



Like many PRWeek readers, I found Michael Bush's article on the 2007 salary survey results ("Help Wanted," February 26, 2007) to make for very interesting reading. While several insights reflected in the survey results were thought-provoking, I was particularly struck by Tuck School Professor Paul Argenti's remarks about the lower relative value that corporations place on senior communications executives versus their CFO and CMO counterparts.

Dr. Argenti's comments echoed the old CW that the fault for this sorry state of affairs lies with all those unenlightened business people who don't accord PR executives the proper approbation and value. Like so many in our line of work, I had fervently embraced this revisionist view like some sort of red badge of courage, only to discover as my career progressed that it was nothing but a scarlet letter.

The fault, dear friends, lies not with our business colleagues, but with us. It's time we awoke from our collective delusion about our "value" and got into the game. And I mean the real game – the game of business -- not the one we've been playing all by ourselves for all these many years. My epiphany came seven years into my career, soon after a senior executive questioned why I was "wasting my intellect in PR when I could be so successful in business." What was I doing to make her think that the two were so disconnected?

I bring no new revelation here. Innumerable articles have been written on this situation, many of them exhorting PR pros to demonstrate their value by thinking, talking, working and generally performing as business people. This is exactly the right mandate. Given this, we're clearly not lacking a sense of direction. Our persistent failure to attain new heights must therefore be a failure of execution.

The following points bear directly on this issue. I believe that unless we collectively resolve them with action, we will still be uselessly bemoaning our marginal status and collective lack of respect twenty years hence.

**Most business executives still see PR as a trade, not a profession.** Webster defines a profession as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation." In contrast, PR, like organized journalism, represents a set of skills that must be applied to some sort of desirable domain knowledge in order to be valuable. As an industry, we've interpreted that to mean deep knowledge of a market or specialization. While that's partially correct and undoubtedly important, we continue to miss (or ignore) the elephant in our rose garden: our often deep inadequacy as competent, professional business people.

Our business colleagues know this. They understand all too well why so many PR people fail to add value when they are invited to a business council: most of us don't understand business at all. Heck, their expectations of us are so low that they're surprised when we manage our budgets correctly. We're largely ignorant of the core values, processes,

terminology and disciplines of business. When we do open our mouths, we often expose the holes in our knowledge very quickly. When we stay silent, our colleagues question the value of our presence. These are the two horns on which many PR executives are regularly gored, and this has hurt the credibility of our profession like no other issue we face.

In fact, this specific failure is why most business people are so singularly unimpressed by APR's value as a credential. To remedy this, we should focus less on "certifying" our mastery of PR skills and more on proving ourselves to be serious business people who specialize in marketing and communications.

Want proof of this? Look around the C-suite. When these executives gather around the conference table, they share a respect born of mutually rigorous professional educations. While they all have specialties, they speak about them in a common language – the language of business. They are paid more than we are because they worked very hard to possess what is valued in business today. In contrast, most PR executives have a liberal arts degree, very little training in any real business discipline, and wouldn't know how to read – much less understand -- a reasonably complex financial statement if their lives depended on it. I submit that our desire to ascend to greater heights of credibility and respect does indeed depend on that very skill and others like it.

**Most business executives see PR executives as talkers, not doers.** We're seen as being like the scribes and minstrels of old, recording and extolling the heroic deeds of others while putting precious little of our own skin in the game.

Most PR practitioners have never actually run a business, and they have no first-hand concept of the pressures, fears, glories and soul-searing judgments that go with such a role. Yet we purport to represent CEOs whose decisions, emotions and motives most of us do not even begin to truly comprehend or appreciate. Most of us do very little – if anything – during our career to correct this deficiency. Is it because many of us – our brave rhetoric aside -- are really more comfortable as one of Theodore Roosevelt's "cold and timid souls" escaping accountability in the back of the room? Do we have the guts and fortitude to do what is necessary to earn a leading role in the Great Game?

Business executives intuitively sense this dichotomy. A famous CEO with whom I once worked observed that many PR (and marketing) executives expect access without scrutiny, authority without accountability, credit without proof of performance, and compensation without justification. Business executives who see that as true adjust their respect for us accordingly. It's hard to fault them for doing so.

**Most business executives feel that PR wants to avoid real measurement.** In business, performance is measured, and measured, and measured again. The corporate earnings report – GAAP or non-GAAP – is a brutally unforgiving assessment against which business executives live or die every quarter. Did they grow market share? Did sales increase? Did EPS sag? Did they fail to control their cost envelope? Did R&D deliver their product on time? Were the customers satisfied?

The answers to these complex questions are typically pretty concrete, particularly when stacked against our comparatively squishy Reach, Tonality, Share of Voice and Message

Reflection metrics. Not only are these metrics pretty uninteresting to most business executives, we typically can't demonstrate any connection between what we're measuring and what the business really cares about. Ask any business person about this, and they'll tell you that if the benefit can't be measured, it isn't real. Regardless of how much they intuitively believe in PR's value, it's not hard to understand their concerns about PR's ROI.

In the end, I submit that we cannot continue to delude ourselves that this is all about a bunch of Neanderthals that "just don't appreciate what we do." We cannot continue to neglect the most basic tenet of business: to deliver what your customers want and need in the way they want to receive it. Our collective failure to be business people first and communicators second is why so many of us still peer darkly through a glass at the seat that should be ours, lying vacant and lonely at the center of power and influence.

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To those who point out, quite correctly, that our budgets are growing at the expense of advertising, I say this: Interpreting advertising's failure as recognition of PR's success is a non-linear, un-provable leap in logic. The advertising industry's self-destructive, head-in-the-sand response to the last 15 years of market-altering change in no way validates PR, quod erat demonstratum.