

PRSA CONFERENCE ROUNDTABLE ROUNDUP: USEFUL ITEMS FOR PRACTITIONERS

¶Public service programs can benefit both sponsors & NPOs if match is carefully chosen. E.g., Encyclopedia Britannica wanted to position itself as an educator, not bookseller, hence underwrote costs of producing PSAs for American Federation of Teachers in exchange for recognition as sponsor. Joel Roselin of Planned Communication Services (NYC), who matched up the 2 orgns, says financing a public service program is NPOs biggest challenge but is simplified by identifying natural affinities. "Don't ask for a handout; instead offer sponsor the opportunity for a partnership." In some cases, sponsor recognition is sufficient motive, e.g., Burger King underwrites professional development program for National Association of Secondary School Principals. Brad Lynch, NW Ayer (NYC), advises that sponsors are looking for a) recognition, b) relevance, c) ease of implementation, and d) no complaints from stockholders.

¶To make certain your job survives a corporate reorganization/takeover, Winthrop Neilson, managing dir, Krone Comms (Harrisburg) offers these tips: 1) make yourself indispensable to top mgmt & corp attorney in their terms; 2) increase your value by taking on necessary jobs others avoid; 3) monitor early warning systems (stocks, rumors, unusual trading patterns); 4) work out a severance contract in advance. Grim reality is that financial vp, corp sec'y & anyone in comms are usually first to go.

¶Get more mileage out of speeches by distributing to other audiences. Consider 1) wire services frequently report on new ideas; 2) local radio stations may be interested in interview on topic; 3) cable tv public access programing may be appropriate forum; 4) national outlets such as Executive Speeches & Vital Speeches (often referred to by journalists, researchers; 5) internal media such as employee bulletin boards & newsletters; 6) reprints for colleagues & professional societies.

¶Social cause marketing has pros & cons for both sponsor & NPO. Sponsors sometimes face criticism of doing it just for visibility or find that funds are used improperly (e.g., too great a portion to overhead). NPOs may find eager contributors whose products aren't compatible with orgn's image. Tax reform makes tax implications of some marketing activities unclear, so NPOs with large assets are considering setting up separate legal entities for cause-related mktg revenues.

¶New ideas for non-dollar donations. Even as many NPOs begin corporate-type marketing, they still have limited funds for research. NPOs with similar target publics may benefit from companies' already available demographic research and/or could utilize a small piece of market research capability.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

ELECTED. PRSA 1988 officers: pres, Dwayne Summar (sr counsel, Summar & Assoc, Miami); pres-elect, John Paluszek (pres, Ketchum Public Affairs, NYC); sec'y, Isobel Parke (sr counsel, Jackson Jackson & Wagner, Exeter, NH); treas, Zoe McCathrin (prof, pr, Kent State U, OH).

Newly-elected dirs-at-large: Bill Chaddock (vp comms, Columbia Gas Transmission, Charlestown, WV); Harriet Gonzalez (dpr, General Telephone, Tampa); Erick Peterson (Peterson/Herring Public Relations, Seattle); Rosalee Roberts (dpr, Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon & Eckhardt, Omaha).

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ECONOMIC PRESSURES ARE PUSHING PRACTITIONERS BACK TO CORE CAPABILITIES IS MESSAGE OF PRSA'S 40TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE, WITH THEME OF CREDIBILITY

Trust, believability, integrity. We are witnessing a squandering of these key qualities in virtually all areas -- politics, business, religion, sports. PRSA-produced theme video put problem in a nutshell: if a good reputation is worth more than gold, why do individuals & organizations risk losing it? And what are the implications for practitioners whose role focuses on building/rebuilding confidence in their organizations?

Three major trends emerge in analysis of speeches, roundtables, PD sessions:

1. Credibility starts with the CEO: Organizational integrity is top-down & it's up to the CEO to set a strong example & policy for organizational values. As Jim Arnold, evp, Chester Burger & Co. said, "Milton Friedman notwithstanding, the business of business is no longer just business."

Personalization of the company image is one method CEO's use (e.g., Iacocca, An Wang, Sam Walton). By promotion of their personal images, their companies look more personable, interesting, trustworthy.

Practitioners also need to be concerned about their credibility with the CEO. Until we demonstrate understanding of the business plan, goals & markets of the institution, management will not recognize pr's ability to make meaningful contributions. Arnold advises: a) think like the CEO & speak the language of management; b) link pr objectives to business objectives; c) be research-based & results-focused.

2. Most credible advocates of an organization are internal, hence practitioners must make employees the major audience. Bill Brody, counselor & prof at Memphis State, says his studies show downsizing of staff is short-sighted right on the bottom line. Predicted labor shortages in not-so-distant future means organizations will vie for employees -- and only a reputation for fair treatment will provide a competitive advantage. (See story page 2).

"Public relations professionals will be the next CEOs of our organizations," believes Bill Brody, author of The Business of Public Relations. He told seminar on Productivity, Credibility & Survival: "Boards of directors bring in the best person in the hottest area to run the company. This field (public relations) is the hottest area. Never has there been social change that has not worked to the benefit of public relations. The greatest opportunity in this time of a diminishing workforce is for us -- but we have to get off our butt, get up to the CEO's office and do something about it!"



In annual address of Foundation for Public Relations Research & Education, long-time AT&T svp Ed Block suggests that as companies translate competitiveness to efficiency, quality & innovation, it will be apparent that employees are the crux, putting ever more importance on the internal audience. Without the support of these stakeholders, we can accomplish nothing. Practitioners have a crucial role here, first by advocating policy that promotes harmony, and only then by communicating.

Yet many still misunderstand pr's role. SUNY educ prof Irene Lober, speaking on lack of credibility in education, said "fault lies with administration & boards of education who've been remiss in seeing need for pr," implying more positive press would help solve the problem. Hence, those institutions facing the most severe crises in confidence may be contributing to it by equating media relations with the basic strategy of building public confidence. Feeding success stories to the public can't replace the more fundamental task of strengthening the infrastructure. As Lober later comments, "Teachers must be made to feel their efforts are recognized. Credibility can only be restored when the district deserves it."

3. Time to take new, harder look at media relations. Top journalist panel at conference tells us:

a) Press is receptive to criticism from practitioners because media is concerned about its credibility. "Speak out if you feel story was unfair or biased," urges David Broder, national political correspondent & columnist for the Washington Post.

b) Understand that market-driven pressures force the media to present negative side, thus putting an organization's credibility on the line more consistently & creating friction. "There are more stories where the thrust is unpleasant -- layoffs, poor service record, etc... and likely to offend someone in the company," says Paul Steiger, deputy managing editor, Wall Street Journal. But that's the nature of business coverage in an intensely competitive market.

c) Be an information source without always putting a spin on it. Most journalists are generalists, hence need knowledgeable sources but don't want a go-between. "I can give a little more margin of doubt to people who've been straight with me in the past," says Steiger. Adds Mary Alice Williams, vp, CNN, "We're in the questions business -- the business of telling all 6 sides of the story."

INTERNAL AUDIENCES AGAIN TOP AGENDA
AS SEVERE LABOR SHORTAGE BREWS

Some organizations are already affected, most will feel pinch in next 20 years. To offset this reality, management "must realize that if you're losing people, you are probably losing the best and keeping the dregs. The best worker is the most mobile worker," says Brody. Employee relations cannot be changed without changing the organization. Three key moves:

1. Commitment by senior management to employees. Long-term hands-on organizational change must deal fairly & openly with all. For example, Brody cites how Chrysler promised workers job security if they gave up some pay and benefits. Recently Chrysler reneged on its half of the bargain by laying off workers thru plant closings. "Do you think those workers will ever trust that management again?"

2. Install an equitable reward system. Change the current "punishments" approach to a reward-oriented one such as a bonus system that produces an equitable distribution of income based on contribution to productivity.

3. Must have a system to communicate 1 & 2. Held up as a model company in this respect is the feedback system at Federal Express: managers there are not only evaluated by their managers, but by their subordinates. "Managers are directly responsible for personnel and are required to communicate."

UPS, Brody says, may be catching up in terms of the number of packages they handle but are basically a time & motion company. They know exactly how long it should take a driver to get from their truck to the front door for delivery. The company may ultimately have as many packages to deliver as Fed Ex -- but when labor is short they won't have the employees to deliver them.

Baby Bust Will Change
Face of Workforce

In 1995 there will be 20% fewer 18-24 year olds than in '75. AIDS epidemic will further shrink the available labor force. Current predictions say about 10 million people now carry the virus, which means we can expect half a million deaths per year unless a cure is found. In 3 to 5 years the labor force will begin to decrease by 1% a year. Currently there are 3.4 workers to support each retiree. By 2015 there will only be 1.5 workers for each retiree.

Workers of tomorrow will be more volatile than in the past. Household income is up but is a false measure: more than half the mothers of preschoolers are working. The Wall Street Journal reports that the middle class is becoming a minority. There has been a 36% increase in the number of families below the poverty line -- 1 million households added since 1960, another million just since 1980.

"Organizations that deal effectively with the coming baby bust & these socio-logical problems will continue to exist," says Brody, "but they must realize there is a price tag on loyalty from workers -- loyalty to employees."

CONFERENCE OF FUTURE: WHERE'S THE BEEF?

Emphasis is shifting away from mass attendance plenary sessions to PD workshops & special interest groups. At Los Angeles PRSA gathering, this trend came sharply into focus. "Big name" plenary speakers from media or politics were often stale or offering info of little application to professional practice. Attendance was a fraction of those registered for the conference. Many walked out during the sessions. Disappointment was reaction to general session speakers whose presentations were: a) so general they could have been made to any professional group; b) lacked substantive content for practitioners; c) reflected superficial understanding of public relations.

Hallway talk centered on PD workshops & Section meetings, which were well attended. Conference planners say name speakers are needed to draw a crowd. When they're provocative (like Tom Wolfe last year) or entertaining (like Hugh Sidey at LA) they serve a purpose. But the field's coming of age is seen in SRO attendance at breakfast roundtables.