Newsletter

Public Relations Society of America
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Managing information overload

by **Patrick Jackson**, APR

First in a two-part series on managing information overload.

The channels of communication are so crowded—and sometimes polluted by sheer junk—that scholars of the field say it is harder than ever to get a message across. What irony for practitioners: more communication than ever, yet less acceptance or understanding. What can we do about it?

1. Fewer messages, more communication.

First, public relations professionals and the organizations they represent need to examine their attitudes about communication. Instead of "how can we get this message out right away," perhaps today we should be asking, "is this topic high enough priority to send a message?". Every time some little thing happens, do we have to tell the world—when we know that message will compete with other, perhaps more crucial messages we want to send?

2. Target audiences—only.

Sending messages to uninterested people because their names happen to be on a handy list is a good way to turn them off to *all* communication from us, as we have learned from unhappy experience. Fortunately, computers give us the capability of building lists as small as two or three people—if they're the only ones really concerned with a specific topic.

Letters and memos are a good place to start this process. But publications and news releases are the most fertile fields. Larger or more dispersed organizations often have three or four in-house information vehicles—and nobody gets more than one. Managers of different levels need different information. University faculty has a different information need from the secretarial staff.

Certainly, there are times when building or maintaining relationships (which is, after all, the ultimate goal) demands that everyone get the same message in the same way. Resistance to targeting doesn't come from that quarter as often as from the viewpoint of not having enough time or budget to produce two publications. But if the time and budget allowed is not enough to make the publication readable or comprehensible, perhaps that money should be put somewhere else. Doing anything ineffectively is unproductive. As public relations pioneer Arthur Page once wrote a fellow manager, "If there is nothing to be done, please be sure not to do it."

The reality of communication overload mixed with the inherent difficulty of building relationships in a mass society is leading inevitably to an increase in the staff, budget and tools organizations will have to commit to public relations. We are today where accounting was in the 1920s or '30s.

Even large organizations would have only one or two accountants plus a staff of bookkeepers whose ledgers were the computer data banks of the day. Today, even with computers to do the arithmetic and records keeping, organizations have corps of accountants. The reason is that interpretation and analysis of financial and other statistical data is a priceless management tool.

Public relations soon also will have platoons of people. The reason is comparable: There is no end of valuable work that can be done, which pays off in the bottom line.

3. Watch the copier.

Copying everything and sending it to everybody usually serves only to build resistance to reading mail from the perpetrator. On the other hand, a highlighted copy of a document that already exists is often preferable to writing a new document—unless, of

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On November 11, many public relations professionals will look at their jobs differently.

Plan to be one of them.

Register now for the 35th National Conference, "Spectrum 82: The Dynamics of Public Relations," Nov. 7-10, 1982. Members who register before October 28 will receive a $45 discount. All members should have received one complete Conference registration. If you need another copy or would like more information, contact Kate Lynott, director, meetings and convention, PRSA, 845 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022, (212) 826-1750, ext. 34.

New Delphi survey assesses emerging issues

What new issues are emerging to present problems or opportunities for public relations practitioners, and which issues are finally dying down?

A major Delphi Survey commissioned by PRSA's Issues Management Committee is asking professional issues watchers, inside and outside the public relations profession, to assess the direction and impact of some 122 issues and concerns in four categories: socio-political; economic; workplace; and governance.

The results will be revealed at the PRSA National Conference in San Francisco, Nov. 9, at the mini plenaries, at 9 A.M. and 10:30 A.M.

The program will include a slide presentation by David Pearce Snyder, lifestyle editor, *The Futurist*, Bethesda, MD, who conducted the survey for PRSA. It will be followed by commentary by **William E. Duke**, APR, manager, national programs, Atlantic Richfield Co., Los Angeles, CA and **Lloyd Newman**, executive vice president and director, Manning, Selvage and Lee, New York, NY. Issues Management Committee Chairman **Darden Chambliss**, senior vice president, policy planning and communications, The Aluminum Association, Inc., Washington, DC, will moderate.

Issues watchers will give their opinions on each issue's status, how severe its impact will be, whether impact will be positive or negative, how their own managements perceive and influence these issues.

In addition, the survey includes a category of issues specifically affecting the public relations profession.

The survey, designed by Mr. Snyder, employed the Delphi technique of successive rounds; respondents got a second chance to answer each question after seeing how others had responded, thereby developing an expert consensus.

Survey went to 350 people on a representative list generated by members of the Issues Management Committee. Included were charter members of the Issues Management Association and a selective list of members of the World Future Society.

The survey was also distributed to professional futurists. Their responses will be compared with those of respondents with public relations and issues management responsibilities.

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course, the personal touch will zing the message home. Which illuminates the major emotional quandary of communications overload.

What messages must people receive in a way that connotes intimacy, *e.g.*, telling a person he or she is very special? And which are more effective because they are open communications, *e.g.*, reminding everyone that February 14 is Valentine's Day?

Everything I've written so far is conventional wisdom. We all know it . . . but may need some willpower to make it happen. The ultimate way to pierce information overload is by applying message strategies and environmental tactics.

4. Look at your letters.

Is everyone still "Dear" to you? "Dear Joe" is hardly an attention-getter. A decade ago, the Killdear Society taught us a method I can vouch for—how to get recipients involved in our letters from the moment they pick them up. Instead of the usual salutation, they advised, start with a key phrase that tells what the subject of the letter is. For instance, try a letter that begins, "The annual report deadline, Joe. . .". He'll know right off what the subject is. You will have his attention.

Opening paragraphs frequently are wasted on chit-chat. Some letter writers believe that margin-to-margin, paragraphic form is Holy Writ. But if you have three points to make, why force people to read voluminous copy? Use the 1, 2, 3 technique, underline the key words, or put the meat into a summary opening sentence and underline it. Being hung up on old-fashioned formalities may soothe a sense of propriety, but it obfuscates communication.

5. Graphic psychology.

The eye can travel three to four inches without blinking, say the experts. Blinking is tiring to the reader. Therefore, columns of this width are easier to read. Sometimes I get letters with copy that goes from page edge to page edge, and to the very bottom—someone is obviously trying to to get everything on one page. Single-page letters are good if you can sensibly boil them down to that. If not, remember that white space is to the eye as the rest is to music. It sets the rhythm that makes it interesting.

6. Fewer facts, more feeling.

Since facts often are mistrusted or open to interpretation, it's amazing how many people still believe that pouring out long lists of them is persuasive. It's the implication of the facts, their potential impact on the person being communicated with that are effective. Refining messages to the most salient facts, then driving them home with examples or illustrations which suggest their impact—that's effective communication.

But we know all these things, don't we? Well, to be sure, I suggest we go to our files and pull out last month's work. Can we say then that we are applying these obvious answers to the "overcommunication" threat?

Mr. Jackson, APR, is senior counsel, Jackson, Jackson and Wagner, Epping, NH, and a PRSA past president.

The November/December issue will focus on sophisticated techniques that practitioners have found useful.

Newsletter

PRSA

Public Relations Society of America
845 Third Avenue
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Volume 10, Nos. 11-12, November/December 1982

Managing information overload

(second in a two-part series)

by **Patrick Jackson**, APR

Nearly everyone suffers from information overload—but public relations professionals are expected to get messages through. Here are some techniques practitioners report are working for them.

1. Follow the three rules of effective communication, as identified by master message strategists:

A. Don't stiffen the resistance, which is always there to some extent, and which turns people away from the communication without ever hearing it.

B. Always ask for a willing suspension of disbelief, just the way we often say "you won't believe this, but . . ."

C. Emphasize the benefits statement, that is, devote most of the message to telling the targeted publics what's in it for them.

2. Use all five languages of public relations:

A. Spoken
B. Written
C. Arithmetic
D. Graphic or aural, depending on the medium
E. "Chinese" which means using the local lingo and dialect to avoid violating the first rule of effective communication (above)

The evidence is that practitioners have an almost Pavlovian reaction when asked to communicate; they head for their typewriter. But written messages are far more difficult for most publics to understand than spoken messages. Actively considering which language to use offers a choice of tactics to hone in on the audience.

3. Use a standard screening device for all your messages. To ensure targeted messages, I use this five-step self-editing process:

A. Is the communication *appropriate?*
- for the sender?
- to the recipient?

B. Is it meaningful?
- Does it stick to the subject?
- Is it geared to the recipient's interest, not the sender's?

C. Is it memorable?
- in phraseology or metaphor?
- through the use of visual or aural devices?

D. Is it understandable?
- Denotative and connotative language?
- Graphically or aurally?

E. Is it believable?
- Does the audience trust the spokesman?
- Does the communication exhibit expertise in the subject matter?

Many a wrongly directed or unnecessary communication has been corrected or dropped by using a screen like this.

4. Apply behavioral science techniques, the most useful of which is Diffusion Process—a model of how the mind accepts or deals with an idea. Scholars find the mind works through five steps:

A. Awareness
B. Interest (when one seeks information)
C. Evaluation (a review of the information to determine the extent of interest, if any)
D. Trial (when one seeks social approval of the idea)
E. Decision

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Society adopts official statement on public relations

In January 1982, PRSA President **Joseph F. Awad**, APR, established the President's Advisory Council, composed of leading public relations practitioners, and charged it with drafting a description of public relations [*see page 3*].

Such a project was necessary, said Mr. Awad, because "it is vital that we attain some consensus on the nature, scope and functions of professional public relations in today's world."

The first draft of the document was completed by Council member **Elias Buchwald**, APR, vice chairman, Burson-Marsteller, New York, NY. After a series of reviews and revisions by Council members and the National Board of Directors, the final document was completed by Mr. Buchwald, Mr. Awad and PRSA Board member **Frank T. LeBart**, APR, second vice president, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, Boston, MA.

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This is sometimes called the Two-Step Flow of Information and Influence. Applying it helps you deal with information overload in two ways.

First, note that only in Steps 1 and 2 is information useful. Yet many times we deal with every problem by throwing more informative communication at it, when what our publics need is the social element of Step 4—provided by "personal media" such as opinion leaders, friends and family. Being careful to build in both phases of Two-Step Flow not only ensures more effective communication, but reduces the volume of mass or "impersonal media" our publics have to deal with.

Second, we can sharpen messages by not expecting people to go through all five steps of Diffusion Process in the same communication. For instance, if the audience is unaware of the issue, concentrate on awareness and don't ask them to make a decision all in one gulp.

5. Pretest important messages through research. Know whom you're aiming at and what you want them to learn from the communication. Then, survey audience samples to judge the probable reception before scattering communications all over the place. As we all know, research not only helps with the message but also helps to make sure we're seeking the right audience. But how often do we use it? No advertiser invests campaign funds until the vehicle is pretested. Why should public relations practitioners act differently? As the old saw has it, it doesn't matter how many people you reach if you don't reach the right people or use the right message.

6. Memorability is the bottom line in overcoming obstacles between the communicator and the target publics. Information overload reduces receptivity—so it becomes practically a crime to achieve receptivity and not make an impression. Publics can only act upon messages or ideas that they remember. This is the primary place for creativity in public relations practice: allegories, metaphors, associations, similes, illustrations and so on will drive the message deep into the receiver's consciousness.

George Orwell's famous rules are a guide to achieving memorability. You should ask yourself, he said, four questions:

- What do I want to say?
- What words will convey it?
- What verbal or other device will make it memorable?
- Is this device fresh or has it become a lifeless cliché?

7. "Perception management" is our salvation if practitioners constantly remind themselves that the goal is not transmitting information or even feelings; but somehow helping to shape people's perceptions. Perceptions are the most powerful force in the world—and public relations is the only profession that concentrates on dealing with this force. To do so means we must learn what a public's perceptions are, and if possible, how they were formed. Then we must develop messages, media and spokesmen to reach out to these perceptions.

Message strategies, audience targeting, and effective persuasion can overcome the barrier of information overload if anything can. However, each rests on a solid base of continual research. The way to combat information overload, in workaday terms, is to think of ourselves less as communicators and more as researchers.

As new communication technologies increase the amount of information overload, anyone who doesn't like research is going to be very unhappy in public relations.

Mr. Jackson, former PRSA president, is senior counsel, Jackson, Jackson & Wagner, Epping, NH. He also edits pr reporter, *a trade publication, and* Channels, *a newsletter for not-for-profit practitioners.*

The two-part "Managing Information Overload" has concentrated on how public relations practitioners can cope with the effect on their publics of information overload. How do we manage the tons of data that reach our desks? Comments, testimonials and tips are welcome. Send to Kathy M. Hyett, APR, editor, 845 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022.

Sections set new policy

Some Section members will see a change in their 1983 dues statement as a result of a new Section policy developed by the Section Council and approved by the National Board of Directors.

All Section members will be charged $15 for the privilege of belonging to an additional Section. This charge will also apply to those members who belong to Sections that charge dues. Four Sections will charge dues in 1983: Association, Counselors Academy, Investor Relations and Public Affairs. In the past, members who belonged to a dues-charging Section were admitted to a second Section at no charge.

"The new policy was developed to treat all members as fairly as possible," said 1982 Section Council Chairman **David Ferguson**, APR, central area director, public affairs, United States Steel Corporation, Chicago, IL.

Mr. Ferguson further commented that the additional income generated from dues allows Sections to enrich service to their members. These programs include publications, audiovisuals, seminars, monographs and other continuing professional education programs.

For more information, contact Belle Sanders, Sections coordinator, PRSA, 845 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022. Phone: (212) 826-1750, ext. 21.