

# A Word – or Two about Technology



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**D**aily, we apply technology to virtually every process in the higher education business cycle. Unfortunately, the soul of our profession can become lost in the clamor and glamour of the e-commerce rush. Customer relationships can suffer. Purchasing professionals exist on campus to strategically manage the acquisition of the goods and services needed to support the mission of the institution. It's a critical role. The wonderful tools available via e-commerce can efficiently deliver the goods and services. But the soul of purchasing lies in

relationships, not transactions or databases. The sometimes-daunting electronic transaction lacks the human dimension that differentiates positive and negative experiences for the customer.

Every day, we make critical choices that determine how well we deliver our service. How you feel about your life, your job, relationships, co-workers, and your customers has everything to do with how you behave. Regardless of the circumstances in your life, you are the sole owner of your attitude, and the actions you make reflect your attitude and affect the quality of the service you provide!

This concern for customer relations comes to mind as a result of a learning experience I had about 30 years ago. Some of you probably know that a speech made by George Morrell from Arizona State University, who at the time was the President of NAEB, has been the central tenet in my leadership and mentoring principles ever since. Literally hundreds of procurement professionals have had the opportunity to benefit from the wisdom George shared with us. Remember, George was speaking when computerization on campus was still in its infancy.

## PR in Purchasing

George Morrell,  
1977–1978 NAEB President  
(Speech to NAEB, 1977)

**I**would like to share, very briefly, some thoughts on a subject I consider very important to the Purchasing profession, but one that I'm afraid is being neglected. Now since all presentations are supposed to name a subject, I labeled this one "PR in Purchasing."

Most of you probably have already substituted Public Relations for PR, but I prefer to call it by a slightly different name – Personal Relation – The Personal Relations in Purchasing.

It's sort of an old-fashioned approach in this day of emphasis on technology and the impersonal methods of business operations so prevalent today.

I'm afraid that with our increasing enrollments, our increasing number of faculty, our proliferation of courses and departments, the computer, additional rules and regulations, with the mountains of forms and paperwork, we have lost touch with the personal relations in our everyday activities.

Are there any of you here that have been with your institutions for some time? Who can remember when you knew every faculty mem-

ber on campus? Or even when you knew at least every dean and department head personally? I'll wager that most of you here don't even know the names of all the department heads on campus let alone know them personally. I think it's high time we began to try and reestablish that personal relationship on our campuses. Now, I know we can't turn back the calendar to those days when life was relatively simple and campuses were smaller and students were fewer, but we can do a lot with our Purchasing departments to bring back some of the Personal Relationship in Purchasing.

What are Public Relations? The public relations of any institution are the sum of all the impressions people have regarding the institution. Personal relations are the contacts you make every day – on the job – and with your neighbors and friends. They are the words you speak, the smile on your face, the service you perform. The sum total of the personal relations of individuals make up the total public relations of the institution.

No administrator in the institution has a wider or more varied range of personal contact with others than does the "Purchasing Agent." His duties are so extensive that his work touches almost every segment of the institution. He is the connecting link between all sources of supply and all departments and units. What he thinks, how he talks, the policies he uses, his knowledge of human nature,

all profoundly affect the relations of his institution with its public. There is no better place to emphasize the personal relationships than in the Purchasing department.

The daily practice of personal relations consists of a multitude of small tasks and a few big tasks. It is the application of common sense, common courtesy, and common decency. It can be talking on the phone, saying hello to the custodian, recognizing the efforts of the faculty, chairing a difficult conference, awarding a contract, or informing an unsuccessful bidder. You don't have to be a trained psychologist to take advantage of human relations just as you don't have to be an electronics expert to use a television set or be able to repair a car in order to drive it.

Mainly you have to be able to get along with people. The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people. In the hiring of new personnel, the first thing I try to determine is how well can he or she get along with other people. The most useful person in the world today is the man or woman who has that ability.

Now how do we go about establishing these personal relationships that are so important, and with whom do these relationships exist? As a Purchasing department and a service agency, we have contacts with the faculty and staff, our internal departments, our suppliers, and the general public. The faculty and de-

partment chairman must feel that mutual cooperation exists between them and the Purchasing department. This cooperation will not be achieved by arbitrary action but rather by working with all parties in a spirit of genuine service. It is important for the Purchasing Agent to know and understand the problems of the heads of the various departments that use the materials and equipment he is buying.

When a new faculty member comes on our campus, I can usually tell what kind of cooperation existed between him and the Purchasing department at his former institution. If he calls or drops by to inquire and familiarize himself on the Purchasing policies and procedures of the University, I can pretty well be assured that he and the Purchasing department got along well. If the first thing I hear from him is a request for a confirming requisition for an item already purchased and received, or a requisition for a piece of equipment or a supply item marked "Absolutely No Substitute," I'm just as sure that cooperation between the two did not exist. I'm convinced that the majority of the faculty will cooperate if they know that the Purchasing department is working with them and for them. Purchasing must look to itself when there is evidence of poor relationships with internal departments.

It's impossible to explore all the possible aspects of personal relations with the faculty today, but I do have some suggestions that will help develop some of these personal relationships with the faculty, staff, and department heads we service.

When a new department chairman or dean arrives, do you call him and welcome him to the campus? Do you let him know that your department is ready and willing to assist him in any way possible?

Try to know and remember as many names of faculty and staff as you possibly can and speak to them by name when you meet them on campus.

Do you insist that your buyers contact a professor occasionally to let him know they are interested in seeing how he is using some of the equipment and supplies your department has been buying for him? If you haven't done this, you will be surprised at the response.

Do you ever drop a note to a faculty member complimenting him on some achievement? Do you have some place in your office where you can invite faculty over for a cup of coffee and the opportunity for a personal visit?

If you have a difference of opinion with a faculty member or a department head regarding some phase of your work, arrange to discuss it with him personally. This method

brings much better results than writing memos back and forth.

If you read some article in the newspaper or magazine which you think might be of interest to some particular faculty member, why not clip it out and send it to him.

Keep your requisitioners notified as to the possibility of shortages, long delivery times, possible price increases, and possible substitutes. Make them feel that you're interested in helping see that their particular work is not held up for lack of supplies. Let the faculty member know that you're interested in his work. You, personally, can't know or contact every faculty member, but insure that your entire department works as a team in this effort.

Do you have a campus information bulletin which is distributed periodically to your faculty and staff? If so, use it. This is the place where you can tell the about the expected shortages, the possibility of curtailed deliveries, etc. Use it to let them know about new Purchasing policies or procedures, or changes in procedures.

Have you published clear, concise, and workable purchasing procedures that can be distributed to faculty and staff? If not, do so. You can't expect cooperation if those you serv-

ice don't know what procedures to follow.

How are your relations within your own office staff? Are your people well informed regarding all phases of your institution's operations? Have you impressed upon your entire staff the importance of the personal relationship involved in their work? Every member of the University's housekeeping staff, the secretaries, the telephone operators, the policemen, the buyers the maintenance personnel, must be indoctrinated with the spirit of friendly service. It is important that these staff members be kept adequately informed of the University's policies, programs, and problems. Your staff in particular must be gently but persistently reminded of its public relations responsibilities.

How well does your office project the image of your institution to those they come in contact with? Most contacts between the University and the outside business world are made through the Purchasing department. How are your personal relationships with your suppliers?

The mere placing of orders does not always build good personal relations. You can't place an order with every vendor. For every successful bidder, there are a number of unsuccessful

bidders. It's just as important to maintain good personal relations with those who don't get the order as with those who do.

Good relations with vendors very often may contribute to better services. Get to know sales representatives who call on you as people, not just business cards and faces or a voice on the phone. An emergency or a rush order or a request for accelerated delivery of an item may be honored more rapidly if the proper relationship exists. Special privileges on returns of items or adjustments may be obtained. In this day of shortages, a good personal relationship between buyer and seller which has been built up over the years is very important.

In order to develop a good relationship with the supplier, the first ingredient must be mutual trust and confidence. Never get the reputation for sharp practice. Be honest with the salesman, and never give one supplier an advantage over another. Don't waste a salesman's time, and don't let him waste yours.

Probably the most frequent contact with the Purchasing department is by telephone. Have you ever taken the time to analyze what type of an image your office projects over the telephone? Impressions made over the telephone are important, perhaps more important than most people realize. Proper telephone techniques should be familiar to each staff member of your organization. A person calling your department will form his judgment of your department by the tone of voice and the courtesy expressed over the telephone.

Since most contacts are made by telephone, doesn't it make good sense to give those who handle your calls some training in the art of dealing with people?

Whoever has the responsibility for answering phones in your department should be impressed with the importance of projecting the proper image of your department to the caller. Be courteous and friendly in answering. Be tactful in requesting the caller's name, and then only if it's necessary. By all means, end all calls just as begun, with courtesy. The thoughtless mishandling of a phone call can cause irreparable damage to the image your department has spent many hours trying to build. And remember this, every time you make or receive a call, you are the University to the person at the other end of the line.

The Purchasing Agent must be a part of the Public Relations team for the University as a whole. There was a time not too long ago when the public had only the highest regard for higher education. This is no longer true due to the riots of the '60s, the radical actions of a small minority of our faculty, teachers going on strike, and the very high

cost of education. You're all aware of the fact that appropriations are harder to get and that donations to private institutions have fallen off. We are continually reading newspaper articles which are derogatory toward higher education while only occasionally reading complimentary articles regarding some College or University achievement.

The Purchasing Agent can do his part to see that the image of the University is not further eroded by adverse actions on the part of his department. The Purchasing Agent is always under close scrutiny from the public. The ethical behavior in every buying and selling situation reflects his own and his institution's reputation. High personal integrity and ethics are a must. Perhaps a good guide for the Purchasing Agent is to act as if everything he does will be reported in local newspapers. The National Association of Educational Buyers has adopted a code of ethics. By insisting on strict compliance with this code, we can strengthen our position with our public.

What I'm trying to emphasize is the importance attached to what people think of your office. Some of you might say, "I only have time to do my job, and I'm not trying to compete in any popularity contest." I'm not advocating that at all. Efficient service is still the most important aspect of your job. A coat of paint may help the appearance of an old house but won't do anything to support a crumbling foundation. By the same token, popularity alone will not get you by. You must be efficient in the service you render but you will be much more successful if you can provide that efficient service in a manner that will make those receiving the service feel they have been treated with personal consideration.

I haven't really told you anything that you don't already know. I only hope I have reminded you of some of the things you might have forgotten. Let's not let this punch-card, computerized, electronic, fast-moving business atmosphere keep us from remembering that personal relationships, warm friendships, common courtesy, fairness, honesty, and service are still the basic ingredients of a successful operation. Strive to make the personal relationships between your department and the faculty, staff, and other units on the campus so attractive that the easiest course of action is to "call Purchasing."

### Some Things Should Never Change

George Morrell's message is still important today because there is a need for balance. Among the e-commerce related trade-offs we make are immediacy, privacy, and the great sense of vulnerability related to increased job security fears as work is depersonalized and workload expectation increases. Leaders assert that job-loss fears are misplaced. Usually attrition solves the macro-level issue, but the problem is the intersection of attrition and the resultant depersonalization that takes place in the department. The result can be a cold, highly diminished customer-relations environment, and that is the issue we must guard against and manage with the utmost skill. George told us to put the PR in Purchasing 30 years ago, and it is still true today. We must keep the PR in Purchasing regardless of the technology tools we employ. Remember to do great things!



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