Using issues to gain a spot at the management table

by Patrick Jackson, APR

If public relations has management's attention, it must have far more to offer than publicity placement and publications. Indeed, old-fashioned media and mass communications strategies often drive us away from the management table.

One fail-safe prediction for health care is that it will continue to be an incubator of issues. As if managed care, new technologies, reengineering, and new diseases like AIDS aren't enough, soon we will be dealing with the full impact of genetic medicine.

The most valued members of the management team at such times are those skilled in dealing with issues, more accurately, in multiple accumulations of issues—and the further erosion of trust in the health care system they often pose.

A sizeable body of knowledge has developed on issues. Health care practitioners have made important contributions. Let's review the state of the art:

- **Latent.** While it's logically possible the issue could emerge, nothing is happening yet, except some innovators are starting to think about it.
- **Emerging.** Not yet a "hot" issue, but appears on its way to becoming one (i.e., animal rights in the last half of the 1980s)
- **Hot.** A current issue that is the subject of extensive public debate (i.e., the cost of health care)
- **Fallout.** An issue born as a result of debate over a hot issue. For example, if the cost of health care was the initial issue in the health care debate, loss of jobs in the health care field because of consolidation could be a fallout issue.

Implications

It is vital to deal with issues in the *latent* or *emerging* stages because at this point you can still take steps to avoid or bulletproof against them. Once an issue becomes hot, it is harder to manage your responses and you will inevitably end up *compromising* instead of *controlling*.

Issues as opportunity

My experience in many years of concentrating on issues is that, if there is such a thing as "issue management," it is the practitioner's opportunity to bring about needed changes in organizations as a result. When an organization is caught up in an issue, publics pay attention. But more important, management pays attention. This is what educators call a "teachable moment." It is a priceless opportunity to initiate culture or policy changes — as we are improving

the practices that incubated the issue. It's also a chance to educate publics while you have their interest.

Public relations then becomes a key player at the management table *per se.*

One clarification: Though the term "issues management" could be appealing to your fellow managers, you could be setting yourself up. Clearly, no one can manage an issue. What we can do is anticipate issues or manage responses to issues that we do not anticipate. Semantics is important.

New type of practitioner needed

If public relations has management's attention, it must have far more to offer than publicity placement and publications. Indeed, old-fashioned media and mass communications strategies often drive us away from the management table.

The major failing is feeling one must respond — get the facts out — to every issue, or even to most. This defensive, circle-the wagons approach makes an organization look unbending, even arrogant, and most often escalates the issue!

Far more substantive thinking is required. Today this usually calls for the following:

- Strategic solutions, e.g., when to respond, when not, and how to avoid, duck, or blanket the issue as required; also, when to raise issues.
- Ability to gather information through various types of research, often needed immediately.
- Having in place a solid group of third-party opinion leaders who can assist and defend the organization if necessary.
- A method for quickly informing the organizational family and opinion leaders in key audiences about what's really going on.

Let's face it. The average CEO cannot stay abreast of every issue that may affect the organization. There are many other details he or she needs to attend to. Public relations professionals need to view themselves as more than communication specialists. They need to view themselves as management professionals with specialized communication and relationship skills. Changing this definition alone can help gain management's confidence in including public relations considerations in all management decisions.

Anticipating issues

Some form of an issues anticipation system should be an integral part of strategic planning. Otherwise the best plan goes awry because arising issues bend it out of shape or destroy its timeframe.

Issues anticipation will help guide the organization into the future with the least amount of conflict. Instead of being viewed as the firefighter who tries to put out hot issues, practitioners can be the fire prevention service by foreseeing what might happen.

Does this make the practitioner a psychic? Of course not, but it does call for some sort of organized method to sense latent and emerging issues, and gather information that lets the organization take action to forestall their impact.

Methods for tracking issues

There's more to this than just keeping your ear to the ground. The systematized method that has become standard is an issue anticipation team. This is a no-cost, minimal-time involvement. Members are chosen from all parts of the organization in order to gain maximum perspective. They brown-bag it once a month, or whatever time frame fits the need. These employee volunteers may be at any level, as long as they're knowledge-able and understand what's happening in health care.

Tracking every possible issue that could be out there for an organization is not the objective. Teams usually ask two questions of the emerging environment. What's happening out there and could it happen here? What's happening inside the organization that could cause embarrassment, result in issues, or otherwise damage the reputation?

Areas to examine

- Scan actual operations and review whether they are producing potential issues.
- Look at current policy to gauge whether it may be out-of-sync with trends.
- Examine the near-term potential issues in the sociopolitical, technical, and financial arenas.

Five causes of issues
(and how to deal with them)

	Cause		Solution
1.	Organizational failure. The organization did something, or failed to do something, that caused the issue.	1.	Acknowledge the goof, own up to your organizational failure, and announce a concrete plan to see that it won't happen again.
2.	Honest disagreement. There is an honest disagreement between two opposing sides — or possibly the organization and the public.	2.	Make it understood that although you believe your opponents are wrong, they do have a right to their opinion and you respect them for it. This way you take the starch out of the opposition rather than stiffening their resistance with "I'm right, you're wrong, and that's the end of it."
3.	Bedfellow. Someone who is your ally or employee does something awful and you are guilty by association.	3.	Distance yourself from the bedfellow.
4.	Scandal. Your organization has broken the law or the moral/ethical codes.	4.	Distance yourself from the scandal — make sure the public understands the scandal is not within the values or systems of the organization, but rather, has been committed by an individual. But be careful not to scapegoat.
5.	Accident. A disaster has occurred and your organization is responsible even if no one was at fault.	5.	Express extreme sympathy for any victims first. Then if it was a failure on your part, admit it. Show plans designed so the accident doesn't happen again.

- Examine the output from the above three areas and concentrate on those that are relevant to your organization in near-term (one-year) and long-term (three-year) horizons.

Track issues

- Scan offbeat media to spot significant events and trends. Major media are not as helpful because by the time they report on a trend it is usual fairly well-established. Seek out "little magazines," offbeat newsletters, specialty journals, and talk radio!
- Network within the local community to determine the local issues.
- Identify opinion leaders and keep in touch regularly to spotlight upcoming issues. At the same time, identify issues — what are they, who is establishing the issues agenda and leading the decisions?

- Expand to a series of issues anticipation teams to provide specialized structure and broader participation to issue-tracking. This means involving more staff and managers from all ranks and departments. To keep interest high, teams often report every so often to a formal "issues board" composed of senior officers. While some organizations have one team that looks at the realm of issues, many others have found value in several teams concentrating on specific areas of concern.

Remember, in issue debates your goal is not always to be "right," but to show that you are reasonable — an organization that is caring and open, that listens, and is willing to change when necessary. You want to be an organization that is the kind of approachable, common-sense entity people are comfortable supporting.