

- a) Research to discover public perceptions. Two findings: public believes competition benefits large companies; doesn't understand regulatory work is much more complex in post-monopoly era.
- b) Message strategies for explaining function & decisions.
- c) Background papers for decision makers to explain factors at work.
- d) Speakers Bureau actively seeking platforms to explain PUC's work & issues before it.

Crucial question for PUC, says Weiser, is "Are we trusted?" High awareness of our role is downsidled by less understanding. We have to build recognition of our ability to serve the community as a whole, despite decisions unpopular with some publics."

CONFERENCE SHORT TAKES: ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PRACTITIONERS

¶Use of media reps in focus group may improve preparation of complex and/or technical background information for press. Example shared by roundtable participant indicates reporters, editors -- particularly of technical publications -- may welcome opportunity to participate in exchange for first look at information. Result is information put into relevant context & at appropriate level for their readers.

¶Corporate foundations may not be the only target of fundraising. Knowledgeable NPOs know that business has overreacted to the marketing craze by giving that department the plethora of funding. Hits may soon be made on the marketing department for direct contributions, as well as for cause-related marketing projects.

¶How to fight the media: Practitioners face a variety of "bad news" situations that require sensitive handling of the media for damage control. A few objectives discussed by Peter Hannaford: 1) get the facts straight by doing your own fact-finding; 2) if you or your organization have done something wrong, admit it & apologize; 3) explain what you're doing to correct a bad situation & decide what actions to take (e.g., announce a recall, form a task force to revamp a production process); 4) communicate personally with your key stakeholders -- don't rely on the news media when there's a story you want to get out to employees, stockholders & community leaders.

¶Communication audit reveals large number of non-literate employees frustrated by written communication. Organization replaced internal print communications with radio, completely re-vamped instruction booklet to emphasize graphics. Result was more cooperative settlement of new labor contract, says Larry Werner, Ketchum Public Relations (Pittsburgh).

¶Shorter, weekend vacations are new travel trend, finds PRSA Travel & Tourism Section: a) weekend trips grew 9.5% in '86 while overall travel grew 4%; b) 29% of Americans combined vacations with business trips last year (38% did this during peak summer vacation months); c) 73% of all trips in '86 were 3 days or less. Hotels & airlines develop cooperative, irresistably priced plans to encourage extra travel. Packages feature convenience (hotel, air & car reservations with 1 call); special events (jazz festivals, sports events, museum exhibits); holiday specials; theme trips (mystery, wine tasting, chocolate lovers, trivial pursuit).

LIMITATIONS OF LOBBYING PAVE WAY FOR OTHER METHODS OF INFLUENCING POLICY: COALITION BUILDING, GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING & STRATEGIC GIVING

Trying to override activist concerns by aggressive direct lobbying no longer works for most corporations & organizations. "Trend is from confrontation to cooperation, because today's adversaries can be tomorrow's allies", Mary Ann Pires, The Pires Group (Armonk, NY), told PRSA conference session on indirect lobbying. Cooperation is also more cost-effective, more productive & lets you respond better -- hence influence the issues better.

A. Coalition Building. Today realization of mutual stakes influences pressure groups & businesses to work together, e.g., environmentalists working with utilities & chemical manufacturers. Dialogue is enabled by more savvy activist leaders & business leaders who've seen the long-term costs of ignoring issues. Pires offers these lessons in coalition building:

1) Find the common ground.

Don't deny legitimate self-interests; do enough spadework to identify what others have at stake. "Building relationships, not putting together deals, is the essence of coalition building."

2) Let your ally have its own voice. Objectivity & credibility are gained when the ally is not the step-child of your organization.

3) Treat people decently. "Remember, coalitions begin by negotiating among allies; they end with negotiations with your adversaries." Maintain contact, even after the work is done. And especially expose allies to others within your organization -- don't be their only contact.

B. Grassroots Organizing. It takes very little for an issue to grab the ear of a legislator, says Tom Dowd, former Conn. state senator, now dpa for Aetna Life & Casualty. Senators surveyed say just seven letters from constituents will prompt them to put an aide on an issue. For the House, it requires just four letters. Two factors influence a legislator's receptiveness: 1) message must come clearly from constituents ("my district & the rest of the world"), and 2) must focus on the legislator's ambitions (re-election) & anxieties (fear of casting a bad vote, disappointing constituents, losing).

"Every issue has its natural allies, but throwing the net wide enough to pick up the unlikely allies is the real challenge and reward. Building such a broad-based trust and coalition is only possible through a mutual threshold of self-interest. And remember to look for the allies inside your organization: employees, attorneys, operations, contributions."

Dowd divides grassroots techniques into two types:

1) Education. Issues that legislators want to learn about are best handled at breakfast briefings, CEO meetings, high-visibility events in the legislator's district (media visits, op ed pages, lobbying visits by constituents). Dowd warns that as the typical Congressman spends 11 minutes a day reading, "best lobbying piece is one that can be read as it's being thrown away."

2) Scare Tactics. Tho you can't be sure your issue will win, you can guarantee it will be a tough vote for the legislator. "Legislators begin to see the light when they feel the heat," adds Dowd.

Best techniques overall are spontaneous personal letters or phone calls from constituents, followed by orchestrated personal letters, identical form letters, with petitions at the bottom of the list. Dowd advises letterwriters to double up: send same letter to both the DC office & local office -- gets counted twice that way.

C. Strategic Giving. A strategic plan for contributions is essential to ensure that your organization doesn't use contributions to respond to lobbyists' short-term needs, says Gene Wilson, pres of ARCO Foundation. A plan becomes vital in era of budget cuts in contributions. With budget extremely reduced, "ARCO has had to practice the art of pouring cold water warmly," says Wilson. ARCO uses guidelines, objective evaluation criteria, proactive issues analysis to evaluate best issues & groups to fund.

RECIPE FOR INTERNATIONAL CRISIS: OVERLOOK LOCAL CONDITIONS

Satellite technology focuses attention on disasters occurring thruout the world with lightning speed & detail, making international crisis planning crucial for organizations doing business overseas. Yet, best planning may be rendered ineffectual by ignorance of local conditions. Do not assume telephone, other communications systems are equal to those in U.S.; in some areas, news doesn't travel as fast or as uncensored. Two case studies from PRSA conference illustrate:

A. News of Union Carbide explosion in Bhopal took hours to reach US headquarters. City's only 2 long-distance trunk lines were tied up with local emergency, hence Indian-based Union Carbide officials had to fly 3 hours to reach fax & phone communication with US. Meanwhile, only news of disaster available to hdqtrs was via India Press reports. Then, value of sending CEO to Bhopal was partially nullified by unforeseen house arrest on arrival. Company's investigation of tragedy -- and apparent sabotage -- has been hampered by Indian equivalent of CIA.

Union Carbide's handling of the crisis made more difficult by: 1) could not control the story in initial stages; 2) plant officials had no crisis media training; 3) no open communication channels between disaster site & hdqtrs; 4) attempt to place dynamic person in charge was thwarted; 5) no objective news source overseas -- only the "politicized" Indian press.

B. In Basel, Sandoz found sloppy chemical storage grabbed attention of international media. Nightly tv pics showed blood red chemicals snaking down the Rhine thru France, Germany, Low Countries. Despite Sandoz' first denial, fish were killed in the already heavily polluted Rhine -- tho no one died. Sandoz had no public relations crisis plan, had not paid attention to unease in Basel about prosperity

built on massive chemical plants. Spill enabled the radical environmental party, the Greens, already fighting proposed Basel nuclear plant, to make Sandoz' inept handling of chemical spill a rallying point against private enterprise in Switzerland & Western Europe. Faced with city's shattered image for efficiency & safety, Basel's gov't officials turned against Sandoz, joined criticism of chemical industry.

"It's essential to have a crisis plan: it's equally important to build in a scan of your local political environment -- then you see the importance of building relationships that can help you through a crisis," commented Dr. Rudolph Meier, Zurich counselor.

Commenting on problem of disseminating information in countries where press is muzzled, Alain Modoux, head of info for Intern'l Comte of Red Cross (spoke in PRSA Conference general session) says that if info is of humanitarian importance to a war-torn region, the public relations officer "must know by heart the system and the environment -- from its publics to its culture."

"Coverage of natural disasters or governmental instability directly impacts on tourism industries or investment in countries as well as companies, especially in the Third World. If these stories are unbalanced or false, the countries which are their victims no longer have access to international television audiences to fight back," says Barbara Burns, evp, GreyCom Intern'l (NYC).

UTILITY UNBUNDLING, COMPETITION SPREADS BEYOND MA BELL, BRINGS PROBLEMS FOR STAKEHOLDER STRATEGIES TO COMPANIES, PUCs

PRSA Utilities Section de-regulation panel

explains why this sector is the hot spot in public relations practice today:

1. How to explain players' roles when FTC, PUCs, Congress, courts, state governments are all vying for top billing in improvised drama of dereg & related issues?
2. How to explain to consumers the new terminology of unbundling in energy sources: production, transmission & distribution? Local distribution is now open to competition, transmission will be next. Consumer confusion over meaning of phone access fee now spreads to energy. Power companies' split on access charging adds to consumer bewilderment.
3. Unforeseen trends: far greater independent investment in renewable energy, interest in co-generation (your own customers may compete with you).
4. Counterintuitive issue: how to explain to residential customers that it's in their interest that domestic rates go up while industry rates go down? Alternative is industry opting for alternative energy source, forcing domestic rates up even faster.
5. Key audience: employees -- keep them up to speed. If they're confused you've lost your best pipeline to your customers. (See last week's issue.)
6. California PUC now has External Affairs committee. Exec Dir Victor Weiser says "Our organization produces nothing, offers neither services nor entertainment, but to retain our credibility, our decisions must be seen as credible by our publics." Work of committee includes: