

3. **Credible Dangers:** Organizations face a whole host of pr challenges when they choose a pro-active strategy to get their message out on the Internet, reveals an article in this month's *PC World* ("Web of Deceit"). The growing leeriness toward marketing (the new bogeyman of the 90s) among regular "netizens" means companies could seriously damage their credibility if their sites try to be a little too clever blurring the line between editorial content & infomercial. Smart organizations need to be aware of the negative connotations associated with marketing on the Web, & construct strategies that blunt them. Another example why smart pr can be more effective than simple advertising. (More from Sockol at 617/587-2890; also see pr 7/14)

MOST SCHOOL CRISES ARE UNRELATED TO TEACHING OR CURRICULUM

There's a lesson here for all organizations: **56% are caused by mgmt**, not by students, teachers or parents, finds an analysis of more than 50,000 crisis news stories by the Institute for Crisis Management. Other findings:

- **68% may be described as "smoldering"** -- someone knows but does nothing to prevent the escalation until the situation gets out-of-control -- compared to "sudden" (the unexpected). Issue anticipation needed!
- **Fastest growing school crises** (comparing '96 with '95):
 - ¶ White collar crime (eg, embezzlement, fraud) up 300%
 - ¶ Casualty accidents (eg, school bus crashes) up 200%
 - ¶ Consumer activism (eg, parent &/or student protests) up 100%
 - ¶ Defects & recalls (eg, bus recalls, construction defects) up 100%
 - ¶ Executive dismissal (eg, firing sup't or principal) up 100%
- **Source of school crises thruout the 90s:**
 - ¶ 25% have been *personnel related* (eg, age, disability, gender, race discrimination, sexual harassment, labor union)
 - ¶ 16%, violence at school (eg, fights, shootings, stabbings)
 - ¶ 15%, catastrophic accidents (eg, severe storms, fires, building collapses)
 - ¶ 12%, white collar crime (eg, embezzlement, fraud, theft, bribery)
 - ¶ 12%, mismanagement (eg, poor or no decisions, false claims, creating a distrustful work environment)

(More from ICM, 1161 E. Broadway, Louisville, KY 40204; 502/584-0402)

7 QUESTIONS TO ASSESS YOUR LEVEL OF PREPARATION

1. What kind of **notification system** is in place?
2. Is there a tested **crisis response plan**?
3. Who is trained to serve as **spokesperson**?
4. What **info** can be disseminated, when?
5. **How best to inform** employees, students, parents & other key audiences?
6. What crises have **others experienced** recently?
7. How well was the **last crisis** handled?

NEW PUBLICATION JUSTIFYING CLIP COUNTING RAISES QUESTIONS; WHAT ARE THE METHODOLOGIES FOR TRULY EVALUATING PR?

PR's ongoing identity crisis -- is it 1-way or 2-way communication? -- is the true focus of the new *Guidelines & Standards for Measuring & Evaluating PR Effectiveness* (pr last week).

- Proponents of 1-way com'n have their say in the measuring *outputs* section -- which considers counting & massaging clippings valuable.
- The 2-way, *outcomes* approach also gets coverage, tho in less methodological detail since that is still being defined.

But the debate continues: How do you evaluate effectiveness ... of either? The answer, of course, will settle the issue. If all pr can do is send messages, then it is a 1-way tactic. If it motivates behavior, and 2-way com'n is superior, then measuring outputs is misleading & inaccurate.

SCALE OF EVALUATION METHODS

Outputs	Reception	Response	Bottom Line Impact
Clip Counting & Evaluation	Awareness, Understanding	Behavior, Intent to Act	Actual Contribution to Org'l Goals

- Academic researchers & pr strategists long ago showed it's 2-way or nothing in terms of adding operational value.
- Yet many practitioners, trained as journalists or writers, cling to 1-way practice. So do many publications in the field. And even most college pr courses.

MEASUREMENT METHODS HAVEN'T KEPT UP WITH PRACTICE

In defense of the 1-way or information transfer school, at least computer manipulated clip counts & web

hit analysis are an attempt to glean as much data as possible from outputs.

At the other end of the scale is the Swedish PR Assn's breakthru project to make measurement of customer loyalty, employee morale, community relations & similar part of a "new balance sheet" (pr 3/10). These intangible, non-financial elements of an orgn's status are far more indicative of future success than measuring hard assets & past financial performance.

In between are emerging metrics for comprehension, attitude, preference.



OK FOR OTHER DISCIPLINES

"Organizations don't understand the importance of measurement & evaluation in public relations. They understand the importance of research in medicine, law, human resources, financial, engineering, marketing. But when it comes to public relations, research is superficial," Don Wright, an academic researcher & consultant, told prr.

He applauds the Institute's contribution which was done completely by volunteers without any funding. He hopes the discussion continues. "It's like any book. The first edition doesn't tell you much. But revisions keep getting better. It's a building block. I hope we move further down the road with this." If people are critical of its content or have ideas for improvement, he suggests they get involved.

EVALUATING RELATIONSHIPS

Two who are involved are Kitty Ward & Jim Grunig. "We have a different take on research," Ward told prr. She & Grunig, among the *Guidelines'* contributors along with Wright, are chairing another Institute task force to establish guidelines for *evaluating organizational relationships*. "I believe communications have to be 2-way & you have to look at the ultimate effect of that" -- your organization's relationships. (Ward can be reached at 617/749-3108) [See also prr 1/27 for a review of current evaluation trends]

WHAT MUST PR PROS DO TO BE VALUED BY DECISIONMAKERS ?

To not get supplanted by attorneys & accountants -- frequently "the first ones called on when serious issues arise"? Jerry Bryan's observations:

Attorneys/Accountants:

- A. Manage areas of significant risk exposure. They are 1) already positioned as counselors to mgmt on mission-critical subjects; 2) have decisionmaking authority that extends to matters with major bottomline implications; 3) able to act, cause change, control the outcome & deliver results on those matters.
- B. Communication is a logical add-on to their work. 1) They handle major issues & make crucial decisions as part of their normal duties. 2) Next step is to make an announcement & get buy-in. 3) So, it's ok for them to determine the message, then summon pr at the late stages.

Public Relations:

- C. Manages activities seen as having far less risk. 1) The perceived downside is not critical -- perhaps a negative news story, but no lasting impact. 2) Some influence can be exerted, but pr cannot control or assure outcomes. 3) When exposure does become great, as in a crisis, the decision moves to the CEO's desk.

CEO:

- D. Values those who make substantial contribution to the issue at hand.
1) The top attorneys & accountants are senior, skilled, savvy. 2) The top pr person often is less senior, viewed as a wordsmith.

SOLUTION REQUIRES A CHANGE IN ATTITUDE

1. **Discard the belief that the CEO needs to be educated about the value of pr.** Those at the top tend to be bright. They understand who adds value to executive decisions. They know where they want to place their trust when the chips are down.

2. **Discard the victim mentality** which says pr is doing a wonderful job but is misunderstood & undervalued. That excuse wears thin. The test of time suggests not that the world misjudges pr but that it has yet to reach the mark.

Following changed attitudes, substantive changes in the field of pr are needed. Some initial suggestions:

3. **Challenge basic premises & revise those which are outmoded**, including the notion that pr is only a messenger & not responsible for results.
4. **Wring out some of the softness**, arriving at a harder alignment from action to outcomes.
5. **Be much bolder in taking responsibility** for mission-critical issues & achieving closure.
6. **Do not view strategy as the stopping point** but instead move to the policy level as counselors to the CEO & their mgmt colleagues. (More info from Bryan, who is vp-cc, Sverdrup Corp, at 314/770-4726)

SOME THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING YOUR WEB SITE

Or redesigning an existing site, as e-mailed to prr from Mike Sockol of Porter Novelli Interactive (Boston):

1. **Utility-Based Thinking:** Many clients don't need full-blown massive Web sites. Just finely defined utilities that meet specific objectives, such as: a) on-line **news bureaus** that cater to the media; b) tightly designed **info centers** that support specific communications objectives (healthyweight.com offers a good example); c) **Extranets** that link corp pr dep'ts with their outside firms. Utility-based thinking places the emphasis on strategic content development rather than cool, esoteric design. In sum, the resurrection of Walter Gropius & the Bauhaus School (form follows function).
2. **Avoiding Marketing Orphans:** As pr professionals, we need to audit our own (&/or our clients') Web sites, see if the on-line messages jive with the communications strategy currently being implemented, & make the appropriate changes. When you allow Web development to proceed independently, you risk creating marketing orphans.