

Tuition-Free PR Lessons You Could Have Learned From The Political Scene By Watching Trump, Biden, Pelosi, Cuomo and Fauci

(Author's Note: This is the 15th in a series of occasional political columns that I'll be writing for CommPRO.biz until Inauguration Day, January 20. Previously, I wrote 17 political columns leading up to Election Day. FYI: My first public relations job was with a political firm, where I worked on local, statewide and presidential campaigns. In this column I write about PR lessons from the political arena that are transferable to none political agency accounts.)

Arthur Solomon

Despite the more than four years of his inflammatory rhetoric; despite his more than four years choreographing the mob action which led to the storming of the Capitol on January 6; despite his much more than 22,000 lies that he has told without shame; despite his slandering any person who didn't follow his depraved, decadent, corrupt and wicked leadership, there were important lessons that PR people who paid attention to the political scene could transfer to their none political agency clients. And the lessons came from the voices of the five most significant persons in the political arena during 2020 and, thus far, in 2021 – President-elect Joe Biden, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo, Dr Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and from President Trump himself.

My first PR job was with a political agency, where I worked on campaigns ranging from local to statewide and a couple of presidential elections before deciding that I didn't want to



spend my life being asked to promote candidates and their positions that I didn't agree with. During my days at the political agency, when I told the owner of my negative feelings about a candidate, he always said, "If you don't agree with a candidate, let me know. I'll never ask you to go against your beliefs." But the most relevant factor in my leaving the political world behind was the early death of the firm's owner, the most generous, creative and caring PR individual I've ever known in a cut-throat industry not known for the niceness of its top brass and their lower-level group supervisor lackeys.

So when I was asked to head up the publicity arm of a nonpolitical agency after his death, I jumped at it. There were important PR lessons from my political days that I incorporated into my work at my new agency, where I toiled for 10 years before being recruited by Burson-Marsteller, where I spent almost 25 years.

The most important of the PR political lessons I utilized was to not follow the run-of-the-mill PR tenets that were created eons ago and still are

taught in communications schools. When considering tactics, I always attempt to think out of the box, and still do. *(FYI: I never attended a communications school. In college, I majored in English and minored in philosophy and history, believing*

those courses would expand my ways of thinking. I did take a few journalism courses toward the end of my college days, because they were easy, but my best journalism lessons were self-learned, from reading seven newspapers a day and studying different approaches to story telling. The school I attended didn't have a public relations course. Those of us who were interested in PR learned it by what I still consider the best way – purchasing an inexpensive book that details PR approaches, pay attention to how PR problems of individuals and entities are covered by the media and, most important, using common sense.)

But for people in our business without the ability to think creatively, there are nuts and bolts take-a-ways from the past year's political landscape that doesn't require a person to be inventive in order to use them.

Below are a few PR lessons from the five people who dominated and influenced the political media scene in 2020 and who I consider provided valuable PR tutorials that were not taught in communications schools – Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, Andrew Cuomo and Anthony Fauci.

President Trump: No matter how you feel about Donald Trump's politics he stood out from the crowd by being different. It helped him get elected as well as being the reason for his unsuccessful reelection attempt.

The main take-a-way from him was not to lie; to always tell the truth. His constant lying damaged his reputation with the media. During his four years, whatever he said was fact checked for accuracy and proven wrong more than 22,000 times. Closely following and damaging to him was his thinking that he is always the smartest person in the room and denigrated the advice of his own medical scientists regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, perhaps the major reason for his defeat, as well as disregarding advice from close associates.

Lesson To Remember: Once you lose creditability with the media it's gone forever. Don't lie. And never assume that your title means that you know more than those who report to you, or that you are the smartest person in the room.

President-elect Biden: He proved that just because you are not promoted you should continue to do your best. For Biden, the third time was the charm. He previously ran for president two to other times before being nominated in 2019 and winning the presidency in 2020. Importantly, Biden also was not adverse to seeking the support of his primary opponents and rewarding them. Unlike Trump, he never assumed he knew more than the medical scientists during the election campaign. And all during the primary and general election campaigns, Biden did what many PR people do not do: In every speech and presser, he always restated his talking points, which every PR person should do.

Lesson To Remember: In our business, it is not unusual for an individual who is passed over to reach the heights at another agency. That because it's important to remember that more often than not, the true ability of an individual is often clouded by the group concept and office politics. Another lesson learned from Biden is to not hold a grudge against others seeking the same promotion you are. Ours is a small world, and the person you disparage today might be the individual that can help you another day.

Rep. Pelosi: Unlike President Trump, Ms. Pelosi acted like a confident leader. She was never afraid to share the spotlight with others in her caucus and defended the right of others to state their opinions even if they disagreed with her, again unlike President Trump who belittled and fired those who expressed an opposing viewpoint.

Lesson To Remember: Never attempt to stifle the opinions of people you supervise who have a different opinion than yours regarding tackling a PR problem; they might be correct. Also,

belittling those under your supervision accomplishes nothing. A true leader doesn't resort to threats or humiliating others, as President Trump has done from the first day that he announced for the presidency until today. Instead of denigrating others, offer to help. *(Unfortunately, in our business, many supervisors cannot offer to help because they attain their positions because of office politics, not because of their PR smarts. That's the dirty secret agencies attempt to keep from clients.)*

Governor Cuomo: The way Gov. Cuomo handled his pressers should be used as a template for every press conference. Unlike too many press conferences where one individual wants to be the star (remember Trump at his pressers where he contradicted others who said something that differed from his script?), Cuomo always permitted others to share the spotlight.

Lesson to Remember: During a press conference, reporters want new information. The more speakers who can deliver information the greater chance of the press conference achieving its purpose – getting out the company message.

Dr. Fauci: From his first talk about the coronavirus to his most recent, Dr. Fauci did what every PR person should do: Not be afraid to change their mind if a program is not working. As the science changed, so did Dr. Fauci's advice. I believe that at a certain point, a PR person should tell the client that the approved program is not receiving the desired results and should suggest ways to amend the program. In my long PR experience, too many PR people are fearful of letting a client know that the plan is not working.

Lesson to Remember: Letting the client know of problems is a must. There are few things worse than letting a client think everything is on track when it is derailing.

Perhaps the most important lessons that PR people should take-away from the political scene is to avoid doing what Trump

did – making promises to clients that he could not keep or had no intention of keeping.

Early in his tenure he promised to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it and kept insisting that they would. That was a promise he should not have made because he had no control over Mexico. But most damning was a promise that he made on January 6 – the day his supporters stormed the Capitol – that he had no intention of keeping, when he said he would join the march to the Capitol. Instead, he retreated to the safety of the White House and watched the onslaught on a TV set.

All of the above lessons from the political scene are transferable to none political client agency accounts. As in 2020 and prior years, 2021 will provide additional tactics that were never taught in communication school classes. Pay attention. There are definitely lessons to be learned – and used.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com) or artsolomon4pr@optimum.net.