

Enhance Rotary's Future through a better Public Image

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Director, Rotary International, 1998- 2000

Dear President of Rotary International, Ray

Dear Chair of The Rotary Foundation, Carl-Wilhelm

Dear Convenor Jackson

Dear PRIP Bhichai Rattakul

Dear Institute Chair, Saowalak

My dear fellow Rotarians, distinguished guests:

It is great to be once again in Bangkok. What a wonderful gathering!

I notice that it will be here where we will be celebrating -in one year and a half- another outstanding International Convention, this time under the inspirational leadership of the then President Kalyan Banerjee.

Thank you in advance for the warm hospitality that you are ready to extend to the thousands and thousands of Rotarians who will come here from all over the world.

This International Institute is being held in Bangkok in the midst of profound economic and social turbulence. As we all know this is a time when many institutions have become precarious, when traditional values are questioned, and peoples and entire countries seem to be left adrift, without any direction.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the challenges the world faces seem bewilderingly complex.

Let's consider, for one second, the forces leading to the current social upheaval.

We are suffering from the absence of reliable values; We sadly lack direction; We are missing a clear plan of action in the global economy.

The big banks are struggling, stock markets are diminishing their yields, and credits are frozen in many areas of the world. This global recession has translated, for many, into pain and grief bringing grim note in the daily news headlines.

Some individuals believe that even while they are in the midst of all this chaos it is never their own, personal responsibility to have any concerns for the well being of others. Many believe that it is someone else's duty to share, to guide or to give hope.

Today, Rotary is facing changes far greater than those of its one hundred plus previous years of existence.

The truth is, my friends, that in this period of fierce and turbulent times we, as Rotarians, cannot sit idle. We cannot and shall not at all abdicate our responsibility to deal with these daunting challenges.

I am 100% positive that as inspired Rotarians, each one of us can and will bring a glimmer of hope and a message of courageous determination to act in many places around the world where there is only soreness and misery.

Let's proclaim that if we keep working and enthusiastically maintain our convictions and our values we will create together, a better future for mankind, bringing hope to the underprivileged sections of our society.

Clearly, my friends, we cannot remain passive, we cannot remain blind and deaf to the voice of despair and to the needs of our fellow human beings.

And to do that, we need to have an immediate impact in our communities.

How can we change the world, if the world does not know what we do?

How can we provide service around the planet, if our voice is not heard?

To put it slightly differently: How can we enhance Rotary's Public Image and Awareness?

We know that one of the three priorities of the revised Strategic Plan for Rotary is "Enhancing our Public Image." Doing so, amounts to a great road map, for keeping Rotary relevant in this century, because, my friends, our Public Image is absolutely critical for Rotary's future.

Rotary's credibility does not come only from what is effectively seen and heard, given that to a large degree, Rotary's credibility depends on the public's perception of its core values, its priorities and goals.

To put it succinctly: Our reputation depends on whether we are close to the very heart of the people.

We know that the public is asking: What are Rotarians doing?

In my turn, I shall ask you all, the following question: How, through the benefits of our image and reputation, can we persuade community-minded citizens not only to join Rotary but also to make donations to our Foundation, our dear gift to humanity?

Nothing will effectively increase and retain our membership, unless we manage to make the organization more attractive to the young men and women, successful in their professions, who will be, in the long run, our society's leaders.

Unless we start by persuading them and establish a solid presence in our midst, everything else will be in vain.

To the members of the younger generations, who usually speak in the language of "networking, volunteerism, cyber communication and international interfacing" our Rotary traditional references to "fellowship groups, fireside chats, and pathways to peace" might not sound terribly attractive.

We need to start by speaking their language. We need to increase our use of the communication tools of the 21st century, including Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr, LinkedIn. Plus, why could we not have more Rotary cyber clubs?

Not so many years ago the late Past President of Rotary International, Bob Barth, stated: "If we want Rotary for another century we must make it attractive to the new generations".

Therefore to meet the challenges of future membership, we must respect the ideas and opinions of younger people, listen to their new language and ideas with sincere interest, and offer them a genuine friendship as a starting point in establishing a relationship of mutual trust and interest in our organization.

Here, my friends, is the main issue that we will need to address. How will we make sure that today's Rotary retains its magic and charm in the eyes of the new generations of leaders? Specifically: How can we make sure that the young people of the Philippines and Brazil, Taiwan and South Africa, Indonesia and Hungary, Australia and Thailand continue to heed the call to service, engaged in a good cause, dreaming to move the world away from illiteracy, poverty, disease, hunger, ethnic turmoil and conflict?

Why don't we share the joy of Rotary service by inviting someone to join?

How can the world's new generations learn about us and come to participate in our actions of service, while at the same time we make sure of preserving our core values of service and friendship?

The answer is simple and straightforward: It is based upon the extreme urgency of a wise and extensive use of Public Relations, innovative, flexible and action oriented that will reaffirm our presence in our communities at large.

We know that Media has an enormous responsibility and influential role in social issues as Media involvement plays a helpful role in the task of increasing awareness of Rotary's good work.

I remember that, for many years in Rotary, many believed that the best service was performed anonymously. No one needed to find out about our good actions. In my country, Spain, there is an old saying to that effect: "El buen paño en el arca se vende," which, freely translated, could be rendered as "Invariably, a golden nugget is always recognized".

Times change. Passive standing is no longer the way to go. Action is the name of the new game.

Let's recognize it: in the past we did ignore and shun the Media and the public's perceptions to a large degree.

Back in those days, nobody outside of Rotary understood exactly what the organization is all about, and, my Fellow Rotarians, we were fine with that. According to what I call the old school of thought, publicity, public relations and advertising were almost forbidden; they were actually out of bounds.

Yes, my friends, for many years Rotary did not seek sharing the news of its good work with anyone outside the organization.

But let's be clear about the requirements of the 21st century: unless we wish to become a relic of the past, we need to effect a profound change in policy and, let me say, particularly in mentality.

The world we now live in has not only notoriously and dramatically changed but it is also constantly changing, which demands, to any organization, excellent communication not just as a desirable gesture but as an absolutely essential aim.

To reach our dreams we need to compete with other organizations for members, to compete for funds that we want to obtain for our Rotary Foundation, to compete for partners and to compete for the understanding and the good will of governments and organizations everywhere in the world.

Make no mistake: all this, my friends, means that Public Relations, in the widest sense, are an essential key to our future.

Years ago, Rotary International surveyed 23,000 Rotarians to ask them what should be included, in their opinion, in Rotary's strategic plan. The answer came out clear and loud: Improving our Public Image was identified as one of the leading goals and in many instances, it was considered the organization's first priority.

These volunteers recognized that we cannot expect service-oriented people with limited available time to join Rotary if they do not know and understand what Rotary is and, even more important, what Rotary does.

Just as dramatic, we can not even aspire to maintain membership under the motto "*Once Rotarian, life time Rotarian*", unless everyone is fully made aware of what we stand for.

Not too long ago, some pedestrians were interviewed in Buenos Aires, Argentina. They were asked what Rotary is. Some replied: "a gastronomic club", "an automobile association", "I just know the name but I don't know what they do", "Rotary is a group of self-serving people trying to help themselves"... Finally, after more than 20 interviews, there was one individual who was able to define Rotary properly.

To make things more seriously complicated, that is to add insult to injury: the overall average age of Rotarians 30 years ago was 47 years. The average age now is 61 years old, and climbing. Our membership among the young is too limited. If we go on like this, our organization will experience a debacle, a serious decrease in a few years.

As President Elect Kalyan Banerjee recently stated, we need to curb the graying of Rotary and to encourage the greening.

How will our centennial aging organization develop a sense of foresight about where it needs to be heading?

Why are there men and women **not ready** to accept to live their lives in the spirit of "Service Above Self"? Is it because for most of those, who have some awareness of our dear Rotary, the perception lingers, that we are old, expensive, exclusive, not diverse, elitist and not relevant?

More than ever, Rotary's Public Image campaign is everybody's business. As trustworthy and genuine leaders we have a moral commitment to make sure that our rules, our set of values, such as integrity, leadership, diversity, fellowship and service, our aspirations, our accomplishments and why not, our treasured dreams of humanitarian service are fully communicated to the communities at large showing them that we firmly stand for goodwill, tolerance and peace.

With that goal in mind, we need to disseminate our message: not just explaining it, but instilling it in our listeners. We need more than understanding: we are aiming to their very hearts to make Rotary their first choice.

The world should be aware that we are leaders, fully committed men and women, dedicated, competent and courageous trailblazers, with a passionate vision and an absolute sense of mission, who create trust with a heart-felt devotion to selfless service.

My friends, we have around 1.2 million committed and devoted members in our Public Image team encircling the globe. They are there simply waiting for our inspired leadership.

Can Rotary count on you, on every one of us, to lend a hand to the referred issues, addressing the incredibly troubled times we are nowadays living? Are you ready? Let's strive together. Let us face the future!

We had a wonderful example of Public Image development at its best back at the time of our centenary year, when the well known New York newspaper, The Wall Street Journal, devoted its editorial on 12 April 2005 to the 50th anniversary of Salk's polio vaccine. The editorial praised Rotary's involvement in the polio eradication campaign. It concluded with the now-famous quote: "It's become fashionable in some quarters to deride civic volunteerism, but Rotary's unsung polio effort deserves the Nobel Peace Prize." Imagine what that editorial did for Rotary's Public Image in the minds of every reader that day showing that we are the conscience of the global polio eradication program.

Let's also remember the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's contribution to our Polio Plus campaign to End Polio Now with a donation of USD 355 millions to be matched by us by USD 200 millions. We are now close to that challenge with USD 152,3 millions as per November 5th.

Let's also remember what the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, said at the RI Birmingham Convention: *"You have done all this in the face of challenges that would have discouraged most other people – funding shortfalls, cultural barriers, lack of political will, even risks to your personal security"*.

And he added: *"I count on your leadership, I count on your commitment, and I count on your support. United Nations will continue to work together with the members of Rotary International to achieve these common efforts, common goals and objectives, which we have to deliver to this world we are living in and for our future generations"*.

Imagine what all these declarations have done for Rotary's Public Image, and many more such as the lighting with the words END POLIO NOW, last 23rd February, of the Sydney Opera, the House of Commons in England, the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain, the Roman Capitol, and many other significant buildings around the world.

Let me, beyond any doubt, declare today: Together, notwithstanding the economic crisis we are living in, we will adapt to the times, we will persist in our tasks and we will succeed in the task of seizing our future through a wise campaign of Public Relations, which is, as I said, a vital and essential tool if we are to attain a strong Public Image.

Let's use outdoor billboards, printed ads, internet announcements, traditional banners, newsletters, annual reports, brochures, leaflets and old fashioned personal communications to explain our humanitarian programs, broadly related to water, literacy, health and hunger, scholarships, and the consolidation of peace to reach our stakeholders.

We do know that if Rotary's Public Image visibility grows effectively, then the giving to our Foundation will also grow, and the young leaders of the new generation, aware of what Rotary is and the good it does, will find sound reasons to join and stay in our ranks.

Communicating requires more than words and nowadays it has to be faster if not instant. Here, mere "lip service" is useless. This is not a matter of giving speeches or sending out memos. This is a matter of living the vision, day in and day out – embodying it- and empowering every person in the organization to grasp, implement and execute our vision channeled through our Public Relations campaign.

Luckily, in some areas of the world the public associates Rotary, not with old people, but with selfless service. However, unfortunately, in too many parts of the world this is not the case.

Let's always keep in mind that being a Rotarian is not a spectator sport! Let's start attracting public attention right now.

This calls for a particularly dedicated effort in public relations exercise.

Therefore, let's now keep in mind the information and guidance means that Rotary and our Foundation provide us all for achieving our aim to keep Rotary relevant including:

- The full range of Humanity in Motion images and recordings for Media and billboard exposure;
- Taking full advantage of the generous RI Public Relations Grants;
- Supporting the work of Rotary International's Zone Public Image Coordinators as they strive to plan and conduct effective Public Image zone and regional seminars.
- Adopting and implementing the new Rotary club public relations "game plan;"
- Starting a growing list of simple promotion projects to celebrate every Rotary's anniversary on 23 February, many of which involve the community at large.

Before we leave the topic of available resources, let's not overlook the importance of the Rotary World Magazine Press — The Rotarian and the 31 regional magazines in 26 languages which regularly show the good work that the Rotary clubs are doing.

Let's also keep in mind the family of Rotary as a potential source of excellent image building: the Youth Exchange Program, with eight thousand exchanges taking place every year, our partners in service, our Youth wing, the Rotaractors and the Interactors, the Rotary Peace Fellows, the recipients of Rotary Grants for University Teachers; the participants in RYLA and Group Study Exchanges: all those Rotary Alumni, provide a magnificent source of prospective volunteers who have understanding of what Rotary is and what its Foundation does.

My dear friends, maybe many believe that Public Relations lies exclusively in the hands of our Rotary International President? Or maybe it is up to the Board of Directors, or perhaps, your District Governor or your Club President?

No, my Fellow Rotarians, no, the creation of awareness is our common task, our challenge, our responsibility, which belongs to each and every one of us, to everybody.

If we Lead the Way to make Rotary attractive, if we Act with Constancy, Credibility and Continuity, if we Lend a Hand, if we Sow the Seeds of Love, if we Share, if we Look Within and Beyond Ourselves, if we truly light a fire in people's hearts allowing everyone to see the noble purpose of Rotary, if we do bring Hope, if we Believe with zeal and enthusiasm in Rotary, we will not have any problems at all in enhancing our Image worldwide.

My dear friends: Then, what in the world are we waiting for?

It is time to turn the page, at the dawn of our second centennial, to write the next chapter of our dear Rotary.

We have so many wonderful stories to tell, so let's make sure that we do. We have had the very recent example of how on-line contributions have broken a record: My

Fellow Rotarians, we have raised USD 2,8 million for Polio Plus on the week from 18-24 October 2010!

Did you know that? Did your communities know that?

Let's give PolioPlus generous contributors a big hand!

We should act now, we cannot rest in enhancing the image and awareness of Rotary, not leaving it to tomorrow, because tomorrow, my friends, will certainly be too late.

It was Richard Evans, a Past President of RI, who stated: "This is our time, our day, our generation, our one chance to do something for somebody else. This is it. This is life. It's all we got. And it's passing".

My Fellow Rotarians, my dear friends: Don't delay, don't be guessing, don't doubt, it is time for action NOW! That's all Rotary expects from us!

Let's then move forward, passionately, with no fear or hesitation, to make our dreams of selfless service an amazing reality thanks our growing, vibrant and innovative clubs.

Let's not forget that:

Service is our passion. Performance is our action. Satisfaction is our reward.

My friends, this is our moment, our time for change in promoting, through Public Relations, the principles, the core values, the vocational service and the action-oriented humanitarian programs of Rotary and of our dear Foundation.

After all, for a Rotarian, what on Earth is the alternative?

My Fellow Rotarians,
Let's have the courage of wisdom,
the wisdom of judgment,
and the judgment of love,
as we passionately promote ways to
building communities and
bridging continents,
thus making
a better world
with bigger, better and bolder Rotary Clubs.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.