

Returned questionnaires go to the hotel's general manager who 1) responds with a letter to the customer and 2) takes the customer's comments to the appropriate departments. "Suggestions are taken into consideration. Criticisms are looked into & rectified. It's a useful source for learning more about what our guests want. What better way than to ask them directly. And the response is good. It's amazing the number of people who take the time to fill out the questionnaires."

[This is one technique which lets public relations participate in monitoring daily operations. It gives insights on how the organization is perceived by showing how the desk clerk treated the customer, whether the housekeeper kept the room clean & comfortable, if the waitresses & waiters were friendly, etc.]

LESLEY SEES JEWEL FOODS' SALMONELLA NIGHTMARE AS THE OPPOSITE OF TYLENOL'S BRILLIANCE

"It's a commentary on ineptitude in handling emergencies," believes counselor Phil Lesly regarding

Jewel's handling of the salmonella outbreak in its milk. In a letter to prr, he writes: "Much has been written about how well Johnson & Johnson helped itself with a proactive, outgoing posture.

This is the other side of the coin." He also notes that Jewel's poor public relations "can make a point about the mistakes made after mergers. After American Stores acquired Jewel, the Jewel public relations staff was decimated -- as if any needs & problems no longer existed or could occur."

EVEN ENGINEERS NEED TO BE COMMUNICATORS

That's the message from C. Bruce Ross, retiring president of the 50,000-member Ass'n of Professional Engineers (Ontario):

"The challenge we face today as a society is to harness technology to the service of mankind. How can we hope to resolve the issue in a climate of reason & rationality -- the hallmark of the professional engineer -- and not in a welter of conflicting emotions & confrontation? I suggest that it has to begin with communication.

"The engineer must not only hone his technical skills, he must be looked upon by the public as an expert -- an authority on technology and its effects. Furthermore, he must be prepared to communicate that expertise in laymen's terms to the public-at-large. In short, professional engineers must expand their skills to include the art of communication in order to explain the products, possibilities and the dangers inherent in today's technology."

As the nightmare unfolded, Jewel brought Bill Newby out of 4-month from the pr dep't to be its primary spokesman. Another was recently added -- borrowed from Jewel's personnel dep't. Burson-Marsteller has now been retained. But according to a Chicago Tribune article, "the agency spokesman proved to be as impossible to reach as Jewel's inhouse spokesmen."

USEFUL INFORMATION FOR PR PROS

"Want to provide pr services internationally? Best to link with a pr firm based abroad, show results of a survey by Lobsenz-Stevens

(NYC) covering 200 major US corporations. According to findings, a) 78% of international corporations utilize some form of pr in their non-US activities; b) 48% of these use pr firms, 30% handle their pr themselves; c) 18% use firms based in the US, 38% use foreign firms; d) only 5% have retainer relationships with US based firms; e) 20% have retainer relationships with foreign pr firms. According to Amelia Lobsenz (chrn) this suggests that corporations needing only occasional pr assistance use domestic firms. But when they experience a continuing need, they turn to firms located overseas.

REAL LESSON OF AT&T BREAKUP, BANK MONEY LAUNDERING & RELATED CASES IS THAT PUBLIC RELATIONS SHOULD CHANGE ITS FOCUS

Last week, respected practitioners analyzed in these pages some reasons why AT&T's huge, highly professional, well-funded public relations function could not avert the breakup of that company. Their presentation was instructive -- but something was missing. Most telephone customers could have told us professionals what it is.

fueling it was a long-held sense of outrage at years of bad treatment by too many telephone company personnel.

This is where the rubber meets the road in public relations. PR is what an organization's members do...not grand official statements, CEO speeches & flashy annual reports. As Emerson warned, "What we do speaks so loudly no one can hear what we say."

AT&T (as do most organizations today) construed public relations to mean primarily publications, annual reports, media publicity, videos & similar products. Basically these amount to communications from management to important publics, plus some feedback devices.

Why were the excellent professionals at Bell not able (or not allowed) to deal with this bottom-line challenge? After all, it was the company's Arthur Page who formulated many basic practices of the field, including the ones discussed here. The purpose of such an inquiry cannot be to throw stones at AT&T's pr pros -- tho possibly at its management or policies. The only question is: What can practitioners learn from this case? Some thoughts:

Yet in terms of outcome -- of meaningful goals & objectives, of the reason it exists -- public relations is not communications products but the relationships between the sales clerks, repair staff, phone answerers, supervisors & others who are the contact points between the organization & its publics. Folks who try to get a phone repaired, have an erroneous bill adjusted, seek an explanation of some policy (such as the amount of deposit required to have a phone installed) or get a straight answer about the latest rate filing know why there was no public opposition to dismembering AT&T. To them the monster deserved to be busted for its uncaring arrogance toward customers, gov't & others.

1. Public relations should alter its focus from being a service unit to becoming a counseling, monitoring & service unit. Monitoring may be the most valuable. A report on Union Carbide's Indian tragedy notes that "organizations tend to economize on internal coordination & control when ever possible, whether it involves financial, environmental or other matters." A balance of power is required to be sure operational laxity doesn't lead to problems. As "conscience of the organization," pr is the logical choice.

In her daily actions, Ma Bell had become the monolithic monopoly incarnate. Other rationalizations may have been used for the actual breakup, but

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2. Operations audits are more important than communication audits.

Monitoring can be done in an organized, openly reported way to show what is actually happening. Banks accused of laundering drug money, manufacturers with leaking wastes or safety hazards need someone to watch out for the breakdowns -- at operational levels. PR should do it. They'll be called in to clean up the mess so have motivation.

3. PR should ask to be evaluated on relationships, not communications output. This means seeking the responsibility that goes along, principally the mandate to monitor the "behavior at the boundaries" where the organization meets its publics.

4. Training may be the highest skill level in pr. What is pr's role in training personnel to deal with customers? Training may be assigned to human resources. Operations execs may pose barriers. But in final analysis, it's the relationships that people are trained to build or maintain that spell success or failure. Therefore pr must be involved.

5. Corporate culture programs are essential -- & never-ending. They begin with orientation, follow with perpetual training & rituals like events & awards. The philosophy of relationships drives such programs, so pr has a responsibility.

6. Corporate culture begins with a value system that is shared by all

members of the organization. If you gave a test to employees, how many could state the company values? If you ask them to site slips in behavior from the stated values, could they give many examples?

7. RHIP policies (rank hath its privileges) are an indicator of trouble. Something as simple as allotted free parking for the boss when others must find and pay for a slot is a twice-daily reminder of how the outfit truly feels -- demonstrated behaviorally. Exec dining, restrooms & similar only make it worse. Either we are a team or we aren't. It is public relations' responsibility to question, attack & otherwise get rid of RHIP.

8. Hierarchical organizations by definition find it hard to build relationships. When a level 3 is prohibited from talking officially to a level 5, it may signify far more than just "going thru channels."

These cases remind us that building relationships, not communicating, is what counts. Relationships involve behavior, human interaction. Communication is words. Relationships are formed for an organization with its publics by every member of the organization who interacts with those publics. Communications come from the tower via the public relations dep't (or some euphemism there for). Only practitioners can effectively change the focus.

-- Pat Jackson

A CONSULTING TECHNIQUE HELPS SELL YOUR IDEAS: MEET WITH ALL PARTICIPANTS BEFORE THE MEETING, BRING THOSE WHO OPPOSE INTO THE PROCESS

discover attitudes & motivations, sell your idea as necessary, and know where you

Before going into a meeting where a decision will be made, talk with each person who'll be there -- to answer questions,

stand, advises public relations counselor Bill Bennington. "I try to get to everyone who is going to be involved in the decisionmaking process before the meeting takes place. Then, going into the meeting I'll know who I can rely on for support and who I can look to for disagreement. It also gives me an opportunity to prepare the counter-arguments when somebody does disagree."

Prior to the general meeting, Bennington asks each person for his or her input & thoughts on his proposal. "In effect, I make them a consultant up front. And, at the meeting they're not asked to make a judgment on something they know nothing about."

Bennington used this technique when he proposed to take his public relations staff at Colonial Penn Group and form an independent firm -- Communication Services Corp (Phila.). Because the company is up for sale, long term investments -- "the things public relations does best" -- are diminishing. Bennington saw that if the department got cut much further, they would be little use to the company. That's when he began playing with numbers and found that by forming an independent firm and still giving Colonial Penn Group the same services, he could save the company a quarter million dollars per year. Plus the pr firm would gain the freedom & flexibility to grow with other clients. That was the motivation.

His decisionmaking process helped him to gain approval. Here's how:

1. "First thing I did was tell the president what I was thinking about and ask if he'd like to see a proposal."

2. "Then I talked with the people I knew he'd discuss it with once he received my proposal. That way when he did approach them, they would already know about the idea and could help sell it."

Sometimes, as the result of someone not agreeing, the idea gets rethought or changed in scope -- for the better, explains Bennington. "It's not always that I'm right & they're wrong." And sometimes it pays to run and not fight. "If you've got 6 people lined up against you, don't go in with the proposal."

"This is basic human relations." Social reinforcement is the key to the decisionmaking process -- something most people instinctively know as children but forget once they become executives & managers.

ARE CONSUMER QUESTIONNAIRES REALLY EFFECTIVE?

"Yes. Because they enable us to get first-hand reactions from our guests about what they liked and didn't like," Sally Bennet, dpr for Fairmont Hotels (San Francisco), told prr. Questionnaires are given out at checkout time with customer's bill. Post-paid self-mailer can be filled out & returned at the customer's convenience. "We've tried to make it as easy for people as possible because we genuinely appreciate comments from our guests. After all, we're trying to give them the best possible service."

3. "I learned who wasn't in favor of my idea and why. It gave me the opportunity to prepare a rebuttal."

4. Because I knew who was against my idea, at the meeting I could say, 'Dan sits on the other side of the fence for these reasons.' It gives you a nice way to let the opposition into the process and they're not going to be as apt to try and nail you."