



50 Years of PR in Buffalo Niagara
Buffalo Niagara Chapter of PRSA looks back and ahead
By Julie Kopfer-Marranca

The Buffalo Niagara Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year by looking back on its history and looking ahead to the future of public relations as a profession and a strategic management function.

PRSA is the world's largest organization for public relations professionals with more than 21,000 members globally.

Founded in 1963, the Buffalo Niagara Chapter of PRSA today has nearly 200 members who practice public relations on the behalf of a wide range of organizations throughout Western New York, including private corporations and businesses, nonprofits, educational institutions, public relations counseling firms and professional services firms. The chapter is one of the largest midsize chapters in the U.S. and is a leader among chapters in the Northeast.

To help celebrate the PRSA Buffalo Niagara chapter's 50th anniversary, PRSA national President William Murray will attend the chapter's "Golden Gala" Thursday, Sept. 26, 6 p.m., at Pearl at the Webb, 76 Pearl Street, in Buffalo.

Murray's congratulatory remarks will highlight a celebration that will include video interviews with the Buffalo Niagara chapter's past presidents, retrospectives on the chapter's history and forecasts on the future of PR. Tickets for the gala are \$35 per guest. To register, go to www.prsabuffaloniagara.org.

As part of its yearlong anniversary celebration, the chapter interviewed some of the organization's members to gain their perspective on how public relations has changed during the time they have been practitioners and what the future may hold. Their answers are below.

Q. What is the modern definition of public relations?

A. John DellaContrada, president, PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter and assistant vice president for media relations, University at Buffalo

“There are common misperceptions about what public relations is and what it does. The modern definition of public relations, adopted by PRSA last year, emphasizes relationship building and strategic communications. The purpose of PR is not ‘spin control’ or publicity for publicity’s sake. The purpose is to help an organization build mutually beneficial relationships with its publics, including community members, customers, employees, concerned citizens and others.

“People today are confronted with so many different ‘voices’ and opinions competing for their attention, and they are sophisticated enough to know when an organization is not being truthful or is behaving irresponsibly. This makes it even more essential that organizations, and their public relations professionals, listen to their publics and communicate clearly and consistently to them. Not doing so creates mistrust and damages relationships, which makes it much more difficult for an organization to achieve its goals.

“PR, when practiced in this way, often serves as the conscience of an organization. For more information about PRSA’s “PR Defined” initiative, go to <http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined>.”

Q. How can modern public relations advance the goals of an organization?

A. Bill Collins, APR, principal at Travers Collins Company, PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter’s 1995 “Outstanding Practitioner”

“I don’t think PR has changed over the years in terms of its role in advancing the goals of an organization--companies and institutions still depend on the understanding support of its constituencies. That part hasn’t changed and I suspect it never will. There is still great demand for smart, well-informed people who have strong PR instincts and who can strategize quickly and effectively. Good, solid writing is still a prerequisite for our business.

“But of course, what has changed are the ways in which we communicate and the speed in which we do so and the fact there’s no such thing as a “news cycle” anymore. The instantaneous spread of news via social media has made our jobs truly 24/7/365...there is no such thing as dealing with something “tomorrow,” or taking a few hours to develop a response. What’s also changed is the expectations that the “public” has of companies and organizations—they are higher, more demanding and less forgiving.”

Q. How has public relations education evolved over the last decade?

A. Marian Deutschman, PhD, APR, Professor Emeritus, Communications Department, Buffalo State College

“The major change is to be prepared to use social media strategically, targeting specific audiences. In view of the 24/7 media and citizen journalism, building trusted sources, aligning digital channels has grown in importance.

Some things have remained the same. The average stay in a job is 4.5 years, even lower for younger people. Be flexible and prepare your self for the next job with continuous learning, finding mentors, networking, and relationship building. Time management skills are especially important, and given the poor writing skills of many students entering college, honing writing skills to make them excellent writers is critical. Some of this can be taught, but some just comes with experience. Sometimes students don't see the value of courses they take in college but you are preparing yourself for a lifetime of work not the entry-level job.”

Q. How has the practice of public relations changed during the time you have been a practitioner?

A. Beth Donovan, APR, vice president of communications at dPost, PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter's 2010 “Outstanding Practitioner.”

“It's funny to think back to the time when the conveniences of technology didn't exist. When I was a new professional in 1989, we would hand-write drafts of news releases, proposals and correspondence, and then submit them to the secretarial pool to type. Every edit meant someone retyped the document. We also spent a considerable amount of time driving around town picking up proofs from designers, delivering mechanicals to printers and dropping off photographs to media outlets. This time was reduced notably when fax machines came on the scene, even with their early inefficiencies of glossy roll paper and fading ink.

From the perspective of the practice of the profession, back then PR practitioners were valued as tacticians. Our worth was measured by quality brochures, newsletters and annual reports, as well as the quantity of news clippings. Today, however, there is a greater appreciation and respect for the value PR brings to an organization's branding and long-term strategic planning. Practitioners are now empowered to direct all facets of internal and external communication, as well as reputation management. More importantly, PR is entrusted to not only coordinate the details for preparing for a crisis situation, they are enlisted to take the lead in navigating the steps and guiding management when crisis hits. Long gone are days when legal counsel dictated a “no comment” strategy.

It is an exciting and rewarding time to be a PR practitioner. In the past, an exclusive management group made global decisions, which were delivered to the PR team along with specific dissemination instructions. Today, we are one of the first to be invited to the decision-making table and we are instrumental in developing the road map for our organization's future”

Q. From a CEO's perspective, what is the value of public relations?

A. Art Wingerter, president of Univera Healthcare and the PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter's 2013 "Outstanding Executive."

"The goal of public relations, from my perspective, is to protect and enhance the brand. At Univera Healthcare that process is a very collaborative one with our public relations professionals involved with nearly every major decision we make. PR is not just at the table or invited to the table, they are part of the table and part of the discussion in every manner. And they have impact.

They are crafting the strategy and crafting the responses. They are protecting the integrity of the industry. Whether it is a good day, a bad day, or whether they are creating a story or responding to a story. They have an impact on our industry and we rely on them every day."

Q. What does the future of public relations look like?

A. Elizabeth Silverman, public relations practitioner, and the PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter's 2013 "Rising Star" honoree.

"I think that there will be continued growth in the public relations field, as more employers realize the importance of communication in a competitive global business environment.

"Also, I believe that in the future, public relations will have a continued emphasis on learning social media and new technologies, and also their strategic implications. There will also be an increased emphasis on measurement and evaluation in public relations. Major PR firms in New York and other cities are signing on to these global public relations standards, so it will be crucial for all of us to know those standards as they are implemented around the world."

Q. What is the APR and what is its value?

A. Barbara Byers, APR, associate director, communications, UB Office of Alumni Relations and PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter's 2009 "Outstanding Practitioner."

Accreditation in Public Relations – known as "APR," is an outward symbol that a public relations practitioner has reached the highest standards in the field. The voluntary certification program measures a professional's fundamental knowledge of communication theory and how to apply it, including a thorough understanding of research, strategic planning, implementation and evaluation.

APR certification tells your peers, your colleagues, your clients and your employer that you truly understand the public relations profession and its ethical

practice. It demonstrates your commitment to the profession and shows that you have a strategic perspective and sound professional judgment.

The PRSA Buffalo Niagara Chapter currently has 36 members who have earned APR certification. 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of accreditation, and PRSA National recently announced it is embarking on an effort to “enhance the profile and prestige of the APR credential” as part of the upcoming anniversary celebration.

Follow the Buffalo Niagara Chapter on Twitter [@PRSABuffNiag](https://twitter.com/PRSABuffNiag) and on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/PRSABuffNiag](https://www.facebook.com/PRSABuffNiag)

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