

Ancient origins of public relations

People



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Ancient Origins of Public Relations Ancient civilizations and medieval society offer glimpses at public relations-like activities. Ptah-hotep, the advisor to one of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, wrote about 2,200 BCE of the need for communicating truthfully, addressing audience interests, and acting in a manner consistent with what is being said. Archeologists have found ancient bulletins and brochures in ancient Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) dating to about 1,800 BCE. These publications on stone tablets told farmers how to sow crops, irrigate their fields, and increase their harvests. These were important goals for monarchs who wanted their followers to be well fed and prosperous, both requirements for a stable empire. In 5th Century BCE Greece, the practice of democracy required that citizens could effectively argue their point of view. The Sophists taught the skills of public speaking, often arguing whichever side of an issue that hired them. Protagoras (right) is one of the best-known Sophist teachers. Later, in the 4th Century BCE, the philosopher Socrates of Athens taught that, rather than the relativism of the Sophists, effective communication should be based on truth. His student, Plato, carried on Socrates' work. But it was Plato's student, Aristotle of Athens (left), who has contributed most to contemporary communication thought. Aristotle analyzed persuasive communication and taught others how to be effective speakers, specifically by developing compelling and ethical arguments to offer verbal proofs. Aristotle's book *Rhetoric* remains influential to this day. In the civil realm, Philip of Macedonia had conquered the whole of Greece. His son Alexander the Great (right), was a student of Aristotle. Philip extended his rule throughout Northern Africa, Asia Minor and India. Both rulers had gold and ivory statues of themselves placed in towns and temples throughout the conquered lands as constant reminders of their

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presence — a common technique associated with public relations, still practiced in examples such as commemorative stamps, monuments, stadiums, named buildings, and so on. Elsewhere in the classical Mediterranean world, others were also studying communication. In Sicily, Corax of Syracuse wrote a book about persuasive speaking. In Rome, Tullius Cicero (left) developed the earlier Greek rhetorical method for presenting persuasive arguments in public, and Marcus Fabius Quintilianus taught about the ethical content of persuasion. The Roman general Julius Caesar, in the mid-First Century BCE, sent public reports back to Rome about his military and political victories in Gaul. Later, as ruler of Roman republic, he ordered the posting of Acta Diurna, regarded as the first public newsletter, to keep the citizenry informed. After a lengthy civil war that destroyed the 500-year-old Roman republic, Augustus became the first Roman emperor in 27 BCE. Augustus courted public opinion, realizing that he needed the support of the people in order to reign successfully. One of his tactics was to commission the poet Virgil (right) to write *The Aeneid*, an epic poem that identifies Rome as the fulfillment of a divine plan and which depicts Augustus as being ordained by the gods to save and rebuild Rome after the collapse of the republic.

A Brief History of Public Relations Public relations has been with us for thousands of years. The Greeks had a word for it: *semantikos*: to signify, to mean. *Semantikos* means semantics, which can be defined as how to get people to believe things and do things. That is not a bad definition of public relations. In 50 B. C. Julius Caesar wrote the first campaign biography, *Caesar's Gallic Wars*. He publicized his military exploits to convince the Roman people that he would make the best head of state. Candidates for political office continue to publicize themselves with campaign biographies

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and accounts of military exploits to this day. In 394 A. D., St. Augustine was a professor of rhetoric in Milan, the capitol of the Western Roman Empire. He delivered the regular eulogies to the emperor and was the closest thing to a minister of propaganda for the imperial court. Thus, St. Augustine was one of the first people in charge of public relations. The modern equivalent would be the President's press secretary or communication director.