

## Regional

# P.R. takes on new urgency in troubled times

There's an old adage that says that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. In our globalized, highly competitive world this saying has never been truer. Fortunately for those who depend on a positive public impression, there are experts in the field known as public relations specialists. And while the term public relations has oftentimes been used as a pejorative, its own perception has changed dramatically.

"That was the image of public relations 20 or more years ago. We were known as the 'spin doctors,' but not anymore," said Isaac Blankson, associate professor and chair of the department of speech communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "People are smarter and our profession has evolved into becoming more credible and trustworthy."

Blankson was born in Sekondi, on the western coast of Ghana. He obtained his bachelor's degree in geography at the University of Ghana, a master's in development studies at the University of Oslo, Norway, a master's in international affairs at Ohio University and a doctorate in communication, also from Ohio University.

While the term public relations has connotations of trying to make people look good, Blankson said that that is not always the case, adding that the current definition of public relations is "building mutually beneficial relationships."

"Public relations evolved in the sense that professionals, scholars and academicians realized that they wanted their organization to really function effectively in the community in which they are operating," said Blankson. "They could not always be on the side of the organization. We have to be on the side and advocate for the clients, the community and the public as well." In an era of financial crisis and with a highly polarized society, Blankson said that effective public relations is more crucial than ever.

"There was a time when if companies were downsizing, for example, one of the first departments to go would be the public relations department," Blankson said. "And there was a simple reason for that. They did not understand the value of public relations." But now, he explained, most compa-



Dr. Isaac Blankson engaged in a discussion with his students.

Photo courtesy of Bill Brinson

nies understand the value of what he calls "friendship" between the company and the public. "We have situations where organizations have messed up, images destroyed, so we have to come in and build and restore that image." He pointed to the negative image that British Petroleum suffered after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. BP, he explained, utilized all avenues to restore its image, including the use of social media. The Internet, Blankson said, has changed the

way public relations is practiced.

"The Internet is actually helping our profession," he said. "These technologies can enhance our profession and build our relationship with clients. It has made it easier for us to speed up our contact with clients and the public. Now the flip side and scary part of it is that we do not have control of anything anymore. If you do not have control in your profession, how do you function? A 10-year-old boy who knows a bit about comput-

ers can create havoc to a company's image." Still, he said that he believes that certain elements of public relations will never change.

"We still relate to people," he said. "Regardless of technology, we still need that face-to-face human connection to be effective. I always tell my students to never forget about the importance and value of the human being that you are shaking hands with."

One of the subjects his department teaches is public speaking, which has become

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an increasing necessary skill in today's world. "At SIUE a class in public speaking is required," he said. "So every freshman has to take that as part of their education requirement. My instructors tell me that over time those who have taken that class and the advance public speaking class do better in other classes when they have to deal with presentations." He said that the most common mistake people make when speaking in public is that they do not prepare enough.

"I think there is some element of credibility in the idea that the root of all our human problems is communication," Blankson said. "You have to look at it in the sense of understanding each other and using language itself and non-verbal language, which causes a lot of misinterpretation, disinformation, confusion and conflict."

Effective communication, he said, facilitates the understanding of many different cultures. "I just published with two of my colleagues an article looking at the recent crisis in Japan (due to the tsunami) and cultural differences in public relations' responses," Blankson said. "It is very true that before we make judgments on whether the Japanese government responded effectively or not, we have to look at the culture and what it takes in terms of behavior. Before I throw stones at you I need to understand where you are coming from." This level of understanding through communication is something he strives to provide for his own students.

"I personally think I give them something different to what they already know of or have been exposed to," he said. "I take them mostly beyond the confines of the U.S. and give them a lot of examples that are global."

*Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College\_Arts\_Sciences@siue.edu.*