

Jack O'Dwyer – The Passing of a PR Legend



Jack O'Dwyer

(Photo credit: Barry Spector)

Fay Shapiro, Publisher, CommPRO.biz

*“OD here...kid, what do you have for me?” – This was the way Jack O'Dwyer and I used to begin a telephone conversation. Today, I was sad to learn of Jack's passing at age 85. This legend in the public relations industry impacted many lives over the last 50 years with *Jack O'Dwyer's Newsletter*. Jack was a mentor, my friend, colleague and a role model to so many people in the public relations community. Hearing the tragic news of his passing today, here are thoughts, stories and heartfelt memories from some of the many people who Jack impacted...*

A Tribute to Jack

Jack gave so many people in our industry a leg up, including me.

– Douglas Simon, President & CEO, D S Simon Media

In a 2011 article about Edelman, Jack wrote that ours was “the only big firm that stayed true to its craft and didn’t sell out.” The same can be said about Jack. Over 50 years he has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the profession of journalism and to holding everyone connected to the PR industry accountable for their actions.

I started in the industry and at Edelman 40 years ago, so it’s not overstating it to say that much of what I learned in the first half of my career came from my father Dan Edelman and Jack. And for most of you reading this, Jack more than likely served as your mentor and guide through the industry via O’Dwyer’s magazine.

For five decades Jack has served as Chronicler-in-Chief of our industry. He’s reported on our evolution from media relations gurus to crisis communicators to strategic counselors; and on the progression of agencies from product marketing to digital marketing to communications marketing.

He’s covered the acquisitions by the conglomerates and has remained a fierce advocate and voice for the independents. Jack is committed to ensuring transparency. His list of agency rankings was the first of its kind, and it made us all accountable for our financials.

He’s a gadfly in the best possible way – in pursuit of the truth. He’s an old-school reporter who digs for the facts and calls it like he sees it. Jack’s a bon vivant who loves a laugh and a glass of whiskey. And he’s a true family man who, like my father and me, has led a family-owned business working alongside his wife Lucille, his strongest supporter; his son John, who serves as publisher; and his daughter Christine, director of research.

Jack's never lost his zeal for PR or reporting on it. Here's to you, Jack, on a remarkable half-century. Thank you for being a voice for us independents and the best source of real news about the industry we love.

– Richard Edelman, President & Chief Executive Officer, Edelman

In his passing, Jack O'Dwyer continues to speak to me as the iconoclast every profession needs. He challenged the status quo, he asked the questions no one asked and he pulled back the curtain on public relations for decades. Opinions about Jack ran the gamut but, love him or not, he generated conversation and heat. He helped me throughout my career and I'm grateful for all he did. Besides his support, Jack gave me the first opportunity to publish (under Kevin McCauley's guidance) and through these experiences, I found my professional voice. I have fond memories of Jack and wish him eternal peace.

– Mark Weiner, Chief Insights Officer, Cision / Chief Executive Officer, PRIME Research Americas

When it comes to public relations, most people refer to it as "PR." You really should just call it "Jack O'Dwyer." He was that iconic.

– Jeffrey Hayzlett, Chairman, C-Suite Network

I am saddened to learn of the death of Jack O'Dwyer. The man was a public relations legend. He was strong, passionate and the man, whom I considered a friend was a strong voice for the pr industry. May his family be comforted and remember his good deeds.

– Ronn Torossian, President & CEO, 5W Public Relations

Jack O'Dwyer was the first name you heard of when you entered what used to be called "the PR industry." You had to know Jack and read his newsletter. It was like a Bat Mitzvah or a Christening. Either you were in the know, which meant Jack, or you weren't. What always stuck me about him personally was his gentleness and kindness. He was a gentleman and a scholar, and today, that's really saying something. He will be sorely missed. Godspeed, Jack.

– Richard S. Levick, Esq., Chairman & CEO, LEVICK

Sad to hear of the passing of Jack O'Dwyer. He covered our industry for more than 50 years and put a spotlight on important issues that helped put the industry on the map.

– Andy Polansky, Chief Executive Officer, Weber Shandwick

While I know he was considered radioactive in some circles, I must say that Jack O'Dwyer was a true professional when dealing with me and his newsletter was always a must read.

– Steve Cody, Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Peppercomm

I'm saddened by the passing of Jack O'Dwyer. He was such an important fixture in our industry, and he was also a very good friend. I look forward to his colleagues continuing to build on the legacy created by Jack.

– Peter Finn, Founding Partner, Finn Partners

Jack O'Dwyer was a top journalist, historian, and critic of the public relation business. He was respected, feared, and sometimes ignored by some leaders and organizations in our business. Many ignored Jack at their own peril.

A good journalist's job is to always seek the truth. Jack did just that. I knew Jack for almost 30 years. I respected him and he respected me. Thanks for your service to our profession Jack. Rest In Peace my friend. You will be missed.

– Mike Paul, President, Reputation Doctor® LLC

In the last couple of years, I watched the tough and cantankerous Jack I knew for the last four decades transition to a kindle, gentler, more introspective soul. There were at least two dinners where he announced to us he would be turning over a new leaf, and stop pouncing on a certain PR association. At his apartment, he made sure we video taped him playing the piano (he was damned good!) and in his office, he made me promise to tell students about his enormous library of PR books. And the loving attention he gave to his wife, Lucille, at our last few events was a heartwarming, precious sight... The kinder, gentler Jack was always there, of course. I think he wanted people to know after all these years that this was the real him.

– Shelley J. Spector, President, Spector & Associates, Inc. / Founder, The Museum of Public Relations

Jack was a force to be reckoned with in our industry for so many years. He held to his convictions and advocated for his point of view. I always enjoyed the repartee and the twinkle in his eye. It's truly the end of an era.

– Roger Bolton, President, Arthur W. Page Society

I always admired Jack's passion about our industry. Yes he could be stubborn and opinionated but that's what made him special and a journalist pioneer. We all read Jack and cared about what he wrote. He will be missed.

– George Rosenberg

I stopped everything when I heard the news of Jack's passing. Everything unimportant. Texting, talking, messaging, and sending emails. I remembered when we first met at his office. . It was like I went back in-time...30-years. No bells and whistles. No fanfare. Just hard work, commitment and a drive to uncover the truth. Today, his teachings are even more important. Jack modeled how PR people should be: honest, unafraid and responsible. He will be missed but let's use his example to stay true to our profession. Rest in-peace.

– Wendy Glavin, Founder & CEO, Wendy Glavin Agency

It has been said that a reporter isn't doing his job unless he is making some people angry; Jack did that and more. He was unfailing in his search for the truth and held firm to his opinions. He was an old school reporter, the likes of which we'll never see again. He will be sorely missed.

– Gene Marbach

Jack was a straight-up journalist who created, among other firsts, the first serious newsletter in the field, first directories of PR firms, first ranking of PR firms, and first PR magazine. In his publications' coverage over 50-plus years, he took much of the secrecy out of the profession and focused PR practitioners on communicating ethically, legally and strategically for clients and employers. He never suffered fools gladly and as a result he paid a price

in conscience neglect by many in the field who wanted him to white wash improper PR. He was unfairly mistreated by a lot of mean-spirited people. Jack wasn't without his weaknesses, but as a journalist committed to covering the field professionally and in depth, he was unexcelled and will be missed by the tens of thousands who read and learned from his writing.

– Don Bates, New York University

Our firm was only a handful of years old in the mid 90s when Jack called me out of the blue. He said he'd heard some good things and wanted to have lunch. I had an idea of his place in PR history but not enough of one. And I was cocky. So I said sure. And we met. He regaled me with a thousand hilarious stories about my competitors and I told him, perhaps a bit too earnestly, about how RLM hated press releases and thought they pissed reporters off with their rigidity. I think he was shocked by that. But he ended up telling a lot of folks about it – and me – and then without much fanfare profiling this “firm that hates press releases” along the back page of the magazine. Without telling me. Scraping a photo from our young site. And then casually mentioning it to me. I found out our convo was on the record! And it was quite a moment. I mean, truly; we had never been profiled before and it was a coming out of sorts on how much we disliked modern PR. I got some flack (ahem) for the piece but loved it nonetheless. And yeah he and I stayed in touch for a long long time. He even made a big deal a few years later about the inordinate amount of gay-themed clients we had at the time. And celebrated it. Which in the late 90s – believe this or not – was a huge thing. My respect for him knows no bounds. He loved the craft of PR. And I already miss him!

– Richard Laermer, Chief Exec, RLM pr

Our condolences and best wishes for peace and comfort go to Mr. O'Dwyer's family, and to his many friends and colleagues in the public relations industry.

– The Public Relations Society of America's Board of Directors and Staff

Jack was a person of virtue and values. He was about correctness and congruency. He held all of us accountable as professional communicators.

– Gerard Braud, CSP, Fellow IEC

Jack was the industry's first trade maverick, paving the way for others to follow. Always fair, blunt and a true believer and unimpeachable advocate for our craft. He will be missed but his legacy never forgotten. May his memory be for a blessing.

– Aaron Kwittken, CEO and Founder, KWT Global

I arrived home in Hawaii yesterday for the holidays and was saddened to learn of Jack O'Dwyer's death. It is the end of an era. Jack was an important figure and an early pioneer in helping to grow and shape the modern PR industry through his monitoring of agency rankings and acting as a watchdog of PR professionalism and ethics. I appreciate what Jack did to contribute to the growth of the PR industry, but mostly I remember his support and kindness to me and my co-founders when we started our employee-owned agency, PT&Co., in 1990. Jack reported on our growth and campaigns and attended all of our agency's milestone events, including our 5th, 10th and 15th anniversary celebrations. The last celebration was a festive "Mambo" party just before Halloween, featuring a performance by the new World Mambo Champions, where we

announced the formation of CRT/tanaka. Jack supported us as we built CRT/tanaka over eight years before we sold to Padilla Speer Beardsley to create PadillaCRT in 2013. His unflagging support was crucial to all three of my agencies and for that I will be eternally grateful to him. Thank you Jack for making us, individually, as PR professionals and the PR industry as a whole better by your steadfast engagement and contribution over many decades. RIP dear Jack.

– Patrice Tanaka, Founder & Chief Joy Officer, Joyful Planet LLC

We welcome your comments and memories of Jack.