

- **Media behavior during a crisis** is viewed as "vultures circling for the kill" (57%); "a pack of wild dogs" (24%); neutral observers (16%).
- **Media tend to blow crisis situations out of proportion** say 89%. 54% feel media treat companies somewhat or very unfairly vs. 45% who believe media are fair.
- **Believability of sources during a crisis:** Eyewitnesses (92%); independent experts (89%); victim or victim's family (84%); consumer advocates (71%); journalists (65%); word of mouth from friends or family (50%); industry spokespeople (49%); company spokespeople (46%).
- **Media receiving highest credibility:** tv (34%); newspapers (29%); mags (22%); radio (12%). However, among college grads, newspapers are most believable (36%), followed by mags (31%), tv (20%), radio (11%).

## WHAT'S THE BEST RESPONSE TO BEING MALIGNED IN PRINT?

Ignore it? A letter to the editor (which brings it up a 2nd time)? "I think a short (200 word), rational letter to the editor is a good communication tool," asserts Richard Lindeborg, pub afrs specialist, IRS (DC). "In this strategy, **it's more important to demonstrate you are reasonable than to prove you are right.**" His thinking on why letters work:

- **They stand a good chance of being printed.** Unlike news releases, they capitalize on whatever obligation the editor feels to provide a forum to an attacked party.
- **They let you look reasonable in print.** The more unbalanced the attack, the greater the opportunity for a rational, easy-to-read letter to repair some of the damage.
- **They really don't spread the bad news.** They are relatively precise in delivering rebuttal to the same audience as read the original attack.
- **They are fairly persuasive.** An academic study done in '76 showed 40% say letters are reliable, only 6% say unreliable.
- **They do reach an audience.** 113 million adults still read daily newspapers. Mag industry claims 88% of all adults read at least one magazine a month. The dominant local newspaper reaches 70-85% of the households, more than a single tv or radio station can usually claim.
- **They do get read.** '88 national industry ass'n survey showed 55% of adult newspaper readers read letters to the editor. '91 study showed 76% read the editorial page, which often includes letters to the editor.

**One strength** revealed by the '76 academic study is that half of the readers make it thru both the first part of the letter (where you refer to the original accusation as vaguely as possible) and the last part (where you make your point as clearly as possible).

**One weakness** is that nearly 40% can't remember the topic of the last letter to the editor they read.

## DEALING WITH UNPRINCIPLED ATTACKERS WHO FEEL THE ENDS JUSTIFY THEIR MEANS

*Opposition was led by a local minister, but evidence indicated ties with national organizations. Angry demonstrations, belligerent behavior, personal attacks & police intervention were commonplace at public meetings. Threats, pickets, barrages of phone calls & written questions designed to tie up operations were among the tactics used. They perused every document looking for words that implied a "conspiracy" against their viewpoint.*

The attack -- in this case from the religious right -- was "completely unexpected & unanticipated," Sandra Frye, exec ass't comty rels of the Gaston County (NC) school system, told prr. It began when New American Schools Development Corp (NASDC) awarded Gaston County a grant to develop a model for 21st Century schools. The religious right's voice "had not been in our community prior to this." Campaign is a case study.

**Schools provide an early warning system for all organizations,** since activists feel they can be effective in small, local units of gov't. Fundamentalists typically oppose: "new age" religion; globalism; "secular humanism"; the occult (as they define it); value clarification; evolution; homosexuality; outcome based education. "Underlying all of this is their accusation that schools are usurping parental authority by teaching values & ethics."

## TAKING A PROACTIVE STANCE

1. **"We determined meeting agendas -- & provided a specific structure,"** e.g. how & when people could speak (in alternating pro/con order), for how long, speakers must come up front & identify themselves.
2. While some meetings were large (as many as 800 attending), others were small groups -- e.g. parents of 1st graders. Opponents still attended but in smaller numbers. Many weren't from the county, didn't have children in these schools. "These meetings helped us **deal with fewer people at a time** as we laid the groundwork of the project so parents could ask questions."
3. **"We organized the mainstream ministers** in the community -- a group we had never called on before but one that all school systems need to have regular contact with. They ended up being one of our greatest allies because they're very concerned about freedom of religion." They educated their congregations, wrote letters to the editor assuring people there is no threat to the family or religious values.



4. **Kept key communicators out front** (e.g. parents organization officers) doing the organizing, communicating, urging parents to let their board of education know their feelings. As a result the pro parents organized. "Parents were finally able to stand up & be counted at public meetings where the religious right had at first been able to intimidate them by shouting down speakers, making false accusations. This gave our board the support it needed to move forward with the project."

"A problem is that most parents are convinced their boards of education will do the right thing, that they're run by people with integrity. So when parents get into a public meeting where there's shouting, accusations & threats, **they're intimidated** & stand back -- leaving it for the board. So you have to use some strategies you might not normally have in your bag to bring those parents around -- yet school systems must be careful that they're not perceived as out-doing the organizing. Key communicators are critical here."

5. Normal communications are system-wide. But new program was being put into 3 of Gaston County's 54 schools; **communication efforts therefore had to be focused.** Worked with organized parent groups, elected officials in that community, kept Chamber of Commerce informed, wrote letters-to-the-editor in local paper.

6. **Took media into confidence.** "They reported things exactly like they happened, which gave thinking citizens information they needed to make their decisions. The more ink you give these folks, the more people can draw their own conclusions."

7. **Educated personnel systemwide.** "It's easy to forget that everybody needs to be in the know in order to communicate about the project."

8. **Called on national organizations** for guidance & support ("you need emotional support too"), e.g. NSPRA, People for the American Way.

9. Gathered info on the national movement of the religious right. "We made it a point to **say at every opportunity that the strength of this group was coming from outside.** We tried to expose the opposition by revealing their agenda -- we did a tremendous amount of research on this."

10. Board of education never wavered from what they heard parents wanting. "It took **a lot of nurturing** & keeping them informed on a daily basis. They got phone threats, were constantly in the public focus because of the humongous media brouhaha. But they were determined & focused."

11. Side by side, **compared fundamentalists' definitions** with educators' for terms such as: critical thinking, outcome based education, decisionmaking skills, cooperative learning, mastery learning, global education, shared decisionmaking.

12. **Did a book comparing fact with myth.** Sent to parents, opposition, media, everyone.

## NEED TO BE ATTENTIVE IS PERPETUAL

School board elections are next year & fundamentalists have a full slate of candidates. "Our job isn't done. We have to educate the public as to what's at stake -- intellectual freedom, the right of teachers to teach & children to learn in an environment that's not threatened by the agenda of any one group."

Frye advises others to plan now for **religious right opposition**, making it part of your organization's crisis plan. "Have a working key communicators organization with key people identified so you can get info out quickly; develop a telephone tree; make your board aware that opposition by the religious right is not just a possibility, it's a probability."

"I'd never advise any group not to work with another group. But **by their very nature, fundamentalists don't want to listen**, they have an agenda. When they stand up in public meetings they don't ask questions, they make statements. We have not had any luck trying to reason or compromise with them. Their strategies are to attack, not to reason."

## DO ORGANIZATIONS' BEHAVIOR REALLY DRIVE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR?

Crises do affect it -- or so people say. In a survey of 1,000 adults, a large majority say an organization's wrongdoing affects their purchase of its products -- e.g., Sears' unnecessary auto repairs (80%) & Food Lion supermarkets' unsanitary food safety procedures (79%) made consumers less likely to purchase products from these companies.

And -- 25% say **a company's economic problems, such as layoffs**, make them less willing to buy its products. Interestingly, women respond with more anger at companies in crises than men, most particularly when employees are laid off, reveals the Porter/Novelli (NYC) survey. Other findings:

- 95% feel **lying is significantly worse** than the crisis itself. Only 19% feel companies are totally truthful in a crisis; 57% feel companies withhold negative info or lie.
- **Practices that make people most angry:** refusing to accept responsibility (76%); crisis that could have been avoided (72%); supplying incomplete or inaccurate info (71%); putting profits ahead of public interest (70%). 65% feel that declining to comment implies guilt.
- **Top remembered crises (without prompting):** Exxon Valdez oil spill, 1989 (51%); S&L scandals, 1980 (25%); Sears' unnecessary auto repairs, 1992 (23%); General Motors fuel tank dangers/layoffs, 1989 (82%); Dow Corning silicone breast implant safety issues, 1991 (15%); IBM layoffs, 1992 (13%); Food Lion supermarkets unsanitary food safety procedures, 1992 (11%); Tylenol tampering, 1982 (11%). The most recent crisis at the time the survey was conducted, Jack in the Box Restaurants bacterial contamination of meat, was only mentioned by 7%.
- **Info sources have low trust levels.** 26% say neither the journalist nor the business exec is truthful. 23% say the journalist is truthful; 9% the business exec; 8% both; 33% have no opinion.