

Five Questions with Phil Morabito
PR savvy evolves in importance
By Mason Lerner

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Pierpont Communications, which set up shop in Houston 20 years ago this February, has had to adjust to rapidly evolving technology and a growing demand from large companies for help cultivating their image.

CEO Phil Morabito, who has led Pierpont since founding it, talked with Chronicle correspondent Mason Lerner about the industry.

Q: What have the trends in PR and marketing been over the last 20 years, and how much have things changed?

A: I think today, the public perception of business is very important. CEOs realize how important communications is today. ... Sales and accounting are, of course, still very important, but today communications runs a close third for many large companies.

We notice more and more that we are dealing at the top levels with these companies because they realize how important public perception is today. Another part of that is reputation management.

Q: Why do you think public relations has become more important over the last two decades?

A: In the past, people thought they could just very easily get their messages out through mass advertising. People are realizing that you have to tell your story, or people will tell it for you.

There is so much noise, and you have to cut through the clutter. You have to elevate your message so people understand who you are, what you do and what you are trying to achieve.

Q: Which industries have evolved to need better public relations services?

A: In general, all industries pay more attention to public relations and communication, but especially old-economy industries like construction, manufacturing and other similar industries that never really thought there was a great need for PR and communication.

We're seeing a lot of that in health care, where the reputations of hospitals and other health care institutions can really affect whether patients want to go there. And of course, there is the energy industry.

I applaud the energy executives who are getting out there and telling their story in light of what is going on with the price of oil.

Q: How has technology changed the way businesses communicate?

A: Well, it's instantaneous. Everything is instantaneous today. If something happens in the news, it's instantly out on the Internet and investors react much, much faster today. It causes stocks to go up or down extremely quickly.

Q: What do you think the best opportunities in the industry are these days?

A: For people who are entering into it, media relations has always been a stalwart. But there are also a lot of opportunities in the areas of government relations and civic engagement.