

Public Affairs, PR and Governance 2.0 – Part II

Interview with Ms Dorie Clark, CEO, Clark Strategic Communications

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Interviewee Bio:

Dorie Clark is the CEO of Clark Strategic Communications, a Boston-based marketing, branding, and management consulting firm that helps corporate, nonprofit, and government clients in strategic planning and communications. Her specialty is in the areas of marketing, branding, management consulting, strategic planning, media relations and communication trainings. Dorie graduated from Harvard University with a Master of Theological Study in 1999, and worked as journalist for the Boston Phoenix and the Boston Globe. She also counts serving as the New Hampshire Communications Director for Howard Dean's presidential campaign and Robert Reich's bid for Massachusetts governor, among her rich array of professional experience.

Daniel: Hi Dorie, do you think we can start off the interview with a bit of background of what you do, followed by your views about the differences between public affairs and public relations?

Dorie: Sure. What I do, about three years ago, I launched my own business. After the Dean Campaign ended, I came back to Boston and I ran a non-profit. In my business I do consulting work, so clients either hire me on a monthly retainer, or I work for them on a project basis to help them. So, if I'm on a monthly retainer, what I would generally do is to help them with their overall strategy development, like how they can shape what they're doing on an ongoing basis so that they can more effectively advance their public policy or fundraising goals. A large part of that is how they make decisions that are compatible with marketing, how do they do things that make it easier to sell them either to the media or the people that they need to influence. If I'm hired on a project basis, usually I'm hired for discrete tasks, like doing what we call communication audits, which would entail what materials they have now, are they representing you well, are they saying what they need to say, and also coming up with a proactive marketing plan for them, usually for the next year about that they need to be doing moving forward. So that's the basic idea. You know, occasionally I branch into other things like, I have an assignment that is going to be coming up soon where I'm taking five senior level executives of an organization and doing detailed media coaching for them. So I'm doing interview practice sessions, and how to create sound bites so they can respond well in interview sessions. So that's the short version of what I do.

In terms of PR vis-à-vis public affairs, I think that they sometimes overlap but not always. Certainly, when you are doing work for a governmental agency, or a nonprofit that has policy goals they want to advance, they should overlap. But I think the key thing is that it depends on the vendor that you're contracting with. Some consulting firms or vendors have a really narrow definition of PR, i.e. you tell me about what events you're doing or the initiatives you have and we will try to get stories about them in the paper. That's nice and helpful, but it's only one piece of it. Public affairs generally encompasses PR, so if you're seeking out people to work with, you ideally want to have a company that can do both. A piece of public affairs is about getting stories in the news, but it's also about what all the strategies are that can be used to influence the decision makers. You know, we need to think like, is there a way we could target this person's circle of influence... is there sort of a grass-tops strategy that you may have heard of?

Daniel: Grass-tops? Can you elaborate on that?

Dorie: You know, the common thing we have been hearing is how we can mobilize the grassroots. They are sort of the regular people. The new vogue is called the grass-tops. This is a much smaller number of people but they are really influential. For instance, if I need to get a bill passed, I need to get the Senate President to support it. The grassroots approach is how we can get 1000 people from her district to write her letters, or do a rally to show their support. A grass-tops strategy is, who gives her money? Who did she go to high school with? Who influences her? What labor unions endorse her? You know, those people who have a 'hold' over her, and how do we get those people to exert influence. So you want a public affairs firm that can help you think through those things too.

Daniel: So, if I may paraphrase what you've just said to check on my understanding... I suppose from the overall strategic picture, we can't just go for grass-tops or grassroots but it needs to be both because you need the numbers from the masses that come from grassroots, but you also need the surgical influence or clout generated from targeting the grass-tops?

Dorie: Yeah, exactly.

Daniel: So this whole thing would fall under the realm of public affairs?

Dorie: Yeah, that's how I would define it. The crucial thing is that people who are in this business needs to see the big picture. See, if I am someone who works for a non-profit or a middle manager in a government agency, I may not know that we need all these things. I may only think about what are the most visible things, which are usually the stories in the papers. So, that's what I might ask for, but that's not all of what I need. So it's a process of making sure you sort of educate the consumer so that you let the people know: Wait! That's only a piece of it, or the tip of the iceberg. And it's also about making sure that the vendors that you choose to work with, that they don't limit what

they recommend to you because they only do PR. You know, there's this saying [laughs] that if you have a hammer, all the world looks like a nail. So basically what this means is that if I'm a PR firm, the answer to everything is, 'Oh, you need PR!' But you actually need something more than that. You need a broader understanding that [PR] is a piece of it, but it's not sufficient.

Daniel: Do you think, and here I'm digressing a bit because I think it's interesting, do you think that this strategic function should have been part of the realm of PR, but over time people started only to focus on the apparent bottom line, which are things like press clippings, but have lost sight that actually, there is a bigger strategic picture about relationship management at different levels and with the different stakeholder groups?

Dorie: I think that certainly, it's good to have the public affairs viewpoint. But I think that it's not so much about an evolution over time but that certain things have changed because there's a lot of marketplace realities. Take advertising firms for example. Nowadays, a lot of advertising firms are branching into PR as well, but the core of what they do is that they create print advertisements or television commercials. The reason why they always say that that's what it's all about is because they were incentivized to focus on that. There were very high commissions that advertising firms would get, sometimes as much as 15% of the total ad-buy. Consequently, that was where the emphasis was. If I'm advising someone who does the presidential campaign or selling sausages, whatever it is, and I'm a consultant, then most likely what I'm going to say to you is, "Oh, you should come with me and use my firm... what you really need, and what's really important is paid television advertising," because that's what was rewarded most handsomely in the marketplace. Lately there's been a growing understanding, and mind you the commissions have been coming down... 15 % is now almost unheard of, and we can narrow it down to even five or four percent... but people made a lot of money from that. But now people understand that that's not the whole ballgame anymore, and I think that the Internet did help to make people more aware that, you know, television advertising with all that high margins is no longer as cost effective or appropriate. Because of the Internet, there's new markets opening up because of Google, for example, where you can be highly targeted and it's much more cost effective. When I put a television advertisement out there, do I really know that someone bought sausages because of this ad? You cannot track it, whereas with Google AdWords, you can do track-through and you can literally see what your return on investment is, and that's far more appealing to people. So I think, because of all those changes, there's more of an understanding that you can't put all your eggs in one basket. Advertising and the strict focus on that has given way to an understanding that you need more PR in addition to the advertising. Ultimately, in the same way, I think people will come to realize that you need more public affairs as well.

Daniel: OK, if I were to ask you boil it down to a sentence or two, how would you differentiate public affairs and PR?

Dorie: I would say PR is the process of gaining earned media for clients. Public affairs includes PR, but is not limited to it. It focuses on influencing key target audiences in a variety of strategic ways.

Daniel: I think it's really exciting, especially if we look at public affairs and PR from the lens of new media development. This whole industry is so nascent and so many things are still grey. This allows us to really step in to shape things, and to own it.

Dorie: It's true.

Daniel: Dorie, can you tell me a little bit about the things you did during the Howard Dean campaign, and the impression that you went away with, especially in the campaign's use of the Internet and social networking platforms? What are your observations about the impact on society?

Dorie: Well, let's see. Web 2.0. I think the adoption has been really fast... I mean, remarkably fast. Let's just sort of time it out, right... I first got Internet access when I was in college in 1995, so that was more than 13 years ago. When we were doing the Howard Dean campaign, the first thing we did was to invent a number of things, and also made use of a lot of other things. Then of course, there were a lot of technologies that we were not able to tap, which the Barack Obama campaign did. The biggest thing we took advantage of was a company called Meetup.com. Up until the Dean campaign, the only way that people had really understood the power of the Internet for campaigns was through fundraising. I mean, John McCain had raised a bunch of money online and that's great, because people are finding it easier to raise funds online than, say, hosting a million fundraisers, so that was cool. What had not been done, which the Dean campaign did to an unprecedented degree, was finding ways to identify supporters online and then get them to take action in the real world, from a field perspective. Meetup was the key thing that enabled that to happen. So...

Daniel: Was this something that was done from scratch and building upwards?

Dorie: I think, pretty much. Meetup was an independent company and was not initially affiliated with the Dean campaign. What it does is that it allows people to organize groups, and this can be anything from Star Wars fans, it could be new mothers, whatever it is. You could just say, 'Hey, I'm a new mother in Somerville, and I want to meet other people just like me,' and so Meetup would help organize it so that there would be a place that people could go to for information, and they also have some arrangements with venues, so that I could schedule something, and it would set up like, for example, a local coffee shop at 7pm on the first Tuesdays of the month. So that's Meetup, which just made organizing very easy. So Meetup came to the attention of Joe Trippi, the campaign manager for the Dean campaign, and all of a sudden, Howard Dean Meetups were starting, made up of people who were supportive of Howard Dean. Trippi was like, 'What's this? This is an interesting thing but we're not doing anything to

support it, so how is it happening?’ And so it just kept growing on its own. It was just sort of an organic thing. At first it was just some 800 people across the country, but soon it became thousands. At a certain point relatively early on, we realized the potential of it, and so we began to invest attention and energy on it. We hired someone on staff to become our Meetup coordinator, and so we were really touting it and encouraging anyone who is a Dean supporter to sign up for their Meetup as a way of taking action and getting involved.

Daniel: Just how big did this movement grow?

Dorie: It was HUGE! We had some 30,000 people meeting across the country one Wednesday a month, and we began devising activities for them to do at the events, so they would phone voters in Iowa, or they would write letters to voters in New Hampshire. You know, it was sort of tangible things that they could do to make a difference. So this is the crux. It was way of translating the sort of theoretical support we had online into concrete action.

Daniel: Yes, because otherwise, simply having a million supporters on Facebook, for example means nothing if you can’t channel them into some meaningful ways.

Dorie: That’s right. Exactly. The other thing that we sort of invented for the campaign world was the use of blogs for it. We were the first presidential campaign to have a blog. So we had a fulltime blogger, and then it became multiple ones. This really encouraged people to become active in the community. I mean, the goal is really to take people along a spectrum, from being interested and aware, to being active online, and then the culmination is where they are active in the real world. And you have to find ways to nurture them along each step of the way. So if you have a blog, then that’s one good way to take them from a general support of Howard Dean to being involved and feeling that they are part of a community. So we found that blogs were really good.

Daniel: OK, so how do you think the Obama campaign has sort of evolved this movement that seemed to have started off during the Dean campaign?

Dorie: Sure. So moving forward four years with the Obama campaign. By then, blogging had become even huger, and they did that well. Another thing that we did not have access to was YouTube, which had not been invented then. There was no such thing at that time. So the Obama campaign really used that. They created special new media such that it wasn’t just putting TV commercials online, which they did do, but they also created things especially for the Web. They also took advantage of open source, quote-unquote, the Obama Girl ads, which were very popular. They were also able to use YouTube and online videos to respond to things. For example, Obama’s speech on race was so critical in defusing the tensions surrounding his former pastor. That was seen online literally millions of times, and it was a huge speech. It was a 40-minute speech that people watched and people watched all the way through. So [new media] really

allows people to gain access to information, and they [the Obama campaign] really plugged that need. Another big thing that we began, and they were sort of able to perfect, because Facebook in the interim had grown to such a major force, was social networking. We had a program called Deanlink, which was kind of an incipient way of social networking to connect people up. They [the Obama campaign] had a site called My.BarackObama.com and that allowed people to organize events and do all kinds of things. They also had a large number of people, millions, who had created unique user profiles and were accessing that.

Daniel: So My.BarackObama.com would be like the modern day version of Howard Dean Meetups? Would that be right?

Dorie: Well in fact it would be more a latter-day version of Deanlink, but it did involve components of Dean Meetups in that people on My.BarackObama.com could suggest... I mean it's a little bit muddled because there was a certain point in our campaign where we actually moved away from using the Meetup platform because we wanted more control. And so we created Deanlink as sort of a hybrid version that involved the Meetup function but also the social networking, so I think My.BarackObama.com became a descendant of that.

Daniel: The interesting thing about new media, based on what many of the new media evangelists are touting, is that it allows you to put your content unabridged on the Web for viewers to access it as it is. Had this just been on traditional media, Barack Obama's race speech, for example, would've been parsed to a 20-30 second clip for television, or excerpts in print. People may not get the full picture, and it's worse when the media picks up on one aspect and starts running off on a totally different tangent. So new media really helps in communication in that sense.

Dorie: Yes, it's exceedingly good for democracy.

Daniel: I was actually asking some other new media and PR 2.0 practitioners about this matter, and I'd like to pose you the same question. Things like the presidential campaigns are excellent for energizing people because it can allow everyone at the grassroots level to get their hands dirty and be involved in putting someone whom they believe onto the nation's highest office. But for government on a day-to-day level, where many of the issues are more mundane, such as anti-littering campaigns, or fire safety campaigns, how do you think PR or public affairs can latch onto new media and even traditional ones to capture people's attention?

Dorie: Yeah, I mean, you're right that a presidential campaign is very inherently sexy. People are inherently into it. I think it's also true that there're some instances where some aspects of social networking are not appropriate. People want to jump on the bandwagon... they want to be like, doing the cool thing. But, in an example I gave recently in a talk at Harvard, if you're a plumber in Medford, you know... don't waste

your time starting a Twitter account. Say you want to build a following and you put your status as, 'Oh, I'm heading over and I'm going to clear out Mrs Jone's leaky pipe...' see it's not worth the effort for the kind of business or the kind of target audience that you want. You're much better off going to chamber of commerce meetings shaking hands so that you can get business. You know, Twitter is good for one audience but not for others, so the best thing is to figure out who your audience is and how to reach them. I would imagine that most Medford homeowners are not on Twitter at this point in time. Maybe they will be in 10 years, but for now it's not an effective use of the plumber's time. So let's say we got an issue here that is less sexy, say, don't litter. Well, I actually teach a class at Tufts on social cause marketing, so this is one of the things we deal with. There are good examples of ways to be creative about things. I mean, if it's just taking things from a PR point of view, like how we can get stories about littering in the papers, then yeah, maybe there's nothing really sexy there. But if you take it a step beyond and you give it a full marketing throttle, you could do some interesting stuff.

Daniel: Do you have some anecdotes to share?

Dorie: Well, to take an example of a non-sexy product... blenders seem very non-sexy right? I mean... what can you make out of blenders, right? But you may have seen a phenomena online created by this company called Blendtec. The magic phrase is, 'Will it blend?,' and you can find it if you type this phrase on YouTube. Now these guys have this blender, and you know, they're batting around ideas like... so what's so good about our blender, what's special about it? Then someone says, 'You know what, our blender is the strongest blender. It's the best one throughout the market.' So someone in the organization asks them to prove it. So what they did was that they created YouTube videos, where people basically write in with ideas about crazy things to blend. So they come up with a list of things like golf balls, and like hockey pucks... you know, all these horribly hard things. And they get a scientist-looking guy in a white lab coat and they put it in the blender and they say, 'Will it blend?' And then they just show it and it totally blends it up into little pieces. People are, like, amazed because, you know, some of them are having problems getting their ice blended and these guys at Blendtec are blending golf balls? It's brilliant!

Daniel: So this is similar to the clip about mixing diet coke and Mentos mints. It's those wacky things but that's what catches our attention.

Dorie: Yes exactly. That's an example of marketing creativity that can be pretty cool. It's always going to be about your target audience. Who are you trying to reach? You know, if yours is a cigarette butt campaign is aimed at young men, then social media and Web 2.0 is probably going to be a good idea because those are people most likely to be on it. If you're targeting families and grannies, then maybe not so much because they may not be signed on with Twitter yet, or they're not on Facebook. So in a world of limited resources, why would you want to spend your resources there? But if you're targeting a young audience who are spending the majority of their time on there, then that's not

such a bad idea. So it's really something as simple as sussing out who your target audience is, and what their main communication channel is. Recall the Obama Girl advertisements on YouTube. It could turn out to be a really campy thing, but what you want is to raise your brand profile and capture people's attention. A perfect example of this would be the 'Don't Mess With Texas' campaign that you may be familiar with. It was an anti-litter campaign in the state of Texas, and they people they were targeting were the working-class tough guys. These guys aren't the kind to respond to a message about being kind to the earth or the environment. So what they did instead was to tap on the image of Texas as being this tough roughneck kind of place, and they got some iconic Texan figures like country music stars, football players from the Dallas Cowboys, all big tough guys, and they did commercials and the tagline was 'Don't Mess with Texas!' And this has the double meaning of 'don't mess with us,' i.e. we're tough, but also 'don't make a mess of the place.' That campaign became a huge cultural phenomenon, and it became extremely effective with their target audience, and it has become so popular that even today you'll see mugs and bumper stickers splashed with the slogan because people like the idea of Texas as a tough and independent place.

Daniel: Would you consider this public affairs, or marketing?

Dorie: I would consider that marketing, encompassing but broader, than public affairs. I mean, yeah, the definitions are a bit blurry, but I view public affairs more as being about influencing the opinion leaders than the general public.

Daniel: These things are triggering several things in my mind. One thing, if we go back to the plumber in Medford. I mean, in the Web 2.0 books that I'm now reading, a recurring theme in PR 2.0, or I would even hasten to say Public Affairs 2.0, is not so much about putting your product out there but showing that you have leadership in terms of the content or knowledge you're putting out. So in this case, Mr Plumber could be putting out a blog that gives people tips on how to maintain their water systems, and show that those are really high quality tips. This is marketing without direct marketing. If people are convinced that your stuff is good, they'll naturally give your business or service a second glance.

Dorie: I think that's absolutely true. I think it's important to sort of keep in mind the goals of the business. I think that it would be particularly good if this plumber had sort of a goal of building a plumbing enterprise or empire. What do I mean by this? Let's say I'm the plumber in Medford, and my goal is to have my own one-man shop and spend my time doing stuff in the community, even if it may be beneficial, it may not make much sense for me to become a thought-leader because that would simply create more business than I can handle. However, if my goal was to grow the business such that I had clients all over New England, and was able to hire other plumbers to work under me, and things like that, then casting a wide net and becoming a thought leader such that even people from around the world were looking to my website or blog for tips that are

quoted in magazines or newspapers or things like that, that would absolutely further the mission. So I think, in that sense, that would be worthwhile.

Daniel: So how do you see other social media tools weighing in for this matter?

Dorie: I think blogs are key for something like that, and I think having a really good website is important, but you know, for something like Twitter, I'm just a little skeptical because it's like TMI, too much information, for me. I mean, for presidential campaigns where there are things that people are legitimately obsessed about, that's cool. Maybe even for celebrities, I mean, there are people who really want to be updated about what so-and-so is doing right this minute, and so that's good too. But for regular people, I just find it bizarre, and I wonder how effective we'll be if we're constantly keeping up with streams from 200 other people for things like, 'Oh, I just got my Starbucks latte,' for example. There is a need to find a balance between giving people the information they need, and not giving them too much random crap. I just feel that with Twitter, we haven't arrived at that yet. So I think Twitter is appropriate in some circumstances, and I think blogs are appropriate in far more circumstances.

For Facebook friends, I'm very sold on the idea of keeping up with friends, connections and networking, things like that. For businesses, I guess it's good if you want to notify people about events or something like that. I mean, the key for a business, it's sort of dumb to have a lot of friends for the sake of having friends. The key is that you want to try to find a way to provide value for them. Facebook basically serves the same function as an e-newsletter would. It's a way you could distribute information to people. So I guess the question is, 'what does it mean to be a Facebook friend of the Medford plumber?' It's not the same thing as being a friend of Barack Obama, where people derive some sense of political identity out of it. It's got to be something like, people who are renovating their homes and they need helpful information on a regular basis about workshops that they can attend or something like that. We've got to ask ourselves how we can give consumers something so that they can make something out of it. If we can answer that question, yeah, then I think it's valuable.

Daniel: Ok... now this may sound like a very tactical question, but do you think it's possible to run your entire blog on a Facebook platform? Right now, it seems to me that it can potentially be a one stop?

Dorie: Yeah. I think that it may eventually turn into something like that. I mean, right now I don't exactly know what the technical specifications are for running something like that because I haven't seen too many examples of that. For now most people who have blogs use Wordpress, Blogger and that sort of systems, but I think eventually it may. I mean, for 20 years we've been talking about how our television and computers are going to be the same thing one day, and your phone and iPod and GPS are all going to be on the same device, and we're getting there. So I think eventually we may end up with something like that. I mean, right now I've not seen any visually attractive blogs

that are hosted using the Facebook platform. I like the theory of it but I'm not too sure about the actual implementation.

Daniel: Well, I think right now the key limitation is that for blogs, anyone can go in and read it, but for Facebook, you've got to be accepted into the network, or you're just part of the out group. Let me wrap up by asking you two questions: Firstly is the key trends in the public affairs and PR industry that you're seeing right now, and secondly is a related question about the key challenges faced by practitioners today.

Dorie: Good questions. For key trends, I would say that part of the reason why the Web is such a big thing right now, apart from the reason that many more people are using it, is that it is getting harder and harder for PR agencies to place things in newspapers. This is simply because the newspapers are shrinking because of smaller ad revenues. So consequently, they're fighting a never-ending losing battle where they're clients want certain pieces of stories in the newspapers, but there's less room, so it's much, much more competitive. They, consequently, are expanding more into the Web because it is infinite, it's very easy to post things online, and you continue to answer to your clients needs too. I mean, it's a very objective measure. In the past it'll be such that if the PR firm did a good job, it would get the client's story on page A1 or B1 of the newspaper. Today, for the Web, we're talking about some sites that see more traffic than other sites, so even though this may be a little grey right now, we're starting to see more PR firms turn towards web placements, or urging their clients to blog, or place things on blogs, because it's a way of getting 'hits' and making the clients happy. That being said, I think it's important for them to be doing it strategically for it to have value; you need people who know what they're talking about because they're dealing with online media pitching.

Daniel: And lastly, what about the challenges practitioners face?

Dorie: I think that the challenges that are faced by practitioners of public affairs and public relations are... part of it is that it is a changing landscape, and the pace of change is accelerating very rapidly. You do have to put a foot in the door of a lot of things because you don't know what's going to take off. You know, people are jumping on Twitter right now, and that may just become the next killer application, or it may just end up fizzling. I think that eventually, there's going to be a showdown – or melding – between Twitter and Facebook. The question is how these technologies are going to be used. I mean, are people going to be carrying their phones with them, with the Twitter application on their iPhones, are they really going to be checking it all the time? How does that fit into people's lives? And I think that's now an open question. I think the real key is to figure out, for individual clients, what's the best use of their time and money? I mean, that's always been a question to think about, but right now, people are scurrying around, and they know they'll need to be doing Internet things, but they don't know what, and before we're going to be able to advise them properly, we need to take into account their target audiences and how they can best take action. So that's what I see

as the biggest challenge: Trying to see around the corner and making good and targeted suggestions that are suited specifically to who your client is and who they are trying to reach.

Daniel: Cool. I really appreciate the insights that you've shared with me.

Dorie: No problem. All the best in your research.

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Daniel Seet is a graduate student with Emerson College's Communication Management program. A self-proclaimed evangelist (but a new one, that is!) of the world of PR 2.0 and the good that social media brings to public communication, he's trying to build an online dialogue via his blog <***Promulgation.Rubicon (PR)***> to connect with anyone who's new to Web 2.0, and who wishes to pursue more about this topic along with him. **You may also connect with him on:** Gmail, Twitter, LinkedIn, Plaxo or Facebook.

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