal polling. How to integrate polling into the message of the organization is discussed more fully in Chapter 3, "Developing a Message and Communications Plan." In assessing your position, polling is also valuable to a new press secretary for an entirely selfish reason: it is one of the few quantifiable measurements of our craft. Since public relations is an art, and not a science, results can often be subjective. With a poll, you have a statistical assessment of how your campaign or message or product has done with the public. For a congressional office, the poll is the ongoing report card for a communications operation (outside of elections). For nonprofits, polling can help clarify public opinion on primary issues, suggest strategy and language that resonates with audiences, and is invaluable in creating a communications plan. For associations and agencies, it can help define a strategic course about the interests and desires of target audiences.

§1.5 Learning the Office Strategic Goals

As part of the development of a communications plan, new press secretaries need to know what the office is working on and where it wants to go. Well-

run offices and organizations usually have gone through some kind of strategic planning process. The results may include a mission statement, statement of purpose, or some other fundamental declaration of the office goals. It's important to get a quick understanding of how important strategic goals are to the office and how they are integrated into the day-to-day operations. Some strategic plans do not have "buy-in" from the entire staff, and are promptly ignored by management and employees as soon as the ink is dry on the paper. These plans still may be valuable to public relations professionals—if only to understand the once-stated goals of the leader, even if they are not matched with the work of the office.

Whether the office has clear goals or not, you must have them. For the purposes of your initial assessment of your new environment, you'll need to keep in mind the need to narrow your mission to two or three goals or messages. In reviewing the office or strategic goals you inherit, think about how best to translate the goals into communications themes. What communications vehicles are best to project the message? What was tried by your predecessor? Which goals are most attractive to reporters? Are there spin-off mini-objectives tied to broader goals that can be encouraged and developed?

As you work with the office goals, keep in mind that you're not just a salesman. Communications professionals have a responsibility to point out opportunities and even to suggest strategic initiatives. This may cause internal political problems because policy experts usually hate it when "flacks" muck about in their well-tilled policy gardens. Nothing more riles an over-educated, masters-degree toting, bespectacled policy wonk during a strategy meeting than some brash spin doctor chiming in, "Maybe we could do it another way that could get us more press." But, in spite of the hateful stares and lost lunch invitations, that's part of your job. Press secretaries are responsible for translating policy into message, and that sometimes means we must tinker with the policy product to make it salable to the media and public.

§1.6 Assessing the Issue Terrain

As public relations professionals come to learn about their new job, usually a clear set of target issues will become apparent: the member of Congress will have committee assignments that revolve around agriculture and foreign

policy; the nonprofit organization is responsible for advocating pay equity for women; the federal agency has a mission and policy initiatives to achieve.

As spokesperson, communications specialists are expected to have a fair amount of knowledge about their boss's and organization's area of expertise. This can be extremely awkward for new spokesmen, since they usually don't have a lot of experience in specialty areas. As you become an expert on your new boss's or your organization's history and goals, you must also become an expert on the issue terrain, the stage on which you'll perform. The crash course in your new office's mission could include lots of articles, seminal writings, and other research that everyone in your world has known about for years.

One simple analysis for examining your environment is to break issues and groups into categories: threats and opportunities. The opportunities analysis is the fun one, and you can usually get help from colleagues in the office to aid with this research. Organizations usually try to build their goals around environmental opportunities. A big push for worker safety legislation makes the time ripe for a key amendment your organization has been seeking for years. A major tax bill is seen as likely to pass, requiring your staff to engage in a coordinated legislative and communications effort. Public affairs opportunities are the gold that policy and press wonks mine for, and the digging is the stuff that makes governmental and non-government organizations hum.

The less enjoyable analysis is a review of potential threats in the environment. One employer I worked with offered this blanket assessment: "Threats? There are no threats." While this rosy assessment did much to buoy spirits in the office on a regular basis, it did little to prepare staff for potential problems. Communications threats often come in the form of political opponents, organizations that oppose your mission, or even reporters bent on drumming up negative news. By anticipating potential threats and preparing for them, your organization and boss will be in a much better position to handle adverse events. We will address crises in much greater detail in Chapter 12, "Crisis Communications in Public Affairs."

Your environment is also filled with like-minded people and organizations. Get to know your friends and allies. Washington is filled with vast, interlocking networks of entities that have overlapping goals and interests.

Good press secretaries—especially those with limited resources—learn how to hook up with those allies and use their strengths. Especially for public relations professionals new to a position, finding an experienced communications ally in another organization or office can be like a unexpected gift.

§1.7 Conducting a Resource Assessment

Every press office usually can also count among its assets a variety of administrative and technical tools in its communications cupboard. Even before joining an organization, prospective employees should inquire what resources they will have in order to accomplish their job.

The most fundamental asset to a communications specialist in charge of an operation is a budget. Many organizations will have thought this through and will provide reasonable funds to accomplish communications goals. These include: money to hire staff, existing contracts for specialty work (such as video news releases), and funding for contingencies and emergencies that tend to crop up in public relations. Unfortunately, others who have not mapped out a central role for communications in their operation may only have ad hoc arrangements for funding communications initiatives. They'll hire one or two people for their "press shop" and expect them to get the word out with a phone, computer, and fax machine. "When you want to put out a newsletter, just show me a draft, and we'll see if we can afford it." Or, "Why do we need a web-site designer? Billy knows computers, he just got out of college." It's best to negotiate a budget before you accept a position. It's a lot tougher to ask for things after you're tethered to a steady paycheck.

If you're not in a position to demand a budget as part of your hiring agreement, at least raise issues related to resources in the interview process. Pitch prospective employers on the need to invest in their communications operations. You probably won't get everything you want, but you'll be putting your new boss on notice that you're aggressive in your advocacy of your part of the mission, and most good employers will appreciate that kind of enthusiasm.

Even if you're not working on the starship Enterprise of PR shops, you're probably going to have one or two toys to play with. Take an inventory of what's in the file cabinets and storerooms that is used in the com-

munications process. Broadcast-quality tape recorders, digital cameras, pocket recorders—all these are the basic tools of modern public relations. Keep track of the age of the equipment, as the march of technology is quickening its pace—yesterday’s neat gadget will become tomorrow’s relic in no time.

As a communications specialist, your primary tool is your computer. This is the “machine tool” in your factory that manufactures all of your product, and it is also your link to the rest of the world. Given the speed of technological advances, it is often difficult to stay completely current with the latest technical marvel in the communications world. While you don’t have to be a computer geek and be able to write code, a little knowledge of these marvelous machines is essential for public relations professionals. I know some senior public relations specialists who still find computers intimidating and who count on people under thirty to guide them through the complicated task of attaching a document to an email message.

Being comfortable with your computer is a little like a basketball player getting comfortable dribbling the ball. You should know what you can do with your computer, learn basic functions that you’ll use on a regular basis (email, database management, common web sites). Avoid the desire to try out every technical innovation. It’s more important for public relations professionals to be functional than current. At the same time, don’t let valuable developments in technology pass you by. Not long ago, a member of Congress was cited as being the last member of Congress to establish a web site—in 2001. It’s not a notation you want on your resume.

It’s also a good idea to become friends with the computer expert in your office. The likelihood is that you’ll need his help in a variety of ways—coordinating databases, building mass mailings, web-site updates, etc. If this per-

§ 1.8 Asset Inventory

- Desktop computer
- Laptop computer
- Printer
- Fax machine
- Television
- VCR (preferably two machines to dub tapes)
- Word processing program
- Database program
- Email program
- Desktop publishing program
- Power Point program (or other presentation software)
- Web site
- Pocket tape recorder/digital recorder
- Tape recorder (broadcast quality)
- Film camera
- Digital camera
- Easel

son is not cooperative or doesn't see your work as central to the office or his mission, you've got a problem. However, with the assistance of someone who understands the office computer system and knows how to make it sing, you can exponentially increase your reach.

The three key software elements of a communications operation are word processing, databases, and email. Advances in synchronizing computer software are making the marriage of these tools increasingly seamless. But, you might find yourself with an antiquated system—especially the database software—that makes your job tougher. A good press database should have a lot of flexibility to manipulate the data. Categories should be created for type of media, geographic region, issue interest, or any other logical issue that could separate reporters.

Ideally, the database should merge well with the email, blast-faxing, and word processing programs. Some press operations regularly generate hundreds of form letters or emails, with the capability of including individualized sections in certain communications. Some organizations maintain association member or constituent databases that are set up to manage constituent correspondence and contacts—and it's possible to adapt these for communications professionals' needs. However, most communications professionals are more comfortable maintaining their own press database because of the flexibility they require. A list of items to include in a database is provided in §1.10.

Web sites are increasingly a vital communications tool for any organization, even edging out mainstream media in some cases. Web sites and electronic communications are addressed in Chapter 6, "Web-based and Online Communications." For the purposes of your asset inventory, you should make a thorough check of your new web site. Because they are still somewhat new to public relations, new media tools are often managed in different ways. Some public relations professionals have total control of the office web site; others work with systems administrators, or even have full committees managing the content.

However the site is managed, it is an important communications tool that you must get to know. The easiest way is to read EVERY word on your web site. This can be like reading a novel for deeper sites, but it's a worthy goal and one that will quickly acclimate you to your new environment. Make the process a constructive one by noting pages you may want to

update, or the ones that could benefit from a contribution from a colleague in the office.

Your office also may have access to research tools, such as Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, or Westlaw. As a communications professional, you have to be one of the best general researchers in your office. You must know how to use the research services available, how best to use common search engines, and how to quickly download and transmit the data to colleagues.

Fortunate communications operations also will have use of television facilities. They could consist of a contractual relationship with a company that produces video news releases (VNRs), or be full studios at your disposal, such as in the U.S. House, the Senate and some federal agencies. If television production is part of the communications strategy of the office, methods and practices will exist for using this asset. For new public relations professionals, working as a “television producer” can be one of the most rewarding aspects of the job. Identify the television assets the organization works with and consider how they may be expanded to enhance the organization’s goals.

§1.9 List Building

For most press secretaries, their most tangible asset is their press list. The White House press secretary probably isn’t fretting over whether his list of the local Iowa weekly editors is updated, but someone in the White House probably is. The press list is the pure definition of your target audience. It should be up-to-date, complete, comprehensive, and in an electronic format that can be used to create letters, send out emails and faxes, and rapidly make phone calls. As the new press secretary, you inherit the list of your predecessor, making you completely vulnerable to the professionalism, or lack thereof, of the immediate past occupant of your chair.

You must first determine what is in your computer and in the files. Does the press list encompass the full universe of media that you wish to target? Are all the specialty reporters who might have occasional interest in your issues included? Are news organizations and reporters coded, based on a logical breakdown of issues and interests? Are all the characteristics of the news organizations accurately recorded? (editors’ names, deadline times, circulation, satellite feed preferences. See §1.10, “Sample Database Checklist”

§ 1.10 Sample Database Checklist

Databases should be designed to capture all relevant information for a news organization. Ideally, they should be laid out using software that allows the user to:

- Have data easily input by individuals not versed in computer software (such as interns);
- Merge with other office software to build letters, fax cover sheets, or customized emails;
- Create flexible forms so that fields can be added to the database when appropriate; and
- Possess clear search and list-building capabilities.

All Media

- Organization
- Phone Number (main)
- Fax Number (main)
- Address
- Subject Area (for news organizations that specialize in certain issues)
- Geographic Region (if appropriate)
- Media Type (daily newspaper, television station, etc.)
- Primary Contact
- Phone Number (direct)
- Fax Number (direct)
- Email Address
- Deadlines
- Notes/Special Instructions
- Preferred Delivery Method of Releases (email, fax, postal mail)

Talk Shows Only

- Host(s)
- Show Time(s)
- Booker(s)
- Format

Television Stations Only

- News Director
- Executive Producer
- Assignment Editor
- Newscast Producers (Create fields for each producer of a particular newscast, such as "5 PM Producer, 6 PM Producer.")
- Newscast Times
- Newscast Lineup Meeting Times (when news staff make choices for story lineups in upcoming newscasts)
- Reporters (Include specialties or beats, if appropriate.)
- Special Programs (Include information on public affairs programs the station may produce; you may wish to create a separate record for this program.)
- General Manager

Print/Wire Services Only

- Publication Frequency (daily, weekly, monthly)
- Time/Date of Publication
- Editor
- City Desk Editor
- Other Editors (Create fields for each editor of a particular section of the publication.)
- Other Reporters

Radio Stations Only

- News Director
- Newscast Times
- Special Programs (Include information on public affairs programs the station may produce; you may wish to create a separate record for this program.)
- Program Director
- General Manager

for a detailed list of all possible characteristics.) While your predecessor's press list may be in rough shape, it's still better than starting from scratch.

After you've assessed what you have, start looking for more information. Press lists can always benefit from an infusion of new data. There are probably other individuals or groups that are collecting the same press lists and might be willing to share data. For example, House and Senate offices from the same state all have overlapping territory. If you work for a Republican congressman in a state with two Republican senators, your Senate press secretary colleagues might lend you their portion of the state press list that covers your congressional district. Similar nonprofit organizations would probably benefit from sharing reporters' names and interests; or, federal agencies or departments may have overlapping missions. However you acquire it, make sure your press list is as up-to-date as possible.

For public relations professionals new to their posts, the tasks of updating a press list and making the rounds of introductions to key news media can be combined. If you can't beg, borrow, or steal your way to a shiny new list, you'll have to go through the labor-intensive process of calling each organization on your list to determine if it's current. As you review your list, make sure you have all relevant numbers of each news organization. Most important, make sure you have direct dial numbers for television assignment desks, radio station news departments, and newspaper news editors (sometimes called the "city desk"). For reporters who cover you on a weekly basis, try to get cell and home phone numbers. They'll likely want to exchange for yours, so be ready to give up some evenings for reporters' phone calls.

As you review your data, it's important to ensure that the software format that contains the data is compatible with the regular communications tasks you'll perform. As stated earlier, you don't have to be a computer expert, but you must know your way around the system and be able to perform basic functions such as mail merging, setting up fax-blast campaigns,

§ 1.11 Media Directories

Bacon's Media Directories

<www.bacons.com>

Burrelle's Media Directory

<www.burrelles.com>

Gebbie Press

<www.gebbieinc.com>

The Capital Source

<<http://nationaljournal.com/about/capitalsource/>>

The News Media Yellow Book

<www.leadershipdirectories.com/nmyb.htm>

coordinating with email newsletters, or whatever common communications tasks your office performs. If your current technology doesn't afford you these basic functions, you may need to have the list converted to another format. To do this, it's best to have your systems administrator or computer vendor help. Databases are largely malleable and can be converted in a variety of ways. It usually means that you or your assistant will have some clean-up and you will have to eyeball each record. But that's another way of getting to know your media outlets.

§1.12 Getting to Know Your Reporters

Next to your new boss, the most important people in your life are the reporters who cover your office. These are the keepers of your reputation, and building a good relationship with them will be one of the key criteria you'll be judged by. As you start a new job, the list of key reporters will become self-evident. For a congressional office in Washington, there are usually a handful of reporters who cover the state delegation. For agencies, there are reporters for major papers or wire services who cover a beat that encompasses the agency mission. The list will probably be in descending order, based on newspaper circulation or television ratings—and that's an appropriate way to get to know your new friends. Every press office either mentally or in a written plan prioritizes the reporters who cover them. This doesn't mean you have to play favorites all the time; but it does mean that you understand who has the greatest reach and who has the greatest impact on your target audiences.

Getting to know the reporters who cover you is a little like learning about the new teacher you have for a tough course. You want to check them out surreptitiously, try to get on their good side without doing much work, but you're always kind of wondering when they're going to slam you with a pop quiz. The friendlier and more comfortable you are with your reporters, the better job you can do for your boss.

One way to get to know reporters is to do a "media tour" by setting up appointments and visiting them on their turf. Since a press secretary's primary link to the media is through reporters, this is a rare opportunity for you to get to know the editors and news directors who pull their strings. It may also be your only chance to meet face-to-face with the radio voices who

will regularly call you at 6:00 a.m. for a sound bite. Visiting news organizations is a great way to demonstrate that you appreciate and respect the work that reporters do. If you're a former reporter, you can establish a rapport as common practitioners of a trade. It's important that you convey your credibility in these meetings and try to build both a professional and personal connection.

§1.13 Internal Politics

Early in your tenure as a new press secretary, the internal politics of your organization will become visible. Whether you're a press assistant in a non-profit association with a hundred people, a press secretary in a congressional office with fifteen, a federal agency department with a half-dozen staff, or a two-person public relations firm, internal politics exist in any organized association of humans. People with apparently equal titles will appear to have different status with the boss, some policy people may have sign-off authority on communications matters, or the executive assistant will review every document that flows in and out of the office. However the power flows, it's a good idea to get a handle on it as soon as possible.

Internal political games can be some of the most self-defeating and depressing aspects of a career in public affairs. People who gravitate to the work are often very intelligent, highly motivated, and have a strong sense of public service. This can often translate into people enthusiastically expressing their beliefs and sticking by them. We'll address how to handle some of the more common internal office issues related to communications in Chapter 9, "Internal Issues: Experts, Policy, Numbers, Leaks, Lawyers, and Language." In your first week, size up the situation and don't make a bad impression. Sophisticated personnel interaction should wait until you get settled in.

Any review of internal political issues should include a check on outside groups or individuals who carry weight on communications issues. Non-profit organizations have boards of directors, members of Congress have political consultants, and federal agencies have lawyers, *lots* of lawyers. You'll want to identify early on those who feel they have a piece of the communications operation and set up a procedure for working with them. As you do, consider two questions: 1) who *should* have input, and 2) who

thinks they should have input. How you manage the answers to those questions probably will have a significant impact on your interpersonal relationships in the operation.

§1.14 Creating a Communications Plan

Often, one of the most important early tasks for new press secretaries is the development of a communications plan. We will address this task in much greater detail in Chapter 3, “Developing a Message and Communications Plan.” Nonetheless, it’s important to recognize that much of your initial research, reviews, and interviews with staff will lead to the development of this important written product. Without a plan, your proactive press work will be rudderless. Sometimes you will enter a press shop that has a communications plan, and your primary responsibility is to help implement it. Many times, if you are the senior (or only) press liaison, you’ll be expected to chart the message course and will have to draft a plan.

When drafting a communications plan, first consider the message you want to convey, the strategic goals of the principal or organization, and the tools you have to communicate with. You may have communications goals tied to a timeline—either a legislative calendar, election campaign, or other major series of events.

Communications plans cannot be created in a vacuum. Staff who are genuinely terrified of dealing with the media will suddenly want to get very involved in crafting the particulars of a communications plan. Recognize who the players are when considering the internal politics, and think about who needs to review the plan in order to make it a reality.

§1.15 Finding Teachers and Allies

Someone once said that wisdom begins with the statement, “I don’t know.” Even the most seasoned professional starting her fifth senior communications position needs help, especially at first. If you work in a public relations firm, large federal agency or trade association, friends in the profession can often be found in the cubicle next to yours. However, many public relations professionals are islands in a sea of policy wonks.

You’ll need to find someone to bounce ideas off, learn from, even just

gripe about the challenges you face. Your logical allies will likely work regularly with your office. Congressional delegations, common policy coalitions, other similar agencies, all have communications professionals who will want to help you succeed. Building personal relationships, professional ties and networking are all necessary for a successful career.

When I was a new press secretary, I was intimidated by the breadth of my responsibility. It seemed awesome, the potential for good or mischief, huge successes or humiliating failures, all at the end of the phone or the computer keyboard. With luck, you'll find yourself in an office that also employs a person who has more communications experience than you.

I was fortunate in my first job working for freshman Congressman Tom McMillen of Maryland. His administrative assistant was Jerry Grant. Jerry was one of these political operatives out of central casting. His resume was filled with work for presidential candidate Senator "Scoop" Jackson in 1976, administrative assistant to Senator Jim Sasser of Tennessee, and he attended every Democratic political convention from Kennedy to Clinton. He had been lured back into politics from semi-retirement by a brash young candidate. McMillen, a former NBA player, University of Maryland graduate, and Rhodes Scholar, was beginning his political career, and won a House seat in 1986 with Jerry's help. I worked in the office for two years before I found out Jerry had never graduated from high school.

Jerry Grant split his day between the Capitol Hill office and making the rounds in suburban Maryland, handling district political and congressional business. His usual attire consisted of casual shirts and docksiders, with a good cigar nearby. Jerry's brutal and often wonderfully profane honesty about political communications was the real-world hardball course I needed. Jerry knew all the messy communications problems a young press secretary could get into, and he helped me avoid most of them. When I wanted to fire back at an editor who (I thought) had unfairly criticized the congressman in an editorial, Jerry gave me my first political rule: "Never get in a pissing contest with someone who buys ink by the barrel." His humor and wisdom guided me through many crises. He wasn't always right, but having someone to talk things through with is invaluable in any communications situation.

Jerry Grant developed bone cancer a few years ago and passed away after a five-year struggle with the disease. I attended the funeral in Annapo-

lis. The political pros from four decades were in the pews—congressmen, senators, governors, sitting and retired. Seems like I wasn't the only one Jerry taught political communications to.

§1.99 Chapter Summary

- Find an organization or boss who shares your values. You'll be a much stronger advocate for the mission if you believe in it. (§1.2)
- Research the organization's strategic position, historical record, and key issues. Use your predecessor as a resource. (§1.4)
- Learn the principal's or organization's strategic mission. Are they following a written strategic plan, or some unwritten yet well-known goals? (§1.5)
- Assess the internal and external environment from a communicator's perspective. Identify strengths and weaknesses of the principal and staff; scan for potential opportunities and threats. (§1.6)
- Conduct a resource assessment. List the hardware and software you have to work with. (§1.7)
- Review the press list, update and build on it. It is the most important asset to a public relations professional. (§1.9)
- Make an effort to get to know the reporters who regularly cover your organization. If possible, visit them in their offices. (§1.12)
- Try to get a handle on the internal politics of the organization. Who is involved in communications strategy? Are there outside advisors who need to be consulted? (§1.13)
- Consider how you'll form a communications plan. Identify broad themes as you conduct other reviews of your external and internal environments. (§1.14)
- Find teachers and allies. Everyone needs someone to talk to and bounce ideas off. (§1.15)

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