



The Future of Trust

THE CRISIS OF TRUST WILL FORCE PR TO RETHINK ITS METHODS

By Lev Janashvili

Structural Distrust

We enter 2012 with the world around us mired in a crisis of trust. Consider the latest evidence.

First, congressional job approval ratings have descended to a historic low of 11%, according to a CNN/ORC poll released last Monday. Other recent national polls (Gallup, New York Times/CBS, ABC News/Washington Post) pegged congressional job approval at 9% to 13%. Decades of earlier polling data had not produced such a scathing indictment of the country's political leadership.

These surveys deliver an unequivocal verdict: Americans don't trust Congress. In fact, higher percentages of Americans hold favorable views of pornography (30%, Gallup, 2011), Nixon during Watergate (24%, Gallup, 1974), BP during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill (16%, Gallup, 2010), and even the idea of America switching to Communism (11%, Rasmussen, 2011).

Second, trust in America's financial systems is dwindling. According to the latest Chicago Booth/Kellogg School Financial Trust Index, only 23% of Americans surveyed in September 2011 say they trust the country's financial systems, down from 25% in June 2011.

Third, public trust in the news media continues to diminish. Only 25% of respondents in the latest Pew survey said that news organizations generally get the facts right, while 66% said stories are often inaccurate. A shocking 77% of respondents think that news organizations tend to favor one side, and 80% say news organizations are often influenced by powerful people and organizations.

Finally, Americans decry concentrations of power. A Gallup poll (March 25 to 27, 2011) found that most Americans believe that lobbyists, major corporations, banks, and the federal government all hold too much power. Sometimes, this resentment flares up in dramatic and colorful forms, such as the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Interestingly, a Pew Research poll (December 7-11, 2011) found that support for OWS increased since the mid-October peak in the movement's media coverage. Last week, supporters of the Occupy movement assembled in DC to greet members of Congress with the message: "You don't represent 99% of the country."

In aggregate, we see clear and convincing evidence of the sorry state of trust. These are not outlying data points that capture bursts of skepticism and anger. These are not negligible downticks that punctuate an otherwise healthy trend. These are not "normal" cycles of discontent that rise and fall with the rise and fall of good things such as economic growth and bad things such as unemployment. Most recent confidence, trust, or reputation surveys represent snapshots of multi-year or multi-decade descents into broad-based "structural" distrust.

Despite the dramatic weakening in the bonds of trust, the PR industry and its clients still operate as if little has changed in the world since Bing Crosby died or since Edward

Bernays published his seminal book: *Propaganda*. We still rely on methods and habits of mind that evolved in a world uncomplicated by post-modern anxieties. We and our clients are facing a torrent of discontent, if not open contempt, and we are still trying to dam the flow with the veil of soulless corporate-speak and tricks of the trade that worked in a simpler time.

This reflexive ritualism only deepens the crisis of trust. It also obscures more sensible remedies consistent with the industry's professed commitment to truth, candor, creativity, and the craft of story-telling. Below, I will share some thoughts on the entrenched practices and assumptions that we need to rethink or abolish to uncover better ways to build trust.

Defining PR's CSR Roadmap

Many of us advise clients on matters of corporate social responsibility (CSR). We often exhort our clients not to think of CSR as a purely symbolic gesture that adorns their core business. Instead, we encourage them to embrace CSR as an integral part of building healthy and ethical businesses.

PR has social responsibilities, too, and our main responsibility is to restore trust, not because that's our bread and butter, but also because that's our best possible contribution to the betterment of society. With this goal in mind, PR practitioners can apply to their businesses the same questions with which they titillate their clients: What are we doing right and wrong to get closer to fulfilling our social responsibilities? What are some of our glaring shortfalls? Here are a few ideas:

Rethink the idea of “influence”

Building trust is qualitatively distinct from “influencing audiences.” Rather than segmenting the world into constituencies that passively receive our influence, we should learn to see every constituent as a participant in a conversation. That's the lesson politicians often preach but seldom practice. PR should at least start preaching this idea.

Re-examine PR's idols and ideals

Why is Edward Bernays still the towering intellectual influence on the practice of PR? Granted, Bernays earned his credentials as a founding father of modern PR. But his ideas evolved in a unique historical context that fed Bernays' elitist worldview and his view of the people as the manipulable rabble memorably depicted in Gustave LeBon's *The Crowd*.

Still, Bernays' ideas were fit for their time. After all, it was much easier to manipulate a nation without Facebook accounts. It was easier to control messages in a society where most information flowed only one way -- from writers to readers, from newspapers to subscribers, and from Walter Cronkite to his viewers.

But since the publication of *Propaganda* in 1928, the world has changed in ways that warrant a thorough rethinking of how PR participates in the marketplace of ideas. Yet, no thinker has yet emerged who can stand on the shoulders of PR giants to see the industry's new horizons, and to reconcile the practice of PR to the realities of a world transformed by cycles of boom and bust, by paradigm shifts in science and society, and by a decade overloaded with trust-crushing Black Swan events.

Confront blatantly unethical practices

If truth and candor truly form the backbone of our work, then we need to isolate and explicitly disown the practices that undermine these values. For example:

- In the dark art of creating fake news, we continue to see fake letter-to-the-editor campaigns and “whisper campaigns” spreading fake news that disparage competitors.
- In the social media world, we see scams and farces perpetrated by “PR professionals” who co-opt the very spirit of unbridled expression that sustains the medium.
- We continue to see futile efforts to remake realities simply by renaming them. British Petroleum became “Beyond Petroleum.” Farce overshadows truth. Oil, by any other name, still kills marine wildlife.
- Objectivity of research – Much of PR/IR research today is so vitiated by conflicts of interest as to be rendered useless. We need to better protect research from undue influences such as a PR firm’s sales objectives and an in-house PR/IR director’s desire to receive a stellar performance review.
- Devil’s Advocates -- We continue to see avid advocacy of patently false claims: e.g., Tobacco is not addictive (1994); cigarettes are “Torches of Freedom” for women (1929).

None of the ideas are brilliant. In fact they are kind of obvious. But, if applied thoughtfully, they work.