

DOES A STRICT SPOKESPERSON POLICY DESTROY OPENNESS?

There has long been agreement that only one or a few people should speak publicly for an organization, to ensure One Clear Voice. In a crisis, for example. To enforce this policy on an everyday basis, calls from customers are referred to customer relations, from politicians to gov't relations, from media to media relations -- and in smaller organizations they all go to pr.

- **Most have strict policies about this ... but might such referrals give a perception that the message is being sanitized,** made official, not spontaneous? Journalists often see it this way, of course, but how about these more important publics? "If there is a policy of open communication, why can I speak only to a designated spokesperson?"
- **The answer used to be that we wanted to be sure they were connected with someone who had all the info ... but does that imply lack of open communication internally?** An obvious solution is to ensure that everyone knows what's happening & why ("transparent communications") so anyone can speak knowledgeably. It's a goal now in many organizations, like GE & Bell Atlantic. The reason, however, is a bit different: so every employee can be an external ambassador, and be a team player by knowing how their job contributes to the enterprise.
- **Multiple spokespersons** are used by many. Partly to allow a 1 - 2 punch & have a higher authority in reserve should the first message get garbled. Partly to symbolize that things are being managed by a team of several competent players.

Can One Clear Voice be achieved amid ambiguity? Careful strategizing, lots of training & intense continuous communication are required. Yet it is undeniable that the person an inquirer is talking to is the organization for that inquirer.

HOW MUCH MORE POWERFUL EVENTS ARE THAN WORDS

... is illustrated again by the latest move in the healthcare debate. Senators supporting universal coverage take the line that if 100% of Congress is covered under its generous plan, then so should 100% of the public be -- or else vice versa. Since NY's Pat Moynahan & others have been pushing a compromise to 95%, group says that means in fairness only 95% of senators should have coverage -- and held a **lottery** to determine who the uncovered 5% will be. "Winner" on first draw was, of course, Moynahan. Dramatizing beats rhetoric. (See [pr](#) 9/13/93)

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

DIED. George Burke (dpa, Public Communications, Chi), 54, after a long battle with diabetes. He was dir comty events, Chi Tribune when he became a founding mbr of the Chi World's Fair '92 Corp, promoting

city's failed bid for the event.

ELECTED. John Budd (Omega Group, NYC) a Fellow of The Yankee Institute for Public Policy Studies (Glastonbury, Ct).

TOBACCO DAMAGE LAWSUITS NAME PR FIRM; TROUBLING PRECEDENT

Tobacco companies are spending major dollars to fight rising calls for action against their products. In latest battle, tobacco's public relations consultants are implicated as well. While recognition of pr's influential status here is gratifying, there are other ramifications:

1. On May 23, Mississippi filed a lawsuit against Philip Morris, RJ Reynolds & 11 other big tobacco names, along with tobacco wholesalers, trade ass'ns & public relations consultants to the industry. "Hill & Knowlton is the only pr firm listed as a defendant in this case. They did a lot of work for the tobacco industry in the 60s & 70s," a spokesperson at the state Attorney General's Office told [pr](#). Suit demands these parties repay taxpayers for the cost of medical services given to victims of smoking-related illnesses. Tho no dollar amount has been named yet, spokesperson told [pr](#) it will depend on the amount the state has paid out, probably "in the tens of millions of dollars."

Suit charges tobacco trade ass'ns & public relations firm conspired with manufacturers to "actively mislead & confuse the public about the true dangers associated with smoking cigarettes." Cites "Joe Camel" & other "intentional & unconscionable" campaigns that promote to children as ways to guarantee "successive generations of addicted customers."

But Trone Advertising (Greensboro, NC), creator of Joe Camel (along with RJR Tobacco internal marketers) is **not** named.

2. On May 26, Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles signed a law **unanimously** passed by that state's legislature. It empowers the state to recoup costs from third parties found liable for Medicaid patients' illnesses. Doesn't mention tobacco companies by name but was admittedly crafted to help Florida sue them to recover millions spent by taxpayers thru Medicaid. Assumedly pr firms promoting tobacco use would be liable -- particularly if the Mississippi suit sets legal precedent.

PRACTITIONERS RESPOND, TELL PR REPORTER:

- "It's unreasonable that our work, on behalf of our client, done in good faith over 30 years ago could be the source of litigation today. As far as I can see, we were merely tacked on to the end of a long list of defendants for no reason other than to make it longer." -- Howard Paster, H&K chairman



- "In our litigious society the move by Mississippi is not really surprising. But where does it end? Suing a pr firm for representing a client makes as much sense as suing lawyers for doing the same thing." -- Joe Vecchione, PRSA president

POSSIBLE RAMIFICATIONS ARE BOTH WORRISOME & HELPFUL

- Will **pr firms** now have to consider this as they contemplate new clients?
- How about liability for **practitioners employed by organizations** that get sued for alleged public damage? Laws now make some environmental degradations criminal offenses for executives. PRSA's settlement with the SEC in the late 70s makes individual practitioners liable for security law violations by their companies. Will this be a new legal worry?
- **Could this trend provide practitioners clout** in getting involved in decisions they may in some cases be shut out of -- since their necks are on the line? Can the profession leverage this positively? Lawyers & accountants use exactly this reasoning: "You have to share that info or that decisionmaking with me because I'm legally liable."

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION IS MOST TALKED-ABOUT TREND BUT...

So finds poll of IPREX members -- network of 46 independent pr firms in 17 countries. Some anticipate old techniques being electronically updated: (a) database marketing for direct mail, (b) broadcast faxing for news releases, (c) satellite news conferences & employee meetings.

They also anticipate new communication modes will be influential & valuable: (d) hybrid tv-computers, (e) commercial online bulletin boards, (f) audio/visual CD-ROM.

For many organizations, this stuff is old hat. Yet:

- **Despite respondents' interest in progressive communication tools**, the majority (65%) revealed that only a handful of their clients are similarly interested.
- **This may be due to lingering uncertainty about hi-tech.** There are twice as many techno-weenies as techno-whizzes, reports Weightman Wire. The larger group's members are afraid of breaking the computer if they hit the wrong button. Techno-whizzes, on the other hand, are usually the first to purchase new gadgets, are a source of info for co-workers, friends & families. Info appealing to techno-weenies may bore techno-whizzes.
- **Hi-tech products that appeal to both** usually offer either a unique feature or fun or both. For example, 77% of adults say they would use interactive tv if it meant they could see their favorite tv show anytime they wanted. On the other hand, less than half are interested in using interactive tv to do their banking. Emphasizing the fun & excitement of hi-tech products may help turn techno-weenies into techno-whizzes -- and help clients move into electronic communication faster.

ANOTHER STUDY VALIDATES PRACTITIONER INTEREST

At the top of trends dominating their concerns (from a list of 14) is using new technologies to communicate (70 mentions), say 114 pr practitioners (half of whom report to the pres/CEO) of Orange County, Calif org'ns with 100 or more employees. Study, commissioned by Paine & Assocs (Costa Mesa) & conducted by David Pincus & Edgar Trotter of Cal State - Fullerton, was done in 2 rounds: 1) mail questionnaire, 2) follow-up focus-group interview. This large county south of LA is usually a bellwether for the nation.

HUMOR MAY AID TECHNOLOGY

"The First, Advanced, State-of-the-Art, High Performance, Totally Integrated, Revolutionary, Leading Edge, High Tech Joke Book" by Oak Ridge Public Relations may help weenies move toward becoming whizzes. It's a 210-pg collection of humor from around the world on technology, computers, software, science & mathematics. Received PRSA's Compass Award for an "external publication other than a newsletter."

Says Oak Ridge's empress of the universe Kathy Keenan, "We ventured into uncharted public relations territory & in the process **proved that engineers do have a sense of humor. Sometimes.**" Book exemplifies the firm's motto: "Age bene opum. Acquire eventos. Habe jocum." Roughly translated: "Do good work. Get results. Have fun." (\$14.95 + shipping from them at 21771 Stevens Creek Blvd, Cupertino, Calif 94014-1175; 408/253-5042)

N.J. HIGH SCHOOL OFFERS PR COURSE: A FIRST? AN OPPORTUNITY?

Public relations is being introduced to juniors & seniors at Cherry Hill High School West (NJ) -- cultivating future practitioners & an informed public. "I want to help get rid of the ignorance about what public relations is. I want to teach that it's more than just publicity," Bill Sleeth, a high school English teacher, told prr. While getting his master's in public relations he, along with the help of his advisor Don Bagin at Rowan College (ex-Glassboro State), developed a 100-pg curriculum.

13 UNIT CURRICULUM

Introduction; definition of pr; history; basic mechanics of conducting a campaign; pr writing; speeches & presentations; publications; dealing with media; strategies & techniques; pr law & ethics; research & evaluation; the profession; case studies. This Sept, Sleeth & a business teacher will team to present this interdisciplinary, half-year course. So far, **33 students have signed up.**

"Are there any other pr courses being offered in high schools? I'd like to put the question out there."

School presently has an inhouse grocery store that was developed by a local chain "to train special education students for jobs in the grocery store. We're planning to use it as a project for the pr class to increase faculty & student use of the store." (Copy of Sleeth's curriculum available from him at his school, Chapel av, Cherry Hill, NJ 08002)