

Vol.32 No.11
March 13, 1989DON'T EXPECT SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, AVERS BERNAYS

In my judgment the vocation of public relations covers too many different items & approaches to categorize them in a page or two. That does not & cannot tell the whole story. And minimizes the true impact & value of public relations to society.

"People power is the most powerful force in our society & has many more approaches to it than can be covered by several pages. To me, the practice of public relations is that of an applied social scientist, who advises clients or employers on the attitudes & actions to take in order to win the support of the publics upon whom the viability of the institution depends. And the goals must be socially sound.

"The Complete Medical Guide contains a listing of 2404 different treatments of disease. Situations that demand guidance of a public relations adviser cover as many or more items as the Guide. Attempting to list them in a page or two belittles the vocation. A wise public relations adviser advises clients or employers on all public matters, as a lawyer does on all legal matters."

So the question remains: how to organize this information for 20-sec, memorable, useful, sound-bite transmission to CEOs?

-- We asked Ed Bernays to comment on the "3 agendas" approach to explaining how public relations adds value to organizations (pr 2/13). His response began "I am glad to answer your question. I have given much thought to it over the last 72 years...."

ITEMS OF INTEREST FOR PRACTITIONERS

Even Small Companies Can Offer Employee Service Programs at little or no cost, says National Employee Services & Recreation Assn (Westchester, Ill). While many large cos offer discount tickets, group travel, wellness programs, etc., limited budget companies usually forego such amenities. "Avenues do exist which allow them to offer such services," e.g. establishing memberships at health clubs which offer corporate rates, turning a conference room into an exercise room, holding seasonal parties & activities at municipal parks, piggy-backing with larger companies. For more info on offering employee service programs on a low budget: NESRA, 2400 S. Downing Ave, Westchester, Ill 60154.

Humor Had Become A Necessity For Leaders, gone from being an admirable characteristic to a mandatory one, says Robert Orben, ed of Orben's Current Comedy. "The recognized importance of a sense of humor has now taken a front & center position in business, politics, medicine, teaching, & communication. Laughter is in." Indeed, Ronald Reagan's jolly countenance helped him maintain popularity with the public, just as Jimmy Carter's gradually-turned-grim personality did him in (pr 2/27). And as recent political debates illustrate, "Rebutting humor with facts, figures, and counter-charges only leaves you open to the question, 'What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?'"

LETTING ADVERSARIES PARTICIPATE DISPELS THEIR FEELINGS OF ABUSE, CREATES SINGLENESS OF PURPOSE: PACBELL MADE THEM A TASK FORCE TO DECIDE HOW IT COULD RESPOND TO REAL CONSUMER NEEDS

People will only get behind those decisions they've had a voice in making, states the Rule of Participation. And until you deal with their feelings of abuse, states a companion rule, they can't even hear what you're saying. Pacific Bell (San Francisco) applied these rules in a case that is public relations at its brightest. What led the company down this path was the web of difficulties it faced in the wake of the Bell System breakup:

- A. Key public interest groups saw the Bell companies as monolithic institutions, at odds with human & public service needs.
- B. Gov't restrictions allowed them to offer basic phone service -- local calling, dial tone, access to long distance carriers -- but not hardware, software, or any additional services to meet consumer needs. These restrictions would not allow PacBell to grow & compete by manufacturing or producing, e.g. electronic mail, voice mail, data transfer, etc.
- C. Public policy was bogged down in regulatory minutiae, unable to focus on the broader issues. Neither gov't, activists nor Baby Bells themselves had a "public interest vision of what a true mass market info age would mean."

"In France they started giving away dumb terminals, hooked up to a giant computer -- the French phone system which is owned by the government. 8,000 new on-line services have developed over the past few years. The hook they used was the directory. Before that, the phone system was a mess -- you could never figure out what someone's phone number was. Mitterand wanted to turn that around, so the gov't devised an electronic rolodex. They distributed terminals to the general public, and now citizens & businesses use these terminals that are networked into the phone company. In the US, we are capable of doing this and much more."

Creating the Task Force Attempting to loosen the stifled business climate, PacBell drew 11 representatives from consumer & community groups (e.g. Christian Leadership, Chinese For Affirmative Action, Grey Panthers, Hispanic Rights) & formed the Intelligent Network Task Force -- a mixed bag of stakeholders, many of them adversarial. "Some were familiar with the technology, some weren't. Many had opposed us, taken us to court on issues. But none of them had an economic interest in our failure," area vp Steve Coulter told prr.



Objectives: "Thru them, we hoped to reach the FCC, Calif legislators, Public Utilities Commission, federal legislators, the federal judge whose order dismantled the Bell System." For 2 years, PacBell met monthly with the group to:

1. Develop joint vision for PacBell & customers;
2. Build alliances with stakeholders -- enlist adversaries' support by actually demonstrating the capabilities of an intelligent network which enables phone company to provide expanded services with real social/economic value to customers;
3. Reframe public policy debate by lifting from a nuts-and-bolts focus on regulation to broader public interest;
4. Demonstrate applications & benefits of the technology to customers;
5. Loosen restrictive legislative & regulatory policies thru allies;
6. Develop corporate strategies to implement new services.

How Task Force Operated Members were trained to work with the technology and were asked to evaluate the potential, problems & possibilities of expanded services. "We equipped them with computers, hardware, software,

'smart' wiring. They & their families were given in-home training, supervisory service, tours of switching facilities, & met with regulators & consumer reps of their choice." INTF set agenda & objectives. PacBell provided ongoing resources, speakers, training equipment & info. We asked them to help us look at the Information Age, how it would affect their constituencies, and compile a report. Their independence was crucial to the process."

Results INTF recommended that PacBell a) redefine "universal service" by offering "expanded intelligent services via the network"; b) develop a range of new services & broaden "Lifeline" -- reduced rates for economically disadvantaged customers -- to include access to other systems; c) expand gateway services & protocol conversion, which would allow systems to "talk to eachother" and thus save the caller from the "tough stuff" while trying to reach other areas. PacBell responded by concurring with recommendations & adopting them as corporate strategy.

"Both the INTF & PacBell are going in the same direction...not 100%, but in many areas. Other states are looking to do something similar -- regulators themselves are interested. Critics have gone as far as to say we were underhanded, and co-opted people to achieve these results. Certainly, the whole thing upset some consumer advocates in Washington. They don't understand the technology, and some have a vested interest in seeing us fail. But the program's success shows that when honest people and industries of good will sit down and discuss their concerns, they can find common ground and develop an agenda which both parties can be excited about."

INTF then focused on 1) federal & state policy activities, 2) public interest group partnerships in order to encourage implementation, create new markets. Coulter assesses the program:

"It challenged our way of thinking & the thinking of consumer groups, legislators, policy makers. Now they say 'What is the major interest here? The public interest, of course!' Where is the US going? The minutiae is not what it's all about. It's very difficult for any consumer leader to ignore politically active professors from Stanford, or Disabled Rights activists. Now we're in the middle of proceedings regarding Calif rate stability, a major filing for redefining how we're regulated -- this involves a network modernization program. And the INTF report has stimulated tremendous interest."

PAY LINKED TO EVALUATION RESEARCH TRIED IN ADVERTISING; PR NEXT?

Ad campaigns that hit or exceed target scores & are on time/on budget will earn higher compensation from Nestle unit

Carnation Co.(LA). The incentive payment system could also mean lower pay if scores aren't achieved. Baseline research will be conducted before the campaign runs, then matched with post campaign evaluation studies. Marketing consultants told Ad Age they find this superior to incentives based on sales -- because there are so many variables in sales results. Plan has many negatives also:

1. Will the surveys be valid measurement, and if so based on what -- awareness, behavior, feeling, opinion?
2. Does this reduce agencies to vendors of creative services, not strategic advisors or "marketing partners?" Where's the outsider's objectivity?
3. If so, does this establish a division: strategy done in-house, messages & creative by agencies? Will agencies become like printers or mail houses?

This adds another evolution to the tortured attempts to find a "fairer" way to pay for services. Earlier items include 1) value billing; 2) pay-per-placement publicity shops; 3) "retainer roulette" in which the client gets a known monthly figure, then tries to squeeze in as much work as possible. One point seems indisputable: the professions are not paid on performance, primarily because real-world situations are not controllable -- and performance pay therefore is merely gambling. A pragmatic reason for public relations to hurry toward recognition as a profession.

Should the idea spill to public relations, it would seem to apply only to product publicity/promotion. Certainly it seems unfair to use it for fast-shifting, uncontrollable public policy work. But how about specifics like employee morale? The inherent difficulty is that most pr topics demand a partnership between counsel & client, and are not one-dimensional like product marketing. Also, adv'g is more vulnerable due to its commission basis -- which has also been eroding below the traditional 15%.