

Communications at a Higher Level

An Interview with Robert L. Dilenschneider, Founder, The Dilenschneider Group, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Dilenschneider is the founder of The Dilenschneider Group, a world-recognized communications firm headquartered in New York, with offices in Chicago and Miami. Prior to forming his own firm, Dilenschneider served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Hill & Knowlton, Inc. from 1986 to 1991, tripling that firm's revenues to nearly \$200 million and delivering more than \$30 million in profit. He was with that organization for nearly 25



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years. Dilenschneider is frequently called upon by the media to provide commentary and strategic public relations insights on major news stories. He has counseled major corporations, professional groups, trade associations and educational institutions, and has assisted clients in dealings with regulatory agencies, labor unions, consumer groups and minorities, among others. He is the author of 18 books, most recently *The Ultimate Guide to Power & Influence*, published by Matt Holt Books.

FIRM BRIEF The Dilenschneider Group (dilenschneider.com) provides a limited and select few access to the finest communications professionals in the world, with experience in fields ranging from mergers and acquisitions and crisis communications to marketing, government affairs and international media.

Will you highlight the history of The Dilenschneider Group?

The Dilenschneider Group was founded in 1991. The goal was to provide companies, foundations, business leaders, and high-net-worth individuals a higher level of communications counsel and implementation. I founded the firm with a former senior vice president at Hill & Knowlton, Kate Connelly, who was one of the smartest people I have every met in the business. I couldn't have done it without her, although she unfortunately passed away at a young age in 1998.

Having run the largest public relations firm in the world at Hill & Knowlton, I knew that despite many incredible capabilities and people, there was an opportunity for a different kind of business model. We are not and don't want to be all things to all people.

Our business proposition is actually quite simple. We are a group of senior communications professionals who do the actual work on your business versus delegating it to junior people.

The model combines extremely low overhead versus larger firms combined with senior counselors who have years of experience across various disciplines that enable them to provide a level of expertise and judgment to C-suite and senior business leaders. We then implement communications strategies based on experi-

ence in virtually every kind of communications activity.

Will you provide an overview of the firm's services and capabilities?

Our most important capability is that based on the years of experience by our counselors and advisors, we develop overall strategies to achieve a company's or an individual's business objectives. This can take a variety of forms:

- CEO and board support around corporate strategy, governance, and issues management.
- Executive communications, including speeches, articles, and opinion pieces for leading business forums published in leading media.
- Crisis-management support for individuals, public entities, and private companies.
- Investor relations strategy and support.
- Networking and outreach to leading business groups, opinion leaders, government, and the top editors of major media.
- Government relations support.

We also have an advisory board of senior consultants who have served in the highest level of government, business, and academia who support our principals.

What have been the keys to The Dilenschneider Group's ability to stay relevant for more than three decades?

At the end of the day, it all comes down to our experience, judgement, and networks that give us peerage to counsel at the highest level of business.

Frankly, a lot of corporate communications departments and communications firms and their staffs do a fine job of the day-to-day work that has to be done, whether dealing with the media, managing trade shows, arranging speaking opportunities, writing speeches, etc. But what business leaders are looking for is

something more – a strategic vision to their communications that provides fresh thinking and ideas, whatever their business or corporate objectives.

But it is more than that. It is also execution – the ability to link those ideas and the corporate leaders to the organizations, individuals and media that will truly make a difference.

I would also have to say that my executive assistant, Joan Avagliano, has been instrumental in our client relationships. She's actually the one that makes the trains run on time.

Will you provide examples of the firm's work?

Sure, we have:

- Helped a number of Fortune 500 companies participate in the World Economic Forum in Davos.
- Arranged a briefing to *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board for a cutting-edge energy company.
- Provided communications support to a recognized brand as it worked through a Chapter 11 restructuring.
- Supported one of the world's leading restaurant chains when the first case of Mad Cow Disease was uncovered in the U.S.
- Provided regular counsel regarding quarterly earnings for Fortune 100 companies, something we still are doing.
- Supported the spinoff of one of the world's leading IT companies.

The firm also has a major focus on research and thought leadership. Will you discuss this effort?

From the beginning of the firm, we have regularly provided clients and friends with extensive trend reports, analyzing national and international trends to help them understand the dynamics of the major issues of the day. Ideally, they also help companies look around the corner to potential areas of opportunity, and also concern. Companies and their leaders want to look smart and be on top of the changes rapidly taking place in our economy and society, so a critical role we play is developing the intellectual capital that positions them as thought leaders, not only in their fields, but for society at large.

Let me give you an example. Very early on, we realized that American society has developed a huge problem with civility. We created a lecture series on civility at the Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut, "Civility in America,"

that also gets significant media exposure. Speakers have included General David Petraeus; Dr. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations; Indra Nooyi, former chairman and CEO of PepsiCo; CBS News' Scott Pelley; Historian David Brinkley; and Jazz Musician Winston Marsalis. The lectures are also available online and, for those unable to attend or listen in, we created a booklet on civility and mailed it to literally thousands.

We also recently published a new edition of *The Public Relations Handbook* that touches on all the disciplines of the business:

- Crisis communications
- Dealing with the media
- Government relations
- Investor relations
- Community relations
- Polling and using words that work
- Social media

You recently published *The Ultimate Guide to Power & Influence*. What are the key messages in the book?

The book explains how technology and globalization have revolutionized the ways to both build and keep success – and tells readers that to accomplish your goals, you must not only gain power, but also apply it with proper wisdom.

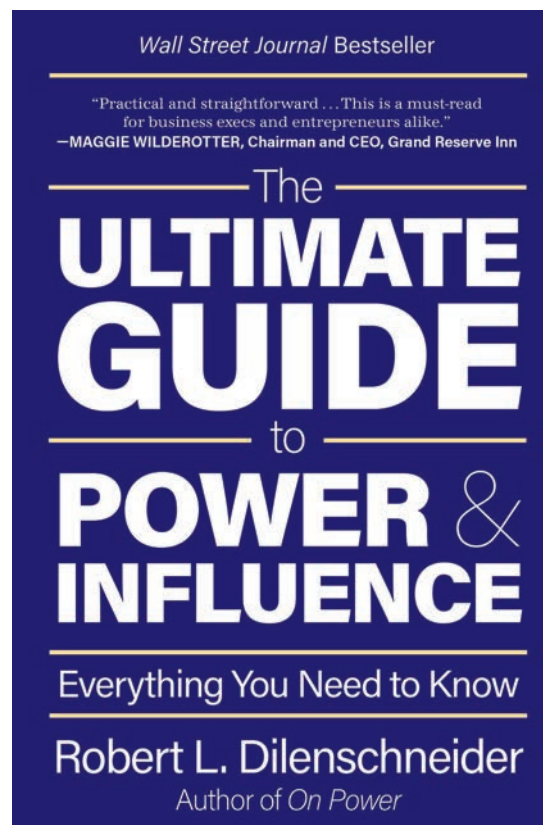
Drawing from current-day lessons and the wisdom of hundreds of drivers of change in all fields of business, it provides anecdotes and insights on a wide range of keys to success, including how to seize opportunity amid crisis, manage your network, communicate effectively, and take full advantage of social media to bolster your image.

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What types of careers are available in communications, and what do you tell young people about opportunities in the industry?

The opportunities are really unlimited. While traditional media, including newspapers and network TV, have faced major declines in the past decade, there has never been a greater need for communications. There's cable, blogs, and podcasts. There's social media – Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, YouTube, Tumblr, Snapchat, on and on, including thousands of influencers that post on these sites. More than 80 percent of Americans are on at least one social media platform.

There are online news outlets – The Daily Beast, Politico, Vox, Yahoo Finance, and MSN.com. But also don't forget the traditional media, like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, which are some of the most visited websites with content far beyond their print editions. There is also broadcast media like FOX, CNN, and the major networks, all of which have highly visited websites.



What skills do young people need to succeed in the business today?

For a young person, the most important skill is to be a good writer. Successful communications really start there. Of course, social media skills are extremely important today. While media relations in the early days sometimes involved sending out press releases wrapped around Scotch bottles, the good news is that today's younger workers already have very sophisticated knowledge and are savvy about the online world and social media.

What type of training would you recommend for those wanting to enter the field?

While many colleges and universities have courses on public relations, the skill really comes with the doing. There are many points of entry:

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- Communications and marketing agencies are constantly looking for young talent, including interns. Working for an agency gives you exposure to a wide range of business communications and challenges.

- While you probably aren't going to get hired by *The New York Times* right out of college, trade publications are a great entry point into the business and will give you specific domain knowledge that can advance your career. Many of the reporters at the top media or top corporate communications firms began their careers in trade publications.

- If government relations is of interest to you, volunteer for a political campaign to understand not only the logistical nuts and bolts of campaigns, but more importantly messaging, community outreach, and media relations.

At the end of the day, it is really the hands-on experience across a variety of business situations and challenges that eventually will give you the skills, experience and judgment to counsel and perform at the highest levels of business.

What are your priorities for The Dilenschneider Group as you look to the future?

What business leaders want is a higher level of communications counsel, creativity, execution, and exposure to networks and contacts not available elsewhere. We continue to strive to provide it. ●