

How did you get started in PR?

I kind of backed into my PR career. (I therefore tend to think that majoring in PR as an undergrad is kind of funny.) My college's career development center had three-inch binders full of internship opportunities, but they were typically for people pursuing accounting or business administration majors. There was very little for those of us earning communications degrees. I found one company offering an internship—Brown-Miller Communications—that specialized in PR for wine and food companies. I jumped on it and had a blast that whole summer.

Before graduating, I was concurrently working as a computer systems administrator, Webmaster, and general manager of my college radio station. I knew I liked being around technology and I had a good career experience at BMC so, in merging the two, my career path just kind of presented itself.

What jobs have you held?

I started as an Account Coordinator with The Weber Group's Palo Alto office, about six months before its acquisition by the Interpublic Group's McCann-Erickson unit. After about three-and-a-half years, I left as a Senior Account Executive to take a similar position at Phase Two Strategies, where I am now an Account Manager. By the time your readers see this, I will have been at Phase Two Strategies about two-and-a-half years.

I worked with Jane Dryden at both companies, who has an incredible history in tech. (She helped evangelize the "Hayes" in the phrase "Hayes Compatible Modem," which amounts to serious tech credibility if you played with computers at all during the 1980s like I did.)

In addition to the jobs mentioned above (tech fix-it guy, webmaster, college radio station GM), I also previously worked as a loading dock gopher at a bookstore and a water boy at a plant nursery.

What have been your career "landmarks"?

- Launching Matrix Semiconductor in December 2001.
- Putting together a successful media and VIP event honoring SRI International's 55th anniversary in June 2001.

- Having the fortune to work with SRI since 1997.
- Realizing that the art of persuasion has changed very little in a very long time and that, at the end of the day, everything you need to know about PR you can learn from Aristotle and English logician Stephen Toulmin. (Learned from Dr. Barry Eckhouse, author of *Competitive Communication* and a former professor.)
- Being called into my boss' office after a client had called her to complain that "Phil uses too many big words when he talks," which is the only time a client has gone over my head to mention something negative about my performance.
- Launching three key products for Hitachi Semiconductor and getting the company to the forefront of what would otherwise have been a very confusing multi-company announcement.
- Earning the respect of my clients and colleagues.
- Winning this award? I mean, seeing as how one of my teammates thought enough of her boss to do this certainly means the world to me.
- Coming up with the idea of the Douglas C. Engelbart Society at Phase Two Strategies. (More below.)

We've heard from your mentors/employers/peers about why you should be on our 15-to-Watch list. Now tell us why YOU think you should be on the list. What have you done that makes you an outstanding young PR pro? (Give us some specifics about accounts you've worked on, clients you've counseled, campaigns you've spearheaded, employees you've mentored, major career accomplishments in your current job and others.)

I can point to two things: My passion for the industry in which I ply my PR skills and my dedication to staff development and learning.

The former is probably evident enough from my answers to the other questions, as well as a brief listing of some companies I've worked with: SRI International, Matrix Semiconductor, Hitachi Semiconductor, National Semiconductor (see a trend?), Phoenix Technologies, and so on. There also have been a number of business software companies (J.D. Edwards, Cohera, etc.) and I even participated in a project for Charles Schwab once. My clients and my colleagues have all recognized my dedication to crafting and executing winning, sustainable technology PR programs.

As to the latter...Well, I can't honestly say that I won this award because I'm necessarily the best PR pro in my age group or, within that demographic, even in my city. What I *can* say that I do better than most is take the time to make sure that my team members have a business, historical, and technical context necessary to 1) do the best work for the client, and 2) gain the respect of media, analysts, and other influencers. This is above and beyond teaching basic PR skills. Learning such trade skills are important, of course, but any application of those skills would come off as hollow without context.

One of the ways this is done is through a literature seminar that I chair at Phase Two Strategies. I dubbed it “The Douglas C. Engelbart Society,” named after the man who introduced the basic tenets and concepts of personal computing in 1968 when he was at SRI. We get together as a group to discuss a reading assigned the month before. For example, we had a lively discussion about network security and privacy after reading the classic work *The Cuckoo’s Egg* by Clifford Stoll. Ellen Ullman’s *Close To The Machine* was a particularly entertaining look at the work of the programmer/engineer—the architects of the information economy that, well, gave us all our jobs.

Instead of relying on the numbing dissemination of facts and concepts, The Engelbart Society allows people to discuss the big issues in technology and come to their own conclusions. In the end, the participants have the benefit of talking about these relevant concepts with their peers.

The next session I’m planning has to do with ethics and finance, especially in light of the rather damning report that the NYC district attorney published about Wall Street analysts. I’m hoping to touch on everything from Michael Milken to Mary Meeker.

Also, my "whiteboard sessions" have become somewhat legendary. I often get so excited talking about technology and business concepts that, before the conversation has ended, I’ve filled a whiteboard several times over.

I’ve also considered that this passion for education works well in a media relations context, since all good PR must seek to educate rather than sell.

What is your personal "mission statement" for your work?

You never stop pitching your client's business, even after the contract has been signed. I've always said this, but I find that it rings especially true these days.

What was the best PR advice you ever received?

It was "The best thing you can do is just read." People who are new to technology PR have a daunting task ahead of them. Not only must they learn PR skills, but it is imperative that they are conversant in the business concepts, history, and technical terminology of the industry. (I, of course, do not mean the excessive use of "buzzwords," or the particularly unnerving habit of misusing the term "strategic" often and as many times as possible.) This philosophy is the basis for the Douglas C. Engelbart Society.

What was the worst PR advice you ever received?

It was "technology and engineering issues no longer matter," which I summarily rejected. During the most recent technology boom, PR neophytes and very senior PR executives alike bought into the specious notion that a company's technical prowess and engineering capability didn't matter. As long as the company was either funded by a big-name venture capitalist or featured an executive team composed of shiny Ivy League graduates, the path to coverage and riches beyond the dreams of avarice were considered guaranteed.

In a meeting, I was asked by a supervisor if a certain competitive technology was going to be a long-term threat to our client. Based on my discussions with engineers, analysts, journalists, and even my client's customers, I said "no," giving numerous logical reasons. In a tone that aurally approximated a condescending pat on the head, the supervisor told me that all of those reasons didn't matter, for no other reason than the fact that the company had a big-name investor on board.

Imagine that: The age-old axiom "It's not what you know, but who you know" suddenly had its own eleven-figure market cap! Today, that same client competitor is squirming more vigorously than a lap dog caught between a Lay-Z-Boy chair and Dom Deluise.

I've since dubbed this managerial phenomenon "Financial Daily Syndrome," whereby executives start to believe that everything they need to know can be gleaned from scanning a single top-tier daily newspaper, primary research or other publications be damned. Lesson: Actionable industry intelligence will trump titularly driven arrogance any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

If you had to leave public relations, what would be your dream job?

I would like to be a communications researcher and teacher. By the time that happens, I'll have enough perspective on the past several years to make academically significant sense out of it.

There's plenty to be studied, particularly in terms of the past decade. We live in a curious time when PR materials often masquerade as news. Log on to any of the major Web portals and you'll see what I mean. As someone who serves as my clients' lawyer in the court of public opinion, this provides for very interesting public relations possibilities. As a voracious consumer of media, however, such a state of affairs is quite terrifying. (I hear that one PR firm is even getting into the book publishing business.)

I've already started on this academic track somewhat: At the invitation of one of the instructors, I lecture about public relations twice a year at San Francisco State University's College Of Extended Learning.

What do you view as your most important accomplishment (career or otherwise)?

My passion for science and technological innovation has allowed me to work with some of the most incredible minds in technology within a very short period of time. For example, I've worked with nonprofit scientific research institute SRI International since 1997. SRI, which holds a historic place in tech lore, has hundreds of the most brilliant scientists in the world at its 63-acre HQ campus alone, making the innovations-per-acre ratio quite staggering. My Matrix Semiconductor client was founded by Mike Farmwald, Tom Lee, and Mark Johnson—all of them veteran entrepreneurs, engineers, and circuit designers with wonderful stories to tell. I also did some work with a startup (Cohera Corp.) founded by Dr. Michael Stonebraker, who is considered one of the leading minds in databases and expert systems.

Now, is this an "accomplishment," or blind luck? I tend to think that we make our own luck. Had I not demonstrated technical knowledge and an enthusiasm for deep technology, I would not have been able to work with these wonderful people.

What's the most embarrassing/strangest thing you've ever done in the line of duty? (We've heard everything, including one guy who dressed up as a giant nose -- think the Breathe Right nasal strip mascot -- so don't be afraid to share!)

Well...In the "strange" category: I was once told to stop pursuing a media opportunity out of fear that any publicity on the particular topic would result in the loss of life. Yes, it was determined that there was a risk—however slight—of homicide, manslaughter, or other mortal deeds if pitching efforts continued and publication resulted.

What was your biggest/most memorable PR gaffe? What lesson did you learn?

When I was working with Hitachi Semiconductor, I made a lunch appointment at Hobe's with Brian Dipert of *EDN* magazine. (Hobe's is a chain of restaurants in California with healthier-than-usual fare.) We were all set to talk about SRAMs, DRAMs, and the set list of the latest Phish concert or something. I got directions to the restaurant from one of the leading web sites that offer maps and directions, emailing a copy of the results to Brian.

I left him a message that morning saying that I was going to be a half-hour late. The message I got back later was: "Hey, Phil. Brian. Thanks for your message. It's just that, well, I don't think there's a Hobe's around here. *[Insert mounting sarcasm.]* There are families, and dogs, and white picket fences... It's certainly a very nice suburban neighborhood, but there isn't any Hobe's that *I* can see anyway. As nice as these people are, I'm sure they won't want us just stopping in for lunch..." The Web site obviously messed things up pretty badly.

This was before agencies became aggressive about supplying cellphones to the rank-and-file, so I had to use a gas station pay phone to get the message. I apparently had just missed Brian at the location, but I agreed that it certainly was a nice neighborhood; at least in that unique and architecturally deficient way that characterizes many South Bay suburbs.

I still correspond with Brian both personally and professionally, but I don't think I'm going to live that one down. The whole debacle, without naming names, was written up in *U.S. News & World Report*. I guess I learned that, when planning anything, one should not leave too much to chance.

What's your best advice for young PR pros just getting started – what should they do to succeed in the business?

As much as possible, young PR pros should try to make sure that they're doing PR within an industry they enjoy, whether it is technology, healthcare, consumer packaged goods, or whatever. PR is the only profession I'm aware of that makes it your job to know and understand how the media works. This has made PR a very rewarding career choice for me, but a large part of that has to do with my personal interest in science and technology.

I'm not sure that I would have been as successful as I have been if I took a job doing PR for, say, the petroleum industry. It's a very important industry, yes, but it just isn't where my interests lie.

What do you do for fun (besides PR, of course)?

I'm into anything that involves the creative experience. (Or, I should say, the "*constructive* creative experience," since I suppose making atomic bombs involves a measure of creativity.) I write both nonfiction and fiction quite often, sometimes performing my work in public. I play guitar and I'm currently composing some rather interesting music with a friend of mine at his loft in Oakland, Calif. (Cross George Winston with Nine Inch Nails, then run the product through a woodchipper, allowing the results to alight upon a lush, green, flower-dotted field. You get the idea.) Also into reading (just started into a collection of interviews with William S. Burroughs), traveling (never enough), and ensuring that my career never gets in the way of friends and family.

What's next for you?

I intend to seek an advanced degree in communications, with an eye toward someday achieving a Ph.D. I already have my dissertation topic planned.

Other Facts

- Maintains a website at <http://www.philgomes.com>, as well as a not-as-frequently-updated-as-Phil-would-like weblog at <http://www.philgomes.com/blog/>
- Education
 - Bachelor of Arts degree in communications from St. Mary's College of California, graduating at top of department
 - Three semesters of intensive classical study
 - Additional coursework in computer programming at SFSU College Of Extended Learning
- Other Awards
 - Five company awards for quality work at Phase Two Strategies for account service on behalf of SRI International, Matrix Semiconductor, and Adaptec (1999 – Present)
 - Three company awards for quality work at The Weber Group for account service on behalf of J.D. Edwards and Hitachi Semiconductor (1996 – 1999)
 - The Weber Group's first "Innovator of the Month" award within the Palo Alto, Calif., office (1998-ish)
 - Honorable Mention, HP/ACM Worldwide Science Fiction Writing Contest, ACM97 (1997)
- Owns two desktop computers at home: Beavis (a Linux-based machine) and Butthead (the obligatory Windows/Intel PC), wired into a switch that allows both devices to share the same mouse, keyboard, and monitor
- Owns several guitars purchased at deep discounts off of eBay, pawnshops, relatives, and—in the case of the very first one—the basement of an athletic shoe store in Cascais, Portugal, in 1988.