

The Future Of Communications

An Interview with Robert Dilenschneider, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Dilenschneider Group

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Dilenschneider is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Dilenschneider Group, a strategic counseling and public relations consulting firm. He is considered one of the world's foremost communications experts and is frequently called upon by the media for commentary on major news stories. He is the author of several books, including *The Ultimate Guide to Power and Influence*, *50 Plus*, *Nailing It*, *Character*, and *Respect*.



Robert Dilenschneider

How do you define The Dilenschneider Group's mission?

Our mission is to bring clients the highest level of communications counsel and creative thinking and more than that, to provide them with the contacts, networks and relationships they need to help advance their goals. We can do this because our communications professionals bring to each and every relationship their experience in fields ranging from mergers and acquisitions to crisis communications to marketing, government affairs, and international media.

What have been the keys to The Dilenschneider Group's ability to lead in the industry over decades?

As I said, we provide clients with advice, creative ideas and valuable contacts, but we go beyond that in the relationship by providing a variety of extra services. Take for example our annual Trend Reports. Those reports draw on our conversations with scores of experts in a wide variety of fields, and they give clients news about trends in business, politics, foreign affairs, science, technology, and more. This helps them anticipate and plan for what lies ahead. We provide the Trend Reports as well as several Special Reports during the year free of charge – you might call them a fringe benefit of working with DGL. We do this because we believe forward thinking is crucial in whatever field you're in, and the feedback we get from clients shows they recognize and appreciate the insights we give them.

How has the role of a communications firm evolved?

We live in a world of constant, rapid change. In the field of technology alone, the developments over the past 25 years have been dazzling, and now we're on the brink of a whole new AI world. The globalization of trade and commerce has created an entirely new business landscape.

Then there are the enormous changes in energy, transportation, politics, consumer tastes and social customs – the list goes on and on. All this, of course, has had an enormous impact on the communications field. Now more than ever, keeping on top of how the world is changing and how that affects the audiences our clients want to reach is the keystone of modern public relations.

How is technology changing the way communications firms operate?

There was a time when getting clients space in the print media was the major goal. Then it was not only print, but also the electronic media – arranging for the CEO to be featured on a major television news show, for example. Next it was the internet – getting messages out on social media and so forth. All these changes have come along at an increasingly rapid pace, so the need for adaptability has become more and more urgent. And along the way we've had to counsel clients that, thanks to the far-reaching developments in the international realm, their interests often lie beyond the U.S. into Europe, Asia, Africa and more.

Now we are entering the Age of AI, which brings a whole new set of challenges. At this point in its development, to be perfectly candid, artificial intelligence appears to be a mixed blessing. It is capable of all kinds of positive achievements, like sorting through millions of data points to solve business problems, finding cures for diseases, and so on. On the other hand, we've probably all heard about lawyers who have submitted briefs written by AI that were thrown back in their faces in court because the brief cited cases that didn't exist – AI fabricated them. Artificial intelligence looks to be a double-edged sword, and history has shown us time and again that those things can be very dangerous.

All this holds true, of course, for the communications field. A client who wants to use social media to reach a particular audience of, say, 21 to 34 year olds can get AI to analyze the data, segment the audience, and deliver targeted messages at an incredibly fast pace. But if a client puts out false AI claims or fake images and gets caught at it, the client's credibility is gone. So, professionals in the communications field face a whole new set of challenges. One is just keeping up with this fast-changing technology. But more important, we need to provide smart, up-to-the-minute

counsel to clients on how they use it – and how to avoid the pitfalls and bad outcomes it is capable of generating.

How do you maintain a high-touch client experience in a digital world?

It depends, of course, on the client – how they operate, how available they make themselves, and so forth. But as a general rule, clients do want to hear from us. They're paying for our advice and are glad to get it, so as long as we don't overplay our hand, they stay accessible. And because we are in the digital age, there are several ways of communicating besides the telephone – email, text messages and all the rest.

There is one more step, though, that I like to take: the hand-written note. It's a throwback to another century, true. But precisely because it is so unusual nowadays, it catches a leader's eye and strengthens our relationship. The notes can't be just a "how ya doing" kind of thing, of course. They have to reflect your close attention to how the client is progressing and offer some valuable commentary or advice. But at their best, they prove that even in a digital world, thoughtful personal notes mean a lot.

When you look to the future of the industry, what concerns you the most?

One of the most significant stories of this year was the Air Canada CEO who broadcast a message to his nation almost entirely in English with only a couple of words of French and lost his job as a result. What that tells us is that today's leaders operate in a world that is much tougher, far more judgmental, much less forgiving. A single miscue can end a career and damage the entire organization. For those of us in the public relations field, this requires new ways of thinking and more evolved communications strategies. To my mind, it increases the value of experience. It's the time-tested counselors who will give the shrewdest advice, especially in a crisis.

What do you tell young people about the types of careers the industry offers?

The communications business will remain in demand. Individuals and organizations will always want to get their messages out, so there's a constant need for communications advisors. Obviously, a knowledge of how to work with the new technology is going to be a must-have requirement for everyone entering the field. But I tell young people that the fundamentals never change – stay on top of the news, keep sharpening your writing skills, and never forget the personal touch. ●