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An interview with Stephen Waddington, Partner and Chief Engagement Officer at Ketchum and Visiting Professor in Practice, Newcastle University, Past President of the Chartered Institute for Public Relations (UK)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	In May 2015, the Journal of Professional Communication's senior associate editor, Dr. Terry Flynn, sat down with Stephen Waddington, Partner and Chief Engagement Officer with Ketchum and Past President of the Chartered Institute for Public Relations in the United Kingdom (UK) to discuss and reflect upon his perspectives on the future of the profession and the challenges that are on the horizon for practitioners and current students of the profession. Waddington discussed how his formative training as an engineer in the UK has helped him to create new systems and processes to better understand and manage the multifaceted challenges that organizations now face within the public arena. Together with a number of UK and European professionals, Waddington has lead a number of crowd-sourced publications and learning tools designed to future-proof the practice of public relations.

TF—Stephen, thank you for taking the time to talk with us about your career. I would like to start off with some brief background on how you got to where you are today. Could you speak with me about your academic and professional experiences and how you eventually became the Chief Engagement Officer of Ketchum?

SW—I didn't start out in public relations. I trained originally as an engineer and studied electronics in the United Kingdom. I started working as a consulting

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engineer and hated it. At the same time, there was an aspect to the job—technical writing and writing of reports—that I really enjoyed, so I pursued that by training as a technology writer and electronics journalist in the trade media in the UK.

Then, about twenty-five years ago, there was really a huge explosion in microelectronics. I did that for about eighteen months and realized that the guys who were pitching the stories were being paid about twice as much as I was, and they didn't understand what they were selling half the time. You had to work quite hard to bring together a story. So I spotted an opportunity, and to be honest, I was originally guided by blatant opportunism and the prospect of making a better living.

My break came working for a UK company called Advanced Risc Machines (ARM), which is a big chip developer now, but was at that time in the very early stages of development. They had a small management team in Cambridge, so I was able to gain experience quite fast. After that, I worked for a couple of small agencies before joining Larry Weber's agency in the mid 90s, called the Weber Group, which he built in Boston and San Francisco. He hired a small team of enthusiasts to help grow the business in London, and we did. We had a great time.

Through the end of the 90s, as the dot-com boom was kind of exploding, I saw lots of people starting their own agencies. I thought, hang on, this isn't really that hard. You know, in my arrogance, I felt I could be a success using my expertise in tech and engineering.

TF—And how old were you at that point?

SW—I was twenty-eight years old. It was Steve Earl, now of Zeno, and I who started the business and a partnership with a guy in Boston. We recognized that to work in the tech space, a strong channel into the US was important. We had a tremendous time building out a business on the back of it. The internet explosion was happening, and we were working in the electronics industry, but we never actually got into working for the dot-com companies. We did a lot of plumbing and infrastructure stuff. In 2004-5, we sold our business to a larger group, which gave us the opportunity to re-devise the whole company and rebuild it around image, reputation, and the opportunity presented by online and social media.

What came out of it was a business called Speed, of which the cornerstone was our tech experience. We saw the opportunity to work in the internet space for social networks where you could create your own forms of branded

media. I guess you could say that it was only at this point in the mid-1990s that I really got to properly understand public relations from a theoretical point-of-view.

TF—And this was really the change-over point for you, from a first to a second business?

SW—Yes, that was exactly it. We were really lucky with our second business, because we were there when companies were scratching their heads trying to figure out what to do with online and social media. That business ended up being sold to a private equity group, and so Steve and I parted company after working together about 14 years. I was looking around for what to do next. We didn't really want to start another agency, because we had both done that already.

Through pure serendipity I got to know David Gallagher at Ketchum really well and realized that international work on the scale that Ketchum offers would provide a fantastic new challenge.

At the same time, I could see that Ketchum was trying to tackle exactly the issues we'd spotted and addressed at Speed, so I knew I could help take the traditional publicity model and shift that up to branded media and then full public relations.

So that's how I joined at the end of 2011. I spent two and a half years working in Europe, helping each of Ketchum's eleven businesses work through what was appropriate for their market. Having helped build those teams, towards the end of 2014, the call came to replicate that work globally.

The goal was to help our clients and our businesses around the world scale up and get ahead on digital. It's an ongoing job, as the digital environment changes so fast. So part of my role as Chief Engagement Officer is organizational design—figuring out what our clients need in each market and helping to run our business to meet those needs.

Another part of it is developing modern products and services that we can sell. Part of this is new business, sales, and big pitches, and then part of it is training, because we have two-and-a-half thousand people working across the agency, and there are pockets that are exclusively doing media relations. That means a key part of the job is providing a road map to the modern form of public relations.

Helping to upskill our workforce is a huge part of what I do, which is how my involvement with the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) collided with my role at Ketchum.

I kind of had an antagonistic relationship with trade associations when I was running my own agency, because I wasn't really getting any support or services from them. There was a moment when former CIPR director general Colin Farrington came out and said that blogging or social media was a fad as far as he was concerned. I was one of the number of people that took him to task on this and called out the lack of intellectual rigour. From then on I had a critical relationship with CIPR.

TF—And that wasn't too difficult with Colin?

SW—Well, then I continued blogging and doing my own thing until Jay O'Connor was appointed president, and she had a totally different viewpoint and approach. She had just built and sold a European agency called Racepoint, by complete coincidence, to Larry Weber. She took a sabbatical year when she was president of the CIPR and basically turned around to a small band of people including myself and asked for help in modernising the Institute's proposition and purpose. So I got involved. There were a couple of us that started a social media panel, and we did a lot of work on training practitioners in what modern public relations looks like.

At the same time, I was engaged in my own personal education around public relations, as I was becoming a chartered practitioner. When the opportunity came up, it seemed to be the right time for me to put myself forward to be president. Looking back it turned out to be a fantastic year, and together with others we did a lot of work around governance, modernisation, and professionalism.

TF—Tell us about those accomplishments in terms of coming in from the edges of the profession and in how you approach things yourself.

SW—There's a level of discipline that you're taught as an engineer. You look for the evidence. In engineering, everything is based on models and calculation, and it has to be backed up by rigorous analysis and rationale. It's an approach I apply to everything I do. It's certainly how I approached my work at the CIPR.

TF—It's something that is not present in our field. Even from a theoretical perspective, it's growing more rigorous in terms of the use of evidence and discipline over the last thiry years. When we look at the field, there is a sense of competency that professionals need to be successful in this world.

You know, that sense of rigour is an important competency factor to be able to test for to make sure they have them. Let's get back to CIPR and talk about its accomplishments. From the governance standpoint, how have you made CIPR more effective and more relevant today?

SW—We started with a governance model that hadn't really been changed in ten or fifteen years or more. There were fifty people who sat on the Council of the organization, who came together five or six times a year. They were elected onto that body at two points during the year. That meant that there was always a transition, it was always very fluid.

There were also a lot of issues with how and why people were elected. There were people on Council just because they chaired a sector group or regional committee. Others just wanted a badge. It didn't work and the skillset was wrong.

The organization was very, very slow. It didn't move quickly enough. How did that manifest itself? Well, there would be six meetings during the year, and twenty to fifty people would turn up. Decision making took a long time and it just wasn't effective at all. At the same time, there was also a Board which, in reality, only existed to give a level of scrutiny to the financial and operational activities of the organization.

Things blatantly had to change, so we streamlined it and ensured everyone had to be elected.

Today, you can be elected either by the members or by groups, and there's a vote every two years to elect the thirty members onto the council. There's also an annual vote at Council level to elect the Board for the following year. The result is a management function which is much leaner, much more effective and dynamic, and critically a lot more transparent. That was a big thing that we sorted from a structural point of view. I just didn't reckon on that taking so much time.

TF—So much of your effort as well.

SW—Yeah, it was a big effort. But you know, the organization has a Royal Charter, so we ended up going through the process of consultation. This took place by Wiki and open meetings, and we ended up with a document that was signed off at the Annual General Meeting. Then it was literally picked up to go up to the Privy Council and finally a meeting with the Queen for her signoff. It was an amazing level of scrutiny.

I was very, very fortunate that I came into the organization with a lot of

energy, and the Institute had a new CEO Alastair McCapra alongside me who recognized—was actually hired on the basis—that we had a lot of work to do. Ketchum was also very supportive, which was a big thing. The second plus was pushing professional development as the main value proposition of the organization. The CIPR had completely lost connection with its original vision and purpose, which was to promote professional learning in the public interest and to promote practitioners.

My role was to encourage the organization to reframe, to use that value proposition as test for everything we did. We promoted professional development, we promoted qualifications, and we promoted lifelong learning and training. It was successful—we drove up professional development through the year, and that trend continues. It gives the organization a very clear purpose and a very clear point of view. The members get it; they see the relevance and are valuing their membership more.

We also did a load of work around membership engagement using the new forms of media we have at our fingertips. And that work continues too. We moved from using media relations to communicating directly with our publics, which was a significant and hugely beneficial shift.

Finally we started a longer-term member engagement project which saw the introduction of the CIPR's own media publishing platform. Online member magazine Influence has now launched and has received a very favourable reception.

TF—This idea of making CIPR relevant to members is important. I think that this applies not only within the public relations and communications management industry but to other trade associations, and they are finding this as well. How do you stay relevant in a membership organization today?

SW—I honestly think we could be more radical and go much further. The value that people get out of the organization is professional accreditation. So what are they willing to pay for? They're willing to pay for learning and skills and that badge of accreditation. Everything else around it is kind of froth in my opinion. I see the evidence of that all around me. There's training and learning organizations like eConsultancy that do this very, very well. You pay a basic level fee to be a member, and then you pay additionally for e-training and learning on top of that. That, I think, is the future of membership for organizations. To help people remain relevant in their careers. To help them advance and develop as individuals in their careers, and ultimately to drag themselves up the career ladder.

TF—Does this idea of building the competencies, skills, and knowledge of the practice through an aggregate movement push the practice to more professional stature?

SW—Yes. So here's the thing: one of objectives that I really wanted to achieve, but just didn't get to, was a competency framework. The organization was too much of a clique. There was too much of a 'but we've always done it this way' mindset.

There were ridiculous situations where people who were trainers were on the qualifications board. These conflicts of interest had to be pointed out. One of the big issues was that there was no competency framework: no career, no ladder.

At the time, no one had specified what a sensible, productive, profitable career path worth investing in looked like.

I found advocates in Anne Gregory and Jean Valin at the Global Alliance who have recently published the results of their GBOK project on core competencies. So I've kind of fallen in with that and am supporting them where I can.

TF—Right. It's hard, because, when I was president of the Canadian Public Relations Society, we engaged in that and developed the Pathways to the Profession competency framework. However, it's complex because you have educational institutions that are, in fact, independent and don't want to follow the competency framework that the profession wants to have. So it's a slow process, and it goes back to this question: what's the stick or the carrot that the profession can use to ensure that the educational institutions are developing the competencies that the industry really wants? You look elsewhere, and the professions that have been successful in this regard are regulated professions.

SW—Well, that's the challenge we've got. I agree.

TF—And is that something you see long term? Is that even a discussion we can have?

SW—Well, regulation, I don't know. Take Dircom in Spain. Dircom is sort of like the Arthur Page Society, but it is made up of senior people who pay a lot of money. They charge £1,000 rather than £200 for annual subs. And if you're

a member of Dircom, you are accepted as being a communications director of standing. Now, that's much nearer what I think we should be aiming for. I think our challenge has been that the CIPR has been too soft. There has been a conflict between the business model and professional standards. Rather than being seen to enforce professional standards, this didn't happen for fear that people wouldn't join or would leave. There surely has to be a happy medium. Regulation: I don't know. I really don't know. Sorry, that's a wet answer isn't it?

TF—No, I don't think it's a wet answer. I think it's the challenge that we face. It's one of the things that push us. I mean look at regulated professions, such as engineering for example, in Canada: in order to become a professional engineer, you have to write a competency exam. Law, medicine, accounting, all are regulated. In public relations and communications management, we have a body of knowledge, we have membership across the world, so what are we afraid of?

SW—I don't know.

TF—Right? And I think, you hear arguments out in the United States that say, "well you can't regulate free speech." Well, in the Commonwealth, we can regulate free speech. Right?

SW—Of course you can have regulations. And it's not really regulating free speech, is it? I just think we're scared.

TF—But why do other professions do it? Why do they, when somebody wants to go into any of these regulated professions, nursing for example— it's not even a question, right?

SW—No it's not, but typically there's some sort of threat to life to justify regulation, isn't there?

TF—Not with accounting.

SW—Right. So it's an issue of governance. But there is—you could argue— lots of governance in public relations, isn't there?

TF—And maybe a threat to public life. Or the public interest, right? So,

from your perspective, what are the basic competencies that you know or see that practitioners have to have?

SW—You said it just there. First of all, working in the public interest. Appreciating the need for dialogue rather than broadcast. Being able to plan strategically, having an understanding of management, management accounting, and the contribution that the practice can make to an organization. And then below that, there's all the skills of craft around writing, speaking, good communication.

Okay. So, we fear regulation, right? This is a really interesting conversation I'm going go think about now, because I'm not actually sure why we fear it. Why do we fear standards so much?

TF—Because we're afraid to be held accountable. Why do many people fear to engage in research in our profession? Right? Again, because of accountability.

SW—Yes, it's astonishing. I don't know why that would be. We fear standards, we fear education.

TF—So within that, tell us about your #PRstack.

SW—The practice of public relations is going through these fundamental changes, and we're going back to the future. We got screwed up around the time when print and broadcast media were in their heyday. We became publicists during the post-war—previously, our role was education, education, and education. Pre-war, it was public relations and public engagement. I think social forms of media are forcing organizations to go back to that form of practice.

The decline in print, not so much broadcast but definitely the decline in print, means that the role of a publicist is diminishing. So in making this transition, there's a whole set of skills our industry must learn. As part of that, there are a whole lot of new networks—there are new media, there are new ways of engaging with citizens, and there's a whole tools industry growing up and around each of these areas.

I use this model where I talk about publicity transitioning to influencing the relationships in any network or media. You know, new influences. Whether that's YouTube or it's you on Twitter. You're an influencer, right? So the shift from publicity to influencing is subtle, but the skills are directly

transferable.

Then you shift through to branded forms of media: organizations creating their own media and then engaging citizens through those media. Then you move to networks, communities, and then businesses being fully social. Along the way, there are tools to help, there's a growing tools market for those seeking to understand how to identify influences in a network, how to map a network, how to understand how messages propagate through a network backwards and forwards. However, these tools are not really understood.

There's a bunch of software guys selling products and features and not really thinking from a public relations point of view. So at the end of last year, I came up with this idea of a stack to describe public relations work flow, where you put tools together to show how you could manage a campaign from start to finish.

The next step is trying to characterize the market across these different stages, so publicity turns into influencer relations, with branded media and networks along one axis, and things like planning content, measurement, and the different aspects of a campaign along the other axis. So, without much effort, over the course of fifty days, we described 250 tools.

After having a chat with a friend who runs a start-up out of Belgium, we created a Google document—making it completely open. People kept adding stuff. Another friend who runs a start-up in the public relations tools business suggested we build a web app that sat on top that would allow you to interrogate this little database. So that's what we did, and it became #PRStack.

The tool helps people understand tool work flow and the tool-vendors like it, because it's helping to explain the market and some of their services. Not long after, I ran a Twitter chat asking people what they wanted and needed next, and they asked for a series of essays or 'how-to guides' on the various tools. So that's what came next, and we published two different booklets.

TF—Nice.

SW—So one thing—a few people have commented on this actually—is that there's this transition over the last few months in public relations from a sort of protectionist point of view to real openness. There has been a lot of research into trying new things and failing, but in public relations we're typically just a bit insecure and don't want to be held accountable. We've also traditionally been frightened about doing stuff like this and working collaboratively.

TF—Might it be the Great Wizard of Oz? Pay no attention to the man behind

the curtain? That there's a fear that maybe a person's competency might not be up to the level of their perceived value?

SW—We need to learn for sure. So that's my motivation—fear of not being up to scratch and not having a job. But I regularly learn by seeking out information, asking for help, and collaborating with others, which is different to most. Being honest about what you don't know is not a bad thing.

TF—The way you describe #PRStack makes it sound like this was you going back to your roots as an engineer. As a systems engineer, right? Trying to figure out how all these things work together rather than floating out.

SW—From a systems perspective, definitely yes. Because you know the market is saturated with tools. There are so many. I have been trying to explain and contextualize how they fit together. To achieve this, I came up with a grid concept—#PRStack was two grids. The first one was a list of tools, what they did, and what they help you achieve.

Then we did a matrix, which had X-Y axes that featured what they actually do. We developed an infographic from that, an interactive thing. They helped me navigate this, but you know, it got so complex so quickly that actually it was much easier, far easier to build a database query to present it in a nice way. I think that's part of the success of it as well—it's so simple to use.

TF—Your comment on the sense of transparency is interesting. Your career in consultancy, your protection is really the stock and trade in the consultancy world right? Is that changing? Are you suggesting that that's going to change the consulting world? That there is more openness in terms of how you do this so that there isn't the "man behind the curtain" kind of world.

SW—I think we are really poor at learning from theory. You sit in on a pitch and they turn out one model after the other. And you know, organizational leads take great comfort from the narrative of a model that explains what's happening in their organization and enables them to predict what might happen in the future. We're really bad at that. The best public relations can often present is a SWOT analysis.

TF—And that's so low on the strategy template right?

SW—We need to put the application of theory at the heart of public relations.

You know it's shameful, it really is shameful. So actually, if you were to line up all the main agencies and compare their IP one with another, you'd find many are following the same basic processes and work flow. If you want evidence of that, look at the sort of newsroom-type, real-time environment that agencies are all building. The differentiation is in the creativity and implementation.

TF—Or in the insights, right? The perspectives of that strategic mindset from the leaders.

SW—That's interesting from Ketchum's point of view. One of the biggest areas of the business is Dr. Rockland's research and measurement team. To develop those insights and creativity.

TF—You've also engaged in a new venture in trying to go back to school as a visiting professor at Newcastle. Tell me about the lessons learned there.

SW—So what happens is you write a book and you're invited to go and do guest lectures and stuff. And I've always been involved in a couple of projects at different universities where we run workshops and other stuff, but that by its nature is always very transactional. I had a conversation last year with a friend who teaches at Newcastle University, and I said I'd like to develop more meaningful relationships and develop something of substance rather than jumping from a train and turning up and speaking to students for an hour. Eventually, Newcastle appointed me as a professor, but it's not exactly my job spec. I'm teaching, but it's fairly minimal; I do three or four lectures a year and then a lot of supervision helping students think about their dissertation topics and exploring those.

I have done a lot of work at Newcastle University around getting students ready for the job environment. So actually this last year hasn't been that different to what I've been doing before, except I'm following students through the year and developing stronger relationships. Newcastle has a lot of international students, so I'm making introductions, and then probably a couple of people are going to land a job soon with Ketchum's business in China. What I want to do next year though is run a project like #PRStack and start to think about my own area of research in public relations. So that's where that piece of work is heading.

Sorry, just a comment there as well, it's a related point I forgot. I attended BledCom in Slovenia, where I was invited to do a keynote, and I was warned by several people, actually old school practitioners in the CIPR, that it was a

really robust, rigorous environment. In fact, it was probably the most intellec-tually stimulating public relations conference I've ever attended. Some of the areas of research and practice that were being explored and talked about had direct and immediate application in practice. You know, it's just that there is no channel between the academics that are speaking at the conference and the practitioners. I blame that on the trade media, or lack thereof, among many different reasons. I'm quite keen to explore that issue as well.

TF—So after a year, how close is the practice to the teaching? This is the big issue. You explained it from an anecdote in terms of the research that we're not making that connection. But what's your advice about how we forge a closer relationship between the academy and profession?

SW—From a teaching point of view, there's an issue in the universities that courses take so long to be ratified, so there's a sort of governance issue within universities that needs to be addressed there. But you can help crack that by bringing in modern examples from modern practice. I recently wrote this blog called "Letter from Bled." It was along the lines of, "why is it there are no channels or media for us to get together and explore thinking in this way?' There's a piece of work to be done to try and solve that. It actually is starting to get a lot better thanks to social media. Thanks to blogs, thanks to Twitter—the fact that we're having this conversation—is an example of how it is a lot better now than it ever has been.

TF—Thank you Stephen for taking the time to explore the emerging trends of the global public relations industry with us.