

On counselors' side, sense of loyalty is communicable -- and desired by clients. In most cases firms couldn't be pitching that bigger account were it not for experience or reputation gained from the present one. (Maybe clients should write 12 or 24-month no-conflict clauses into their letters of agreement, as employers do.)

The thrill of the chase will give way to more open, more professional relationships in the 80s...as public relations gains increasing recognition as a profession.

-- Patrick Jackson

USER GROUPS, ANOTHER PERSONAL MEDIUM,
PROVE EFFECTIVE IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS;
HAVE MARKETING, COMMUNICATION POSSIBILITIES

For small firms, customer education is expensive & time-consuming. But it's an essential part of customer relations -- particularly in high

tech fields. For Penta Systems (Baltimore), supplier of computer software & hardware to typesetters, solution was to get customers to form a users group.

"People buy things and then everyone disappears on them," says Charlotte Mayne, mktg staff. Penta runs internal training program for customers, built into product cost. Also set up series of "support lines" so users can call in for help. Mayne told pr reporter company hit on idea of users group after handling a "tremendous number of calls -- many of them the same questions over & over again."

Over 91 customers came to first two-day meeting in Baltimore this spring, some from as far as the West Coast, Canada & England. Group elected officers, established a newsletter, is now holding meetings every couple of months. Mayne sees company saving time by "letting the customers help themselves." They also benefit by having more than one information source for answers -- and new ideas.

Concept is not new. For example, Digital Equipment Corp. (Maynard, Mass.) has a group now 10 years old with 125,000 members worldwide. "DECUS" is largest in computer field, according to corp info mgr, Peter Connell. It even has its own library at Digital hq.

Both Mayne and Connell feel that while knowledge sharing is primary intent, groups can serve marketing function, too. Digital, for example, sometimes makes product announcements & presentations at meetings -- "a lot easier because you've got them all together in one room," Connell notes.

Healthcare providers also find "user groups" valuable. Stroke patients, cancer survivors, others who share a problem form "clubs" to exchange info on coping, provide mutual support. Usually meet at hospitals or clinics which provide programs, staffing.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

DIED. Gerard A. Mulligan, pr exec with National Assn of Manufacturers (D.C.).

ACCOUNT SUPERVISORS. Philip G. Ryan, Bozell & Jacobs PR (NYC)...Barry Brinster, Harshe-Rotman & Druck (NYC).

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"CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS" COMES TO FORE AS ATTACKS ON ORGANIZATIONS
HOLD MEDIA ATTENTION; TWO EXPERIENCED PROS SHARE VIEWS
ON RESPONSE POLICY, INTERNAL PREPARATION, AVOIDING FUTURE CRITICISM

Last week we covered what has become a typical problem for practitioners: a high-circulation publication showcases an apparently well-researched article accusing important organizations of seriously antisocial behavior. In this case, Penthouse attacked the Medical Establishment and its public relations programs for "suppressing" promising but non-traditional cancer cures.

What is your policy for responding to such reports, pr reporter asked pr pros in organizations hit by article. Irving Rimer, vp-pi, Amer. Cancer Soc., "tends to respond in terms of the substance of the medium." Answers "responsible critics" only. To National Enquirer e.g., ACS wouldn't respond. To do so would "give legitimacy to sensational media." Another rule: Critics "must accept we are moral people" or we don't respond.

Keeping your constituency & internal organization informed is most important, Rimer finds. "There's no way they can know the answers unless you provide them." For instance, how would ACS field staffer get facts to rebut detailed inquiry into cancer research? And "volunteers are uncomfortable being associated with any organization that is the subject of criticism."

Local people are best equipped to handle attack. To help them Rimer's dep't is heavily involved in training. He reports increasing discussion at staff training sessions on conflict and public information. One teaching method is to play actual series of 5-min. newscast critical of ACS, let attenders decide how to handle if occurred in their town.

John Paluszek of Paluszek & Leslie (NYC) finds "the magic of print is still amazing, so get on record, into print" with factual rebuttal. "Years later someone finds the

RESPONDING TO ATTACK

Irving Rimer's Strategy

1. Don't counterattack writer or medium.
2. Do counterattack misinformation.
3. Use occurrence as hook for positive coverage.

John Paluszek's Counsel to Clients

1. Consider whether response will aggravate situation or address it positively.
2. Consider influence of medium: "What degree of influentials are being reached?"
3. If reply, do so only in medium which carried criticism.
4. Candidly assess truthfulness of attack, address untruths & distortions.

Paluszek's Rules

1. Avoid escalation.
2. Avoid polarization.
3. Seek accommodation.

article attacking you and says it has never been refuted." Op-ed pages are "a big plus" in his experience. Even your own external magazine is OK, so long as data appears on record somewhere.

He treats publications on three levels: a) NYTimes, Washington Post, Science, similar leading media; b) Penthouse, Playboy, Cosmopolitan, women's magazines, read by "politically active people"; c) racy, entertainment media like Enquirer or Star, read by people who don't form public opinion.

How to stop future attacks? Participate in public policy process so can anticipate issues, says Paluszek. Get independent scientists from universities or research centers to evaluate your findings or product. Be sure your own technical people are respected by their peers. Case in point: American Industrial Health Council found disagreement on what a carcinogen is. Is dose or exposure the key? Or is there no tolerable level? It asked National Academy of Science to "make a judgment and let the chips fall" because "industrial healthcare movement better know what these scientific opinion leaders are thinking. You may still get zapped, but you have a credible defense."

"Listen very carefully to a legitimate critic," Rimer advises. "When they do touch a nerve, public relations must do its darndest to bring about change, in order to remove the basis for constructive criticism."

Rimer and Paluszek do not agree on Penthouse-type media. ACS will not respond to them as a rule. Paluszek feels they are now "established media," attracting "the better class of writers."

Of Related Interest: "Crisis communications" is hot meeting topic coast-to-coast. PRSA of Northeast District will hold day-long conference in NYC Sept. 26. Same day San Diego Chapter hears chief of U.S. Navy pub info, Rear Adm. David Cooney speak on subject.

ITEMS OF IMPORTANCE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Tax Limitation Amendment, Michigan's "Prop. 13" is affecting budgets, particularly higher education. Act guarantees local gov'ts about 40% of state revenues, holds increases in appropriations to growth in personal income. With layoffs in key sectors like auto, personal income may not rise. But inflation will up costs of state agencies, universities. Human service needs have more emotional grab than education, did better in '80 budget.

Sloganeering in aid of energy conservation produces "S.T.P." to promote truck & auto efficiency: Slow up (obey 55 limit), Tune up (to get mpg), Pump up (keep tires inflated to cut road resistance). Runzheimer & Co. predicts greater use of phone rather than auto travel as one way organizations will effect fuel conservation.

Leaving phone number off letterhead (or any document, today) remains major irritant, lousy public relations. Banks, gov't agencies, fancy versions of corporate stationery most frequent villains. While phone user leafs thru directory to find number in fine print, dislike & anger are rising. Alfred Univ. (L.I.) goes to opposite extreme, includes only phone number, no address on its letterhead. Call Martin Moore, exec dir-univ rels, for sample -- at 607/871-2144.

GETTING READY FOR THE 80s/NO. 3

COUNSELOR-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS WILL BE MORE PROFESSIONAL WITH EMPHASIS ON LOYALTY RATHER THAN ACCOUNT GRABBING

What is the extent of loyalty owed by professionals to clients? Usually the issue comes down to this: does a counseling firm have an obligation to advise a current client it is carrying on discussions with a competitor? Or does conflict of interest begin only when the firm signs up the new client?

Unceremonious dumping of the original client -- once supplanted by a more prestigious or higher paying replacement -- does the field's reputation no good. Yet few firms say they tell clients of exploratory negotiations with others. PRSA's Code says:

Article 4. "A member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those involved, given after a full disclosure of the facts; nor place himself or herself in a position where the member's interest is or may be in conflict with a duty to a client, or others, without a full disclosure of such interests to all involved."

Many counselors feel this wording is unworkable. Telling a client about talks with another could result in losing both, they say. Supporters think any other approach means "the robber is guilty only if he finds money in the till, but innocent otherwise."

Ad agency head Jerry Della Femina recently announced his firm will not negotiate with competitors of clients without their consent. "You can't demand loyalty from a client when you don't give it in return," he said. The trend today he characterized as "how much can I make from this account and how fast can I replace it with another. This disloyalty is making advertising dirty."

Contributing to free-for-all approach are clients' expectations during contract discussions. Full-fledged speculative programs may be demanded. Often firms give in to this unprofessional request. (Try asking a law firm to do it.) A Calgary firm's "2 of 3" rule offers a solution to this problem (see last week's issue). Unless a client is seeking absolutely identifiable services -- like publications or publicity -- speculative presentations are a poor indicator anyway. They reduce public relations to the level of cleaning supplies, nuts & bolts and other mass produced items with identical specifications. Organizations choosing firms this way reveal how little they understand contemporary public relations. Certainly it is not professional, in their eyes.

I am convinced research would show that sticking with one firm over time is more cost effective -- and provides better results -- than jumping from one "hot-shop" to another, or firing counsel in anger if they drop the ball. Time wasted indoctrinating new counsel usually takes longer than helping present firm reassert its value.