

In 2004, I was interviewed at some length by a PR student who was preparing a case study on a PR practitioner for his final semester.

I am publishing this material because it is perhaps a revealing document about the state of PR and journalism.

What was the name of the senior journalist/s who mentored you at the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin? When did you leave for ABC and did you do radio or TV first?

The training role under the old cadetship scheme made it the responsibility of all senior journalists to take cadets under their wing to introduce them to the various facets of journalism. For example, my mentor for a great deal of general rounds was Rod McQueen (formerly of the Melbourne Herald), courtroom work was Sheila Hemenstall (formerly of the Women's Weekly) and general writing style was the day sub editor, Skipper Francis. There were others, including night sub Vic Taylor. The paper was the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, and was then one of the bigger regional dailies in the country, with a reporting staff of more than 30. Regional dailies were a great training ground for reporters because you got a much wider experience with a variety of tasks. In a capital city paper, you might end up doing nothing but weather reports for six months. I compressed my four year cadetship on the Bulletin to three years and stayed on for another year as a D Grade Journalist. Then joined the ABC in Rockhampton, did a lot of relieving work around the state and studied TV in Brisbane, then ended my ABC career in Toowoomba. I spend ten years in the ABC from 1959 to 1969.

What freedoms and benefits do you find a career in PR has over one in journalism? Do you find more variety in the challenges presented in your current job than you did as a journalist? What is the favourite part of your job?

In reality, moreso these days than when I turned to PR, there is just no comparison between journalism and PR. As I told you, all of the people I knew who went into PR at around the time I did, were journalists. The real theory of PR was a rather unknown quantity, and few of us had ever seen a textbook on PR, if indeed one existed. So we flew by the seat of our pants. PR to us was more simply the role of press agent...helping to get clients into, or out of the media and protecting them if they had media problems. Over time, the role expanded into one of, what I call, communication strategy. I spent a lot of time educating businesses on the difference between, and the various merits of advertising over editorial, and the difference between editorial and advertorial. From my viewpoint, the careers are now vastly different, to the degree that I spend very little of my time dealing with the media, whereas in the early days, it was virtually a 100 percent exercise. I guess what has influenced the change is the fact that media has changed dramatically from being predominantly news gathering and reporting agencies, to quasi news and entertainment media. Most

journalists of my vintage despise what the media has become....the day to day media I mean, not the specialty media like the Fin Review or the major national dailies like the Australian. The avenues for publicity, in many of its guises, has narrowed over the years. Once I could tell a client that a story on his company could make page three or five, or lead story in the business section and the journalists in the paper to whom I directed the story, would reach the same conclusion and it would be published accordingly. Now, I doubt if even the journalists in the newsrooms understand which stories go where, or if indeed they are stories at all. Much of the stuff recycled in the daily blats as news is not news at all, just commercial puff and nonsense, trivia, sensational crap etc. Favourite part of my job - probably the thrill of diversity...being able to switch instantly from dredges to finance, from violins to auto electrical, and know enough about everything to sound like an expert. I really enjoy, especially at the end of making a documentary, being told that the show had made its mark, or, as happened recently with the China job, it helped to win a major contract for my client. That's real job satisfaction.

You said during our interview that sometimes the suggestions you have made to a client to make their product/issue/proposal more publishable can actually bring about a change in the direction of the client's business. Is this what you mean when you describe yourself as a strategist? Do you have an example of an occasion when your suggestions have caused significant changes within an organisation?

Yes I guess this is strategic work, or strategic thinking. I can't actually pinpoint any major changes within an organisation, but I believe I have stopped many organisations from making fools of themselves with ill conceived presentations, or exaggerated claims. I think I could say that my most influential successes have been achieved with the use of video documentaries, which have propelled companies and their technologies perhaps much faster or more successfully than otherwise might have been the case, simply because I was able to encapsulate their business and their aspirations in an emotional and impactful way for presentation to their chosen audiences.

How many staff did you hire when you started Newton's Pty Ltd? How has the company changed since then?

I have reinvented myself many times, and sometimes not always through business pressures...more personal pressures, like a messy divorce, death of my second wife etc. I began business with myself and a senior assistant with roughly the same qualifications as myself, plus office staff. It grew in the heady 80s to 15 people in plush offices at Bundall. In the economic downturns of the early 90s we were all forced to prune our businesses and in fact many PR companies go to the wall in recessions because they are still considered as "luxury" items for a business.

When my wife died in 1994, I saw life very differently and I lost interest for a

couple of years. I kept the business going of course and around this time, I was offered the overseas work with Burchill Partners and I grabbed it with open arms because it helped me to escape. Then followed a fantastic five or six years with constant and highly productive specialty work on documentaries and other presentations in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and India. With the Asian economic crash of 1998, or thereabouts, I had to turn back to Australia for a living and re-ignite a few client fires here. This has kept me going since then, quite adequately, as a one man show, with contract assistance from web technician, uni graduates, casual labour of various kinds and of course my close associations with camera crews, editor, narrator, sound engineer etc, which has gone on for about 20 years. I still collaborate very closely with Paul Noonan who edits all my material and supervises many of the shoots. Paul and I spent a lot of time together in Asia and India over the years and while he continues to run his own one man constancy as an editor and PR man, we work closely together. We all need an association of this kind, if nothing else, to stop us becoming complacent or stale.

[How would you rate the standard of writing within the corporate world? What do you think is the best way to train a someone to be a better writer?](#)

The standard of writing has deteriorated dramatically as more people acquire a university education. I have had uni graduates doing work experience who couldn't even answer a telephone, let alone write anything worth reading. What hope do they have in the corporate world of the future. It is noticeable over the years that I am called on more and more to write sometimes the most routine letters to government or council for client companies. Some clients even today, run important letters by me before they send them, especially to politicians. I loath the way the language has been butchered by the so-called new breed of creative thinkers who believe that you can write anything you like as long as the creativity is intact. Bullshit. I take the view that just as people are judged by the company they keep, so you are judged by the way you express yourself in the written word. You don't find the important newspapers and magazines butchering the language just so they can keep up with this new wave of creative witchcraft. In any case, I don't think the creativity has improved either. They might think it has, but most of what I hear coming out of the mouths of the new modern executive has been done before and is so wrapped up in techno-speak or excluding language that it becomes incomprehensible anyhow. The language of business has also suffered terribly by the trend to political correctness and jargon....like outcomes, commitments to excellence, stakeholders and the rest of the bullshit words. Read Don Watson's book, "Death Sentence" and you will know what I mean. I couldn't agree more with Watson's assessment of the deterioration of corporate language. I really have no idea how to teach anyone to be a better writer. As I think I said to you, it's like playing the piano. Practice, practice and more practice. Intending young writers come to me and say, "how can I be a good writer". Then I ask them, "show me something you have

written"...."Oh, I haven't started yet." Big deal. Good writing comes with doing it....reading it...and doing it some more.

The documentaries you write are often aimed at convincing an audience to accept the proposal/s which it presents. With this in mind, is it more important to evoke an emotional response in the viewer or to rationally persuade him or her of the merits of the idea?

When I write a documentary script, I jokingly claim that I set out to make the audience cry. I have indeed succeeded at times. If you can't bring out the emotion of a subject, it becomes sterile and therefore uninteresting. This is why I spend a lot of time getting into the client's heart and mind before writing a script. I regard every script as the life story of someone or something. Capturing how ideas evolve, evoking, as I did in many cases in Malaysia, ancient folklore or mythology, help in the development of an interesting story line. Emotion is one thing, rational argument is another, but just as important component of the script. What I always do, is attempt to answer the possible questions which might be expected of a critical audience. Many clients have been horrified when I say, "we will begin this documentary by examining how you stuffed up to begin with and how you turned your thinking around to t he current concept." All I'm doing is easing the audience, who will be sitting there thinking, "they stuffed it up first time round, why should this be any different....or,.....they are trying to hide the fact that they stuffed it up first time round..why should I trust them now." see what I mean. This, I believe, is basic PR strategy, portrayed through a script treatment.