

BEDSIDE MANNER IS THE TECHNIQUE OF THE DECADE

Personal with a cap P. Humanized. Local. The feel of the 1-room school, the corner store, the country doctor. Examples:

1. Local police are adopting "community policing." Officers are assigned to neighborhoods, rather than beats -- with responsibility for getting to know the folks, help them deal with personal problems, become part of the family. Not only does this build effective police-community relationships, it deters crime -- and helps police know likely victims & perpetrators in advance, so crime may be avoided.
2. Planned Parenthood used to thank every donor with a personal, hand-written note from a volunteer -- so identified in the missive. Now the fundraising is done the same way. To add a touch, volunteers write their names above the indicia on the business envelope used. A far cry from the batches of computer mail most of us get.
3. Now that school board & city council meetings are regular fare on cable, interactive hookups are being tried again. Less sophisticated than pioneering efforts of the past, method might be nothing more than staff taking phone calls from viewers with queries or comments.
4. Computerized phone messages are linking teachers with parents. Teachers record what's being studied in class, what parents might find interesting to study with their children, what assignments were given. Callers can then leave a message for the teacher. Or get another general update on school events or the lunch menu. System can also be programmed to call parents. Businesses are prime funders -- and in some schools half the parents reportedly call every day.
5. Large national drugstore chain has pharmacists take a color snapshot of themselves in the store, send it to everyone on the prescription list. Message is simply "Happy Holidays." Oldest idea around -- but did you get a card from your druggist?

"People are looking for a way to connect," says a baby boomer who volunteers for a minority education program. This feeling pervades & drives the personalization quest. And now there's the American Ass'n of Boomers to organize this huge group, as AARP did seniors. (2621 W. Airport Freeway, Irving Tex 75062.)

TRAINING IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL IN THE DECISION PROCESS -- & PR BACKGROUND IS IDEAL FOR IT

14 years ago, when your editor & publisher took the reins, we wrote a series of articles urging practitioners to find training roles within their organiza-

tions -- or for clients. Objective then was to demonstrate specialized skills that would move them into decisionmaking circles.

Proving the soundness of this approach is Jack Pyle, ex-dpr, Mich. Dept of Transp. Linking the relationship philosophy & sound management, DOT assigned him to create a new leadership skills training academy for the Dept. -- the incubator for senior managers. Now he's setting up to offer the service to others, as Peak Performance Associates (Mason, Mich). Note well the words underlined; how much closer to influencing policy can pr get?

First of Year Issue: PR AS POLICY INFLUENCER: SITTING AT DECISIONMAKING TABLE MEANS TAKING THE LEAD, & THE RISK, OF SPEAKING TO THE ISSUES THAT REALLY MATTER; DO PRACTITIONERS PREFER SERVICE ROLE?

Whether or not '91 proves to be the "R" year (recession), it will be tough on pr in other ways. One more time the question is being debated: are public relations professionals decisionmakers? A renewed split between the service & counseling roles is possible. In recent weeks various sources report

- the head of one large pr firm feels pr's role is not in decisionmaking but in communicating decisions to persuade publics to go along with them;
- another large firm is starting to concentrate on clients where counseling is the major need, downplaying some once highly-touted service functions;
- while some promotion/publicity firms & depts are cutting staff, those specializing in issues are having banner times.

The service side, principally communication, will always be needed by organizations, but it can be performed by persons with less training & comparatively narrower experience than the counseling, or decisionmaking, role. It is a legitimate question, then, whether practitioners want to aspire to the uncertainties & turmoil of managerial leadership.

What is also clear is the dire need in most organizations for the pr philosophy & viewpoint. Decisions are made without it almost as a rule. Many boomerang -- which public relations foresight could circumvent.

Failure of both the Challenger spacecraft & the Hubble telescope have been officially ascribed to poor internal communications cultures -- closed systems where workers & managers didn't talk to one another. PR staff there apparently were publicists, not counselors or change agents. Then no amount of pr razzle dazzle could save them from the resultant actual -- as well as public relations -- disaster.



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IS A PLACE FOR DECISIONS

Public relations differs from marketing: it does not pander to current opinion but often advocates a longer view. As pr futurist Bill Banach suggests in his top ten issues for '91,

"Decisionmaking in the decade ahead must be based more on fact than opinion." In other words, going along with erroneous ideas, however popular, is bad policy -- tho superior skills in dealing with public perceptions will be called for to suggest another course.

The assignment for pr to educate, persuade, change behavior here is obvious. But first correct organizational decisions must be made -- and pr has a key part to play by counseling managers when & how to challenge prevailing (or apparently prevailing) opinion. Examples: Is styrofoam "bad" so don't use it? Is recycling always "good"? Are chemicals necessarily "dangerous"? Each of these popular assumptions is under serious question from impartial scientific sources.

Ethics is critical here, to differentiate between attempting to alter opinion 1) because it is shortsighted for the public interest, or 2) because it's in the short-term interest of the client or employer. Part of pr's poor reputation stems from campaigns that were clearly not in the public interest, such as opposing auto safety devices, then looking foolish by promoting them later.

IS A SMALL ENVIRO BACKLASH COMING?

When nearly every product, substance or process is attacked as harmful, a retreat to some more reasonable position is inevitable. One method being

used to sort the smart moves from the dumb ones is full cost accounting. Applied to disposable diapers, it shows they use less energy & water, create far less air & water pollution -- but generate much more solid waste for disposal. A formula for informed decision, one way or the other.

Applied to energy independence, full cost accounting would add the social costs of pollution plus the billions for Persian Gulf military operations to the price of a barrel of oil -- since consumers end up paying for them anyway. Figured at this real out-of-pocket cost to consumers, oil is much more expensive than investing substantial sums to develop solar cells, for instance.

Evidence someone is raising questions in important places comes from last fall's National Garden Club Federation board meeting in Little Rock. These "original conservationists" were lectured by scientists about the ozone layer, acid rain, the Alar scare. Their conclusion: "Don't be swayed by sentiment or panic, even if your favorite movie star is trying to sell you. Be sure of your facts."

Issue: Did you report that your organization's toxic chemical emissions dropped between '87 & '88? US EPA says that while raw numbers do suggest that, the drop is really due to a change in reporting rules. PR pros understand that bragging about a false improvement can be very harmful later (or soon!) and can help management make the prudent long-term decision.

Ever read the copy on a box of Rainforest Crunch? Product is financed by Working Assets Funding Service, "another business committed to social change." Profits are split between a number of peace, environmental & social causes. Like socially conscious mutual funds, idea is similar to a) chemical companies making products from what used to be their waste stream, b) recycling & c) similar closed systems. (Write prx for a photocopy of the box.)

SOCIETY MUST BE HEALTHY FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO BE

Yes, money is tight. Things look a bit scary. But have we got our priorities straight? In 4 years, 70 people have been shot to death in US

schools, another 200 seriously wounded. Michigan reports 1 of 6 women there lives in poverty, 100,000 are beaten regularly by abusive males. Census Bureau reports 23% of children under 6 live in poverty, 19% of kids 6-17. 11% of US school kids are in special classes for the handicapped -- 4,376,000 of them. And on & on.

What if some company or industry decided its social responsibility project was to rid the world of, say, child deaths by dehydration or measles. Unicef says smallish amounts of money can accomplish this. With a major volunteerism & awareness campaign, even less money would be required. Or pick any human scourge of the '90s.

That scourges exist in our era of wealth may be the ultimate public relations problem, which can have dire effects on every organization. Ask any business, hospital or school that's been thru a riot.

THE MEDIA IS DANGEROUS NOW; THEY'VE BECOME PART OF THE PROBLEM

With all the issues on which the public needs information, pack journalism leads to the same "news"

from every medium, driving audiences away. Top story of '90, finds a reader poll, was the Gulf situation (67% followed it). Only 38% followed November elections or the drug war. 30% at maximum followed the changes in Eastern Europe. But 75% knew about Pres. Bush's dislike of broccoli.

60 Minutes & Natural Resources Defense Council are being sued by Washington apple growers for irresponsible reporting leading to the Alar scare. Yet other media simply repeated the allegations rather than doing the journalist's job by questioning them. (Write prx for an insightful commentary on this by columnist Vincent Carroll; you ought to have this in your databank.)

Every practitioner has his favorite similar story of media abuse -- yet thousands of us continue to chase the media. However, an increasing number of wise heads are opting for a low media profile -- going directly to key publics via the many communications techniques now available.

This is an important decision for every organization -- which requires public relations knowledge at the senior management table.