

Richard Stanton
Media Relations
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Reviewed by Paul Ryder

Setting its subject in the context of framing and relationship building, Richard Stanton's *Media Relations* makes a sound contribution to an emergent body of literature that deals with a crucial sub-class of the public relations discipline. Stanton is at his best when dealing with the practical aspects of media relations, especially tactical imperatives and the area of measurement – the latter commonly overlooked, or dealt with all too scantily, by commentators. He seems less secure, or possibly less enthusiastic, when dealing with strategy, high theory, and the relationship between the two.

Stanton correctly sees criticism of media relations and public relations as part of a reductionist critique that focuses on inferior applications of the disciplines. In his preface, the author appears to conflate media relations with public relations but makes it clear, later, that media relations is actually an important sub-category of public relations. While there is an implied understanding of the distinction between the two, this might have been made more plain in that, among other things, media relations seeks to establish and leverage relationships with media representatives (and to offer strategies and tactics to that end) while, among other things, public relations is about securing third party endorsement, with media relations figuring as an important sub-field in the achievement of that general aim.

Media Relations is divided into thirteen chapters, each headed with a brief, but useful, set of objectives. Punctuating the entire volume is an equally valuable set of textual take-outs, highlighting and defining key terms. Given the book's target audience of tertiary students, some of the words selected seem surprisingly simple however. A definition of "individual" as "someone acting alone" and "listener" as "one...attentive to a sound or speaker" are cases in point. Further to these overwhelmingly pertinent take-outs, a range of useful case studies, or chronicles, is offered. These illustrate key points and through them Stanton offers insightful, detailed, and generally engaging, commentary. Importantly, the practice of public relations in Australia and New Zealand is succinctly and accurately adumbrated, although there might have been some discussion around the

effectiveness of PRIA and PRINZ (the professional public relations institutes in the respective countries).

As Stanton segues into to some of the meatier matters of his book, he moves to circumscribe the treatment of his subject. He argues that because public opinion is formed after the point of mediation, it is beyond the scope of his book. In that one, quite breathtakingly broad, assertion, he ignores a crucial element in the media relations matrix: its profound influence as a conduit for media subsidy. Yet, it is only a little later that Stanton gets to the issue of influence when asserting, quite properly, that the field of media relations is populated with agents and forces operating on behalf of others. However, his acknowledgement of the relationship of media relations to the public sphere is, at best, glossed over lightly, and even when Stanton touches on the importance of strategy in a contested field, he fails to get to the crucial matter of expert influence over the public sphere. In fact, at one point, he denies that big organisations have, at their disposal, a stockpile of weapons of mass persuasion. Eric McLuhan, and others, remind us that they do, and that, when in the hands of a super-competent literary elite (for instance, media relations experts headhunted and retained by these organisations), this arsenal of rhetorical ordnance may be used to stunning (and sometimes nefarious) effect.

This takes us to the matter of framing, where Stanton offers a theory incorporating strategy, ground, and image. The author sees framing (a crucial strategic matter) as the construction of a ground onto which an issue or event may be projected as an elegant story relevant to specific media stakeholders. The notion of framing, however, is better thought of as finding a felicitous perspective or angle on an already constructed ground; a focus on a particular part of terrain already sub-divided from a broader ideological milieu. Stanton then goes on to offer a useful acronym “PESTLE” to remind students that issues may be framed around political, economic, social, technical, legal, and environmental spheres.

In the third chapter, we sense that Stanton, who worked as a journalist, reporter, and sub-editor — as well as in the fields of political and corporate communications — is in very familiar territory. Here, he details the dialogic relationship between the media relations specialist and his or her client before offering a range of models for media relations campaigns. There is, nonetheless, some confusion over strategy, which, at one point, is defined as “goals and objectives” — as opposed to a cultural frame incorporating overarching principles, approaches, and aims. At various junctures we do find reference to these aspects of strategy, but at no time are they brought together as a coherent whole. For instance, on page 32 he notes that strategy is about overarching principles, and on page 41 correctly identifies strategic advantage with framing. The author is, however, particularly strong on the analysis of tactics. In fact, a fairly exhaustive list is offered in the fourth chapter. While more might be done to persistently reinforce the relationship between strategy and tactics, Stanton’s analysis of the latter is generally insightful. For instance, he identifies the growing importance of more imaginative tactics such as street theatre. But, in a rather odd oversight, when discussing the media release, Stanton omits to note the notion of embargo — a fairly fundamental element when an offering is not for immediate consumption.

Media Relations also offers very good chapters on writing; the development of media relationships around news (observations vis-à-vis commodification of the news are disappointingly brief, however); the political and governmental paradigms; and timelines, budgets, and measurement. The final chapters traverse territory often avoided and it is to the author's credit that he makes a good job of tackling the, sometimes, tricky areas of assessment and measurement. Among several qualitative and quantitative measures of campaign success, Stanton discusses formative, process, and summative evaluations.

On balance, while decidedly weaker in the areas of strategy, theory, and the relationship between theory and practice, *Media Relations* offers the student of the subject a useful industry overview and good, practical, insights into the practices of the media relations specialist. As such the book is a useful addition to a growing body of literature on its subject. Certainly, some will appreciate, as I did, the references to *Last Man Standing* and to the cowboy genre more generally. Given the subject matter, that metaphor might be substantially extended.

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