

COUNSELOR: DESPITE TREND, PR FIRMS
BETTER OFF INDEPENDENT OF AD AGENCIES;
COLLABORATION NOT COHABITATION

In an address to American Ass'n of Advertising Agencies, Janet Diederichs (Chi) laments the current wave of ad agencies acquiring

pr firms, says the 2 can form viable partnerships without getting married. "PR & advertising are totally different disciplines. Tho both attempt to communicate on behalf of a client, the strategies, tactics, audiences & costs differ significantly. I believe it's our independence from each other that offers clients the best of both worlds -- 2 professional points of view, unencumbered. We should collaborate without one discipline being subservient to the other."

The relationship must be collaborative, parallel to that of practitioners & marketers or practitioners & lawyers, she told prr. "With advertising, collaborative projects include things like product intros, special events, promotions & crisis mgmt, e.g. product recalls."

Diederichs polled her 35 Public Relations Exchange affiliates, concluded that independence is better for practitioners because it:

1. attracts top-quality staff:
"Independent firms attract pr pros who realize these org'ns provide the best opportunity to learn & grow";
2. allows freedom to represent clients of choice, without conflict;
3. increases profitability;
4. fosters variety.

"Many ad agencies were intrigued by the idea of collaboration," Diederichs told prr. "They're facing competition from the big guys & were wondering if they, too, would have to go out & buy a pr firm. They agree this approach makes more sense. A number of them called to see if they could work with me or my affiliates on their projects.... I told them to look to their own communities, that there are small pr firms everywhere that will make viable partners."

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

HONORED. Stan Wallace, retired vp Panhandle Eastern, as Outstanding Practitioner, by Houston PRSA.

CLOSING. International Public Relations Ltd (Hawaii), formed by

chr Roy Leffingwell, will close in August after 30 years.

APPOINTED. Joseph Scherer, dir nat'l programs for Edunetics Corp (Arlington), as exec dir, NSPRA.

Uniting pr & adv'g under 1 roof yields a marriage beset with problems -- most notably: a) competition for budget; b) disputes over authority; c) disagreement on strategy. "One of my affiliates spoke from sad experience when he said pr is often viewed as a stepchild operation, especially when it's in-house."

pr reporter

The Weekly Newsletter of Public Relations,
Public Affairs & Communication

603 / 778 - 0514

Vol.32 No.21
May 22, 1989

HANDLING A POTENTIAL SCANDAL: MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT EMERGENCY PROVIDES CASE OF DEFLECTING SENSATIONALISM & MEDIA ONSLAUGHT BY TAKING RISK OF TRUSTING MEDIA NOT TO ATTRIBUTE DATA

Early last March, an employee of Drury College (Springfield, Mo) attacked a local tv anchorwoman in the bedroom of her apartment, where he had apparently been waiting for her return from an evening out. He was fatally shot by the woman's male companion, who had been walking behind her as she entered the room. The story had all the ingredients to make it manna for the media: a) sex -- it was later found the would-be attacker (who wound up as the victim) had a history of voyeurism. That the anchorwoman's date had rescued her gave the story a romantic twist; b) celebrity -- violence was directed at a media member, which intensified press interest; c) sensationalism -- as a dormitory chief & a church deacon, victim was well-liked & accomplished, had graduated a few yrs ago with honors & a triple major. He apparently had a dark side known to few, is now suspected of many rapes.

The small, private, liberal arts school was suddenly the subject of public scrutiny. "We rarely face major media inquiry," Guillebeau told prr. "This incident thrust us into an intense local & regional spotlight. Our chief public is our students and their families. We were afraid of the bad feeling that would arise if parents thought we had carelessly put their children in a dorm with a pervert."

Julie Guillebeau, Drury dpr, was notified by campus security at 2:45 am. Before knowing all the facts, she, the college pres & dean of students prepared to deal with the incident on 2 levels:

Calming Campus & Neighborhood "The dorms & immediate community needed info & reassurance. Administration wanted to notify everyone quickly & personally before they heard it elsewhere. Procedure:

1. Posted a black-bordered statement on residence & dining hall doors;
2. Door-to-door visits in the victim's hall to notify those closest to him. This was accomplished by mid-morning;
3. Meetings were held that night in each dorm conducted by dean, campus psychologist & dpr. Students were briefed on what was known with Q&A. Goal was allaying fears;
4. Maintained contact with victim's family & helped them.



5. Rumor control. Staffers were rehearsed in answering the 3 types of calls -- a) media, b) personal (friends, parents) & c) curiosity.

Media Needed
Curiosity Satisfied

"We decided we would take the initiative, not be forced into a reactive position. Experience has taught us that getting in front of a potentially embarrassing story is the best way to manage it." Guillebeau drew from her experience as a reporter years before. "I knew inquiry would be most intense now and when the police finish the investigation. It was a very sad, confusing situation for everyone, but we had to distance Drury from the incident, while still being honest & direct." Strategy :

1. Release Statement: "We confirmed that he worked & lived at the college, that he had done a good job for us & we are saddened by his death. This was carefully crafted so we could all stand by it regardless of additional info that would be forthcoming." Statement was sent to all local media as well as pr officers at victim's alma mater & prior employers. "Calling fellow pr's was done as a courtesy since their orgns were mentioned in the statement we released."

2. Tell All At Briefing Session But Ask For Non-Attribution: "Ground rule was that all questions would be answered, but none of it was for attribution. This supported our effort to be open & direct, while removing Drury from the incident. I wanted to keep these one-on-one briefings as fact-seeking discussions. The reporters knew that we were being upfront with them, that we were trusting them. They came thru for us by honoring our agreement."

Victim's Past Adds
Complication

"New info pitted us against his former employer & alma mater, Southwest Missouri State U. While there, he had been apprehended by security for window peeping, at which time he submitted a hand-written confession admitting 'sickness' & pleading for help. Why didn't we have this info? Instead they had provided us with glowing references when he applied at Drury."

To handle this twist, Drury again met the press -- this time with a news conference. "We also told reporters that a year ago, 2 students reported the victim had lingered too long on the sidewalk outside their apartment window. College officials had spoken with the students & the victim, who said he was looking for a lost dog. We had no reason to believe otherwise, the students were relieved to find out the peeping tom was 'only Greg.' This was disclosed for-attribution, an artful way of gaining support on the data not-for-attribution."

Afterthoughts
& Lessons Learned

1. Anticipate Questions: "The best way to minimize damage is to anticipate questions and answer them as quickly & accurately as possible."
2. Keep Records: "The time is precious when you're under fire, take 5-10 minutes to dictate or type notes after each interview or phone call. Also, keep diary or daily log, particularly of rumors & control efforts."

3. Do Formal Evaluation: Notes, records & clippings of statements help evaluate the incident & resulting action. This should be done about 2 weeks after the furor has quieted down. "Our evaluation confirmed that these actions worked. Reporters' attention quickly turned to other aspects of the story & Drury received minimal attention. Altho follow-up inquiries continued daily, we were mentioned less frequently in news reports after day one. The 2 best elements of our plan: a) meeting students in the dorms that night to diffuse rumors, alleviate fears; b) holding media sessions with the condition that info was not attributable. Trusting the media proved to be a risk worth taking. If, God forbid, an emergency happens again, we have a proven plan on how to deal with it."

Of Related Interest:

SEMINAR PROVIDES TIPS ON ART
OF MINIMIZING NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

"First, forget the word 'crisis.' A 'crisis' occurs when the situation is out of control," Carole Gorney, dpr Lehigh U (Bethlehem, Pa) told prr. "In psychiatric terms, it happens when someone has difficulty coping with change. The word creates a negative mindset. By using it, we encourage the media to overplay situations."

Twice a year Gorney offers a crisis management seminar that draws CEOs, practitioners nationwide. Her advice:

1. Assess vulnerabilities. "Think about your orgn's special problems. How will your emergencies affect other organizations, then rebound back onto you -- & vice versa?"
2. Have an Emergency Plan. "Consider several types of emergencies: personnel, natural disasters, sabotage. Planning is preventative, and so is practicing that plan. Emergency Plan should include anticipatory questions, e.g. 'Under what circumstances are media not allowed on the grounds?'"
3. Communicate with media when an emergency occurs: a) seek media out & tell them as much as possible as quickly as possible. Explain why certain info is unavailable & what steps are being taken to obtain it; b) try to appear objective, because this will keep the media objective. Present anticipated arguments, then impart your view. When there is opposition, an organization often tightens up. This forces media to highlight the opposite extreme.
4. Negotiate with opposition: a) know who they are -- protesters are not always picketers -- they can be splintered into many publics; b) allow freedom of expression -- don't try to prevent them from getting media attention. Instead, create reasonable doubt by acknowledging their opinions; c) evaluate their argument. Maybe they have valid points to consider. Also, are there any subgroups you can work with, from which you could gain support? Working with opposition enhances credibility.