

BROUHAHA OVER AWARDS BROCHURE IS LESSON

Unthinking use of the swastika & Nazi propaganda references to get attention for Kansas City/PRSA Prism awards ended up as "shooting yourself in the foot." It got national media attention. Eric Morgenstern, who is quoted in the AP story, told pr how it evolved:

Mon: I got the awards application & I'm outraged. I called the person in charge of the program & said 3 things: 1) thanks for doing a thankless job, 2) I know you have the right to push the envelope when doing pro bono projects, 3) I'm outraged at the use of the swastika & reference to the Nazi propaganda machine. Why would you choose to make reference to that with the best of what we do as professionals? Then I suggested they be prepared with some crisis communication plan because I'm willing to bet I'm not the only person who's going to react.

Wed: I get a page & a half fax from the organizer saying "we're sorry if we offended anyone." I thought it was a wimpy response. I would have been more content if she'd said, "We blew it. This was poor judgment. We're very sorry." But I made no response.

Fri: I get a call from the beat reporter who says, "I got your name from the org'n because you're one of the people who was upset about this. I'm doing a story, can we talk?" My counsel as a pr professional would be to acknowledge the mistake & move on. Don't drum up anything, don't do anything -- such as letting the media know. Having been called, "As a Jew & community leader & human being, I feel compelled to respond if asked."

WHAT'S TO BE GLEANED FROM THIS?

"You can't utilize the swastika & reference Nazi propaganda &

assume no one will be offended. That's why I'm talking. In today's world, slavery isn't funny. You don't hear jokes about Bosnia, do you? This has nothing to do with being politically correct. This is just humanity."

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

NOMINATED. PRSA officers for '95: pres, John Beardsley (CEO, Padilla Speer Beardsley, Mpls); pres-elect, Luis Morales (dir mktg & comms, Robert Morris Assocs, Phila); sec'y, Mary Lynn Cusick (vp corp comms, Bob Evans Farms, Columbus, O); treas, Janice Newman (Newman, Newman & Jones, Riverside, Calif).

David Swanston (Stackig Adv'g & PR, McLean, Va), Barbara Van Fleet (AG Comms Systems, Phoenix).

To serve 1-yr terms as Assembly delegates-at-large: Jerry Bryan (Sverdrup Corp, St. Louis, Mo) & Debbie Mason (JM Family Enterprises, Deerfield Beach, Fla).

To serve 2-yr terms as dirs-at-large: Steve Pisinski (The Montgomery Group, San Francisco), Steve Seekins (Amer Med Ass'n, Chi),

To serve 1-yr term as CPRS delegate-at-large is Yves St. Armand (BDDS Comms Consultants, Montreal.)

THE OTHER SIDE OF A CRISIS, IN MANY WAYS, CAN BE OPPORTUNITY

Monday, April 25, late night fire at a high school in Burnsville, Minn, resulted in \$7 million damage, tho it's now thought to be double that -- "second worst fire in the state's history in terms of damage," Gary Kubat, comms coord, told pr. "It's not the way anyone would like to achieve it, but it really pulled the school district & community together." Since schools touch so many publics, this is an ideal "lessons learned" case:

- **By Thursday a plan was developed:** (a) students from the burned out high school (2000 of them) would attend a neighboring elementary/jr high school from 6:00 to 10:45am; (b) students from the elem/jr high would attend from 11:15-4:15. Logistics to be worked out included: (c) almost 100 bus routes; (d) making the cafeteria a teacher work space; (e) serving breakfasts & lunches elsewhere; (f) setting up free before- & after-school daycare at a nearby church; (g) using city hall parking lot for high school students' cars.

VOTERS RESPOND

- **\$49.5 million bond referendum** to build a new elementary & junior high & remodel all other

schools in the district ("bringing them up to code, e.g., fire sprinklers") had been announced before the fire. Now, campaign's focus changed to fire protection "which was what everybody wanted to know about." Vote on May 31 was passed by a 2-1 margin "in one of the largest voter turnouts in the last 10 yrs."

HANDLING MEDIA EARNS POSITIVE RESPONSE

- "They were at the fire thru the night & started

showing up at our administrative offices Tuesday morning. I tried to limit our contact because they kept wanting to pull people from planning meetings -- which was very disruptive. So we set up daily press briefings at 4pm." **Tactic: Kubak asked questions, the superintendent provided answers.** If reporters still had questions they asked them afterwards. "It kept the circus atmosphere to a minimum." First briefing was run live on tv.

- Press were allowed in the building "as soon as we were allowed in" but **always accompanied by an administrator** -- "usually me or our property director." They accompanied tours given to state commissioner of education, governor & Republican legislators, on another day the Democrat legislators -- all reported in the media. "It gave people confidence to know the state was involved in this."

● **Reporters kept trying to find something wrong but they never did.** When school began the following Tuesday, media wanted to interview students -- which "kept up till the end of the school year. Fortunately they let us pick the kids they interviewed. They did some site visits, too. They showed up at a little league game at the elem school & parents didn't say anything negative. Overall the kids liked the media's presence. Student attendance was up."

● **"We tried to emphasize positive things** in the press. Press coverage did help us, particularly in passing the bond referendum & in letting people know we had the situation under control. Even the news people were amazed at how quickly we pulled it together."

DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS PAYS OFF

● **Each of the 300 individuals & businesses that called offering sympathy or help received a personal thank-you note signed by the superintendent.** Two newspapers donated a full page ad, in which the callers were listed -- following these words: "We got fired, but we're still on the job thanks to you." Notes Kubak, "people appreciated being acknowledged."

● **Phone info tape that normally tells the day's menu & activities was used to give updates on the fire.** Employees were told if they got calls to refer people to this taped message. "I couldn't get on the thing to change the message because people kept calling."

● **Met with 10th, 11th & 12th graders** Friday, after announcing the plan, to explain where they would go & other details. Meeting was taped & run on cable tv for those unable to attend.

● **Employees received a memo from the superintendent the first day.** Weekly staff newsletter carried info the first 2 weeks. Employees in the affected buildings met face-to-face with the superintendent. **Lesson learned:** "The thing I'd change is letting employees know more about what's going on. It's hard because the media showed up the first day & were right in our faces so we almost had to accommodate them. I wouldn't change how we did that, but I would change the order. We did get some information out to employees right away, but probably not as much as we should have."

COMMUNITY RALLIES AROUND THE SCHOOLS

● **Positive spirit.** School board members remarked at a meeting that they hadn't received any calls from parents -- which was unusual. Instead, "parents were saying, 'if this is what we have to do then this is what we'll do.' A lot of credit goes to our superintendent. He's very calm, a good leader. People have a lot of confidence in his ability."

● **Volunteers rallied** in numerous ways: (a) Parents pulled the contents of lockers, bagging, labeling, then putting them in order on the gym floor for students to claim. (b) Community is "planning an event like a street dance to raise money." (c) Someone donated t-shirts for all staff the first day back that read, "We can make it happen." (d) 20 retired teachers came back to help by directing students to their classrooms, etc.

"It has been a good experience for our staff & community. It has been unifying. One of my goals now is to keep that momentum going."

"People never think a crisis could happen to them so why expend all the effort on designing a crisis plan. But now I know. We had a bare bones plan. It wasn't adequate to deal with something of this scope. One of my charges now is to develop something more sophisticated."

DEALING WITH BAD NEWS IS AN OPPORTUNITY, SAYS GOV'T AGENCY

Federal Aviation Administration is moving from "relying on its image" to becoming "more open, taking a more proactive approach," Sandra Allen, dpa, told prr. "For too many years the FAA has relied on its image without realizing it's an ongoing process. Being available to address bad news, or not quite so flattering, is every bit as important as talking about the good things. It's simply seizing opportunities."

1. **External Publics.** Shift in emphasis involves its relationships with media, congressionals, user groups, "all our constituent audiences." Allen points to the FAA's recent revamping of its responses to the Freedom of Information Act. "We are dedicated to making sure those are handled efficiently, thoroughly & expeditiously."

2. **Internal Relations.** Allen calls it a "change of culture" from what has existed for years. Change began with new administrator David Hinson. He has made "a concerted effort to beef up & extend internal communication" to FAA's 50,000 employees. He holds meetings regularly with employees -- face to face in small groups. Also in large groups: "we have a very active internal communication system of town hall meetings -- satellite broadcasts out to our employees thruout the US."

"We're changing a culture so **there's resistance to change, but not to the idea of more open communications.** We have a long way to go before we see the fruits of our labors, but we're trying." [Proof -- Allen was aggressive about returning prr's call, calling several times to reach us.]

WRITER SAYS ETHICS ENFORCEMENT IS THE REAL BOTTOMLINE

"To imply that Hill & Knowlton was innocent of any misconduct in relation to its representation of the tobacco industry" (pr 7/25) is to miss the point, Jane Inouye of PRSA/Hawaii writes to prr. "H&K chairman Howard Paster suggests that the work they did was merely in good faith for their client.... "The development of the Tobacco Institute was a good faith effort? Or, was it just 'some pr ploy' to fool Congress into believing the industry has a research & design group formulated to address potential health/societal issues?"

"I would agree there is a 'troublesome precedent' set here, but I don't believe the inclusion of pr firms in law suits is the problem. The real trouble is that the public relations society lacks the courage to address & question activities conducted by its members."

"Not until the profession starts policing its members' activities by the introduction of a mandatory accreditation process which includes an enforceable code of ethics, will we start to address the real issue."