

A New World of Communications

An Interview with Robert L. Dilenschneider, Founder and Principal, The Dilenschneider Group, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Dilenschneider formed The Dilenschneider Group in 1991, which is entering its 30th year. Prior to forming his own firm, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Hill and Knowlton from 1986 to 1991, tripling that firm's revenues to nearly \$200 million and delivering more than \$30 million in profit. He was with that organization for nearly 25 years and started his career in public relations in 1967 in New York.



Robert L. Dilenschneider

Dilenschneider serves as a Trustee of the Institute of International Education and is a member of the North American Advisory Board of The Michael Smurfit School of University College Dublin. He serves as a judge for The Olin Award, a program of the Olin School of Business at Washington University in St. Louis. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Economic Clubs of New York and Chicago and has also served on numerous corporate boards. A former member of the Board of Governors of the American Red Cross, Dilenschneider also served on the advisory board of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Board of Governors of the New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and The Bretton Woods Committee. He is a former member of the U.S.-Japan Business Council and the Florida Council of 100 and is a Knight of Malta. Dilenschneider has authored 14 books including his latest, *Decisions*, which was published by Kensington Press in 2018. He received an MA in journalism from The Ohio State University and a BA from the University of Notre Dame. In 2001, he received an honorary Doctorate of Public Service degree from Muskingum College, and in 2012 he received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of New Haven.

COMPANY BRIEF Headquartered in New York and Chicago, The Dilenschneider Group (dilenschneider.com) provides a limited and select few access to the finest communications professionals in the world, with experience in fields ranging from mergers and acquisitions and crisis communications to marketing, government affairs and international media. The company's objective is to bring its clients a level of communications counsel, creativity and an exposure to networks and contacts not available elsewhere.

The world is fighting a public health crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

Like everyone else who knows the risks and sacrifices these amazing, dedicated people have undergone, I am full of gratitude. But just saying thank you is not enough. It's what we do next that will demonstrate the real depth of our appreciation. There are many things to be done on their behalf, but first and foremost is making sure they have the support and supplies they need, like personal protective equipment, for future crises. They should never have to undergo again the same terrible stress and dangers.

The Dilenschneider Group is a purpose-driven firm with a long history of supporting its employees, clients and communities. How have you adapted your business during this unprecedented time to continue to effectively support your employees, clients and communities?

Like many other businesses in America, we have had to rely extensively on telecommuting and teleconferencing. Fortunately for us, that is not only feasible, but very successful, since our team of professionals can communicate with and serve our clients extremely well that way. What we miss are the benefits of face-to-face meetings with clients – and among ourselves, I should add – but all in all, we've gone through this without missing a beat.

The Dilenschneider Group was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How is the firm addressing its business during this time to succeed in this challenging environment?

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Much of the advice we offered to clients still holds, like delivering speeches, holding media interviews, sponsoring conferences, and meeting with influencers. But modern technology offers a vast array of alternatives, from Zoom conferences to the whole range of social media and much more, so we’ve added services to this extraordinary new world of communications to our offering.

How has your team changed the way they work to be effective with the changes that have been necessary for all businesses to make and how proud are you to see the resilience of your people?

Well, let me say, as we enter our 30th year in business this October, that I couldn’t be prouder of my colleagues who, if anything, have upped their game. As I said, we are giving clients new kinds of advice and services, but in terms of operating the business, we continue to consult constantly among ourselves to develop the best ways to serve clients. It really is a team effort.

There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a “new normal.” What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like and how is The Dilenschneider Group preparing for the next stage in this crisis?

We know there will be many changes in our society, but a lot will depend on how long the pandemic goes on and how much economic damage and social upheaval results. Great numbers of small businesses won’t survive, a tragic loss for the people involved and for our nation. But once the all-clear has sounded, there will be a resurgence of entrepreneurship. These new small businessmen and women will need a lot of financing, so the banks have to be ready for that. And these new entrepreneurs will need a lot of guidance on how to run a business and communicate their message, so that’s where we see The Dilenschneider Group playing a large role.

The Dilenschneider Group is headquartered in New York City. What are the keys to the City’s recovery and how critical is it for there to be a strong public/private partnership to ensure a safe and effective reopening?

I’m glad you brought up public/private partnerships, because they have been one of the most effective tools in New York City’s kit for a long time, from the financial crisis of the ’70s to the restoration of a once-decrepit Central Park. Those partnerships will be crucial as the City comes out of the pandemic. And again, a lot of the work will have to be done at the small business level where so much of the damage is being inflicted. Beyond that, among the FIRE industries that are the backbone of the City’s economy – finance, insurance and real estate – it is probably real estate that will have the hardest recovery since so much office space is now vacant. But New York City’s economy is like a rubber ball. When it goes down, the very fact that there are unexpected opportunities, like all that empty office space competing for tenants, gives it new resilience and it bounces back.

What do you see as the role that business can play as a force for good in society by bringing its talent, expertise and resources to help address global crises?

The potential is enormous because, as you rightly say, the business community is the world’s reservoir of talented, resourceful people. I think one thing that’s going to happen next is that many more business leaders will start thinking about the responsibilities they and their organizations have to the world at large. The mantra that we’re all in this together is right, and I believe that realization is going to produce a very positive benefit in the future.

You are known to be an optimistic person. During this difficult and uncertain time, what are you telling your people and what would you say to young people across the country who are deeply concerned and uncertain about the future?

To quote an old baseball saying, “Ya gotta believe!” In other words, I would tell everyone, especially young people, to have faith in the United States. Dedicate yourself to playing your role – whether it’s as a student, employer, employee, public servant or budding businessperson – and we’re all going to come out of this stronger than ever. ●

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