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Adams, Paine, and Jefferson: A PR Firm

[By Jason Karpf]

When Harold Burson, APR, fellow PRSA, speaks, we marvel at the decades of innovation and leadership he has brought to the PR profession. However, at PRSA's 2001 International Conference, Burson, the founding chairman of Burson-Marsteller, urged attendees to look back further than mere decades and study PR achievements from another century—specifically, from the late 1700s and the American Revolution. He cited founding fathers such as Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson as models for today's PR profession.

Burson's remarks are not simply patriotic—they constitute sound professional advice. An independent United States breaking free from Great Britain was a concept that had to be sold to the colonists and their foreign allies. And as with any significant selling proposition, it took public relations to pave the way. In particular, three major procedures of modern public relations correlate to three principal actions of the Revolutionary Era:

- Swaying Early Adopters: Samuel Adams and the Committees of Correspondence
- The White Paper: Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*
- The Product-Launch Press Release: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

Swaying Early Adopters: Samuel Adams and the Committees of Correspondence

No sales force, marketing division, or PR team alone can duplicate early adopters' ability to drive a product or company to success. As PR professionals "enlist" early adopters today, Samuel Adams did so more than 230 years ago. Cousin to President John Adams, Samuel Adams was a politician, author, and activist who maximized an incident in 1770 when the British fatally shot five colonists by dubbing it "The Boston Massacre." Toward the end of his article series on the Boston shootings, Samuel

Adams unveiled an even more effective plan to promote revolution.

There were two significant obstacles to achieving independence from Great Britain: apathy and difficulty in communication, both rife throughout the colonies. In recognition of these factors, Adams espoused the importance of "social clubs," "associations," and "combinations," and he pushed for establishment of the first Committee of Correspondence in Boston. Adams' goal, as stated in a 1771 letter, was to "promote union not only among the colonies but also with men of similar views in England."

The inaugural meeting of the Boston Committee of Correspondence was held on November 3, 1772. Numbering 21 members, the committee agreed to create and distribute what amounted to a three-part report: a statement of colonists' rights; a declaration of how the British had violated those rights; and a letter to other communities in the province and the world giving "the sense of the town" (the nature of opinion from influential Boston).

Opinion leaders and public officials throughout Massachusetts, the ideal "early adopters," received the first pamphlet from the Boston Committee of Correspondence, entitled "The Votes and Proceedings of the Town of Boston." Its contents were recited at town meetings, prompting several other communities to form Committees of Correspondence, with many of them documenting their own lists of grievances.

Within two years, a network of committees based on Samuel Adams' Boston model was spreading revolutionary ideas and texts all the way to Charleston, SC. Concepts from the Committees of Correspondence poured into two other proven channels of information: the press and the clergy's articles, editorials, and sermons that furthered the American cause.

The crowning moment for the Committees of Correspondence came in 1773 with the Boston Tea Party. With the colonies united against England's taxed tea, a showdown loomed in Boston as tea-bearing ships entered the harbor. Samuel Adams called a collective meeting of several Committees of Correspondence, which resulted in a vote to send the tea back to England. Adams ordered resolutions that chronicled the vote to be distributed throughout the colonies and to England. With Adams having once more employed his PR skills to ensure an event's place in history, 342 chests of tea were dumped overboard.

By the time of the Boston Tea Party, communication had improved, and pro-independence sentiment had strengthened across the colonies. A system of integrated thought and action would be essential to the creation of the United States. Cass Canfield concludes in *Sam Adams' Revolution*, "Without the work of the committees [of correspondence], it is doubtful whether the First Continental Congress could have been held in 1774."



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The White Paper: Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*

Between the time of the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and the beginning of 1776, many American colonists lacked confidence about seeking independence from Great Britain. In January 1776, an ambitious, sweeping essay appeared as a pamphlet explaining the benefits of American independence and the means to secure it. In the manner that a modern white paper informs and reassures consumers regarding a product, company, or issue, *Common Sense* was the enlightening, emboldening document that catalyzed support for the American Revolution. It took a man who had been in America barely more than a year to write this most persuasive case for its freedom: Thomas Paine.

Paine was born in 1737 in Thetford, England. As an exciseman—a customs official—in London, he wrote his first political pamphlet in 1772, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, an argument for higher wages for England’s excisemen. Paine distributed his pamphlet to Parliament and learned the importance of influential connections when he met Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia. Admiring Paine’s politics and abilities, Franklin advised Paine to seek his fortunes in America. Having been fired for neglecting his excise post while petitioning Parliament, Paine left England in October 1774.

Upon arrival in Philadelphia, Paine progressed from tutor to journalist to editor of *Pennsylvania Magazine*. After minutemen and redcoats clashed at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Paine wrote critically of England and King George III. In the fall of 1775, he left *Pennsylvania Magazine* to work on his definitive political tract.

Approximately 50 pages long, *Common Sense* was released in January of 1776 in the potent medium of the pamphlet. The British helped ensure the immortality of *Common Sense* by simultaneously issuing a disastrous

missive in the colonies: a copy of a speech King George III had made to Parliament. In the speech, the monarch revealed his intention to crush the Revolution quickly, “to put a speedy end to these disorders by the most decisive exertions.” England’s “most decisive exertions” had recently included the burning and bombardment of towns in Maine and Virginia, plots to incite Indian attacks and slave revolts against Americans, and the hiring of German mercenaries to fight on the English side.

Although grievances against the mother country were rising, many Americans were still reluctant to sever ties completely due to kinship, faith in the British form of government, and fear that prolonged military action would be futile. The timely purpose of *Common Sense* was to prove that independence from Great Britain was necessary and possible.

To state the feasibility and righteousness of American independence, Paine assails two British institutions: the monarchy and the navy. Paine’s invective against royalty jars readers slow to shed their traditional loyalty to the king. In turn, Paine denigrates British naval power, reporting an enemy fleet in a low state of preparedness.

While Thomas Paine compiles facts, analogies, and arguments in *Common Sense*, he ultimately relies on uplifting rhetoric to cement his case:

O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is over-run with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. – Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

Available for 18 pence, *Common Sense* was advertised in newspapers, taverns, and public meeting places. It sold 120,000 copies in three months, according to Thomas Paine’s estimate, with further estimates placing total sales for 1776 at 500,000 copies. Politicians sent copies to their constituencies, strengthening attitudes about independence throughout the colonies. *Common Sense* commanded the American public’s mood in early 1776 and set up the greatest PR act of the Revolution.

The Product-Launch Press Release: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence

With the title of her definitive history *American Scripture*, Pauline Maier captures the reverence American citizens and much of the world hold for the Declaration of Independence. It is one of history’s most momentous and noble written works. It is also a superb example of public relations. The Declaration of Independence acted as a product-launch press release from the Second Continental Congress, conveying an inspiring but simple message: the United States is now an independent nation, ready for full investment of men, arms, money, and loyalty.

As 1776 progressed, the Second Continental Congress had to confirm American independence—the “product”—with two crucial publics: the American populace and foreign powers. These paralleled the modern business publics of consumers and investors respectively. Consensus regarding a complete break with Great Britain was uncertain, with scholarly assessments describing an approximate three-way split of colonials between the revolutionists, the loyalists to Britain, and the ambivalent.

American leaders knew that the intervention of foreign powers was essential to validating and achieving independence. France and Spain, historical adversaries of Great Britain,



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were natural allies for America. However, these two countries' interest and assistance had been covert and careful so far. As hostilities escalated, America needed more from its alliances. Carl Becker writes in *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*, "Without the aid of France the colonies could not long wage war against Great Britain; and to obtain the aid of France they had to make it plain to her that they were fighting for independence and not reconciliation."

Throughout the spring, colonial legislatures began instructing their delegations at the Second Continental Congress to vote for independence. On June 7, 1776, Virginia Delegate to the Second Continental Congress Robert Henry Lee proposed a resolution that the colonies were independent, absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown. A committee of five was assigned to draft the pending declaration. With Benjamin Franklin, the other noted author on the committee, battling gout, Thomas Jefferson became lead writer of the document, a move facilitated by fellow committee member John Adams.

Jefferson's preface contains the most memorable language. In the later tradition of the press release, it is an introduction that quickly captures the reader. As Paine does throughout *Common Sense*, Jefferson disavows the long-standing notion that God's will made people the unquestioning subjects of a monarch. To substantiate the introduction's revolutionary concepts, Jefferson speaks in absolutes, announcing truths that are "self-evident." He insists that the people themselves are the source of a government's power:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit

of Happiness-That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...

The Declaration of Independence confirmed the United States could conduct business on all levels with other nations. France and Spain could now risk confrontation with Great Britain, knowing they were supporting a people for whom independence was the only option.

After approving the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress ordered copies printed and distributed throughout the country. Legislatures, assemblies, and committees received it. Commanders in the Continental Army used copies to raise troop morale. After New York's colonial assembly gave approval to the Declaration of Independence on July 9, General George Washington called army brigades to order to hear "the United Colonies of America" declared "Free and Independent States."

As they did with previous revolutionary writings, the American print media embraced the Declaration of Independence. The document appeared in newspapers and was produced as a broadside—a large sheet printed as a notice. Public readings were encouraged. On July 26, 1776, the *Virginia Gazette* devoted its front page to the text of the Declaration of Independence, terming its publication "The Greatest Scoop in History" above the masthead.

The first crucial public, the American people, responded fervently to the news notice that was the Declaration of Independence. Big cities and small villages held celebrations, parades, and bell ringings. Response from the second crucial public, foreign powers, was more cautious but ultimately highly productive. Both the United States and Great Britain watched France—powerful benefactor

to the new nation, mortal enemy to the mother country—whose ultimate enthusiasm for the Revolution was more strategic than philosophical.

In September 1776, two months after news of the Declaration of Independence had reached Europe, a Paris contact told Benjamin Franklin that France was willing to increase aid to the United States. Franklin, with diplomats Silas Deane and Arthur Lee, began negotiations with the French by the end of the year. Publisher, writer, scientist, and PR pro Benjamin Franklin developed a personality cult in Paris; his likeness was recreated on porcelain mementos, and his celebrity resembled that of touring rock stars two centuries in the future. Franklin's efforts led to the Franco-American alliance in 1778, a turning point in the Revolutionary War, as America defeated Great Britain with considerable help from France.

The American Legacy of Public Relations

Numerous successes propelled America to independence. Alongside George Washington crossing the Delaware, next to John Paul Jones besting the British frigate *Serapis*, there were key patriots fighting for hearts and minds. Popular opinion was a battlefield where some of America's greatest strategists recorded immeasurable victories.

In today's PR profession, we practice and refine techniques to gain attention, establish credibility, and win commitment. Methods to move mass audiences that are precious in modern America were vital in early America as well. The founding fathers counted many PR masters among their ranks, including early-adopter genius Samuel Adams, revolutionary white paper author Thomas Paine, and the creator of America's greatest press release, Thomas Jefferson. As a nation, we are most fortunate for their PR triumphs.



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