

looking now. The emotion will be unbelievable when the site is announced. If that company succeeds in getting it sited, they will not gain acceptance, they will gain tolerance and that's the best they'll get. **15 years ago, arrogance & corporate hubris led the way. Not today.**"

STRENSKI: TACKLE DIVERSITY OR LOSE MGMT RESPECT

"As the greatest single barrier to communications is the delusion that it has already occurred, so **the greatest barrier to understanding cultural differences is the delusion that we already do,**" Jim Strenski, chrm of Public Communications Inc, said in his speech accepting the Ball State National Public Relations Achievement Award. He stressed the need of organizations to address diversity & for public relations to play a leading role:

- o "Thank God there are enlightened organizations which recognize that managing cultural diversity is an absolute imperative for both business success & the stability of our country. Value in diversity is about learning to live together. It is about moving away from tolerance. Minorities **do not want to be tolerated.** Neither do other employees. They want to be valued. If they are valued they can be effective."
- o "One of the greatest demands on our talents as communicators must be our ability to listen, to understand cultural differences as assets. This starts with gut level communications. There is **no alternative to frank & honest discussion to help people understand their differences,** to address their concerns & recognize that in unity there is strength."
- o "Diversity will not disappear. CEO's are searching for answers. They have turned to legal counsel in the past when public relations leadership proved wanting. They could look elsewhere to help manage diversity. **If public relations practitioners fail to step to the plate, human resource directors or cultural affairs officers certainly will. And, public relations will once again lose management respect.**"

MEDIA NOW SENSATIONALIZE, PERSONALIZE BIZ NEWS, TOO

Media interest in crises caused by white collar workers & managers is rising. Coverage of operational crises like oil spills & toxic waste cleanups is declining, reports Institute for Crisis Management. It advises keeping an eye on the fastest growing crisis categories: (1) mismanagement, (2) business crime, (3) personnel issues like executive dismissals, (4) sexual harassment, (5) discrimination.

Note that even business reporting is picking up on the personality issues, away from the substantive (see last week's prr). 4-pg report lists the 9 industries with the most negative news coverage in '93: insurance, automobile manufacturing, security brokerage, banks, prepackaged software, gas & electric utilities, air transportation, aircraft manufacturing, pharmaceuticals. (Copy from ICM, 710 W Main st, Suite 210, Louisville 40202; 502/584-0402)

ANSWERING TOUGH EMPLOYEE QUESTIONS -- BY E-MAIL

"My goal with internal communications is credibility. I don't want it to be perceived as just the official company word or jargon," Lindsey Beaven, comms dir at Children's Hospital Oakland (Calif), told prr. 1900 employees are scattered in different buildings within a 1-mile radius. After surveying them & doing focus groups, Beaven found employees wanted to be heard by management.

TOUGH Q&As

Leading up to this, CHO had experienced several layoffs. Beaven began a Q&A document, for her own use, of all the questions "I didn't want to be asked by the press" & found answers for them. "As I developed this list I thought 'Gee, these have to be the same questions employees are asking & I have answers.' What the list did is head-on answer the most awful questions you heard in the corridors." Beaven went to the CEO & got permission to distribute it to employees & media. It was well received.

OPEN LINE

Q&A document was the beginning of Open Line -- using **E-Mail to answer employees' anonymous questions.** "At the time I thought it would be nice to always put out a bulletin when someone has a question. It's so easy to stop a rumor if you know what the questions are." At the same time, employees were getting into E-Mail & the idea for Open Line came to life, with Beaven taking responsibility for being the clearinghouse -- about 2 hrs of her time per week.

KEY INGREDIENTS

1) "Our CEO is a very candid person, happy to answer questions, personally prepared to be put on the spot."
 2) "I sit on the executive group in the hospital so I have direct access to them."
 3) "They all said, without hesitation, sure we'll answer any questions. They may not always like our answers but at least we're getting the word out."

THE PROCESS

1) Announced Open Line via internal newsletter & E-Mail in Feb '93. Any employee can access merely by requesting an access code. (Those who choose not to, can ask questions & receive answers in hard copy.)
 2) E-Mail questions are sent to Open Line's "in box" which only Beaven can access. She strips the employee's name off the question (only she knows who sent it -- so she can answer & sometimes clarify the question) & sends it on (unedited -- "in the name of credibility it's best to leave them as they are").
 3) Responses are guaranteed to be returned within 2 weeks, though "usually I can get back within a week."



Summer is tougher because key people may be on vacation. Then I get back to the asker & let them know I haven't forgotten." 4) Beaven treats the answers (which she collates, edits a bit) "as if I've received respectful questions -- which they are not always. Even the ridiculous questions I'll answer. Employees aren't holding back. They trust it & know they'll get a response even if they don't like it."

Categories of questions that have been asked: organizational (36%), safety (15%), cafeteria (11%), benefits (11%), facilities (9%), suggestions (11%), employee pleas (7%).

DOWNSIDE

1) "I'm getting questions that the person could have asked his or her supervisor. I don't want to discourage those questions but I'm afraid this could become an easy out." To keep the supervisor in the loop, Beaven has asked those employees, "have you talked to your supervisor about this? Is there a problem with talking to your supervisor? If so, let me know. I don't want to take his or her place."

2) "I have one dilemma I can't figure out at all. One department writes & writes & writes. All 12 people in that dep't. Any time I get slightly obnoxious questions, they're always from that dep't. Their questions are generally critical of something the hospital is doing. I answer them with full detail, & they keep coming. If I go to each individually, I can't let them know their co-workers are also doing it. It's distressing. I've talked with my peers in the hospital for ideas. I'm thinking maybe there's something wrong with management of that dep't." Beaven would appreciate recommendations from fellow practitioners. (747 52nd st, Oakland 94609; 510/428-3367)

BEAVEN'S WARNING: Do not attempt this program unless your CEO & senior management are:

- Seriously interested in what employees think;
- Prepared to answer with frankness even the toughest questions;
- Prepared to give you sufficient authority & discretion to represent the organization's views without requiring multiple approvals.

15 YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, THREE MILE ISLAND ...

"brought the demise of the nuclear industry. Prior to that, nuclear power enjoyed an incredible reputation -- the greatest energy source known," Bill Green of William J. Green & Assocs (Pittsburgh) told prr. In January '79, Green joined newly-elected Gov. Dick Thornburgh's Dep't of Transportation as dir of press rels. 70 days later he was detailed to the gov's office to deal with the TMI crisis. His comparative look at then & now:

LOSS OF TRUST

Communication from the company was "perceived as imprecise, guarded or disingenuous. The way it was handled killed the nuclear industry. Today it's totally questioned. You'll never see another nuclear power plant come on line. Look at WHOOPS,

the power system in the northwest during the 80s. It went bellyup because it couldn't find the capital to build the power plants. Today, companies involved with highly technical materials & environmental impact are extremely conscious of how they're represented, how they explain their side of things. There were great lessons learned as a result of TMI."

CRISIS RESPONSE

Ashland Oil's spill in ('88) is a good example. Company's president immediately responded: flew in, held a press conference, agreed to pay overtime for cleanup crews from the environmental agencies & county workers, made public statement that company would cover any damages resulting from the spill. "It was handled brilliantly. Instead of becoming the goat, the guy became a hero because he immediately addressed the problem. Compare this with how TMI was handled. Companies have come a long way. They aren't as arrogant as they once were. You'll still see an Exxon every now & then. But by & large they're more sensitive. While a lot of that is due to regulations & liability, they also recognize it just makes good business sense."

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The base of crisis preparedness. "It has to be ongoing. An orchestrated plan, adhered to. Not just lip service & a \$5000 check to the United Way each year. It's executives serving on local boards, involved in the community. Most are probably already doing these things -- *tho not as a conscious strategy*. Why not take an inventory, make it more organized. Help employees -- compensatory time off or something that encourages them to do this. I'm not saying it should be incentivized, but there should be some sensitivity."

EMOTIONS VS. FACTS

"When an incident or project is highly visible & highly controversial, emotions also run high. But you can't deal emotion to emotion. You have to deal with facts. Companies present facts. People with emotions don't present facts. In the environmental field, companies are heavily regulated. Regulators make the determination if you're doing something right or wrong -- based on facts. If we get into a debate of facts vs. emotions, we lose. Emotion always wins. We have to do fact with fact; try to get the other side to deal with facts. If we're all dealing with facts, then we can dissipate some of the emotions & solve some of the problems & concerns of citizens. How do you deal with emotions? Start way in advance."

When employees are on local boards, they represent your organization. They're saying as much about you as they are about themselves. This has much more value than a press release. Your organization will build trust, confidence & believability, so if something happens you'll have at least the benefit of the doubt -- your credibility will be intact."

TOLERANCE OR ACCEPTANCE

"When you deal with controversial projects & incidents, **if you can gain tolerance, you've succeeded** -- because you're never going to get acceptance. Pennsylvania is going to become a host state for disposing of low level materials exposed to nuclear radiation. There's a low level siting commission out