

Nigel Atkin



## Acrimony or Accord?

In public relations, managing the relationships between an organization and its publics is often demonstrated by viewing “publics” as circles of interests. The circle model demonstrates stakeholder interests on a global, local, or even institutional level.

Public relations is a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to convey and maintain mutual understanding between the organization and its publics—the management of communications.

Circles of interest are everywhere. On the international level trading blocks, can be viewed as circles. The European Union is one; North America is another; Asia and other individual countries form others. Some countries are not in trading blocks because of beliefs, heritage, tradition, geography, access to technology, and different economic systems.

In our society, each of the broad areas of medicine, law, religion, and government contain numerous smaller circles of specialized disciplines. In health services, there are literally hundreds of areas of specialization, most of which we don't realize exist, until we require expert service.

In religion our options have multiplied as we learn more about beliefs and the commonalities of most of the world's major teaching, how they interconnect. In government, areas of specialization abound. In just food and water safety scientists, regulators, and administrative disciplines are many.

In law there are many areas of specialized practice. All lawyers are Notaries, and lawyers can practise in numerous areas—business law, family law, criminal defence and a host of others, among them.

A Notary Public is also a specialist, practising within clearly delineated areas of law such as Wills preparation, the administration of oaths, and Powers of Attorney; Notaries, too, deliver many other defined services.

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It is said that the great trends in our age are those of **tribalism** (circles of common interest that perceive their own uniqueness, sometimes thinking they are threatened by siege) and **globalization** (a growing uniform practice of commerce, democracy, standards, and understanding).

Both trends are accelerating at international levels, as evidenced by looking at the past decade in the former Yugoslavia, and more recently at the global War on Terrorism. Less dramatically, these trends can also be

witnessed at local levels within chosen professions, say accounting and consulting, and even law.

At the local level, say in law, it is not a stretch to view specialization as tribalism and to view lawyers in terms of globalization.

The boundary crossing of “clearly delineated areas” affects most of us in one way or another. Understanding interests in other “circles” is important.

I contend there has been no greater time, nor greater need, for better communicators or continuing education than now. I ask, are boundaries blurring? Is there a need to communicate what we do more effectively in our communities?

We live in times of great transition. The forces of technology, instant communications, easy travel, and individualism have empowered all of us to know, to question, to travel the world, to build businesses, to help govern and maintain civil societies, to share ideas, to listen openly, and to communicate our messages widely.

The acceleration of the times in which we live is unsettling. Few of us wish to move into uncertain futures. Accelerating rates of change, where even the acceleration is speeding up, often breeds reaction. This is understandable.

Tribalism and globalization are said to go hand-in-hand. Both are facing scrutiny. The pros and cons are being

weighed on many fronts, from battlefields to boardrooms, communities and classrooms, in markets, in our associations, in the hearts and minds of people like you and me.

Communications today requires the understanding of others, and a wider understanding is one of the hallmarks of continuing education. In public relations classes at the University of Victoria, we discuss vested interest, consequence, and empathy.

The communications process evolves, and like continuing education, it never ends. Communications today requires conveying messages effectively between, and among, a wide variety of organizations, often crossing the boundaries of ideas and states, and states of mind.

The communications tools acquired in learning empower individuals to cross boundaries, to journey, to learn, to explain, effect change, and develop mutual understanding.

Without effective communications, tribalism will defeat globalization, and paradoxically, at the same time in different locations, globalization will dominate the tribes.

In business and government, at all levels, we face communications choices. In the extreme, by the nature and intent of the quality of our dialogue, we choose either acrimony or accord.

In this regard, communications is a growth industry. There can be no individual abdication of responsibility to become more effective communicators. Peace, justice, civil society, good government, and profitable business demand it.

Our chosen professions require both our ear, and our voice, and most of all, an open mind to learning and those in other circles. ▲

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