

900 NUMBERS TRY SELF REGULATION Users of 900 numbers have coalesced in a public relations effort to regulate their industry & assure the public of their integrity. DC-based Nat'l Ass'n for Information Services claims its mission is to implement a code of responsibility; establish a consumer hotline; speak for the industry; enhance levels of service & professionalism; track relevant legislative issues.

"Industry self-regulation, coupled with enforcement of existing laws, is the best means of combating abuses that exist in 900 services," says mng dir Helen Pohlig. She's referring to pornlines as well as illegitimate businesses using 900 numbers, both of which gave the industry a bad reputation by bringing it before the Supreme Court (pr 9/25/89). NAIS Hotline starts this month to provide info & hear complaints.

Number of pr programs using 900 lines, in a wide variety of ways, is growing (pr 4/2/90). As are 800 numbers & internal hotlines.

RESEARCH TOOL RATES ORGANIZATIONS ACCORDING TO REPUTATION

A new research system allows corporations to continually gauge their public image.

"Corpus 400" maintains a continuous survey of 10,000 selected individuals representing the top 25% of the US population. "It's a crisis communication tool," Doremus & Co CEO Curt Troeger told pr. "Never before has there been an ongoing, syndicated study readily available. Before, a company would have to engage a very costly, separate study to find out how the public feels about it, how it compares to competitors. Now they can subscribe and keep up with their image on a daily or weekly basis."

HOW IT WORKS For 20,000 per year, subscribers receive periodic reports. Surveys are ongoing, conducted daily by NDP Research (Port Washington, NY). Client can be compared with other companies of similar size, in the same industry, or any other requested grouping. Data is supplied, for example, according to public awareness, management quality, ethics, good citizenry, environmental responsibility etc. "This system will strengthen a company's ability to deal with a crisis & the public's reaction to it by giving execs an ongoing read out of the public's perception of them." Sample size is about 500 at a given time.

Troeger notes a shift in public attitudes can have a powerful impact on the future of even the best managed company & its bottom line, and public opinion can change overnight. Raytheon, he notes, is now receiving high visibility and points for its role in designing the Patriot Missile -- one example of how a turn of events shapes public perception. (More from Doremus & Company, 212/366-3117)

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

ELECTED. Officers for newly formed Nat'l Ass'n of Prof'l Environmental Communicators: pres Timothy Brown, ICF Kaiser Engineers (Chi); vp Stephanie Reith, Donohue & Assocs (Chi); sec'y Deborah Volkmer,

Roy Weston (Vernon Hills, Ill); treas David Nichols, Jacob Engineering Group (Chi). Nat'l Society of Fundraising Execs: pres-elect Patricia Lewis, CFRE.

AS NEW REALM OF ELECTRONIC LINKAGES BECOMES MORE PREVALENT, CONFUSION GATHERS AROUND PRIVACY RIGHTS, EAVESDROPPING; TOO-EASY COMMUNICATION MAY TURN PEOPLE AGAINST COMMUNICATING

The development of communications technology outpaces the public's ability to understand or govern it. Computer networks & telephone lines are becoming game for voyeurs, hackers & spies. It's been called the "white collar crime of the 90s." And who can love a phone pitch from a computer, or a pile of faxed ads? Issue spotlights privacy rights v. freedom of speech, raises question whether public will be wary of all targeted communication -- a dangerous situation for pr practitioners.

1. **Caller ID.** Should recipients of calls be able to see caller's number on a small digital screen? Those for it are: a) large customer service or sales operations, like utilities & direct mail; data on customer calling automatically pops up on service rep's screen; b) privacy advocates who believe individuals should be able to screen out phone solicitors, obscene callers. Against it are: a) privacy advocates who say it could eliminate anonymity, as exemplified by tips to police, etc.; b) telemarketers who feel few would accept their calls; c) researchers who rely heavily on phone surveying. Phone companies in certain states are offering it, with blocking option for the caller.

2. **Cellular phones** are wide open to whoever wants to listen in. The Electronic Communication Privacy Act ('86) outlawed eavesdropping, it's difficult to enforce. In fact, unscramblers are available for \$250+. They'll let you listen to any conversation within range.

3. **Picturephones** are closest yet to in-person communication. But what do you do when you get out of the tub to answer? Of course, you shut off the picture. But it's just another confusion to a doubting public.

4. **Consumer Information Computer Networks:** Lotus just canceled "Market-place" software which features a ton of consumer data that user can collate by various categories. "There was a great deal of emotionalism from people who believed we were offering personal info to whomever, even tho we were eliminating phone numbers," pr mgr Janice Brown told pr. "What many didn't realize is that large companies already have such databases. We were compiling it for smaller users. It was a method of 'desktop marketing.'"

Evan Hendricks, ed Privacy Times, says he's disturbed that such info is inaccessible to the people it's about. "Databases have information on you, but you have no legal right to check that information, make sure it's correct." Law on credit info is 20 years old & badly enforced. "It's coming up for revision this year."

5. **Electronic Bulletin Boards** are open files where people can post & swap tips or tap into services like home banking, shopping, stock trading. According to computer security consultant Bob Freiday, downloading them is a risk. "This is the easiest way for a virus to get into your system," he told prr. Another consideration: how much productivity is lost to employees gossiping or otherwise distracted by the terminal?

SECURITY TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS & CLIENTS

First of all, be aware that

car phones & cordless phones are vulnerable. Be cautious about giving out dates, times, phone numbers, names, flight numbers, credit card numbers or other personal information. Case in point: the Boston Globe embarrassed one senatorial candidate by disclosing details of his car phone conversation with his campaign manager. Adds Hendricks, "Assume you're talking to the world. You may not want to hold your most intimate conversations under those circumstances."

Regarding computer security, Freiday says organizations must protect themselves from rogue employees. "Establishing rules may imply you don't trust them, but it's better than losing your business thru theft or sabotage." Another difficulty in this era of employee relations problems.

"What we have happening now," says Hendricks, "is spy-counter-spy. The laws aren't keeping pace. The US would do better to imitate other Western countries and put a national officer in charge of privacy who could study situations and make recommendations." Such legislation would defray the implications for practitioners, who now have to field the sensitivities of target publics to the privacy/publicity issue: employees, vendors, customers, opinion leaders, et al.

Add to this the gut level irritation of never being able to escape the beeper, E-mail, fax & other modern miracles. In an age when the issues before mankind demand open relationships & free-flowing 2-way communication, it may be communication technology itself that becomes the major barrier.

Brown says flap reflected a much larger concern. "Lotus became the lightning rod for the privacy issue. People are upset about privacy & the electronic media. The choice between an opportunity and appeasing the public became clear." How will this directly affect the practice, e.g. keeping lists of opinion leaders, surveying, focus groups? Perhaps the question practitioners will have to ask themselves & their clients is: "Is it worth it to fight for or against cutting edge, state-of-the-art technology if it's ultimately going to tick people off?"

Of Related Interest:

Can You Use A News Photo in Advertising or Promotion? Probably not unless you have written permission of the persons depicted. This & other aspects of the privacy/publicity issue are discussed by pr pro & lawyer Sondra Byrnes in the winter edition of PR Review. Byrnes outlines the tenuous relationship between Constitutional protection from gov't intrusion on privacy & commercial intrusion, complicated by First Amendment rights. Advocacy & legislation are forming on both ends of the continuum.

EXPERT SAYS MEDIA BIAS IS TO THE RIGHT, NOT THE LEFT AS SOME PROCLAIM

Media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz calls the press a "lap dog" for the

government, a view that contradicts the prevalent charge media bias is left of center (purview 10/22/90). "The news media do not in any way question what is going on or challenge what the government says or does," he told prr. Comparing the relationship to a dysfunctional marriage, Meyrowitz says the partners grumble about each other constantly but stay married. "It's interdependent."

Meyrowitz calls the liberal bias charge a red herring, noting:

1. Reporters routinely call government sources for info. "Watch MacNeil Lehrer -- 90% of their guests are governmental officials. White male government officials. When you find out about a debate or controversy thru the news media, it's always when 2 officials disagree." Even exposes of the government invariably come from government leaks.
2. **Coverage of enviro issues rarely feature environmentalists or activists.** "Look at tv coverage of Seabrook. Rarely do you see protests. Usually, you see a reporter in front of the utility on a quiet day." Meyrowitz says when protesters are shown, the "shaking camera" technique makes them seem unstable.
3. **Challenger disaster.** "Journalists went straight to the head of NASA, which didn't know anything, and ignored engineers at Morton Thiokol."
4. **"We hear little about Latin American countries** we support in which thousands are being killed, where elections are rigged. It's almost never reported that the government of El Salvador has been bombing its own civilians. Ray Bonner reported on it, but he was branded an advocacy journalist."

"A dramatic element of the news media is their effort to support the status quo. People have to learn to not only study the news, but to pay attention to how it's being reported, who the sources are."