

Josette Massy

YOCOM PROFILE



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B.A., M.Sc., APR

Montréal, Québec

Josette Massy, founder of Massy-Forget Communications in 1982, distinguished herself through her efforts to secure a prominent place for women in public relations and the business world, in addition to contributing to the visibility and recognition of the profession, notably as a founding member of the *Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* in 1998. A permanent member of the SRQ (now SQPRP), she devoted her time and energy to making herself known and heard, showing an entire generation of young women the importance of being fearless at a time when the profession was still a male-dominated specialty.

In this regard, she will quickly become the only French speaker in a national network of owner-operated agencies in all major Canadian cities.

At the helm of Massy-Forget Communications until 2002, she became deeply involved with various cultural and business organizations, notably the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal (CCMM). Her outstanding contributions were recognized in 2012 by the *Société québécoise des professionnels en relations publiques* (SQPRP), which awarded her the Yves-Saint-Amand Award for the excellence of her professional work and her dedication to the profession and the next generation. In 2017, she received the Distinction in Consulting Award from the *Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* (ACRPQ), highlighting her exceptional contribution, the excellence of her work, and her ongoing commitment to the field.

Her personal and professional influence has left a lasting mark, with the agency she founded continuing to thrive to this day. In 2002, her daughter, Mylène Forget, became the new owner, while Josette Massy remains actively involved as Chair of the Board of Directors. This enduring leadership has contributed to the agency's remarkable longevity of over 40 years.

Her legacy reflects a powerful and sustained contribution to public relations practice in Quebec, providing deep roots for the profession and amplifying the voices of women within it.

What year did you start practicing public relations; with what organization; where?

I came into public relations quite by accident. After completing a Bachelor of Arts and a Master's degree in Biology, I stepped away from my studies for ten years to take care of my family and raise my two daughters. I later returned to university to pursue a PhD in Science (Physiology).

I had already passed my comprehensive exam and begun writing my thesis when my thesis director was invited to spend a year at a prestigious university in California. One must remember that at the time, there was no Internet and no FaceTime. I therefore decided to put my studies on hold during that period and explore something new. That decision changed my life.

A few initiatives led me to obtain a science-popularization radio program on CKAC, a major radio station at the time, and to become a researcher at TVA for a weekly public affairs program, *La parole est à vous*. These two experiences sparked my passion for communications. At TVA, in addition to researching topics and selecting guests, I was responsible for preparing the guests for what awaited them on set. As luck would have it, I met the President of the Quebec Chamber of Commerce, who asked whether I could handle the public relations for the first edition of *Les Mercuriades*—now a well-known competition—and mentioned it would be on a volunteer basis. I accepted, as I have always loved a challenge, and thought it would be an opportunity to work in a new field. I adored the experience.

I must have done a good job, because I was asked to do it again the following year. This time, I requested compensation—enough to launch my business in 1982, in one of the rooms on the second floor of our home, and to purchase my first computer. Massy-Forget Communications was born.

Three years later, we were four people working out of beautiful shared offices in Old Montréal. After another three years, we relocated downtown, where our team had grown to six. Three more years later, we occupied an entire floor of a prestigious building, with a team of sixteen, including three jurists, reflecting the growing number of crisis-management mandates. Our clients referred new clients to us, making it increasingly unnecessary to actively seek new business.

Alongside this growth, we were among the first firms in Quebec to implement a network of interconnected computers linked to multiple printers and to a fax machine—quite innovative at the time. A custom-designed computerized time-tracking system, integrated with a highly advanced billing software for its era, also greatly facilitated the management of the firm, all of this in the late 1980s.



In 2002, I fulfilled my dream of successfully transitioning the company to the second generation. This remains one of my greatest prides, particularly as it marked a first for a firm founded by a woman.

My daughter, Mylène Forget, a jurist, acquired the firm, which is now operated under the name Massy Forget Langlois Public Relations.

Today, more than 40 years later, the company is still thriving, guided by the same principles of quality and integrity that have defined it since its very beginnings.

To get a more general idea of your background in communications, could you give us an overview of your career path over the years?

And so, on May 1, 1982, I found myself in my small home office with a single mandate and the absolute certainty that I simply could only succeed. Ah, youth!

My first step was to join the Montreal Chamber of Commerce, where I was able to meet business leaders and enter a world that was entirely new to me. Little by little, I began securing short-term mandates that helped me define my new field of work. And when a mandate was too complex for the skills I had at the time, I would hire an experienced freelancer and learn alongside them.

One Sunday morning, just a few weeks after I had started, my office phone rang around 8 a.m. Naturally, since I was working from home, I answered. It was my first client in crisis management, calling because no one at the large PR firms could be reached on a Sunday. The crisis involved an explosives plant near Montreal, where an accident had caused a fatality. I decided to jump in.

The next day, with a respected freelancer in this field, we went to meet the client and immediately set up a crisis management unit, organized a press conference, and established communications with all three levels of government. It was one of the most intense weeks of my career, but we succeeded in positioning the company as a responsible organization—showing compassion for the family of the victim, support for the remaining workers, and serious, credible accountability to the community. All while responding to government authorities who, in the following weeks, appeared satisfied with how the company had handled the situation.

This success helped build the firm's reputation and made me realize that, quite naturally, I had applied to my PR work the same logic and intellectual rigour I had developed through my scientific training.

In less than five years, the firm built an impeccable reputation and established a highly respected position within the field. It was described as a public relations boutique—a small, specialized firm focused on expertise, close client relationships, and tailored solutions rather than size and volume.

I have always been driven by a strong appetite for challenges, and in this new professional path, I operated as I always had. I could have declined that first, highly complex mandate, but the idea never crossed my mind. This mindset, which comes naturally to me, is one I sought to instill in the many young people I supported and trained within my firm. Don't be afraid to move forward, I would tell them, but make sure the risks you take are calculated. And never hesitate to seek the advice of the experts around you—because mistakes may be part of the learning process, but disasters must be avoided.

It was during this period that I began to consider expanding our services by establishing a presence elsewhere in Canada. To secure mandates spanning multiple regions, I needed to develop a network. Following brief trips that took me from Halifax to Vancouver, I worked with the owners of the agencies I had met to create an affiliate structure that brought together firms in major Canadian cities. Like my own, these agencies were all independent and owner-managed, and we shared a common need to come together as a network.

An initial meeting of the firm leaders allowed us to establish an agreement grounded in trust, with standardized fees and operating terms that facilitated the exchange of information and mandates. It was a bold initiative, particularly at the time, and it opened new horizons for our firm beyond Quebec. We were the only francophone agency within the network.

In 1987, I was invited to co-chair the annual conference of the *Société des relationnistes du Québec* (as the SQPRP was then known). My involvement in numerous professional committees and causes has continued ever since.

It was deeply rewarding to witness, in such a short period of time, the recognition of my work and that of my team by our peers.



In the years that followed, *Publics*, a magazine dedicated to public relations in Québec, devoted a six-page feature to my work under the headline “An Entrepreneur Who Is Not Afraid to Take Risks,” highlighting my role as a founding woman and leader of a public relations agency in Quebec.

Numerous other articles and mentions—both in specialized publications and in the general press—also helped raise the profile of our firm and increase its visibility over time.

A few years later, in 1998, I took part in the creation of the *Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* (ACRPQ), which brought together the leading public relations firms in Quebec.



Later, in 2012, I had the great privilege of receiving the Yves St-Amand Award from the SQPRP, in recognition of professional excellence and sustained commitment to both the profession and the next generation. In 2017, I was also awarded the Distinction in Consulting Award by the ACRPQ.

I accepted these honours with great pride, especially given the challenges women faced at the time in establishing themselves in the profession.

The following two anecdotes help illustrate this reality.

ACRPQ Distinction Award.
Pictured here with her daughter, Mylène Forget.

Montreal Chamber of Commerce

From 1982 onward, I was an active member of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce, participating in various committees and initiatives.

I quickly realized that, although women make up 51% of the country's population, none were represented on the Chamber's Board of Directors.

Fueled by my natural enthusiasm, I decided in 1985 to establish a committee called Access 51, aimed at driving change and enabling women to join the Chamber's Board as well as the boards of major corporations, where they were practically absent.

This committee, composed of men and women, defined itself as a bridge working for the common good, without conflict or confrontation.

That same year, at the Chamber's annual conference, the press relations efforts carried out by my team ensured that some media coverage focused on our committee and the importance of including women on the Board.

The Director General at the time took offense, and under pressure, appointed two women from my committee to the Board—telling me he did not want to appoint me because I was “so combative”. I responded that it was unfortunate that a quality admired in a male business leader could be seen as a flaw in a female business leader. Fortunately, things have changed since then...

Club St-Denis (a business club founded in 1874, from which women were excluded)

This took place in the 1990s. The president of Club St-Denis at the time reached out to me for advice. Several presidents before him had, one after another, tried to allow businesswomen to become members—without success. The new president was determined to succeed.

I suggested preparing a full set of arguments that he could present at the next board meeting, outlining specific reasons why the rules should change. He accepted my suggestion.

At the end of my brief, as a final resort, I included one final question that he could ask if all else failed: “But what are we afraid of? How is the presence of women at the Club dangerous?”

I don’t know which arguments convinced the board in the end, but women were finally granted access to that prestigious Club. I was among the first.

If you look back over the years you’ve been working in public relations, what would you consider your crowning achievement for a client/ organization? Why? When was that?

That first mandate—the explosives plant—is, in my view, one of my greatest accomplishments. During the year that followed the accident, our communications work within the community led to a rather unexpected outcome: the municipality selected the company as “Business of the Year”.

That moment made me fully understand the crucial importance of communications.

This experience was also transformative for my firm, which went on to build a reputation as a PR boutique combining intellectual rigor and exceptional client service.

If you look back over the years you’ve been working in public relations, what would you say your worst moment was? Why? When was that?

My worst moment—I remember it as if it were yesterday—ultimately turned into one of the best, as you will see.

Five years after launching the firm, we had offices downtown Montreal and a team of six, including our receptionist and myself.

One morning, the receptionist informed me that someone from the Coca-Cola marketing office in Toronto wanted to speak with me. My immediate reaction was

that it had to be a prank. I simply could not imagine that a company of that size would be interested in the services of a small firm like mine. But I decided to play along and took the call, assuming I would unmask the prankster within a few seconds. The conversation remained perfectly serious, right up to the point where a meeting was scheduled. I hung up and forgot about it, thinking that one day I would find out who had tried to trick me.

But on the day of the meeting, the receptionist came to my office with a puzzled expression to let me know that three gentlemen from Coca-Cola had just arrived. I was stunned. At my request, she placed them in the conference room. I joined them as soon as I had caught my breath.

After the usual greetings, I immediately explained the situation: I had not believed Coca-Cola would honour us by considering a meeting. And I played the card that has always served me well: the truth.

I gave them a choice—either to remove us permanently from their list of potential firms, or to give us a second chance, knowing that they would be our primary client and that I would personally oversee their account.

They scheduled another meeting!

We won Coca-Cola's global public relations mandate for Quebec and kept it for 11 years.

That “worst moment” became the beginning of something extraordinary, because having Coca-Cola in our client roster opened the door to many others.

Strategic communications planning: what changes have you seen since you started in public relations? And what are the implications?

When I began, most of our work consisted of one-off mandates—press conferences, product launches, media tours, crisis management and so on. Over time, clients increasingly began working with us on a retainer basis, which meant we were integrated into their management team and involved on an ongoing basis.

Very quickly, I started proposing—and often securing—the opportunity to prepare a comprehensive communications plan for the organization. This allowed us to work with clear, defined objectives rather than reacting to isolated requests.

Over the years, public relations evolved from being a secondary function, used only when a need or a problem arose, into a recognized management function that plays an integral role in the organization's overall strategy.

What changes have you seen since starting a career in public relations, and the implications, with respect to the following areas:

Media Relations

In the early years of my practice, media relations required a great deal of time and patience. The strategic component—analyzing the situation, identifying audiences, defining objectives, and so on—has not changed much over time, but the technical side has changed completely. Forty years ago, one of the first steps in preparing any media activity was to create a press list. At the time, there were many more journalists than today, and they changed beats frequently. And of course, there were no computers, so researching who covered what had to be done manually—mostly by phone. Each media event, even when held shortly after the previous one, required updating the entire press list.

There were no social media then, and the number of TV stations and newspapers was limited. Magazines had to be contacted under embargo up to three months before their deadline. We had to make sure every targeted outlet was reached at the right time and in the right way—without any electronic assistance and using the tools of the era: mail, fax, special couriers, and countless follow-up phone calls.

For those who did not experience the era of couriers, these were young messengers who would pick up envelopes at the office—often within an hour of a telephone request—and deliver them across the city by bicycle, regardless of the weather.

Today, everything is different. You know the current methods better than I do. Information is continuous. What happens on the other side of the world reaches us instantly, and digital and social media relay news so quickly that even the smallest error spreads like wildfire. At the same time, there are fewer journalists, and influencers now occupy significant space.

Progress is not always positive, in my view, and the speed that defines today's world allows information to circulate in real time—but also misinformation. I find this deeply concerning.

Media Organizations and reporting quality

I witnessed the beginning of what I consider a media revolution.

When I started, the media landscape was solid and limited: a few newspapers, magazines, weeklies, and a handful of radio and television stations. Journalists were specialized, and most worked exclusively for the outlet that employed them.

Less than ten years later, media organizations began to consolidate, often for financial reasons. With the arrival of the Internet and multiplatform publishing,

journalists had no choice but to become more versatile, as they were now expected to produce content not only for their traditional outlets but also for new digital platforms.

At the same time, advertising revenues for traditional media declined dramatically. By the 2010s, we saw the beginning of the collapse of print journalism and the shift toward digital—now our everyday reality.

I no longer receive any printed newspapers, and even my neighbourhood weekly has gone digital.

To this likely irreversible digital shift, we must now add the increasingly “capable” presence of artificial intelligence. One may wonder what role AI will play in newsrooms in the coming years. Will journalism be standardized downward with automatically generated content and only slight variations depending on each outlet’s AI settings? With all the potential for misinformation that such a scenario could bring...

Employee / Internal communications

Although human resources departments have always understood the importance of communicating with employees, I observed that, in my time, this area was often the neglected side of public relations. Internal communications generally became active only after a crisis or during major cultural shifts such as mergers or the implementation of new work procedures.

During my career, we professionally managed at most half a dozen internal newsletters. But I should note that some of our clients produced simple photocopied sheets sharing updates about employees. It was better than nothing.

Shareholder / Investor Relations

Our work in this area was limited to producing annual reports, organizing annual general meetings and drafting the speeches delivered on those occasions.

Overall Application of Stakeholder Relations Planning

In my time, stakeholders were already numerous: internal and external audiences, various levels of government, advocacy groups, and more. Each divided into subgroups. I don’t believe that has changed. However, the influence of certain groups has increased significantly.

Environmental groups—along with others focused on key issues in today’s society—have gained considerable weight and visibility. This now goes beyond traditional public relations.

And as for social media! I never had the opportunity to manage that area, having retired before it became widely implemented.

Use of pre and post Campaign Research

This was another underdeveloped area in my early years. Budgets were almost never allocated to research, except in marketing, prior to a product launch. Our corporate clients generally felt that our final report—detailing quantified media results—was sufficient.

Fortunately, mindsets have evolved. I understand that research is now gaining importance, although there is still room for progress.

Issues Management in a Structured, Formalized Way

Issues management has always been a necessary precursor to any rational and professional public relations approach in crisis management or in situations involving potential problems for an organization.

I don't believe this preliminary reflection—essential to preparing a comprehensive strategy—has changed much. Without it, I doubt that a professional strategic plan can be developed.

Quality and Competence of those starting work in Public Relations

I was very surprised to learn how many new public relations firms have been created since I retired. With today's public relations university programs, I am sure that those who work in PR have the skills required to serve their clients professionally and according to best practices.

The APR designation, granted by the CPRS, is a mark of quality, and I am proud to place those letters after my name.

Trusting that reputation management is an integral part of good, effective public relations, how is it being applied differently today than, say, 30 years ago?

Reputation management is essential for any organization. What differs today, in my view, is the number of parameters that shape that reputation. It is no longer enough to produce quality goods and services; companies must now meet society's expectations on all fronts: ethics, integrity, honesty, environmental standards, respect for differences, inclusion, and more.

An organization must therefore be fully engaged with both its immediate and broader communities, and demonstrate that it acts not only in its own interest but also for the collective good.

How do you feel about large national and multinational public relations firms, and small niche firms?

They all have their place. From multinationals firms to generalists or specialized boutiques, they offer a spectrum of services that organizations can choose from according to their needs.

A global company might need several firms: a multinational one for international requirements, and multiple local boutiques—valued for their knowledge of regional or national contexts—for more specialized services that require familiarity with local customs and realities.

Is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding how the practice of PR has changed since you've been involved in it? For example, how do you think ethics as a fundamental principle of communication and issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity have evolved in your view? And what about today's role and responsibilities of women in PR?

When I began my career, ethics was rarely discussed. Public relations were primarily aimed at influencing public opinion. Over time, the field evolved toward building relationships with audiences—relationships based on listening, dialogue, respect, and transparency. It became essential to ensure that all information disseminated served to establish and maintain trust with the public. This approach has become increasingly critical with the rise of social media, which continuously broadcast information and expose any ethical lapses almost instantly.

Regarding the role of women in PR, much has changed. Women were already well represented in firms and organizations in the 1980s, but most often in secondary roles. I realized this when I noticed that, at the time, I was the only woman who had founded an agency. Over the years, women have taken on increasingly prominent roles, and today they are highly visible, holding more leadership positions in PR firms and large organizations. However, it seems to me that women remain less represented in the fields of lobbying and public affairs.

During my active years in public relations, at a time when I felt it was important to make my voice heard, I may have inspired young women who were just beginning their careers in the field. I never turned away those who wished to meet with me to discuss career paths in the field, and I have had the deeply gratifying experience of receiving numerous messages confirming that what I had achieved helped some of them find their place in what was, at the time, a strongly male-dominated communications sector.

What are your thoughts on the evolution of social and environmental values in communication practices? And what about the attention given to climate change in today's communication? CSR communications, communications on

sustainable development?

In the 1980s, social and environmental concerns certainly existed, but they played a relatively marginal role in communication strategies. At the time, the focus was primarily on traditional public relations: reputation, media, and operational issues. Environmental matters only began to emerge in certain sectors—particularly natural resources or energy—and corporate social responsibility had not yet fully developed into a structured framework as it has today.

Looking back, what strikes me most is how societal values have gained importance in the way communications are conceived and deployed. Audiences have become more demanding, more informed, and, above all, less tolerant of inconsistencies. Organizations can no longer simply “say the right thing”: they must do the right thing—and demonstrate it. This need for alignment—between words, actions, and real impact—is one of the greatest changes I have observed.

CSR and sustainable development, once seen as peripheral concerns, have become central to many corporate communications. Companies are now evaluated on their ability to contribute positively to society, reduce their footprint, and be accountable. For communicators, this demands rigour and a deep understanding of complex, multidisciplinary, and often sensitive issues.

In short, I see a very clear evolution: we have moved from communication that was essentially transactional to communication that is deeply rooted in values, transparency, and responsibility.

Ultimately, this is a necessary and healthy transformation that delights me. Communication is never more relevant than when it serves the common good.

Where do you see the public relations profession heading?

The world has changed dramatically since I began my career in public relations. From an era when information was based on a limited number of media—TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines—we now find ourselves in a complex digital system that changes the way we communicate. The widespread adoption of the Internet and the proliferation of social media mean that information can be tailored almost individually based on each person’s profile and interests. This fragmentation, while fascinating in itself, makes the task of disseminating information far more complex. The speed at which information spreads also means that any mistake can instantly become catastrophic.

In this context, PR professionals will need to master an ever-growing number of communication channels to reach increasingly fragmented audiences. And since audiences are reading less and less (in my personal opinion), audiovisual communication will become increasingly dominant.

And then there is artificial intelligence! I really doubt it will replace PR professionals.

However, it is a highly useful tool for handling routine tasks and will almost certainly be used more and more as its capabilities continue to improve.

On a personal note, I somehow miss the relative slowness of communication during my active years. We had time to reflect, documents traveled by courier, and were returned in the same way, giving us time to think. Today, when I receive a message, I am sometimes called five minutes later and asked why I haven't yet replied!

What advice would you give, as a mentor, to a young person entering the public relations field?

I have often helped young people who were considering a career in PR. Many of them had a mistaken idea of what the work really involved.

I would tell a young person to begin by obtaining a solid academic education. PR work requires professionals to be aware of what is happening in our social, political, economic, and artistic environments, and to understand the issues shaping today's society.

Next, he or she should develop critical thinking skills in order to distinguish truth from falsehood in a world where misinformation is pervasive.

Finally, this person must have the courage to take risks and not accept "no" as an answer. How many times in my career was I told that something was impossible? But I tried anyway—and often succeeded.

Above all, I would tell them that respect must guide everything they do: respect for the truth, respect for individuals, respect for the organization they work for, and respect for the values of our society.

Awards and distinctions

- **1982–2002:** Active member of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce
- **1985–1987:** Member of the jury for the Person of the Year Award granted by the Governor General of Canada
- **1985–1987:** Member of the jury for Quebec regional weeklies
- **1986–1988:** Member of the Board of Directors of the Société des relationnistes du Québec
- **1986–1990:** Member of the Board of the Théâtre populaire du Québec Foundation
- **1987:** Co-chair of the Congress of the Société des relationnistes du Québec
- **1987:** Chair of the Paul-Dumont-Frenette Award Committee of the Société des relationnistes du Québec
- **1987:** Chair of the organizing committee for the Théâtre populaire du Québec annual gala
- **1994:** Member of the commission advising the City of Montreal on the future of Bonsecours Market

- **1998:** Co-founder of the *Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* (ACRPQ)
- **2002-2004:** President of the *Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* (ACRPQ)
- **2012:** Yves St-Amand Award – presented by the SQPRP
- **2017:** Consulting Award – *presented by the Alliance des cabinets de relations publiques du Québec* (ACRPQ)

Merit scholarships related to my scientific background

- **1967-1969:** National Research Council of Canada (NRC) Scholarship
- **1979-1980:** Quebec Health Research Council Scholarship