

AN INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE OF FAILING PUBLIC OPINION POWER

China's reclaimed sovereignty of Hong Kong was only moderately successful in winning public opinion, finds an informal survey of members of Pinnacle Worldwide. Members, from 27 countries, also believe Hong Kong's position as an economic center will be diminished.

- A century of British gov't made tiny Hong Kong a world economic powerhouse. Now, with a decidedly un-democratic China taking over, a majority think Hong Kong will lose its economic position; 7 expect it to remain stable; 1 believes it will be strengthened. Expected to benefit from Hong Kong's loss of economic status are Singapore & Japan.
- 40% believe China handled publicity surrounding the event well; 60% believe China did not fare well in the pr arena. Almost all respondents believe local media independence & reliability will be affected.

But no matter what the rest of the world thinks, China can do as it will.

"The Chinese gov't needs to be proactive in telling the world that the media & the economic system in Hong Kong will remain free. Silence will send negative messages," says Sharon Van Sickle, pres of Pinnacle.

ITEMS OF IMPORTANCE TO PROFESSIONALS

Meeting cascades" & "cascading information" sound very top-down.

Is a new terminology needed to show these techniques also are meant to stimulate the flow of feedback upward? Better yet, to show that modern org'ns are abandoning top-down mgmt and these techniques really mean info cascading laterally across the org'n -- as a stone thrown into a pond sends cascading ripples out to the shore? Any suggestions?

Great rejoinder to inquiring reporters -- and it uses humor. Rumors of a Barbara Streisand wedding to take place at Spring House Hotel on Block Island, R.I., caused Providence journalists to report their confirmation came from "unnamed Spring House Hotel waiters." But the night manager was ready for the barrage of calls from other reporters: "I've asked all the waiters, and they know nothing about a wedding. Besides, all of our waiters are named. We have no unnamed waiters."

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

NOMINATED. PRSA slate for '98: pres-elect, counselor Sam Waltz (Wilmington, Del.); treas, Steve Pisinski (Montgomery Group, San Francisco); secty, counselor Lee Duffey (Atlanta). For directors: Jody Buffington Aud (Prio Group, Owings Mills Md.); Aileen Katcher (Katcher, Vaughn & Bailey,

Nashville); Fred Morgan (Jacobs Engineering, Albuquerque); counselor Deanna Pelfrey (Louisville); Frank Stansberry (U. Central Fla, Orlando). A nominee from the Northeast District will be added either thru petition for election by the Assembly or appointment by the '98 Board.

CAN A SOCIAL SEGMENT THUMB ITS NOSE AT PUBLIC OPINION ?

The case of higher education can profitably be studied by every practitioner -- as it unfolds. Criticism of colleges & universities is gathering steam, on a number of counts. But similar anger at higher education mounted at least twice before in recent decades -- and fizzled.

Congressional & presidential actions illustrate the ambivalence. With many others, both have decried the never-ending rise of college costs that seemingly puts it out of range for many. But the income tax credit just enacted for tuition payments may give colleges a windfall without any guarantee they hold the line on cost increases.

THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION IN ACTION

When unfair, greedy or anti-social actions or policies become sufficiently widespread to cause outrage, the public turns its wrath onto institutions. This contrasts with attacks on specific organizations, which is perpetual & more immediate. Public education, the federal gov't & healthcare are current cases of institutional onslaught.

CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

1. **Tuition increases**, in most cases annual hikes, above the inflation rate. Top colleges cost in the \$20,000 range per year total. With all costs considered, that's about \$100,000 for an undergraduate education. Even state universities keep raising rates, and some are quite high.
2. **Faculty intransigence** -- as critics term it. Tenure protects them from the pressures of most jobs ... often researching subjects that seem irrelevant ... free to express views that upset various constituencies etc etc. Current example: Faculty union push for spousal benefits for homosexual or unmarried households. That businesses as different as Levi Strauss & Coors offer them doesn't quiet critics.
3. **Administrative overload**, which enrages tax-reduction groups and divides campuses when faculty gripe about too many managers or support staff.
4. **Graduate anger** when degrees don't guarantee the jobs they want. Curricula & professors' teaching abilities get blamed, rightly or wrongly. Flip side is **employer anger** when graduates seem unprepared or are not targeted to the job categories where the need is at the moment.
5. **The cushy campus life** -- summers off, course load means teaching 3 or less courses per semester, time is measured in terms of school years or semesters, lots of athletic & cultural amenities (all subsidized) et al.



WHY THIS HAS THE MAKINGS OF AN ATTACK BY THE PUBLIC

1. Healthcare, public schools & gov't each had **virulent internal cleavages:** doctors vs. administrators, providers

vs. third party payers, teachers vs. school boards, civil servants vs. downsizing political appointees. The fractiousness of cases like Harvard's clerical workers strike, Tennessee's budget cuts by a governor who's ex officio chairman of the board of trustees, faculty union battles for raises & rule changes, increase in student crime (or reporting of it) especially rape & athletes' misdoings -- these evidence a house divided.

2. **Linkage to current emotional issues.** To cite a few: a) Gay & lesbian faculty members, b) supposed dumbing down of courses (e.g. attack on Georgetown for eliminating a Shakespeare requirement), c) political correctness rules, d) minorities demanding to live together & sitting together rather than mixing (which fueled attack on affirmative action).

Add these elements to the "factual" case outlined on the previous page and the classic formula for a Big Issue is in place.

PR's ROLE IN FENDING IT OFF

1. **Environmental scanning** would quickly alert administration to the impending crisis. Doesn't help higher education today because few pr dep'ts are doing it, too many administrators think pr = news bureau.

2. **Issue anticipation teams** can take the issues identified from scanning & fill in the particulars -- so execs can remove or resolve the issues before they explode. PR is the lead player in establishing & guiding such teams.

3. **Explaining what \$100,000 buys as an investment** over a lifetime. Yes, it's a lot of money, but amortized over 40-50 years of a career it brings huge returns in earnings & job satisfaction. Consider that med school grads' *debts* at graduation run \$60-100,000.

4. **Making the undeniable case** that economic development & technical survival are an essential societal & personal investment. There can be no successful city or state today without a great university, as the economic development pros tell it.

HOW HIGHER ED DUCKED BEFORE -- & MAY AGAIN

Alumni\ae of universities are the elite, the the opinion leaders. Called into action in previous crises, they quelled the storm. Will or can they do it again, when the loudest critics are from their own ranks?

Competition is also changing. Once-underrated community & tech colleges have improved mightily. Vast numbers of students begin -- even end -- their education there. True, many go on to a university & become its alums -- but they seem to have far less of the rah-rah spirit. Community & technical schools also compete to fill the training & night school void, taking dollars away from universities. But, is this creating a 2-tier system based on students' wealth -- fueling the issue? **Or is the collective clout of 3200 colleges & universities beyond the reach of public opinion?**

LITERATURE SAYS COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION RULES EVERYONE...

Four seminal books provide a virtual history of this subject, and of pr. Musts for every pro's library. They teach that no entity is beyond the reach of public opinion. But the last of them was written 3 decades ago:

- 1922 *Public Opinion* Walter Lippman's classic put the phrase into common usage, based on an earlier French text
- 1923 *Crystalizing Public Opinion* One year later Edward L. Bernays showed you could put public opinion to societal use
- 1955 *The Engineering of Consent* Bernays traces advance from opinion to consent, finds are scientific rules for obtaining it, as in engineering
- 1968 *Only by Public Consent* L.L.L.Golden's study of the major US organizations shows the public reigns

STILL TRUE ?

In this era of ever-larger org'ns via merger, of gov't policies that seem uncontrollable, of global mega-corporations barely scratched when they are attacked by the court of public opinion ... **must a new book be written saying things have changed?**

- Democracy -- or something called that -- is taking over in nations everywhere. So public opinion must be powerful -- right?
- Yet, to select one countervailing example, outrage at Exxon's Valdez gaffes had almost no impact on the company. Something like 40,000 consumers reportedly cut up their credit cards -- but one new contract to serve a large commercial fleet was said to more than make up for it in sales.
- Then again, maybe it's a matter of speed, or lack of it. The first attacks on tobacco occurred decades ago. Only now are they getting *close* to impacting the industry -- which still racks up huge profits on products medical science claims are addictive killers.

¶ **Public relations history bearing on this question** is brought to life in 6 lectures first presented at PRSA nat'l conferences during the 60s & published then by PRSA's Foundation for PR Research & Education (now the independent Institute for PR Research & Education). Given by eminent historians, they illustrate pr principles & techniques used during the ratification of the Constitution, opening of the West, throughout the Civil War, World War I & II, during the making of Canada. Impetus to republish comes from a gift from Betsy Plank, a past pres of PRSA & former board member of the Foundation.

It's valuable, in view of the above article, to have these lectures back in print. (Copy of *At The Beginning* ... available from The Institute at U of Florida, College of Journalism & Com'ns, PO Box 118400, Gainesville 32611-8400; \$15)