

Survey, conducted by George S. May International (Park Ridge, Ill), sampled about 300 via Website and mail. "It wasn't a scientific sampling," Michael Bruening, dir corp com'n told pr. He says the idea was to get a general notion of how companies are reacting. Other findings:

1. **Opportunity for pr and marketing firms.** "Another bright sign is the fact that positive, growth-oriented actions were selected by 59% of respondents as their solution to the lagging economy."
2. **Other growth-oriented opportunities:** a) retaining & increasing employee benefits (12%), expanding internationally (9%), increasing number of employees (5%), increasing inventory (3%).
3. **Some are hunkering down.** 41% are taking action to reduce business activity. These include reducing inventory (17%), laying off (14%), reducing benefits (11%) and cutting back on marketing & sales efforts (1%).

Results also indicate that there is general agreement the downturn will hurt the majority of industries, at least in the short run. Those seen as most vulnerable are: retailers, dealerships, manufacturers and trucking companies. Moderately affected are restaurants and food companies, wholesale operations, contractors and business-to-business services. Healthcare is the one category viewed as being actually helped by the slowing economy.

The majority of respondents (56%) say their organizations are being hurt by the economy – 50% say moderately, 6% very negatively.

HOPE ON THE HORIZON

A majority (76%) believes the economy will turn around within the year. "In our survey, people's opinions are closely divided within six months (21%), nine months (25%) and 12 months (20%)."

An overwhelming 71% believe the business climate is more competitive than in the past – 25% think it's about the same and only 4% say it has gotten less competitive. "Perhaps the four percent have seen some of their competition eliminated. Even if that's the case, it's not time to relax."

(More information from George S. May International, 847/825-8806, ext. 239)

ITEM OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS

¶ **"Hello, Who Are You?" Worst Layoff Practices.** The Herman Group reports a sad trend that provides lessons in how not to downsize. New Internet-based companies that grew too big too fast are firing people without telling them. One dot.com company, rather than lay off employees in person, simply disconnected their cell phones, killed their e-mail accounts, invalidated key cards and took computers away. Not an isolated incident, says Herman. "We're hearing of other instances that suggest the situation has intensified. This kind of employee abuse is unconscionable in an era characterized by employee-centeredness and will have far-reaching negative consequences." Herman says cause may be routed in young, inexperienced companies with green managers. The general feeling among fired employees and others is disillusionment, they're moving back toward traditional businesses with experienced management, leaving companies with shallow leadership in a fragile position. (More from the Herman Group, www.herman.net)

AMBASSADOR PROGRAM TRANSLATES WELL INTO THE PUBLIC SECTOR; HELPS SCHOOL BOARD ASS'N DEFEAT VOUCHER INITIATIVE

A few years ago, Gail Braverman, com'n dir of the Lansing-based Michigan Ass'n of School Boards (MASB), heard Pat Jackson speak about an "Ambassador" program created by a large for-profit health organization as a way of implementing grassroots pr for the company (pr 11/10/97). "Coincidentally, someone here at MASB suggested we needed 'passionate people' to go out and speak on behalf of public education." This was especially crucial, she says, given the level of criticism being directed at public schools nationally and the threats of a voucher campaign in Michigan. Braverman put together a proposal that included costs of recruiting/training a group of people who could go out and talk up public education. "Our Board of Directors funded it and we launched the pilot program in 1997." Braverman invited Pat and 5 others to speak to their starter group of 27. "Many of those who saw his presentation said he solidified a lot of their training."

The ambassadors were called into battle last year when a school voucher proposal was slated for the 2000 general election. Touting public education became a chief priority of MASB.

GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN DEEMED BEST WAY TO GO

MASB knew that the voucher initiative had big money behind it, including funds put up by the owners of Amway and Wal-Mart. "We didn't have the money for a big media campaign [so] we decided that a grassroots campaign would work best." Selected board members participated in an "advocacy skills certification" program that included:

1. Basic overview of public relations disciplines
2. Media relations
3. Public speaking
4. Kits with sample press releases, letters to the editor, etc
5. Tutorial on putting together a community meeting, running a campaign

Ambassadors were set loose, each with the same message but using their own special talents to communicate that message. The more boisterous favored the large crowds while the low-key ambassadors chose to communicate to smaller groups. They gave presentations, fielded questions, initiated discussions, engaged in debates with the other side.

Key publics included opinion & community leaders, school PTOs and PTAs, business groups such as Kiwanis, Rotary, Optumus, etc.

The ambassadors would be unpaid volunteers, MASB knew that it had to be selective about which board members it chose to train, seeking out those who were not only passionate about public education, but able to articulate that passion. The job of ambassador is a one-year commitment with the choice to sign on again for another year. Braverman says many take the option to continue.



PUBLIC EDUCATION WINS OVER VOUCHERS

Michigan voters resoundingly rejected the voucher proposal 70% to 30%. "Our ambassadors rose to the challenge and exceeded our wildest expectations." One woman alone gave 30 presentations. Another ambassador chaired the campaign in the county that defeated vouchers by the largest margin in 83 counties. "Amazing things happened during this campaign."

AMBASSADOR PROGRAM ONGOING

Braverman says that the victory in the general election wasn't the only prize for MASB. "We surveyed the ambassadors and the feedback we got back from them was that the experience had made them better board members."

The program remains active, even in the wake of the victory over vouchers. "Public education will always need advocates. Keeping the program going is a great way to ensure that school board members are prepared and ready to speak on a variety of critical issues facing the public schools," Braverman says. She adds that a second attempt will be made to bring a voucher referendum to the ballot in 2002.

(For more information, contact Braverman at 517/327-5900)

¶ Of Related Interest

GAP BETWEEN STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS / PROFESSIONALS IN HOW THEY VIEW PR EDUCATION

PR educators have work to do in teaching incoming freshmen about the profession. In 1998, the National Communication Ass'n & the Commission on PR Education sought to find out what educators and professionals perceived to be the most important components of a pr education. This became a landmark report, recommending:

- a) graduate as well as undergraduate degrees
- b) continuing education for practitioners
- c) teaching methods to be used

Report also identified realistic curriculum components based on current requirements of pr jobs as outlined by those in the field. Although the report was hailed as a guide for educators & practitioners alike, there was one omission: students' perceptions of the pr field.

A recent study designed to augment the 1998 report points to differences between what pr educators and professionals believe to be key in pr teaching and what new pr students think are important attributes and issues. The new study, "The Students' View: A Survey of Public Relations Education," was conducted in response to a report, "A Port of Entry: Public Relations Education for the 21st Century," presented at the National PRSA Conference in 1999.

Study was backed by Grand Valley State U and overseen by Dean Kruckeberg, U of Northern Iowa prof & co-chair of the Commission on PR Education. Target population was pr undergrads at 4-yr universities with pr instructors who are members of the Educators Academy.

STUDENT DATA PROVIDES MISSING LINK

Researchers received a total of 2,038 responses from 55 institutions – a 49% response rate. Most (83%) were first-year students; 21% had worked in some capacity that they considered to be "pr work." In other words, tho it was assumed the study would reach students before they learned about pr, about 1/5th already had some first hand exposure to pr concepts. (For the most part, 94% were traditional college students age 18 to 25. 70% were women, reflecting the influx of women into the profession.)

STUDENTS NEED REDIRECTION

When hiring for entry level public relations, professionals especially want applicants with writing skills, critical thinking & problem solving skills and practical experience. Students, on the other hand, think employers will most value their ability to communicate publicly.

Both groups agree the above skills are important, along with interpersonal communication skills, a good attitude, initiative (self-starter), and a basic knowledge of mass media – but they disagree on the relative ranking of these attributes.

- **Students underrate the importance of:** writing skills, organizational skills, critical thinking & problem solving skills, basic knowledge of mass media and their understanding of protocol with the media when compared to what professionals desire. Educators can make them aware of how these skills will be valued and how they should be presented in the job search process, advises the study.
- Pros and students are in agreement on the **importance of an internship**. Based on this, notes the study, it would be reasonable to require an internship as part of the curriculum.
- One disturbing finding: **Neither students nor professionals who hire put much emphasis on PRSSA membership**. "Since PRSA supports the student program as a feeder into professional PRSA membership, it would be in the best interest of PRSA to take a close look at the program to determine how it might be made more valuable to students & professionals alike," advises the study.

Authors say study is significant because it gives educators direction on concepts that need clarification & skills that need to be strengthened. "Misperceptions about career expectations can be addressed & accurate impressions can be reinforced, giving the student a better understanding of the requirements of their chosen field." The skills & attributes students say are lacking within themselves can be targeted, and new methods can be used in planning lessons.

(For more information, contact Betty Pritchard, pritchab@gvsu.edu)

PR NEEDED MORE THAN EVER IN DOWN TIMES, FINDS SURVEY

Despite a soft economy, business owners are seeking pr counsel and launching a plethora of advertising and marketing activities in an effort to increase sales. A survey of medium and small-sized businesses finds 30% plan to step up sales and marketing; that's double the next most popular tactic – reducing inventory, which 19% of those surveyed are doing.