

Their goal is to align large groups of people with a common cause -- to get them to buy in, not just go along. This is also a traditional goal of public relations, but the question is one of tactics. Trainers who go overboard or manipulate, like all extremists, put the goal at risk. One such is Richard Bandler, co-founder of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, who was recently tried for murder. "Having rejected many of the boundaries governing relations among people, he was like a sailor adrift on a New Age sea...here he could deny not only guilt, but responsibility for the death of Corine Christensen," writes Mother Jones, itself a survivor from the 60s groups that preceded New Age.

Bandler offered a familiar NA promise -- fast & painless change, and "typically dismissed ethical questions with a disturbing sameness: a person can't avoid manipulating others, but with NLP at least s/he can control the manipulation." How often has this argument been raised in defense of pr, marketing, advertising? Bandler ran afoul when "mirroring" exercises went too far & he began imitating peoples' lives. "Like Woody Allen's Zelig, he was lost in a swirling vortex of imitation, deception & manipulation."

NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE LOOKS AGAIN AT WHEN "NO COMMENT" IS LEGITIMATE

Currently, NYSE guidelines for listed companies offer no provision for it; they are advised to confirm rumors affecting their stock that are true & deny those that are false. Now a subcommittee -- of lawyers, of course, since it is the legal implications that concern the Exchange -- has proposed changes that will sound familiar to practitioners.

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Why do stock market goings on require special rules for what is true, what constitutes an honest answer? What's different there from a school district giving false information about an AIDS case, gov't agencies denying considering rules it is in fact discussing? Hospitals & the military have carefully detailed rules for release of patient or incident information. But here's a sticky one: companies developing new products that would lose competitive advantage if it came out. Situation ethics is alive & well in public relations.

"No comment" can be used when it won't mislead investors, but not when corporations are merely hiding behind it to avoid telling what investors have a right to know. Or when they're already on record. Or when disclosure is required by law. NYTimes reports lawyers are having a tough time putting that into legal language.

Problem stems from court rulings enabling companies now to avoid comment even tho Exchange rules say they can't. Widespread use of "no comment" may be eroding investor confidence, given case after case where a company says, no, we're not thinking of merging -- when subsequent events prove this simply untrue. (Has anyone been accused of a PRSA code violation for this obvious breach of basic ethics -- or is it?)

SEC's Carnation rule & Supreme Court's Basic v. Levinson case are cited as reasons companies use "no comment." In Carnation, company lied about merger talks with Nestle by not telling its spokesman about them so he could innocently say there were none. In Basic, court found preliminary merger talks are material & cannot be denied "when a reasonable investor would consider the talks significant."

TO ALLAY EMPLOYEE FEARS, ALLSTATE FINDS THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR QUICK, DIRECT COMMUNICATION FROM THE CEO; NEW STUDY SHOWS THIS TYPE OF FOCUSED ACTIVITY NOW DOMINATES INTERNAL RELATIONS WORK

1988 held immense changes for Allstate Insurance (Northbrook, Ill). Parent Sears Roebuck announced that structural change is imminent; Proposition 103 (rolling back rates to 11/87 and cutting 20%) passed in California; company pulled out of Massachusetts; Sears announced it was selling Sears Tower in Chicago -- all within a few months.

"We sensed employees were upset, that the environment for communication was tenuous, that we had to be cautious," Dick Madden, dir of internal comm told prr. "A random telephone survey of 500 employees indicated yes, there was a high degree of anxiety & concern." To calm fears & squelch rumors, Madden's group arranged a Q&A session between pres Wayne Hedien & chmn Dick Haayen and employees. "We have great support from top mgmt when it comes to communication." But they couldn't meet with all employees, even at home office, to say nothing of locations across the nation. So:

1. Various dept heads were asked to recommend articulate, "typical," non-mgmt employees to prepare and ask questions.
2. Videotapes of session were later used in small group meetings with employees, and finally distributed as a support piece for every employee to take home.
3. Session was subject of special issue of employee publication, "Allstate Now," which begins: "No Allstate employee needs to be told that 1988 brought more changes than ever before -- & more messages that must be communicated."

"The idea of holding informal gatherings in which employees tell top mgrs what's on their minds is not new, or new to Allstate -- it's part of our line function, part of a bigger overall comm plan. In this case, however, the blows came all at once. We addressed the issues within 4 weeks of our telephone survey." Such recognition of employees as Public #1, and such focused programs for them, have replaced the old school of "management-owned in-house publications".

Study Finds Organizational Communicators In Fact Doing What Experts Have Long Urged

Internal publications bid farewell to brides, babies & bowling, finds Conference Board study of comms execs in 281 leading manufacturing, financial & service companies. Restructuring, staff reductions, mergers & acquisitions have created major shifts -- which mean more is demanded of the comm dept. It must carry out mgmt objectives and present serious biz messages. Top 4 tasks: 1) improving morale; 2) informing employees about changes & strategies; 3) explaining employee benefit plans; 4) making employees more productive & quality conscious.



"Such tried & true staples as brides, babies & bowling scores are being replaced with talk of products, business strategies & competitive threats. Increasingly, employees are also demanding better information about their firms' performance & future directions."

- Trends:
- a) use of an array of media -- video, desktop publishing, etc. to convey messages;
 - b) face-to-face meetings between mgrs & staff, which all the research shows is what employees want;
 - c) 60% distribute internally-focused work to outsiders;
- ¶Southwestern Bell ensures accuracy in its employee surveys by contracting outside vendors to conduct study, compile special reports. Headquarters hold mgmt briefings to address problems, brainstorm, develop plan. "In most situations where a determined effort was made to address a problem identified in last year's survey, the results this year show more favorable employee responses," says SW Bell spokesperson.
- d) 3/4ths of respondents develop annual plans for employee comm -- usually part of the corporate plan;
 - e) 60% now monitor effectiveness via employee surveys -- & all report doing readership studies.

This isn't a moot subject. Ragan Report, leading newsletter for internal editors, asks on its current issue's front page whether reported disappearance of bowling scores etc. is real -- because editors still say they're what readers want, or what shows pubs are reader-owned: "...they edit their newsletters for the employees, by God, and that means giving them what they want to read... even about what they're doing at the bowling alley."

(Study \$20 for members, \$60 for non-members from Conference Board, 845 3rd Avenue, New York, NY 10022; 212-759-0900)

INDIANA LAWMAKER WOULD BAN MEDIA USING UNSUBSTANTIATED ALLEGATIONS, ANOTHER BILL (CONN. THIS TIME) CALLS FOR TAXES ON ADVERTISING

¶A Sales Tax On Adv'g would bring in \$90 million annually, says Conn. Senator William DiBella. "Why should advertising be exempt?" he asks, when everything else pays a sales tax of some kind. Tho tax would alleviate his state's budget deficit, bill is assailed by retailers, advertisers & agencies -- who predict its passage would mean disaster for the state economy.

"We don't want Conn to be a state where it's perceived to be a disadvantage to do advertising," says Brian Magree, pres of the Advertising Club of Greater Hartford. "Watch out, because if it happens in Connecticut, it will probably happen in Rhode Island, New York, and Mass. as well. States are starved for revenue." Looks like Florida's ultimately repealed action opened the gates.

¶Bills Restricting Reporting Are A New Twist. Two introduced in the Indiana House call for penalties for news orgns which don't substantiate allegations before running them -- which could sound mighty good to pr pros who've suffered thru too many stories attributed to "a source." "All I'm wanting is for people, before they run a story criticizing someone, to try to substantiate it," says Rep Rep. William Spencer. Bills require that before distribution, media outlets a) confirm unattributed information with at least 2 independent sources, b) or identify a source, c) or state that the info is unsubstantiated. Neglecting this procedure could result in criminal prosecution.

Altho these are supposedly the standard ethics of journalism -- as anyone who has read or watched "All The President's Men" knows -- media don't like the idea of being legislated. "The intent is apparently to hinder investigative reporting," says Richard Cardwell, counsel for the Hoosier State Press Assn. Calling bills "oddest in the nation," he says they could never "survive the slightest breeze from the First Amendment."

CONCERN FOR WORKERS: JUST A COST ITEM? OR ARE THERE OTHER CONSIDERATIONS? "Don't overemphasize wellness as a cost containment strategy," says Bert Seidman, dir of Dept of Occupational Safety, Health & Social Security (DC). He told Worksite Wellness Works newsletter: "It's important, but the health and well being of your workers should be of paramount concern." He urges employers to be sensitive to job & life satisfaction and to implement cost-effective programs which protect confidentiality and are tailored to publics at risk.

When bookstores refused to carry "Satanic Verses" because of fundamentalist Moslem threats, managers cited employee safety & resulting morale problems as their first concern. But if morale is that vital, how explain demoralizing internal policies & the interchangeable-parts approach so common today? Is the answer that such things aren't publicly known, so not as risky? Well-publicized threats -- or similar morale issues that become public -- take precedent because they also affect external publics, such as gov't & customers.

"The safety of the individual is paramount," states the chmn of the terrorism cmte, Amer Soc of Int'l Security. Writes the LA Times, "Concern for a company's public image & its employees' morale has prompted employers to put security first & principle second."

This is why striking unions always run to the media with their appeals. Yet there are few if any cases where public behavior has followed public disapproval. Did hosts of First Amendment supporters not buy from B. Dalton, Waldenbooks, or Barnes & Noble over the book flap? There has never been a successful product boycott in terms of greatly reduced sales. Apparently executives are more responsive to public opinion than they sometimes get credit for. As Ron Rhody of BankAmerica told a class of graduating pr students at San Jose State, "We've moved past the stage where organizations, or even gov'ts for that matter, can manage by command & control as was the mode in the past."

NEW AGE IDEAS AREN'T BAD, JUST OVERSOLD; DANGER FOR PR IS SIMILARITY OF GOALS Many good things in this "new order" (pr 2/20) are already widely adopted, e.g. decentralized power & open organizations -- also basic tenets of pr. New Age movement is driven by ex-hardliners who realize as they near their 40s that materialism & titles are shallow rewards.