

SURVEY: MEDIA ARE BECOMING "WIRED"

For those concerned about media relations, technology is in the newsroom, notes a survey by Steven Ross (Columbia's Grad School of Journalism) & Don Middleberg (Middleberg & Assocs, NYC). 6000 writers, editors & reporters from dailies, large weeklies & biz mags were queried; 12% responded. Some highlights:

- 16% use online services at least daily; 17% once a week; 17% once a month; 11% less than every 2 months; 36% almost never.
- Newspaper biz eds are most likely to say they are never or almost never online. 48% of mag editors & 42% of freelancers will check in weekly.

"This doesn't mean they will see your specific material, however. Providers of info must develop strategies to make their material stand out, just as we do now with paper-based material."

- CompuServe is used by most respondents; Internet is 2nd; America Online 3rd. Use patterns are essentially identical among editors & freelancers.

- Disk drives available at their desks for almost 3/4ths of the non-freelance press, & nearly all freelancers.

- Only a few have CD-ROM drives, however.

- More than half of all editors prefer to receive writers' submissions electronically.

- 2/3rds of editors at dailies say they will prefer electronic images in 2 yrs time.

- Journalists are significantly more likely to use free online info provided by nonprofits than the same sort of info from business (59%-50%). Difference in attitude is more pronounced among daily editors than for sample as a whole.

"In short, credibility in cyberspace will be hard to establish. It will also be easy to lose. Remember, it will be easier for reporters & editors to check the validity of material online. As a result, they may even penalize companies for accurate but incomplete data."

(Copy of survey from Middleberg & Assocs, 130 East 59th St, NYC 10022; 212/888-6610, fax 212/371-2851, CompuServe: 73354,727)

"For public relations practitioners, it means an important new dimension has been added to the profession. While personal media relations skills will remain paramount, an entirely new set of writing & communication skills will be needed.... As electronic forms of communication grow in popularity & in use, public relations practitioners must not only adapt new technologies, but embrace them."

ETHICAL ISSUES TOP PR PROFESSION'S NEWS -- AGAIN**1. PRSA CONDEMNS USE OF FALSE FRONTS**

PRSA's position statement on "the disclosure of front group membership" has been completed by a committee chaired by John Paluszek. It reads in part:

- "PRSA specifically condemns the efforts of those organizations, sometimes known as 'front groups,' that seek to influence the public policy process by disguising or obscuring the true identity of their members or by implying representation of a much more broadly based group than exists.
- "Accordingly, PRSA requires its members -- & urges all other persons engaged in public relations -- to be completely forthright in all such communications, at a minimum offering to provide information on membership, sponsorship & funding as well as providing a simple means of obtaining such information."

(Full copy from pr or PRSA, 33 Irving Pl. NYC 10003-2376)

2. NEW IABC ETHICS CODE RELIES ON EDUCATION vs. ENFORCEMENT

Three years ago, IABC began to rethink its ethics code "primarily to make sure it was comprehensive & sensitive to the various cultures around the world. We attempted to develop 'relatively universal' standards," Mark McElreath (Towson State U), who led the committee, told pr. "Secondly, it's a healthy exercise. We don't consider this revised code the final word. Probably in a few years we'll gear up & look at it again."

DOES CODE HAVE TEETH?

"It's a bully puppet. The teeth is the law." If someone violates the law in their prof'l activities & is found guilty, then IABC exec board will review that person's membership. "It does not have an approach with negative sanctions. If you run afoul of the law, the org'n will look at you. But it does not set up its own internal judiciary review board -- that would raise restraint of trade, libel, slander, a whole range of liabilities should you be wrong. A real risk is involved in going that direction."

Instead, IABC will "educate its members as to the value of being ethical, rather than using teeth to tear into someone who isn't ethical. It's more persuasive for IABC to focus its energies not on negative sanctions but on positive rewards."



Code is just now beginning to roll out. Later this spring, committee will design PD materials for the chapters so they can talk about it. "That's why I say the process of revising this code is healthier than just having a finished code. The discussions are more interesting than the document itself."

3. PR CRITIC STIRS ETHICAL BATTLE ABOUT ACCESS

PR Watch editor John Stauber is trying to bring heat on Wisconsin Assembly Majority Leader Scott Jensen -- an account supervisor with Zigman-Joseph-Stephenson (Milwaukee) -- "a lobby-for-hire firm," Stauber calls them. Push is to get Jensen to release his & firm's client list. Battle is receiving media attention. Recent article reports Jensen's wife is also a registered lobbyist. "It's an ethical quagmire," opines Assembly Minority Leader Walter Kunicki (not unexpected from the opposing party).

IN LETTER TO ETHICS BOARD, STAUBER REVEALS HIS VIEW OF PR:

- It's "built in a very large part upon the sale of an intangible but valuable & powerful commodity service called 'access.' Access to the news media & to public policy decisionmakers, known as 'influencers,' is the key to successfully affecting favorable public policies & opinions on behalf of clients.
- "Many former governors, legislators, legislative aides & political consultants are well-compensated within pr firms precisely because they can provide important avenues of access to friends & acquaintances sitting in positions of power & influence.
- "However, Scott Jensen's case is unique. It is extremely unusual for sitting politicians to be practicing pr executives. If Mr. Jensen is allowed to maintain his pr practice while serving in public office, this could signal the start of a lucrative trend within the industry."

Legislation will be introduced by Democrats to make it illegal for a sitting legislator to work for a lobbying firm. "But Jensen & (Gov.) Tommy Thompson control the legislature here. It can't become law unless they see to it," notes Stauber.

FELLOW PRACTITIONER'S REBUTTAL

"Consider the source," rebuts Gary Myers of Wisconsin-based Morgan &

Myers. Stauber is "anti-tech, anti-business, on a personal crusade to expose pr."

Myers says Jensen & his firm are fine, ethical practitioners -- "good competitors." He calls Jensen a "fine member of the legislature." Wisconsin, like many states, has a part-time assembly. Every member has a job -- lawyers, real estate agents, teachers, businesspeople, farmers. All have a vested interest in what goes on in the legislature -- yet Myers feels the

state has "the cleanest gov't in the whole 50 states," with watchdog media, even the Ethics Board -- which he says can be "fearsome."

"Why shouldn't public relations be allowed in the Assembly?"

Is there any substance to these criticisms about "access"? Stauber aside, many of pr's reputational problems of late have centered here -- the several Washington access peddling issues of the big pr firms, for example.

4. WHAT ABOUT PR WHISTLEBLOWERS?

Does PRSA's ethics code -- unlike IABC's, it is enforceable -- have teeth? "It's worse than toothless," Stauber writes in response to an article in prr 12/19/94. "It's simply a convenient means of avoiding, denying & hushing-up the dirty tricks & unethical practices that pervade the pr industry. Bad behavior within pr is institutional, lucrative & protected by Code 14, a code of silence."

PRSA CODE ITEMS 14 & 6

14. A member shall not intentionally damage the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner.

6. A member shall not engage in any practice which has the purpose of corrupting the integrity of channels of communications or the processes of government.

"Code 14 is also a 'Catch 22.' Publicity experts know best of all that exposing bad conduct is the prerequisite to reform. My message to pr whistleblowers is 'keep those memos & faxes coming!'" Of course, PR Watch depends on them...

IABC's MacElreath believes if an ethical (rather than legal) issue is involved, (1) "your first obligation is to the small group considering the unethical behavior. A professional will try to resolve it up close, eye to eye. If that proves untenable, (2) contact other professionals to explore options. (3) Ultimately there may be a need to resort to outside org'ns to assist in doing something."

McElreath sees blowing the whistle as a last resort. "I find if you raise an ethical issue, most people are quite interested in talking about it. Peer pressure to do wrong works the opposite also in terms of peer pressure to do the right thing if the topic is raised, put on the table. While there's a lot of dysfunctional denial, the professional communicator is someone who knows how to raise those difficult issues & get them discussed. I don't want to say blowing the whistle is unprofessional, but there would be a whole chain of feasible things to do before getting to that point."

PUTTING SOME PERSPECTIVE IN THIS

Code item 14 exists, of course, to avoid the "liabilities" IABC tried to steer around by not making its code enforceable (page 1) -- as well as a matter of simple fair dealing among professionals. PRSA does speak directly to political manipulation in item 6 (above).