Ivy 'Ledbetter' Lee

Historical Contributions to PR

John Hillegass

Radford University
Ivy ‘Ledbetter’ Lee

I. Background

“Ivy Ledbetter Lee, (born July 16, 1877, Cedartown, Ga., U.S.—died Nov. 9, 1934, New York, N.Y.), American pioneer of 20th-century public relations methods, who persuaded various business clients to woo public opinion. A graduate of Princeton University, Lee worked as a newspaper reporter in New York City from 1899 to 1903, when he joined the staff of the Citizens’ Union. In 1906 he became press representative for a group of coal miners, and in 1912 he began representing the Pennsylvania Railroad Company.” (Britannica 2013)

Lee, is most famously known as the ‘father of modern PR’ by many scholars and professionals alike. That is because around that time, Lee issued the first press release. Which is an instrument that has become widely used in the field today. Lee’s first use of a press press was seen through his work with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Consequently, he has also done phenomenal work with the “Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, the Guggenheims, Chrysler, Schwab, Standard Oil, Bethlehem Steel, General Mills and United States Rubber.” (Larson, 1967)

Lee’s career as a public relations practitioner is nothing short of amazing. His perspective at that time was considered “pioneering.” (Chavez, 2004) It is a shame that his career was cut short, as “he developed a brain tumor and died on November 9, 1934, at the age of fifty-seven.” (Larson, 1967) However, regardless of his early death, it is important to note and explore the notion that Lee changed the field during his lifetime as a public relations practitioner.
II. Contributions to Public Relations

Lee has contributed so much to the public relations field. He has been idolized as a “revolutionary” (Turney, 2000) and recognized as “the first true public relations practitioner in the USA.” (Harrison & Moloney, 2004) Before Lee, American public relations practice was considered ‘the province of the old-time snake oil peddlers.’ (Olasky, 1987, p. 5) Where as, public relations professionals had historically been seen as “propagandists and unethical.” (St. John, 2006) Lee however, was of a different breed and this is why he began to transform the industry. Lee used the opportunity to do things differently and spring boarded his success “thus laying the foundations of the public relations profession as it is practised today.” (Harrison & Moloney, 2004)

Earlier in Lee’s career, when he began working with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, he was called in to help them with a train accident one day. Arriving at the scene, his reaction was quite unusual for the time. Where traditional public relations practitioners would have shunned the media. Lee instead “immediately invited reporters to come to the accident site.” (Harrison & Moloney, 2004) This was so unusual for the time that the company initially opposed the decision. However, in spite of that “opposition from the company management, he provided reporters with factual information and answered all of their questions,” (Harrison & Moloney, 2004) proceeding as planned.

Lee’s unusual response was soon becoming famous and revered by news media when it was contrasted by the response to a similar train accident involving the New York Central Railroad. During which “reporters did not get such assistance.” (Harrison
In this instance, the news media was not happy with the way that the situation was handled and “poured forth columns and editorials, chastising the Central and praising the Pennsylvania.” (Arnoff, 1997, p. 50) This is when the idea of using press releases began to gain some momentum in the field. His handling of this situation was so successful that it soon led Lee to another business opportunity.

The next chance that Lee had the opportunity of implementing his ideas was when he was working for John D. Rockefeller and the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company on another publicity nightmare. That event is now called the Ludlow Massacre. Which was a bloody conflict at one of Rockefellers mines in Colorado that erupted out of a workers strike, where “18 innocent men, women and children were killed.” (UMWA)

This time, in order for his campaign to be successful, Lee began utilizing bulletins (as press releases) in order to control the news that was released to the press. His goal was to create the image that a majority of “newspapers in Colorado side with the mines and their owners…and to criticize the strike organizer.” (Business Journalism History) In the end of it all, Lee “had miraculously transformed John D. Rockefeller’s public image from that of an uncaring and reclusive tyrant to a warm, paternalistic employer and an incredibly generous philanthropist.” (Turney, 2000) This was once again, another great victory for the press release and soon led Lee to more clients in need.

Another showing of how effective the press release was seen when Lee was working with George F. Baer and Associates, another coal mining company. When Lee
came aboard, they were experiencing a “strike in the mines.” (Turney, 2000) Given the nature of this particular strike, Baer and Associates was between a rock and a hard place. The big issue, once again, was that local newspapers had been sympathizing with the workers on this issue and the company had been stating silent. So, Lee’s plan had to be dramatic and he told the owners to “open up and issue a ‘Declaration of Principles’ to all newspaper city editors.” (Harrison & Moloney, 2004) Excerpts from that Declaration are listed below:

“This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.” (Chavez, 2004)

The goal of this press release was to dissuade “rising hostility which journalists were expressing for ghost-written press releases, ads disguised as news stories, and other efforts to manipulate news coverage.” (Turney, 2000) Lee’s attempt to control the impressions and handle the news that were given to the press during this incident really shines on just how well press releases work.
Lee was successfully “taking the operators’ news and positions directly to the media, thus establishing himself as an advocate for the organization to speak loudly and justify its role.” (St. John, 2006) Which is consistent what modern public relations departments are designated to do.

Throughout his career, Lee had essentially helped to define the role of a public relations practitioner and designated the positions usefulness to organizations with his demonstration of press releases. Lee’s “strategy was so successful that by the late 1940s almost half of the news was based on press releases from public relations departments and firms” (Beder, 1999) The idea of using press releases had successfully transformed from an unusual method into that of something that is useful to just about everyone in public relations.

III. Closing Remarks

Time and time again, “Lee’s efforts resulted in positive publicity, increased credibility, comparative advantages and good, constructive press coverage and relations.” (Arnoff, 1997, p.50) It’s no wonder that nowadays, his methodology is taught in academic institutions worldwide. Some may call Lee deceptive, but I think that he had just discovered a better way of doing his job and that the media loved it. He has forever changed the industry and I am proud to learn the lessons that he has demonstrated through the work that he has done with these organizations.
References


