

James A. Cowan

YOCOM PROFILE



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Toronto, Ontario

If one single word could possibly summarize James Cowan's contribution to Canada's public relations profession it would be: "foundational."

Other descriptors could include pivotal, distinguished, legendary, and pioneering, but they pale in comparison. Given Cowan's lengthy career, ground-breaking achievements, intuitive insights into our craft, innate sense of discretion, out-of-the-box thinking, and seemingly endless string of productive relationships with jaw-dropping famous names in Canadian arts and international business of his day, "foundational" crystallizes the depth and strength of the profession he helped create.

And so much of that was before CPRS was founded in 1948.

Ironically, James A Cowan was born in Shakespeare, Ontario in 1901. The irony stems from his hometown of Shakespeare being only a stone's throw from Stratford, a city he was to put on the map as an adult. Ironically too, because while he didn't graduate from the University of Toronto with a degree in English, that mattered not: he mastered and profited handsomely from the language of his birthplace's namesake for the rest of his life.

At university, he befriended the Massey brothers, Vincent and Raymond, each of whom was to become illustrious, as either the first Canadian-born Governor General or an iconic Hollywood personality.

Cowan was editor of the university daily and soon started a sideline. In 1921, he and three of his buddies started a humorous magazine called, The Goblin. It became a best-seller. Small wonder: their writers included such future luminaries as: Stephen Leacock, Gregory Clark, Bruce Hutchison and Leslie McFarlane of The Hardy Boys fame. Cowan quit school to expand it and became its Editor-in-Chief. A

few months later, the quartet sold their creation for a princely sum and Cowan ended up at the Toronto Star as a reporter, then feature writer.

At The Star, he befriended the person who was to become one of the 20th century's most famous writers: Ernest Hemingway. And the connection deepened.

In 1923, Hemingway published his first book, Three Stories and Ten Poems. When he gifted one of the ten author's copies of 300 printed to Cowan, he autographed it and wrote: "This book is the property of James Cowan—he is not responsible for it—nor did he buy it. It was presented to him by the author."

The book is now a bona fide collector's item with a value, of \$US 125,000 in 2012.

In January 1924, Hemingway then hosted James' wedding to Grace Fenwick Williams at Hemingway's Cedarville Mansions in Toronto, where he was also the couple's best man.

While at The Star, Cowan was able to pursue his interest in the theatre and was even acting with a professional stock company.

It wasn't long before his curiosity had him investigating the enticing role of "advance man." That led him to a productive phase as advance man for the famous WW I entertainers, The Dumbbells, an all-soldier review that had entertained thousands of troops overseas.

He enjoyed travelling, arranging publicity, and boosting ticket sales but he wanted something more substantial. His next step was to hook up with a Toronto publisher who gave him a desk and someone to take phone messages. Now, he was a publicity agent.

And while still in publicity, he expected more out of his future. As he envisioned, if he was ever going to become a public relations counselor, he had to offer more than publicity. That led him to start thinking about reputation and the need to manage it as a resource. In other words, he wanted his clients to improve how they were perceived by the public, independent of whether any publicity was involved.

In 1928, he publicized the opening of the Royal York Hotel. Other clients included the Canadian National Exhibition and Australia.

Cowan opened Canada's first public relations firm, Editorial Services Limited, in 1930 and the famous brands and names began to build an impressive legacy. His clients included Brewers Warehousing, International Nickel, Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, Revenue Properties, Steep Rock Iron Mines, and Canada Steamship Lines. Cowan was also an advisor to U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, from 1935 to 1939.

By 1939, Cowan had a staff of 30-40, as the Canadian office of New York's Institute of Public Relations.

As he made his way through the trials and tribulations of a new business, Cowan clearly understood that his greatest asset was his natural flair for quickly assessing what a client was trying to explain and then communicating that clearly and concisely for the public. It became the modus operandi for his and future generations of practitioners.

An early challenge was the campaign to introduce lobster to a Canadian public, who looked on it as a new and different food.

For years, the live lobsters harvested along the Atlantic coast went to the U.S., but the biggest part of the harvest went to the canneries and then to the UK and France. Abroad, Canadian lobster was highly rated but, at home, it was unknown. When WW II destroyed the lobster fishers' principal market, it soon became clear that the lobstermen would have to depend on domestic sales. The job of selling it to Canadians involved introducing a completely new food product. Soon, advertising began to influence the Canadian public and so did Jimmy Cowan's deft public-relations work.

Pictures soon appeared in magazines of lobster fishermen, with stories of their lives and work. In theatres, movie trailers told the same stories. The master chefs of Canada even staged a contest among themselves for a new lobster dish.

In those days, lobsters were graded and cans were very plain. Soon, fancy labels were devised. Canadians may not have been aware that the influences which lead them to regard the crustacean as a desirable delicacy were Cowan-arranged, but they started eating lobster.

In its first year of domestic sales, lobsters sold out. The government established new standards in the lobster industry. Domestic foods had to meet quality standards, unlike exports; so canneries were inspected and regulated. Prices were established for the basic producers. Apart from selling Canada's lobster and maintaining the income for nearly 100,000 persons, the lobster industry had subsequently found its domestic feet.

Despite having three of its own PR departments and an outside agency, Rank Films of Great Britain hired him as a director of press relations, where he assisted such famous movie stars as Alec Guinness, Laurence Olivier, John Mills, Deborah Kerr, Trevor Howard, Jean Simmons, Stewart Granger, Basil Rathbone, Michael Redgrave, and Leslie Howard.

By now, his reputation as a doer and shaker was starting to build. At age 44, he was described as the acknowledged master mind of the public-relations business. Later described as the "Dean of Canada's PR Men" one writer commented, "when Cowan picks up that telephone, it seems he can reach almost any level of business, government, or the communication industry. His clients include some of Canada's most intriguing enterprises and his relationship with many of them stays unknown."

All things considered, probably his most impressive achievement came as one of

the founding fathers of the Stratford Festival, in the early 1950s.

As the story goes, Dora Maver Moore, the Canadian theatre legend, approached Cowan about the PR strategy for the Stratford Festival and asked him to help reach out to the theatre community in the United Kingdom. Cohen introduced Moore and Tom Patterson to Leonard Brockington, then the president of the Rank Organization.

One of the first things the Rank team did was to help the Stratford committee set up a realistic budget. Cowan then recommended that the key to the opening season was having a high-profile headliner for the festival. Rank's London office arranged for none other than Alec Guinness to be released from his picture commitments, allowing him to come to Stratford for its first season.

As a PR specialist, Cowan came up with the concept of creating Stratford, not as an event, but rather as a destination. That's because he believed it was critical to have strong pre-season ticket sales, as opposed to building the project gradually. His strategy launched the plays like a movie première, something he knew a great deal about as the North American PR Director for Rank films and Odeon theatres. He and his stockbroker friend, John Frame, provided their first year's campaign pro bono.

As part of his plan, Cowan convinced his sister-in-law, Mary Joliffe, who had just finished her teaching career, to be the festival's first publicist. With her brother-in-law's mentoring and her own remarkable talents, Joliffe filled the position for seven years.

The first season was enormously successful because Cowan promoted the sale of Stratford tickets through travel agents. His research had shown him that people were now prepared to travel distances to attend special functions. This travel-agent approach won important advanced ticket sales in Boston, Chicago, New York and other cities.

On opening night, 99 critics attended including the major New York reviewers. There was even a critic from the old Brooklyn Eagle. Cowan quipped, "It must've been the first time anyone ever left Brooklyn for culture."

Later that summer, the local citizens who had pooh-poohed the festival and delayed buying tickets were dismayed when the season sold out.

Cowan's early reputation was earned with national resource clients like Inco, Steep Rock Iron Mines, and the radium industry.

He may well have been the first practitioner to use illustrated booklets to educate the public. As he observed:

“The public is always anxious for information. We did a booklet on salt once, Canadian - produced salt. It did not ballyhoo any company. It just told how important that industry was to Canada. Our interest, of course, was in preserving the industry’s position as far as tariffs, taxes, and so on are concerned. That was many years ago. Every week we get at least half a dozen requests for copies. And the requests are all from schoolteachers. I can show you a list of their names. There are thousands of them. Some have written 15 or 18 times. We put good information into that book. It shows that people want to know facts about things, all kinds of things. The government department wrote asking where we got our facts. They were surprised. Yet it was just a story of where salt comes from, how it is recovered, and some of its main uses.”

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Cowan continued, “If a kid bothers to write for a booklet, you can be sure he is going to read it,” Cowan explained. “Then he will be an informed citizen on this subject. Slowly, you build up an informed public. The student writing an essay five years ago is a voter today.”

Cowan’s work for the radium industry was exemplary for its time. Despite his suspicion that the effectiveness of radium, as a medical treatment, was so fantastic it couldn’t be true, he took on the job of establishing Canada as an industry player on world radium markets.

He was intrigued by the romance of Gilbert Labine’s discovery of the radium mine on Great Bear Lake and the incredible processes by which rock, thousands of miles from nowhere, finally becomes a match-size tube of hope to despairing sufferers.

Jimmy bucked the Belgian’s syndicate world-wide marketing organization by selling the story of radium itself, the romance of the Canadian discovery and, incidentally, by letting the world know of this promising new supply. He sold and resold the story of the Curies; he brought Eve Curie to Canada’s radium reduction plant at Port Hope. He took the then Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir, to the mine near the Arctic Circle. He sold engineering publications the story of Canadian efforts to find the process of reduction and intimated the Belgians had declined to cooperate.

He organized a Western Hemisphere committee, with members from every nation in the hemisphere, to watch research and supervise radium distribution. Not the least important result of this campaign was that the price of radium, on the world

market, dropped from \$75,000 a gram to around \$25,000.

Cowan led the life of a night hawk. His business associates said he had a memory an elephant would envy, but he was often in trouble for missing before-lunch appointments, as most days he was waking around noon. Articulate about most things, he was tight-lipped about others. For instance, no one knew how he voted. When it came to accepting political jobs, he was highly selective. He believed a politician ought to be good enough to keep his own public relations straight. And the same selectivity applied to accepting high-profile individuals on their public relations.

“What could I tell Winston Churchill?” was his comeback. “People,” he said, “who can attract attention don’t warrant its being attracted. But corporations will lose control of their relations because no one individual, perhaps, speaks for them or defines policy. Or an entire profession or industry will suffer for the mistakes or misdeeds of a few members. That is when they must get together, sort themselves out, discuss what they really feel and represent, and correctly present themselves. An outsider can help: He brings a fresh view.”

At the same time, he insisted that no one can put across an inherently unsound proposition. He believed newspaper and magazine people were about the smartest in the world and no one could fool them for very long and remain in business.

Cowan was also personal and corporate advisor to McMaster grad, Cyrus Eaton, one of North America’s most successful businessmen, who owned the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. Eaton became famous for his Pugwash, Nova Scotia Conferences on Science and World Affairs.

In 1941, Cowan married Grace Joliffe; they were divorced in 1963. Later that year he married Mary Welsman.

In 1958, James was one of the six businessmen who brought Louis Tussaud’s Wax Museum to Niagara Falls, Ontario. To generate publicity, Cowan flew the costumed wax images of Bloody Queen Mary and Beethoven as first-class passengers on a Pan-American Airways flight from England to Canada. One can only imagine what other passengers thought as they saw that pair sitting there while they were boarding. Christopher Columbus and Horatio Lord Nelson sailed together up the St. Lawrence Seaway. Khrushchev arrived in a Cadillac convertible on the International Bridge. Prime Ministers Diefenbaker, Macmillan, and Nehru had special police escort from Malton Airport in Toronto. Various presidents, members of the royal

family and others of the great, the good, and the villainous, all were received with great fanfare.

And it worked. The company had gross sales of \$100,000 in the first 55 days, exceeding their investment of \$90,000.

One of his recreational interests was nature. His love of nature included a number of conservation projects, including his work helping to secure Canadian support of the Quetico-Superior Foundation to preserve the boundary waters area that created the largest international wilderness preserve in the world. Additionally, he had a great interest in promoting adult education and literacy. He worked with the Canadian Association for Adult Education led by J. R. Kidd of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education on numerous projects.

Cowan was elected the first president of the Canadian Film Institute in 1950 and held office until 1966. He was also one of the founding board members of CTV Television Network and one of the masterminds behind Expo '67, Montreal's highly successful Man and His World World's fair.

Later, Jimmy served as the Canadian Cancer Society's first national campaign chairman and as a member of the national board for 18 years.

He was recognized for his community service and awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal in 1953.

Jimmy Cowan left us on September 9, 1978, at Bracebridge, Ontario. He is buried at the Mickle Cemetery in Gravenhurst, Ontario.

Our profession remains in his debt.

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Completed on November 25, 2025