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Poor old PR. No matter the value added to company reputation or public sector awareness, nor its soaring popularity as a career choice, the profession continues to struggle with misperceptions of its real worth.

True, the antics of a handful of high profile players have gifted a scandal-hungry media plenty to feed on. But there are also the perennial industry pleas for greater recognition of PR's value in the boardroom - or a greater share of the communications budget - or better understanding from other marketing professionals. Take your pick.

Where does this negativity and wilting self-confidence come from? Well, entrenched attitudes take time to shift and sceptical views of PR as a reputable profession can be traced as far back as the careers of Robert Kensington Lansford, Matt Libby and Buddy Bliss. If these names don't strike a chord, it's because they never actually existed other than as fictional characters in movies. But does their portrayal - generally glib, weak, shift - mark the beginnings of a mistrust so prevalent today?

The first PR movie

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Take a look at public relations counsel (sic) Bob Kensington Lansford in *Four's A Crowd* (1938). Starring Erroll Flynn, sporting a suit rather than tights, this is probably the first PR movie and was a flawed attempt to cash in on the success of other romantic comedies of the period, like *Bringing Up Baby* with Cary Grant.

But the film does demonstrate that PR's media image was just as wobbly then as it seems to be now. Here's Kensington Lansford's definition of his job: "Most of my clients have more money than reputation. I sell them fine reputations through their donations to charity...so they'll die with easy consciences with the public hailing them as great benefactors." As for strategy, Flynn's character also proves something of an innovator as he proceeds to target a wealthy tycoon as the most hated man in America, no less, in a bid to boost the circulation of his old newspaper.

Post war, Hollywood turned the cameras on itself with a series of withering self portraits exposing the sordid underbelly of the star and studio system. In the Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born* (1954), for instance, the doomed star Norman Maine (James Mason), drunk and on an irreversible career slide, is minded by studio PR man Matt Libby (Jack Carson). Maine describes Libby as "looking after me like a fond mother with a good sense of double entry bookkeeping" before asking him how many lies he's told the public that day. Libby replies, with the inevitable smirk, "Oh, a couple of hundred, I guess."

Worse was to come with the following year's *The Big Knife*, based on the play by Clifford Odets about star Charles Castle (Jack Palance), "a man who sold out his dreams but can't forget them." The "first rate", if hapless, publicity man is Buddy Bliss (Paul Langton) who has already endured a ten month jail sentence for falsely confessing to a fatal hit and run accident to protect Castle, the real culprit. His attempts to schmooze influential columnist Patty Benedict (Ilka Chase) are dismissed by her with contempt - "I want my gossip from the horse's mouth not his tail."

Perceptions

Moving a little more up to date, *Sliding Doors* (1997) shows that the film world's perceptions of PR have lost none of their negative potency.

Before her character splits into its two alter egos, Gwyneth Paltrow's Helen is fired from her PR job for draining the office's supplies of vodka for a birthday celebration and, worse, leaving the drinks cabinet tactlessly bare when clients come to call. True to type, she confronts her management's displeasure by suggesting some smooth talking might have got round her indiscretion - "We're in PR. That's what we do."

So there you have it. Superficiality, lies, a suicidal desperation to placate the boss at all costs and booze before business - 60 years of PR fiction compounded by real-life indiscretions. No wonder the industry has proved such an easy target. Of course, none of this matters in the real world where PR continues to deliver tangible and worthwhile results at so many levels. But it might be nice to redress the image balance a little. After all, reputation management should begin at home.

Anyone wanna make a movie?

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