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Dick West

The Lighter Side

P. R. Image Gone to Pot

By DICK WEST

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The public relations business, I'm told, is seething with internal strife over a move to improve its own image.

The object of dispute is an accreditation process worked out by the Public Relations Society of America. To become "PRSA accredited," a member must pass an eight-hour written test followed by a three-hour oral exam.

The idea is to give the P.R. business more of a professional aura.

The Washington PRSA chapter recently held a cram session to help its members prepare for the ordeal. Which would indicate the quiz is pretty formidable.

However, one member who has already taken it told me that "any working journalist" could pass it without difficulty.

Nevertheless, some P.R. men bitterly oppose the accreditation program. They resent having to submit to testing, they claimed P.R. talent cannot be reduced to paper and in some cases they suspect it will be used to try to force them out.

I ran into one of the dissidents the other evening when I stopped by the National Press Club to participate in a seminar on African violet

cultivation.

Although the indoor smog was rather thick, I espied at one end of the barroom a local P.R. man whom I shall identify here as Esterhazy Flack.

He had a flagon of mead at his elbow and was morosely taking deep draughts, punctuated by sorrowful sighs.

"I am what we used to call a press agent," Flack said when I inquired into the cause of his melancholy. "But that term isn't used any more. It's a matter of imagery, you see.

"While we were busy improving the images of our clients, our own image was going to pot. People somehow got the impression that press agents were undignified.

"Then the good fairy came along and turned us into publicists. That helped some but it still didn't sound properly dignified. So all of us publicists went to Baltimore for an operation that changed us into public relations consultants.

"Now they're trying to give us a professional status, like doctors and lawyers. Accreditation exams! Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous?

"I'm 20 years in this business and now I've got to waste an entire day proving that I know how to take a newspaperman to lunch."