

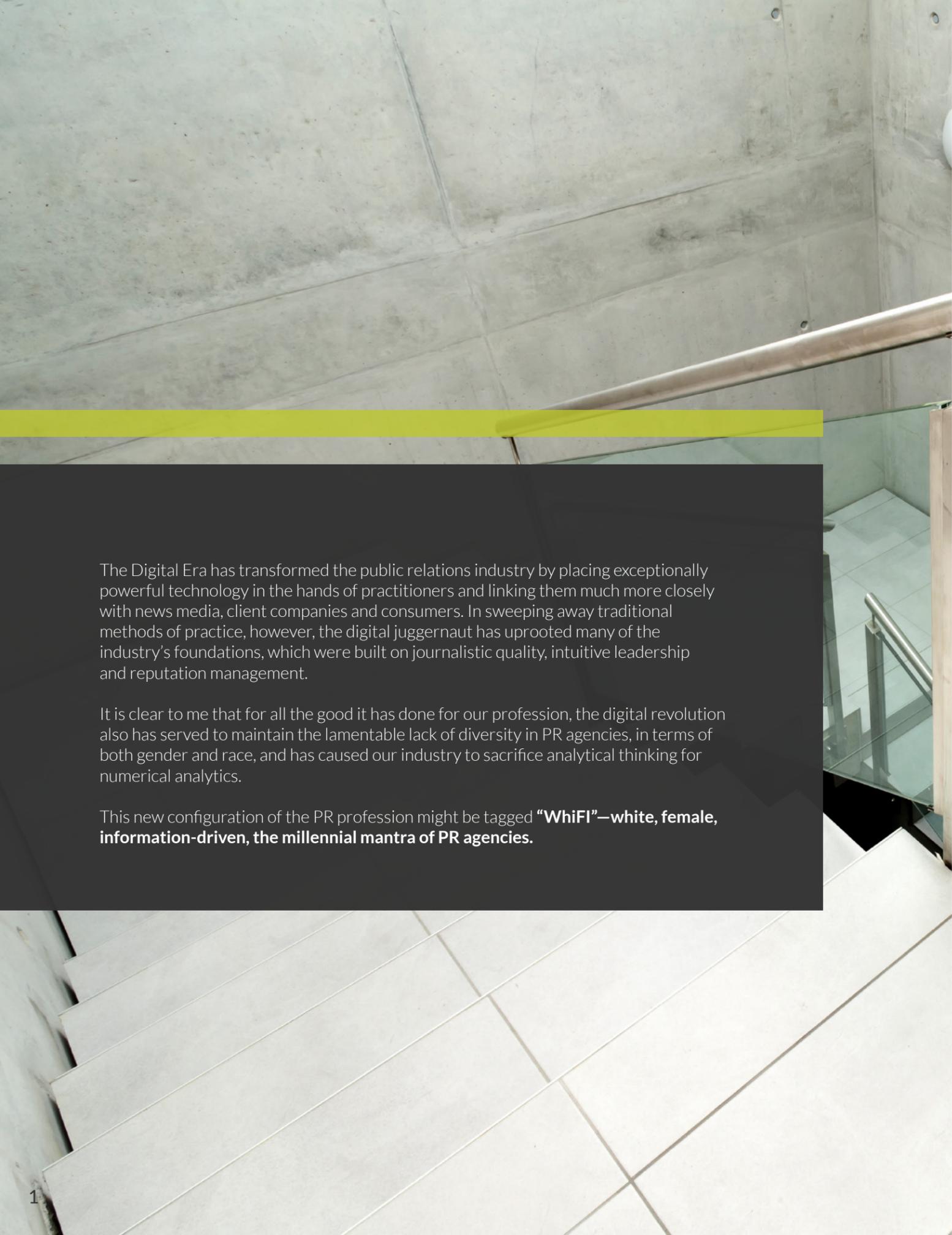


WhiFI:

The Unspoken Status of the PR Industry

Lisa Vallee-Smith, co-CEO
Airfoil Group

PR today finds itself a profession dominated by white, female, information-driven practitioners as the digital juggernaut sweeps away a tradition of journalistic quality in favor of pure numbers.



The Digital Era has transformed the public relations industry by placing exceptionally powerful technology in the hands of practitioners and linking them much more closely with news media, client companies and consumers. In sweeping away traditional methods of practice, however, the digital juggernaut has uprooted many of the industry's foundations, which were built on journalistic quality, intuitive leadership and reputation management.

It is clear to me that for all the good it has done for our profession, the digital revolution also has served to maintain the lamentable lack of diversity in PR agencies, in terms of both gender and race, and has caused our industry to sacrifice analytical thinking for numerical analytics.

This new configuration of the PR profession might be tagged **"WhiFI"—white, female, information-driven, the millennial mantra of PR agencies.**

A Failure to Acknowledge the Gender Gap

In past decades, PR agencies were led by men who were often perceived as giants on the local or national scene, while the day-to-day work was carried out largely by smart and talented account teams overwhelmingly populated by women. Today, many more women own and lead PR agencies, but this very fact helps account for the continued gender imbalance in the ranks of agency account staff.

In a "Lean In" world, where women view themselves as a minority discriminated against in pay, rank and stature, it would be not only counter to the prevailing culture but also politically imprudent for women agency leaders to acknowledge that their firms hire too many women. Yet, the most recent available U.S. Census figures show that, in 2009, 60.7 percent of all PR practitioners were women, and in 2010 that figure fluctuated only slightly, at 58.8 percent.

Look at the demographic makeup of the nation's top communication schools and you'll understand why PR firms are dominated by white, female hires, but not talking about this imbalance does women a disservice. One implication, for example, may be that, if women indeed are earning less as their advocates assert, PR agencies may be hiring a preponderance of women as a way to reduce salary budgets and simultaneously encourage turnover to avoid nurturing high-priced talent.

No evidence exists that firms are pursuing any such strategy, but by failing to acknowledge, discuss and/or take action on the gender gap, agencies unavoidably raise suspicions. Leadership appears to be afraid to publicly recognize this unspoken status of the PR industry.

In part, this reluctance derives from the speed and reach of today's digital communications. Politicians have been skewered for whispered conversations on the dais, supposedly private briefings of supporters (who carry cellphone cameras) and social networks that enlarge concerns into crises. Business leaders have learned the perils of speaking out, even informally, and their leadership often suffers from their caution.

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get to tell the truth these days"*

I frequently believe that only standup comedians get to tell the truth these days; anyone else is inhibited by political correctness and potential blowback. This failure of communication must be addressed if women are to advance with the general acclaim that their male counterparts have received in the past.

A Deplorable Lack of Ethnic Diversity

Perhaps even more damaging to America's PR agencies is their deplorable record on diversity of race and national origin. In the spring of 2014, PRWeek Managing Editor Gideon Fidelzeit, wrote this about the perils of the current composition of agencies:

According to the US Census Bureau, "people of color" - and I realize diversity and inclusion goes beyond that - made up 36.2% of the population in 2011 and will climb to 49.9% by 2050. That is an audience most of your PR campaigns target. How can you effectively craft programs for them if your staffs don't represent them?

According to data compiled for the annual PRWeek/Bloom, Gross & Associates Salary Survey, only 11% of the PR workforce is black (5%), Asian (2%), or Hispanic (4%). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, people of color made up 18.7% of the US labor force in 2010 and will rise to 20.6% in 2020. PR's numbers on this front must improve.

Further concern has been expressed by the LAGRANT Foundation (I sit on that organization's board), a nonprofit seeking to increase the number of ethnic minorities in advertising, public relations and marketing. The foundation states:

The demographics of professionals in the public relations industry are shocking. For example, managers in the public relations industry are mostly Caucasian. Only 3.3 percent of managers are Hispanic (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010); compare this to the U.S. demographic where Hispanics make up 15.4 percent of the total population.

African Americans, however, are even more underrepresented in the public relations industry than Hispanics. The percentage of African American public relations managers is only 2.7 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). This means that there are 1,890 African American public relations managers in the U.S. And this small group is supposed to represent the 37.6 million African Americans in the U.S. today. This imbalance is completely intolerable.

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The foundation makes this further observation:

Communities of color are often disconnected from many messages delivered through advertising, marketing and public relations. Many messages do not speak to these communities and are not relatable because companies do not know how to reach these neglected audiences. In order to reach them, minority talent is imperative.

And that's the business proposition for minority hiring. Certainly the hiring of minorities is good for our nation, our communities and our PR teams, but it's also good for our messaging, our marketing and our practice. At a time when agency clients are increasingly global, our own industry's talent does not reflect the demographics of the global marketplace. The question is, how can we craft programs for diverse audiences if we all look the same?

A lack of diversity limits thinking and possibilities; it restricts diverse points of view and limits the conversation. We're confronted with this situation for many socio-economic reasons, including basic economic inequalities, fewer men entering college and unequal access to technology training and devices.

The fact is that recruiting minorities to PR firms is time-consuming and expensive and may demand changes in traditional hiring perspectives. Minority recruitment requires traveling to regions of the country where minorities are concentrated and recruiting directly at those schools. Such a strategy may take you to California to meet with Asian students, traditional African-American colleges to talk with their communications majors, or the Southwest to meet with Hispanic candidates.

Furthermore, agency leadership needs to accept that not all recruits will speak perfectly and look like everyone else in the agency. Writing skills and language may be challenges, but these are good problems. If we expect to reach minority audiences effectively, minority employees are our best developers of strategies and plans for execution.

Independent agencies have an advantage here over those that are part of larger groups of companies. The privately owned firm has the flexibility and authority to make the needed investments in recruiting and advancing minority candidates without being held to a holding company's profit metrics. Privately held agencies like Airfoil can diversify demographics in a much nimbler manner, just as we can source our work to consultants and strategic partners without being bound by an organization's limited network.

The Ascendency of Amplification Management

While diversity issues may warp agency effectiveness, a massive change in the day-to-day focus of the industry is eroding the foundations on which it was built. PR today has become more science and less art. It literally is focused on digits, as numbers—rather than content—become king. Consequently, the profession becomes further and further removed from the practice and principles of journalism and newswriting, the progenitors of our industry.

For nearly a century, PR practitioners created messaging and content to resonate with specific target audiences. We were in the business of managing reputations through well-considered written pieces that ranged from thoroughly reasoned messaging to op-eds, feature articles, comprehensive media kits, three-to-four-page news releases, extensive white papers, speeches and other long-form communications. The analytical thinking, strategy, interviewing and research that went into these pieces encompassed a certain amount of integrity and focus.

Today, PR practitioners are creating messaging and documents that are being held up to standards not so much of understanding, awareness and persuasion but rather to quantifiable metrics of amplification. It must be short, sweet and easy to amplify through tweets, pins, posts, blogs and video clips.

It's a numbers game, rather than a relationship game. Sure, Millennials live in a markedly different era than Baby Boomers did in their prime, but the foundation of the PR profession—reputation management—is fundamentally not quantifiable. Often, for example, it has entailed the avoidance of personal and company crises—measuring the impact of not enduring a crisis is problematic at the least. At other times, PR has worked to boost the overall reputation of companies, working in conjunction with corporate teams on the launch of new products or geographical expansion. Trying to measure how much of these successes were attributable to specific PR activities is both unreasonable and unnecessary.

Today, the practice has changed from reputation management to amplification management. Presumably the number of social responses, page views or video watchers reflects awareness, but that's a stretch. What was seen may be forgotten in seconds as consumers pursue other digital distractions, and it often is difficult to know who is watching our online messages—10-year-olds or senior citizens. It's a largely unsegmented audience other than the demographics of the social network as a whole.

"It's a numbers game, rather than a relationship game"

We are doing all this measurement—through online tools that analyze pure numbers—mainly because we can. The tool is leading the task, whereas we first should be defining the task in a more sophisticated way and then selecting the best tool to achieve it. Just because something can be measured doesn't mean it should be. And the measurement we do should be of progress toward a goal, not just output.

The demand for technology tools has necessitated huge increases in operating budgets. In the past, our agency's operating expense budget for tech infrastructure would have been a subscription to PR News-wire and perhaps a media database. Now we have separate tools for social listening and management, social analytics, tabulating market research findings and other tasks. If we're going to hire more social media experts, these investments are essential.

140-Character Realities

That said, the effects of this switch from human analysis to digital analytics are disrupting our profession as has no other development before it. The quality of the practitioner's work suffers immensely. Long-form content is rapidly disappearing. Today, long-form may be defined as 300 words, rather than 140 characters. Shorthand is no longer a form of note-taking (we're fortunate if practitioners actually interview a client and take notes); rather, it's the ultimate result: a short message followed by a link, an abstract linking to a three-page white paper.

PR practitioners have traditionally come from a news background, many directly from news media and others from journalism schools or at least work on the college paper. Today, the requirements of the job are different, with different behaviors being established. The best candidates are those who know how to use the tools to gather data, how to run the analytics programs, how to amplify a message online. The once essential quality of being a good writer has been downgraded.

One result is lazy writing behaviors and short cuts, a diminution of intelligent writing that can reflect poorly on the clients the account people represent. Writing primarily for analytics threatens to dumb down creative, emotionally-driven branding for the sake of numbers. Search-engine optimization, for instance, converts powerful writing into a word-substitution game where redundancy is good and the message is expressed in keyword syllables rather than carefully crafted sentences.

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Another result is a drive toward hiring younger employees—those who are native to the digital world. Today, a person who is early in her career and has really good social media skills is highly desirable, but she lacks experience.

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Experience is what once provided the PR professional with insight, a historical perspective and the ability to think analytically in developing a strategy. A very large proportion of today’s PR practitioners have never been through a true national crisis. A 25-year-old account executive in a PR firm today was just 12 when the World Trade Center towers collapsed. For the inexperienced, the implications of corporate crises may be limited to the news cycle of a workplace violence incident or a product recall announcement. The broader potential repercussions that must be addressed in communications may completely escape them.

In previous times, corporate communicators developed media strategies in which, conventionally, broadcast followed print. Today, everything is on the same screen, and because so many channels are available, the old rules no longer apply. Corporate news is just as likely to be announced via a blog post as it is through a news release. Instead of giving a big story to the bureau chief of the New York Times or Wall Street Journal, the corporation goes directly to consumers and business customers through its “owned” media—a website, social sites, blogs, mobile apps and podcasts, for example.

Recently the White House pursued this type of strategy in announcing its dire climate-change study. Instead of calling together national media to release the report, the Administration took it directly to local news affiliates, understanding that all weather is local and that this is where the report would receive the highest levels of exposure and the least likely partisan criticism. Such an approach would not have been an option 10 years ago.

In this setting, businesses also become more prone to crises. Social networks increase a company’s exposure to everything—including crises. Social media could be described as an exposure platform, and risk management associated with social media is critical to any organization. In a world where everyone has a camera, text messaging and social apps, company leaders, managers and employees must exercise extraordinary judgment and restraint—two qualities that are not exactly hallmarks of the Digital Era.

Hiring in this environment becomes immensely difficult. I believe that many of us who have been in the industry for decades would not meet entry-level hiring criteria today because we lack the knowledge and working ability for social media. I still see social holdouts, but I personally believe that, to understand and counsel

clients, one needs to actually use social media. Additionally, HR teams must be thoroughly schooled in the workings of social media to be able to evaluate the digital skills of the candidates they are considering.

Included in these skills are critical analysis of market opportunities and alternative means of addressing issues and opportunities. Practitioners need to be able to develop strategies from multiple approaches. Unfortunately, market research today is driven by instant online surveys—even mobile surveys—which may shun careful sampling for quick results.

The fundamentals of understanding market research traditionally have not been taught in journalism and public relations schools, but today marketing numbers drive everything. All marketing decision-making now can be measured, and practitioners need to understand from where these decisions are coming and alternative means they can use to make decisions from market research.

I call these the “hard” skills, as opposed to the “softer” skills of years past. The fundamentals of writing and planning still apply, but the ability to measure and research results effectively are critical.

The Shift toward Integrated Marketing Communications

Another outcome of the massive changes in the industry has been the shift by PR firms to join or become integrated marketing communications (IMC) firms – agencies that combine PR, advertising and marketing services. In an IMC environment, PR practitioners can operate with bigger budgets, greater access to senior-level marketing decision makers and more creative freedom. For example, PR may actually lead a campaign instead of just supporting advertising and events. In this instance, it’s the PR practitioner who owns the big idea.

Just how much integrated marketing can change the role of PR has been demonstrated at Weber Shandwick, a global PR firm within the McCann Erickson holding company of IPG. As was traditional in such organizations, Weber had been subordinate to McCann Erickson, the advertising agency. But in this new era, former Weber CEO Harris Diamond now is leading the parent company as CEO of McCann Worldgroup, the world’s largest multi-disciplinary marketing communications network, a reversal of position that would have been unthinkable in years past. Diamond is winning millions of dollars of new business for Weber at the same time that the PR firm is leading huge advertising campaigns.

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The IMC movement has generated its own requirements. A diverse talent base again is essential, and leadership must have sufficient vision to incorporate all aspects of PR and marketing. Moreover, the need for specialized skills and services led to the creation of previously non-existent positions in the firm. The title of social media director is new. Content specialist is new. Market research analyst is new. Digital design and production are new. Practitioners have the opportunity more than ever to specialize and find their own niches in this array of burgeoning digital job titles.

A challenge in this emerging organization is to maintain appreciation for the creative process. The creative approval process, for example, is far different in an IMC than it is when a PR firm runs a press release through an approval channel. In the integrated firm, many handoffs occur, and the creative is subject to full-scale digital production and design. These subjective processes require considerable leadership, patience, steadiness and drive. Most important is someone who can move the creative through these processes without diluting it. To see just how difficult this can be, review the journey of Don Draper of Mad Men and the lack of commitment to the creative that some of his cohorts have demonstrated.

Another challenge has been pricing. The conventional PR agency fee-based retainer model is not appropriate for an integrated firm, where the advertising side has operated on a fee plus markup basis. The fact is that, if you’re a multidisciplinary agency going after multidisciplinary work, your pricing needs to be multidisciplinary as well—flexible and appropriate for the project or client. Currently, the “right” pricing model is a vast unknown. Historical models may not work in an IMC today because much of the work is contributed by partner companies and consultants, from digital design and website development to animated video. While the largest firms have these disciplines in-house, most agencies do not.

Scanning Forward

We might ask if the PR industry is doing enough to manage and lead this change, instead of falling victim to it. From my perspective, I see some agencies leading, some are lagging, and some like Airfoil are “fast followers.”

One of the biggest threats that all of us face is that our most experienced practitioners, those of the Baby Boomer generation, now are retiring. This is a phenomenon that just about every business sector is confronting all across the industrial and service landscape. In most industries, departing Boomers can train a new generation to use the tools of the trade and provide for a smooth generational transition. In our profession, however, the senior experienced counselor can try

to convey writing techniques and analytical thinking skills to young hires, but unless those tools are wrapped into digital applications, such training will be meaningless for incoming employees.

10 Ways We Can Do Better

So how can we make things better? What can we do to prepare, to find the right people and to shape our firms to compete in the numbers game we’ve become. I would offer 10 recommendations:

1. Acknowledge not just the science of PR but also the art, and reward ingenuity within your agency.
2. Take more risks in inventing new services and practice areas to move toward the multiple disciplines that are required for digital public relations.
3. Balance training in technical skills with the basics. Teach creative as well as coding.
4. Invest more in technology and training for your staff. If you expect them to understand their clients’ operations, your account teams should be using up-to-date technology to carry out their own work.
5. Encourage universities to combine communications and advertising in their programs. College curricula for PR candidates should cover basic computing, statistics and market research as well as reporting, newswriting and other journalistic skills. In some cases, the new courses might be pursued as electives outside the core curriculum, as online courses or through internships.
6. Get involved to re-shape higher education. Sit on advisory boards, publish relevant articles and initiate direct contact with students in their early college years to influence their coursework.
7. Invest more time and budget in diversifying your employee base to intentionally target diverse groups and colleges. Invest at the high-school level to establish early relationships with the best potential candidates.
8. Encourage staff to travel globally early in their careers so they appreciate the value of ethnic, social, racial and political diversity and their impact on strategic thinking. Provide global travel and work opportunities whenever possible.
9. Encourage staff to spend time in urban areas to understand the priorities and influences in that market.
10. Require all your employees to read great books. Help them to find examples of the best writing, whether fiction or journalism, so they can mimic it in their own work.

Public relations is all about conversations. It’s time we started talking with each other about the changes we’re facing, the reasons behind them and the attitudes we must change to manage our futures.



**Lisa Vallee-Smith, co-CEO
Airfoil Group**

vallee-smith@airfoilgroup.com
@LValleeSmith

www.airfoilgroup.com