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THE
COMMUNICATIONS
CONSULTANT'S
FOUNDATION
LEVERAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS
EXPERTISE FOR PERSONAL AND
CLIENT SUCCESS

ROGER DARNELL



“Author Roger Darnell does an excellent job breaking down a complex subject in the pages of his book, *The Communications Consultant’s Foundation*. I would highly recommend the book for students and professionals, as this handy reference guide is rich with helpful information that’s focused on building a communications consulting business and achieving greater success along the way.”

—**Deirdre Breakenridge, CEO of Pure Performance, speaker, author**

“Roger has written a true field guide for communications consulting, covering everything from branding to business development and finances. An excellent read filled with practical advice for any enterprising professional who dreams of becoming a trusted advisor.”

—**Elise Mitchell, Principal, Velocity Collective and elisemitchell.com**

“A must-read for rising PR professionals. As with the best business books, Mr. Darnell frames the PR business as a calling, one with a set of principles and a way to contextualize concepts with real-life examples. Being great at something literally comes down to understanding the abstraction levels of that practice. This book helps readers achieve that.”

—**Ric Peralta, Founder, RogueID, former Chairman and CEO, ATTIK**

“This informative and compelling narrative from an accomplished public relations and marketing expert guides and inspires all those interested in liberating their careers in the 21st century post-COVID. Blending astute research and vast empirical knowledge, this book prepares readers to navigate the world as dynamic, successful, independent communications consultants.”

—**Dean Ramser, Ed.D.**

“Roger Darnell is a best-in-class PR expert with legacy experience that provides a diverse playbook capable of accommodating anything that could arise in a company, especially a creative company where the lines blur a bit. I am so pleased Roger has penned this book. Having worked with him for many years now I have benefited from his experience and distinct point-of-view... and now you can, too!”

—**Erin Sarofsky, Executive Creative Director & Owner, Sarofsky Corp.**

“Roger Darnell’s expertise and services have been key to Leviathan’s success over the last decade. To have all of his public relations knowledge packed

into a concise compendium such as *The Communications Consultant's Foundation* is a tremendous value.”

—**Chad Hutson, CEO, Leviathan**

“Ethics and strategic communications are going to be of the utmost importance in the next decade for great leadership. Roger goes well beyond the foundations to show you how to aim and succeed in this new book.”

—**George Hedon, Enabler of Awesome, Pause Fest**

“Roger Darnell’s guidance was crucial during the acquisition of my first feature film. Whether you are interested in a career in communications or like me, looking to gain tangible PR strategies to get to where you want to go in your profession, I highly recommend this book!”

—**Finnerty Steeves, Actor/Writer/Producer,
Marsha’s Daughter Productions**

“Roger has done it again. A master class in vital skills that will set you up for success. Even seasoned professionals will learn valuable lessons and benefit from this expert advice.”

—**Shelly Palmer, Business advisor, author, commentator**

“Excellent read for both the student and the client. My three top takeaways: Aim high, ethics count, and be sure there is truth in your storytelling.”

—**Pamela Tuscany, Vice President and General Manager,
Universal Studios Florida Production Group**

“Roger’s invaluable insight extends way beyond simply writing a good press release. His deep understanding of the creative industry informs his methodical, holistic approach to reputation management.”

—**Adam Gault, Partner, BLOCK & TACKLE**

“Roger Darnell is a class-act and master of his craft in Public Relations. From my first interaction with Roger, it was obvious he trail-blazed his path to representing some of the top names in the creative industry by putting respect at the forefront and implementing a considered demeanor that kindles the prized trust. In this book, Roger generously shares his tried-and-true methods and packs each page with personal anecdotes, well-researched insights from other visionaries in the field, and offers thorough exercises so you too can hone your skill set and become a successful, independent, and sought-after PR whiz.”

—**Bevin McNamara, Filmmaker, Creative Director,
former Editor-in-Chief, Motionographer.com**

My Story

It is a great honor for me to lead you on this voyage of self-discovery and specialized business education, based on a career trajectory that has been extremely fun and rewarding. Not so long ago, I was starting out, and since then, I have learned that every person and opportunity met along the way can absolutely transform the world. Since we are still strangers, here is a quick tour of some of the experiences illuminated in this book, to help light the way for you.

As a high school student, I had earned good grades and demonstrated enough aptitude that college seemed like a sure thing. I gambled on winning a four-year Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship that did not materialize, and found myself entering the workforce with no clear pathway forward. Still, the Air Force’s powerful campaign urging everyone to “Aim High” pulled me in; as a Reservist, I got the leg up I needed to begin studying at the University of Central Florida.

By the time I graduated from UCF, I was intent on using the positive feedback I had earned as a writer to make my mark in the world of motion pictures. Two amazing openings occurred right away. First, as a VIP tour guide for the grand opening of Universal Studios Florida (USF), I was briefly allowed to step into the world of Hollywood moguls and celebrities. I also earned a part-time job writing press releases for the impressive post-production business Century III, which made its home at USF.

Despite my persistence, the results from my efforts to land more hands-on employment in “the industry” were up and down. So, I applied myself freelancing – including word-processing work for defense contractors – and eventually, using the writing and photojournalist skills I had sharpened through my Air Force Reserve training, I started placing some nonfiction articles in trade publications. I also submitted a lot of creative writing to

prominent literary reviews, scoring a few placements and starting to understand what it meant to succeed – and get paid – as a professional writer.

With experience and determination, better prospects began arising. While the scripts I wrote for major sales conferences and cruise lines paid the bills, it was my technical writing skills – and my interest in film – that opened the most exciting doors. Between 1994 and 1997, I found work as a network TV script coordinator. That momentum led my wife and me to relocate to Los Angeles.

Despite my hopes for screenwriting my way to success, even with lots of connections at the top of both the feature film and TV industries, all of that came up short. This ultimately led to 24 months of employment in LA, representing an education unto itself. It was the Century III experience, and my success writing articles for industry trade publications, that helped me land my first job in LA. From there, I was the director of marketing for a creative production company in the promo space, which led to a career-opening position as an account executive for a high-tech focused PR firm, The Terpin Group (TTG).

At that point, I was no longer pining away for a career in the movies, for a few key reasons. I had learned that the production industry demands most of one's time – 14-hour days and six-day work weeks are standard. Being part of the crew on TV series for FOX, NBC and HBO taught me a lot about my work preferences. At TTG, I earned good money working regular hours ... but I also saw the difference between what the agency billed, and what I was paid. So, after learning all the PR agency ropes over the span of about seven months, I was able to launch The Darnell Works Agency (DWA) and immediately double my income, while working from home.

This was an amazing turn of events for me. Once again, it became extra meaningful due to my focus on film and TV, and the people in my life at that time. One of my colleagues at TTG recommended me for an account she had previously handled. This became my first account in the commercial advertising industry. The client group was extraordinary, and it was essential in demonstrating my capabilities at the highest level. In other words, it was a perfect fit, and it set me on the path of independent success.

Within a year of launching DWA, my wife and I made another big move, leaving LA for the mountains of North Carolina, and starting a family. At the time of our departure, my business was thriving. What would be the impact of leaving that dream factory, for a small college town in the Appalachian Mountains? In short, we have come through several massive economic

downturns, the unmeasurable upheaval of 9/11, and a global pandemic, in excellent shape.

At the beginning of my career journey, finding work was not easy. It was certain to require me going to work at some location, doing my job according to a schedule set by my boss, and hoping that things would go well, that I would have some job security, and maybe eventually, some perks. The dreams of working from home, living where I chose, earning over U.S. \$100 per hour, and being able to pick and choose clients, were beyond my reach. How in the world could I ever make them a reality?

This book is here to achieve just that. If you have similar aspirations, read on. With diligence, we are going to elevate your journey.

1

Reputation Management and Ethics

When I was a bright-eyed 17-year-old, I had some extremely ambitious career aspirations; they were all summarized brilliantly by the United States Air Force’s world-famous slogan: Aim High.

That is just one of many good reasons for selecting reputation management as the first topic in this book. Time and again, executives from different companies – and even different countries – tell me that a main goal of their new PR program is to ensure that the company’s reputation precedes it. Of course, none of them were talking about any of the negative buzz, like gossip from their holiday party or the mixed reviews posted on their Facebook pages; they were exclusively wanting to spotlight their best work, their grandest accolades, their charitable activities ... and imagining future business meetings where every attendee would already possess a solid understanding of the company’s strengths, capabilities, and the most positive aspects of its character. To be clear, when they talk about their “reputations,” they only mean *all the good stuff*.

Like most other consumers, even when I am wearing my hat as a communications consultant, I look at many aspects of a company to get a sense of its reputation. Certainly, if something bad is known to have happened in the past, that is absolutely one of the key ingredients ... and that is never easy to offset. In fact, there are many PR firms specializing in handling exactly that type of situation, well known as “crisis communications.” Even startups are responsible for telling their own stories well. Most people expect to be able to research a company and assess it quickly and accurately. If one is to be rewarded with our money, it must pass our tests for shared values.

Every area that contributes to a company’s reputation can benefit from proactive communications efforts to educate the world and potentially shape perceptions. We all know that bad news travels fast, and history shows that

overcoming negativity requires many elements ... generally including taking responsibility, making and sustaining corrective efforts in good faith, and sticking to the corrected course over time.

These points underscore a fact many take for granted: Companies and individuals require positive reputations to succeed. In the corporate world, recent studies place the value of good reputations even higher than lines of bank credit.¹ The Harris Poll Reputation Quotient elegantly illuminates the many factors that make up a company's reputation by identifying these six dimensions: social responsibility; emotional appeal; products and services; workplace environment; financial performance; and vision and leadership.² Reputation management is the process we employ to ensure that people will think about companies and people the way they wish to be perceived.

The Anatomy of an Influencer

Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* first appeared in 1936, and it was based on a 14-week course taught by Mr. Carnegie himself, which aimed to help individuals put themselves on the right track toward success. Whatever is implied by the expression "straighten up and fly right" seems to fit with the model behavior Mr. Carnegie taught others in his methodical approaches toward becoming reputable.

Designing this curriculum involved a great deal of analysis regarding my mission and responsibilities as a communications consultant. Across the successes, one specific piece of feedback reflects a daily internal focus which has ultimately paid massive dividends. In the words of creative director, director, and photographer Justin Meredith, "One of Roger's defining characteristics is keeping both internal and external communication positive."

With that in mind, my attraction to Mr. Carnegie's optimism-in-action is easy to see. To absorb the discussions to come, I feel one should embrace the basic tenets of professional etiquette and be able to apply them personally. Further, to me, the ability to remain positive in all situations is mandatory for anyone seeking to manage reputations for others.

Each of the discussions to follow is built on a foundation of personal conduct that is essentially impeccable, and of undeniable integrity. By successfully taking this training to heart, you will be in the position to offer excellent counsel to any business executive on any subject where you have established your expertise.

Mr. Carnegie spent 14 weeks bringing his students to the point of being solid, interesting, influential people. If you have never been exposed to good leadership, I encourage you to read *How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age*, as well as career guidance workbooks like *What Color is Your Parachute*, and to have enough conversations with smart, positive, respectable people about yourself, to have a good grasp of these two things:

- You are proud of yourself.
- You are willing to take on a proactive role to communicate with the world.

This emphasis on professional personal conduct directly addresses the fact that many people think of public relations as reputation management. To be fit for such service, one must measure up to very high standards.

Commitments to the Audience

In the advertising industry, the debut of the annual AICP Show in New York City is always a big deal, drawing attendance from agency executives and the Who's Who of commercial production professionals worldwide. Attending one year, I met an executive for a massive ad agency, where I had often engaged with his VP of Public Relations, and knew him to be quirky but friendly. When I asked if the PR VP was in attendance, my question immediately caused him to bristle. "He's not the kind of guy I typically hang out with," was the reply. To me, that represented another level of proficiency to aim for.

Although this standard may be impossible to meet, I take it as my *challenge* to be the type of person people will be happy to associate with. With the increasing difficulty of gaining attention, this subjective aspiration remains a benchmark for me. Being at least worthy of someone's time – in a word, interesting – puts the right emphasis on what the job of a communications consultant entails, at least to me. To summarize:

- Being a good communications consultant means interacting effectively with others and making that process as interesting as possible for them.

I will offer two more pearls of wisdom here. The first comes from author and former presidential speechwriter James Humes: "The art of communication is the language of leadership."³

And distilling some of Mr. Carnegie's teachings, taking interest in others may be the best way to earn their esteem.

I also have strong feelings about having a personal mission and pursuing it diligently over time, which is a main reason this book exists. Feeding one's personal development through ongoing education, and by challenging oneself to grow, are vital in becoming someone worth knowing.

The importance of staying informed about others and making efforts to understand their cares and concerns (especially those affecting the workplace) cannot be overemphasized. Communications are all about the audience; as we devise strategies and translate them into action, we attempt to drive certain responses. Only by being well versed in others' mindsets, motivations, and particulars can we hope to be successful as communicators.

Helping a Business Take Aim

Understanding the basic meaning of a business reputation, and considering what goes into managing one, it is easy to see the power of the world-class skill set at the heart of this book. The next part of the equation is about strategy.

If you have any experience working for a small business, no matter what your job was, you probably have some sense of the source of the cash-flow, or how the money came in. In the big picture, a main strategy for any professional or business is typically aimed at helping to support cash-flow, which usually comes down to sales, fundraising, underwriting and/or deal-making. Well-managed brands with long-term vision and deeper resources engage in brand-building and – in the best cases – socially responsible campaigns, knowing that their fortunes generally rely on positive reputations. And in the beginning stages, most businesses must start with a name, business cards, directory listings, often a website ... because without them, they have no credibility. By defining the bottom-line objectives for a business, (for example, (1) try to attract new customers; (2) take excellent care of existing customers so they will continue to buy from us), you can then start to understand what their strategy should be. We will be covering all of this in more depth, but I wanted to highlight strategy's essential role before talking about another key aspect of communication, which has to do with discerning right from wrong.

Ethics

I was retained by global creative agency ATTIK in 2003 to serve as its PR agency of record. For my small business, it was one of several prestigious

accounts that motivated me to be among the best PR consultants in the creative industry. Over the next couple of years, I can think of very few scenarios which put me on the spot regarding my values, making me question whether I wanted to take on an assignment ... but there was one.

During that era, ATTIK's UK office was retained by Japan Tobacco, Inc. to rebrand and reposition its Camel brand of cigarettes, aiming to optimize its brand perception worldwide. When I was being briefed on the idea of trying to generate some media coverage through a PR campaign focusing on ATTIK's work, I was surprised at how the conversations struck my nerves, producing some negative sensations. Could I tell my client that this was a project I did not want to touch? My solution was to provide an action plan to frame up the strategy and proposed tactics, but I made it clear to my boss that I would prefer not to pitch it to the media, and I did not want my name attached to it.

In another instance, I was hired by the owner of a production company to help him generate media exposure around a project he had produced, which was about to win an award. I wrote the story according to his specifications, but when I told him we needed to get client approval, imagine my surprise when he told me, point blank: "Fuck them!" Based on my experience working in the creative industry, I let him know that I was uncomfortable distributing a story to a trade media outlet that tells only one side of a story, does not give everyone involved due credit, or may be inaccurate. Unmoved by my insistence that forging ahead distributing that story without the main client's input and approval would be a bad idea – I told them it would be like giving a journalist a gun that we were likely to get shot with – I ultimately refused to proceed, and refunded their money. While that was a difficult situation, it was also an important moment, teaching me how much it is worth to protect my reputation.

The late American Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once made this profound point: You may have a right to do something, but is it right to do it? Ethics is understanding the difference.⁴ For your further reference as you navigate these waters, we can point to some widely respected ethical guidelines that serve bright human beings and professionals each day. Especially in a democracy like America, one can get the idea that right and wrong are indistinct. The standards we are about to discuss help us assess the ethics involved in situations we confront, and define the moral implications, so we can better sort right from wrong – good potential impacts to our reputations from bad ones – and handle decisions accordingly.

Ethics in Life

Over the past century, the Girl Scouts of the USA and Boy Scouts of America organizations have guided the lives of well over 60 million girls and young women, and 100 million boys and young men. The oaths each has voluntarily agreed to abide by bear strong similarities. Here are the Boy Scouts' vows.

- On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.⁵
 - Law: A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

Also worth noting, both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are committed to doing a good turn daily.

Ethics in Business

Many professional fields have adopted oaths that define the ethical standards its practitioners vow to uphold. The Hippocratic Oath⁶ has been around for thousands of years now, and to this day, it represents a set of ideas we all can expect medical doctors to honor.

Among the multitude of avenues leading to business leadership, the one chosen by those who attend Harvard Business School's Masters in Business Administration (MBA) program is tried and true. A group of 2009 graduates decided to formulate its own oath, drawing inspiration from others, like this one from the Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University.⁷

- As a Thunderbird and a global citizen, I promise: I will strive to act with honesty and integrity, I will respect the rights and dignity of all people, I will strive to create sustainable prosperity worldwide, I will oppose all forms of corruption and exploitation, and I will take responsibility for my actions. As I hold true to these principles, it is my hope that I may enjoy an honorable reputation and peace of conscience. This pledge I make freely and upon my honor.

Just as Thunderbird graduates unite to speak these words at their commencement ceremony, and rising medical doctors engage in similar group activities which bind their individual decisions to common ideals judged to be good and necessary, the authors of the MBA Oath invite anyone to use their

website to voluntarily pledge to being ethical and responsible. The website is <http://www.mbaoath.org>.

Through the stories I shared where I mentioned getting negative sensations, and even deciding that my only course of action was to refund payment and walk away, it is clear that communications consultants have important roles, just like MBA graduates and doctors. Without doubt, we must prepare to field requests where doing so may very well jeopardize our personal or our clients' reputations, and bottom-line success. Aiming for and maintaining unquestionable standards of morals and ethics is always the safest bet.

Through research, one can easily identify the extent to which leading PR practitioners are held to high moral ground. The codes of conduct for these well-respected organizations are illuminating.

- The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (UK): <http://bit.ly/CIPRcc1>
- The International Public Relations Association (UK): <http://bit.ly/IPRAcc>
- The Public Relations Consultants Association: <http://bit.ly/PRCAcc>
- The Public Relations Society of America: http://bit.ly/PRSA_e1

Ethics in Your Practice and Mine

At least from my point of view, the truth is this: Even if you have sworn to any of these oaths of conduct, there is really nothing to stop you from violating their tenets. That is, unless you are intending to continue to live in the world where ethics and morals are expected, which allows people to trust and rely upon you to provide value to them and “do no harm.” Doing harm is obviously bad, and after going in that direction, regaining trust and convincing people to rely on you will be an uphill battle. Therefore, my advice is for you to join me in aiming high and committing to upholding and enforcing equity and honesty.

From there, in my experience, adopting the Boy Scouts' law should take you far, personally and professionally: “A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.”

Exploration

1. Can you think of a time when you heard about someone who had “a reputation”? If so, list a few attributes the person supposedly had, and imagine the impact on the subjects.

2. Name three men and three women who have positive reputations and list the main attribute you think of for each of them.
3. Name five companies you would like to work with that have positive reputations.
4. If you were hired to handle PR or social media for a company known for condoning sexist behavior, what would you do first?
5. Identify five things that can be attributed to a positive business reputation.
6. Can you think of anything negative that might come from a business having a positive reputation?
7. Given two assignments that demand immediate attention where both involve posting a public message on the company's social media accounts, how would you prioritize?
8. Asked by an executive to impact her company's bottom line by consulting on communications, how would you establish the working relationship?
9. Can you think of a company with a positive reputation that failed? Why did it die?
10. Can you think of a company with a negative reputation that prospered? Why did it survive?

Notes

- 1 Van den Bogaerd, M., & Aerts, W. (2015). Does media reputation affect properties of accounts payable? *European Management Journal*, 33(1), 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2014.05.002>.
- 2 The Harris Poll. (2017, February 9). Corporate Reputation Politically Polarized as Companies Wrestle with Taking a Stand for Their Values. *PR Newswire*. <https://prn.to/2BdIq6b>.
- 3 McKinney, M. (2017, November 9). Communication Quotes | LeadingThoughts - LeadershipNow.com. *LeadingThoughts - LeadershipNow.Com*. <http://bit.ly/leadword>.
- 4 Stewart, P. (n.d.). Potter Stewart Quotes. *BrainyQuote*. Retrieved October 31, 2016, from https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/potter_stewart_390058.
- 5 What are the Scout Oath and Scout Law? (2019, December 16). Boy Scouts of America. <https://www.scouting.org/about/faq/question10/>.
- 6 Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). Hippocratic Oath. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved February 26, 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath.
- 7 Thunderbird Oath of Honor. (2018, June 1). Thunderbird School of Global Management. http://bit.ly/TB_oath.