

USEFUL RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Hill & Knowlton survey of 53 mid-sized public companies (\$25-\$500 million annual sales) shows crisis preparedness is largely informal. Only 32% have crisis communications plans (compared to 90% of 30 Fortune 500 companies -- see pr 4/20).

Opinion was divided over how open organizations should be with press & public during an emergency. 17% would communicate as little as possible. 42% would try to provide as much info as possible "without going overboard."

Most respondents said they would probably turn for direction to an ad hoc group consisting of the CEO, chief operating & financial officers, perhaps company lawyers. Only half would involve public relations counsel from either inside or outside the organization.

Biggest worries: becoming involved in a major lawsuit or trying to explain declining financial performance. Only 6% worry about dealing with product failures or recalls. 8% have already used their "informal" crisis-managing approach to deal with a takeover attempt; 11% to deal with a significant industrial accident.

2. Survey of 190 news directors reconfirms that VNRs without voice-over narration and with B-roll (unedited footage) are used twice as often as completely produced, narrated stories. Most would rather not have "lower third" titling of spokespersons dubbed, preferring to generate their own style titles.

"We recommend a fully produced VNR, followed by a version with natural sound only, and then additional B-roll footage. The larger the market, the more likely it is to have a station re-edit using its own reporters' voices, or to incorporate a local angle for their broadcasts," says Robert Kimmel, Audio-TV Features (NYC), which commissioned the survey.

USEFUL ITEMS FOR PRACTITIONERS

¶Info communicated on video is not conducive for reflective study. That's the reason Emhart has gone back to basics. It's distributing print & audio summaries -- rather than video -- of chm's state-of-the-company annual meeting address. "You just don't reread video. Inasmuch as '86 was a year of worldwide restructuring and culture change for the company, we suspect this report will get substantial rereading; at least we wanted to make it easy to do," explains John Budd Jr, sr vp corp communications.

¶Trashy words apparently up the ratings for some radio programs. But the FCC has ruled against using "patently offensive language" on the air. It cites George Carlin's skit, "Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television," as the definition of what can't be said on radio. DJs, VJs & prgm directors are left in limbo to a large degree with the threat of court action breathing down their necks. Says one general manager, "If (the guidelines) are not clarified further, how am I going to act as censor? So far, this seems akin to saying, 'You don't have to stop at every red light, but I won't tell you which ones they are.'" Billboard magazine's May 2 issue helpfully, and humorously, covers the subject...including sidebars listing the 7 taboo words and program directors' favorite vulgarities. (For copy, write pr)

pr reporter

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"CONSTITUENCY RELATIONS" MAY BE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
EITHER AS THE CENTERPIECE THAT LEADS & FOCUSES ALL PROGRAMS
OR, IN A PINCH, IT COULD REPLACE EVERYTHING ELSE

Quality vs. quantity. Research-based. Tightly-targeted. Visible personal impact vs. "messages shot into the air to land we know not where," as Scott Cutlip puts it. Automatically self-evaluating. Links marketing, issues, relationships in one vehicle. These are some of the virtues of constituency relations (CR) programs, which work like this:

BASIC FEATURES 1. Key opinion leaders (OLs) are identified for each important external public, based on a) desired behaviors sought b) in order to achieve current objectives. Include opponents as well as neutrals & supporters.

2. Contacts are assigned to each OL. Preferably they a) cover all ranks & types of personnel, b) get initial training, c) become an elite corps or support group to reinforce each other & continue training. Often they will be friends of the OL.

3. On a regular schedule, usually once or twice a year, contacts make extended calls on their targets with objectives of a) listening to their views, experiences, what they hear from their networks; b) delivering the organization's currently important messages & appeals; c) getting reaction to potential products, services, plans, policies; d) building a mutually trusting & sharing relationship.

4. Specific findings of each visit are entered into a computer database.

5. Small facilitating staff supports contact personnel, keeps program running, analyzes data & distributes it widely to operating dep'ts & decisionmakers. CEO's cabinet, for instance, can have to-the-minute data available for any topic they're discussing.

IMPORTANT ADD-ONS 6. Formal research once a year or so is used to validate CR database among the entire publics.

7. Speakers bureau starts seeking audiences it needs to reach, or that will reinforce CR contacts, rather than taking what comes along. Q&A is emphasized in pres-

Research shows that personalized 2-way communication is vital to building relationships that can motivate behavior & create trust -- which media programs & other impersonal communications cannot do. Research also shows that opinion leader influence via word-of-mouth, networking & social rewards/punishment is at the core of individual's & society's decisionmaking. CR is the only program that puts these elements together in one focused activity.



entations so audience reactions, Q&A response, things overheard can be entered into the database when speaker returns.

8. Sponsored memberships are realigned to assure organization is covering all vital groups, rather than everyone joining Rotary or the Chamber of Commerce. From time to time the member is given topics to toss into the table talk for reaction. Relevant information from any aspect of meetings is put into the database upon return.

9. Community relations, open houses, tour programs, contribution programs & many others can have research value by plugging into the database what is learned from contacts made during these programs. Even sales calls or informal contacts can be entered. Breadth of individuals & groups whose opinions, perceptions & behavior goes into the database safeguards against skewing -- & these are the very folks who influence the rest of your publics.

CR is ideal for utilities, health-care, government, schools, human service agencies, plant location programs, even retail or banking, where the whole community is served. But it can work for national marketers, individual industrial manufacturers, insurance or financial services by adjusting the geographic frame. For centralized organizations it keeps touch with the local building blocks of stakeholder constituencies -- often a major problem.

10. Some form of face-to-face program for employees -- or team tasking, work groups, quality circles -- ties CR to internal publics. The difference is that all employees are involved, not just opinion leaders.

ADVANTAGES & INSIGHTS A. Each year an organization can hold thousands of personal conversations with the OIs in its environment -- listening and communicating via the same vehicle.

B. In today's thrust to create market-based organizations, this is about as close to 1-on-1 relationships with markets as you can get -- yet it covers the environment-creating publics as well. CR makes the needs & values of constituencies visible on an ongoing basis.

C. In periods of downsizing or tight budgets, this low-cost program can replace most other pr or pa activities -- and those are usually difficult to evaluate, whereas CR automatically evaluates itself thru the ongoing database.

D. Lobbying & media contacts can be wrapped into CR -- where they may have more credibility since they are two-way exchanges conducted without a specific immediate objective. Off-season CR contacts with legislators or candidates are especially effective.

E. CR creates a One Clear Voice outreach involving managers, employees, practitioners, senior execs, even retirees if desirable. People who've gotten tunnel vision, are becoming bureaucrats or have lost touch can be revitalized by participating (see prr 4/27).

F. Play back to internal publics from contactors (some programs call them liaisons) sharing their real-world external experiences brings optimism or realism to the rank-&-file -- and either is a springboard for morale & teamwork programs.

¶During a crisis CR system provides an existing network for seeking needed support, seeding the word-of-mouth information system, defusing opposition arguments, even learning who principal opponents are. Special contacts can be made at such times -- by telephone or even mail if necessary.

CERTAIN IMPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS COME VERY CLOSE TO BEING PERSONAL IN ABILITY TO PERSUADE

But it requires a trust relationship built over time. Abigail Van Buren, "Dear Abby," is one example. Her influence helped pass a sexual consent bill in New Mexico (raising the age of consent to 16 from 13, lowest in the US).

Bill's sponsor, Sen. William Vandergriff, wrote to Van Buren after the bill had failed two years in a row. Advice columnist responded with "a plea to all my New Mexico readers" to contact their legislators. Thousands did. Vandergriff received about 10,000 letters from around the world after Abby's column, reports a Santa Fe Journal article. "I got letters from people all over the state, saying they'd written their legislators." The "Dear Abby Bill" passed the Senate 22-14 and the House 56-0.

Practitioners note: Abby told an interviewer she will use her column to further good causes thru legislation "when she thinks it appropriate."

DON'T LET PIZAZZ OF NEW TECH BLIND YOU TO POLICY, MESSAGE PRIORITIES

Like toys under the Christmas tree, desktop publishing, video conferencing, electronic bulletin boards, et al, have

communicators excited about possibilities. But don't let the medium overshadow the message, warns E. W. Brody of Memphis State.

Though new technology can transmit messages more rapidly and frequently less expensively, they are still merely tools. By themselves, they can do nothing to enhance organizational performance, message content or response. Instead, they bring risks:

"Communication processes and objectives remain essentially stable in the face of environmental & organizational change. Attitudinal & behavioral change are the primary objectives. Processes continue to be controlled by the receiver. Channels created by new technologies may enhance communicator ability to deliver messages, but greater efficiency in transmission cannot be equated to enhanced results."

- A. Unless used carefully, they can distract users from their primary purpose: to communicate;
- B. They also may cause depersonalization in an era when organizations need more, rather than less, interpersonal communication.

Brody suggests these first concerns:

- 1. For management, the wider impact of technology -- global environmental & social change -- comes before worrying about communications methods. The effects of economic dislocation, rising healthcare costs, changing values & lifestyles are of more fundamental concern to stakeholders than how the message is communicated.
- 2. For practitioners, the rate & complexity of change means that the first responsibility is to act as advocates for organizational policy & action that meets needs of important publics.

An organization's commitment to truth & fairness must be expressed in deeds rather than words. "Only then can communication succeed. Only then will new technologies enhance results."