

Speaking for the Government:
The Role of Contractors in Army Public Affairs

Dan Nance
SBLM Class 99-2, Seminar 10
July 7, 1999

Speaking for the Government:
The Role of Contractors in Army Public Affairs

Dan Nance
SBLM Class 99-2, Seminar 10
July 7, 1999

Abstract

In the quest for the most efficient and economical ways to accomplish the Public Affairs mission, the Army should use a cautious strategy when contracting out selected public relations functions. Keeping the American public and the military community informed is vital to the Army's success and a responsibility that should not be delegated to external organizations. This paper examines the need for a careful approach to contracting Army Public Affairs functions and explores trends in private industry related to the outsourcing of industry public relations activities.

In the quest for the most efficient and economical ways to accomplish the Public Affairs mission, the Army should use a cautious strategy when contracting out public relations functions. Although the Army can rely on commercial sources for many Public Affairs activities, contractors should not serve as an official government spokesperson or representative.

This article will examine the need for a careful approach to contracting Army Public Affairs functions. It will also explore some civilian business practices and considerations related to the outsourcing of industry public relations activities.

Background on the Commercial Activities Program

The Department of Defense (DoD) is using the federal Commercial Activities Program to save money and increase efficiencies. The program, which is outlined in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) circular A-76 and several DoD and Army directives, pamphlets, and regulations, requires that the in-house workforce of appropriate functions and organizations compete with commercial contractors to determine which can do the job more economically. According to Army Regulation 5-20, Commercial Activities Program (1997), the goal is not to contract out the function but to “obtain the most cost effective services through fair and open competition” (p.3). The government workforce must become competitive to win a commercial activities study, so the military saves money through such competitions regardless if the in-house workforce or commercial contractor wins the bid (Hamre, 1997).

The Impact on Army Public Affairs

In fiscal year 1998, the DoD conducted a comprehensive study of all military and civilian authorizations to determine which jobs and functions are exempt from

commercial activities study and those that should be competed. This review was directed by Defense Reform Initiative Directive 20 (DRID 20). In announcing the directive, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre (1998) required that military and civilian authorizations be assigned a specific reason code if they are exempt from commercial activities study and coded “R” if they are reviewable for potential outsourcing. Authorizations could only be exempt from review if they met specific criteria (p.2).

These criteria recognized that some Public Affairs Office (PAO) positions should be exempt from study. An Army tutorial guide on DRID 20 (1998) states that a number of PAO military positions can be exempt to support assignment rotations needed for the career field and for combat readiness (pp. 23 & 27). It also provided for a “minimum” number of governmental PAO positions needed to “maintain sufficient levels of oversight, control and accountability over government operations”(pp. 29-30). The Army also issued supplemental guidance on DRID 20 (1998) stating that government Public Affairs officials “providing public information are required to maintain government control.” However, the guidance said that work can be contracted out if it is performed by Public Affairs staff members involved in news editing and writing, broadcasting, publishing newspapers or working as photo and news journalists (p.11).

A majority of PAO positions were placed in an administrative category and coded as reviewable as a result of the DRID 20 review (Meyer, 1998). The placement of PAO positions in an administrative category rather than management or command is not consistent with Army policy or doctrine.

Maj. Gen. John G. Meyer, Chief of Army Public Affairs, in a memorandum to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (1998), asserts that many PAO positions were miscoded as reviewable because they were classified as administrative support when they are actually part of the command and control function. Meyer cites Army Public Affairs doctrine found in Field Manual 46-1, Public Affairs Operations (1997), which states that Public Affairs “is an integral element of the decision-making process at every level across the continuum of operations” (p. 20). It further states, “Army Public Affairs is a fundamental tool of competent leadership...and an essential part of successful mission accomplishment.” (p. 7). Meyer argues the term administrative, used to classify many PAO positions as reviewable as a result of the DRID 20 review, does not accurately reflect the nature of Public Affairs functions.

Pao Core Processes

At the heart of this argument are the core processes of Army Public Affairs. Army Public Affairs doctrine (FM 46-1) divides these processes into five categories. They are: Conduct PA Planning; Execute Information Strategies; Facilitate Media Operations; Conduct PA Training; and Maintain Community Relations (p.20). Public Affairs Planning and Information Strategies involve the strategic thinking and careful planning a Public Affairs practitioner must do to guide the organization on how it keeps its internal and external constituencies informed. The goal is to ensure that both the mission and the public’s interests are mutually served. Facilitating media and maintaining community relations are also used to tell the Army story, maintain public support, and fulfill our public information responsibilities. Public Affairs training

teaches Army leaders how to communicate effectively and about the importance of keeping the public informed.

The Need for a Cautious Strategy

A careful study of these core processes and their associated functions and tasks should be the focus of commercial activities studies. Organizations conducting commercial activities studies develop a performance work statement (PWS) to document the functions and tasks for which contractors and the internal workforce will compete. Several Public Affairs products or tasks can be included in a PWS and are obvious candidates for commercial activity studies. Per Army Regulation 360-81, Command Information Program (1989), the production of Army newspapers is already accomplished by civilian contractors whenever possible (Sec. 2.7). Contractors can effectively produce Army web sites and command information cable television channels as long as a government representative approves the products before they go on line or on the air. It is also appropriate to use a civilian contractor for professional advice on a publicity campaign or research. The government, however, must speak for itself.

Officials should carefully look at the impact of outsourcing PAO tasks and products to determine how much can you rely on a commercial contractor without putting contractor personnel in the position of speaking for the government or participating in the government's policy-making process.

In developing a PWS, an organization may try to separate Public Affairs products or functions such as writing news releases or escorting news media representatives for potential contractor performance. Such a strategy could reduce the effectiveness of the Public Affairs program. The government personnel responsible for answering these

questions or accompanying news reporters can better anticipate and respond to these tasks if they are involved in developing the products. For example, a contractor may prepare a news release but should not respond to media questions prompted by the release. In another example, a contractor can coordinate an agenda for a reporter's visit. However, the contractor should not serve as the media escort because the escort often represents the Army's position on issues as he responds to the reporter's questions. As these examples demonstrate, contractors should not perform some PAO tasks if it puts them in the position of speaking for or representing the government. Some may argue that a contractor can answer questions from texts prepared and approved by official government spokespersons. This is true, but unwise. It has been my experience during the past 13 years as a Public Affairs Officer that you lose credibility when you rely solely on prepared statements without the flexibility of being able to represent the Army's position by providing additional and non-scripted remarks to clarify the issue. You either speak for the government or not. There should be no middle ground.

As a commercial activities study progresses, an organization must consider how much it can separate reviewable functions from the in-house Public Affairs staff and still have a congruent and effective program. However, you will still need an in-house staff to ensure the command's communication strategy is being accomplished.

The objective of a commercial activities study is to ensure efficient and economical mission accomplishment. This is a duty the Army has to the American public. However, the Army must balance this duty against the responsibility of keeping the public informed. There is more at stake than a business decision aimed at saving

money. The primary issue should be fulfilling, not handing off, our responsibilities to inform the public.

However, the Army must aggressively pursue the Commercial Activities Program to meet the challenges of the future. Private industry offers many examples of good business practices from which the Army can benefit. Such change is never easy, according to Jacques S. Gansler, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology (1998), who described the DoD's new outsourcing strategy as a "difficult culture change" for the military. However, he said that outsourcing initiatives do "not mean that the DoD should become a business. It means we want do our job better by using appropriate lessons learned from the private sector" (p. 5).

Lessons Learned from Private Industry

Lessons learned from the private sector support using a cautious strategy when outsourcing Public Affairs functions.

One issue is the possible public perception that the Army is building a propaganda machine by relying too heavily on public relations firms. The use of prepared statements and elaborate responses prepared by private sector organizations may increase the perception that the organization is putting a "spin" on issues of public interest. Art Steven, Chairman and CEO of a New York public relations firm, acknowledges that public relations firms in private industry are getting the reputation as "spin doctors." He posits the development of the word spin "suggests that public relations professionals no longer tell the truth, but engage in a brand new art form that consciously constructs, molds and creates the truth where it hasn't existed before" (Nation's Business, 1999, p.10). Government spokespersons are not immune to such public perceptions. However,

I believe the perception of “spin” will increase if the Army excessively depends on outside professional communication firms or professionals to accomplish the Public Affairs mission. There is no problem in seeking outside advice or assistance, but the Army story is its own and we owe it to the American people to stand up and tell it ourselves.

The need for credible public information programs void of “spin” is highlighted by the recent air campaign over Kosovo. Lt. Col. Steve Campbell prepared the daily briefing notes for DoD spokesman Kenneth Bacon. Campbell asserts that he “is not in the business of spinning. Obviously I’ll give a positive message if I can, but from my viewpoint it is important to get accurate information to the people via news outlets” (Cobb, 1999).

The Army is certainly following private industry trends in studying the potential outsourcing of Public Affairs activities. Outsourcing public relations is increasing in popularity within private industry, according to a 1998 survey done by Bisbee and Co., Inc. and Leone Marketing Research, both of Orlando Florida. In reporting the findings, Jennifer Bisbee, a public relations consultant (1998), advises companies to be “strategic” about the public relations functions they decide to contract. A company should retain an in-house staff that advises the organization’s senior leadership on public relations considerations and civic responsibilities regarding company policies and strategies (p. 2).

Army Public Affairs may be under increased scrutiny for outsourcing because leaders do not understand the value of using in-house personnel. Public Affairs civilian employees provide a critical knowledge and experience base important to developing and maintaining effective communication strategies to deal with long-term, recurring issues.

Carole Howard (1995), a civilian public relations practitioner, predicted that many public relations products in private industry would be outsourced if “value cannot be added by doing the work inside -- value such as strategic thinking and intellectual creativity that comes from deep knowledge only an insider would have” (p.5).

In private industry, there are key differences in the roles of in-house public relations personnel and external consultants. Internal public relations personnel participate in company decision making and make management aware of potential public reaction or support to proposed actions or policies. In-house public relations personnel are part of the decision-making process and often act as the official spokespersons for the company. External consultants provide guidance and recommendations, but do not speak for the company to internal or external audiences (Law, 1996).

The internal public relations staff serves as a company’s “corporate conscious” to ensure that the company is meeting social responsibilities (Ryan M and Martinson D. 1983). Public Relations staffs are viewed as part of management and share responsibility for an organization’s behaviors and policies (Martinson D. 1995).

Keeping Management / Command Responsibilities In-House

Like its civilian counterpart, Army Public Affairs is a critical part of the Army’s decision-making process and contracting out PAO functions should not disrupt this role. Field Manual 100-22, Installation Management (1994), places the PAO in the commander’s special staff and as a management function, not as a post or administrative support activity (pp.2-6).

Public Affairs will remain a command and management responsibility in the future. Department of Army Pamphlet 100-1, Force XXI Institutional Army Redesign

(1998), is a working document that shows how the “institutional force” supports the “operational force” in the future (p.1). Public Affairs is described as a management function found in the “Direct and Resource the Force” core capability of Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA) (pp. 20-24). Public Affairs enhances this capability by maintaining public recognition, understanding and goodwill (p. 23).

Public Affairs is a Title 10 (Sec. 3803) responsibility for the Army, and public law requires the Army to establish and maintain a Public Affairs specialty to keep the public informed. Field Manual 46-1, Public Affairs Operations, highlights this mandate and states that “implicit in a government for the people are the concepts that the people have the right to know about the activities of the government, and the government has the obligation to inform the people about its activities”(p. 7).

Contracting Army Public Affairs functions should be limited to appropriate products or activities that result in money savings and workload efficiencies without delegating the Army’s public information and other management responsibilities. Maj. Gen. Meyer emphasizes that “Public Affairs planning, strategy execution, media facilitation and maintaining community relations require Public Affairs professionals who can unambiguously and officially represent and speak for the U.S. Army” (1998).

Keeping the American public and the military community informed is vital to the Army’s success and a responsibility that should not be delegated to external organizations.

Bibliography

- Attachment 1, FY98 Inherently Governmental and Commercial Activities Inventory. Quick Reference Guide. (1998). (on-line). Available: <http://oasamra5.army.pentagon.mil/drid20/enclosure1.htm>
- Bisbee, J. (1988, Feb.). Wish you could clone yourself? All about outsourcing. Public Relations Tactics (on-line). New York. Available: <http://prsa.org/bisbee1.html>.
- Cobb, C. (1999, June). The role of Public Relations in the Kosovo conflict. Public Relations Tactics (on-line). New York. Available: <http://www.prsa.org/Tactics/tac9906.html>
- Department of Army Regulation 5-20. Commercial Activities Program. (1997). Washington D.C.
- Department of the Army Pamphlet 100-1. Force XXI Institutional Army Redesign. (1998, March 5). Washington D.C.
- Department of Army Regulation 360-81. Command Information Program (1989, Oct. 20). Washington D.C.
- Executive Office of the President. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Circular A-76 (Revised 1999). (1983, Aug. 4). Subject: Performance of Commercial Activities. Washington D.C.
- Field Manual 46-1. Public Affairs Operations. (1997, May 30). Washington D.C.
- Field Manual 100-22. Installation Management. (1994, Oct. 11). Washington D.C.
- Gansler, J.S., Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology. (1998, Dec. 18). Building on the momentum: The revolution in business affairs. Speech to National Defense Industrial Association, Alexandria, Va. (on-line) Available: http://acq.osd.mil/ousda/speech/ndia_lunch.htm
- Hamre, J.J., Deputy Secretary of Defense (1998, Jan. 16.) Official memorandum. Subject: Department of Defense Reform Initiative Directive #20: Review of Inherently Governmental Functions. (on-line). Available: <http://www.defenselink.mil/dodreform/drids/drid20.htm>.
- Hamre, J.J., Deputy Secretary of Defense. (1997, Nov. 10). DoD News Briefing (on-line). Available: http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Nov1997/t11201997_t110dri2.html

- Howard, C. M. (1995, Aug./Sep.). Building Cathedrals: Reflections on three decades in corporate PR and a peek at the future. Executive Speeches. (Vol. 10, Issue 1, p. 5) Dayton, Oh.
- Law, G. (1996, Dec.). The pros and cons of inhouse PR. Management. (Vol. 43, Issue 11, pp. 98-104). Auckland, New Zealand.
- Martinson, D.L. (1994-1995, Winter). Are public relations practitioners personally responsible for management or client behaviors or actions? Public Relations Quarterly. (Vol. 39, Issue 4, p. 16). Rhinebeck, N.Y.
- Meyer, J.G., Maj. Gen., Chief of Public Affairs, U.S. Army. (1998, Oct. 7). Memorandum for Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Subject: Adjudication of DRID 20 Coding. Washington D.C.
- Nation's Business. (1999, June). Don't let worry over "spin" stop you from telling your story. (p.10) Washington D.C.
- Reason Code (DRID 20) Criteria, Army Supplemental Guidance. (on-line) Available: <http://oasamra5.army.pentagon.mil/drid20/reasoncodecriteria.htm>
- Ryan, M. & Martinson D.L. (1983, Summer). The PR Officer as Corporate Conscience. Public Relations Quarterly. (pp. 20-23). Rhinebeck, N.Y.
- United States Code: Title 10. Sec. 3083. Public Affairs Specialty. (as of 1998, Jan. 26) (on-line). Available: <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/10/3083.text.html>