

"NO-NONSENSE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR NEXT SPEECH"

Hints from Joan Detz (speechwriting/coaching consultant, Doylestown, Pa) in her PRSA conference presentation:

- **Make the first point the shortest.** It gets people's attention, gives the perception that the whole speech will be shorter. Lessens the anxiety.
- **Use less research, but deliver it in a context that people will understand.** Barbara Bush once said, "Turn off the tv once in a while. The average kindergarten student has watched 5,000 hours of television. That's more time than it takes to earn a college degree."
- **Make it easy for people to understand.** Use simple words, simple structure. Look at the commas on a page; each comma combines elements & structure may be too complex for the audience.
- **Remember that just because you are presenting doesn't mean the audience is listening.** The audience can leave -- mentally or physically -- at any time, so let the presentation be entertaining, rhetorical & have humor.

LANGUAGE YOU MAY BE ABLE TO USE PERSUASIVELY

1. Anders Gronstedt (The Gronstedt Group, Superior, Colo) offers his favorite metaphor for Integrated Communications: Like a flock of geese flying -- alone one goose can fly 70 mph, but in a flock they'll fly 100 mph. The geese work together & take turns leading -- when one gets tired it falls back & lets another take over...and somehow they all know where they're going. Of course, when integrated communications doesn't work properly, it's more like a herd of cows.
2. Biz schl students' at UK's Sheffield Schl definition of MBAs: mediocre but arrogant.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

HONORS. '98 PRSA top award winners: John Reed (chrm, Consultants in Public Relations, DC) receives Gold Anvil Award, PRSA's highest honor; Melvin Sharpe (dir pr sequence, Ball State U, Muncie, Ind) named Outstanding Educator; Jim Strenski (chrm, Public Communications Inc, Tampa) receives Paul Lund Public Service Award.

Robert Heath (prof, dir Inst for Study of Issues Mgmt, U of Houston)

receives Jackson Jackson & Wagner Behavioral Prize. Prize recognizes contributions to behavioral science research that pr professionals should be using in their work.

Pat Jackson receives David Ferguson Award, PRSA Educator Academy's highest tribute. Award is presented "only when a professional's contributions to pr education have been truly outstanding & exemplary."

CASE: WHEN HOLLYWOOD RESURFACES WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

Many may remember the well-publicized lawsuit against W.R. Grace -- first in '82, then retried in '86 -- by 8 families claiming a leukemia cluster existed in the town of Woburn, Mass. The reason: drinking water allegedly contaminated by the chemical company.

The case was settled for \$8 million in '86, despite the company's belief then & now that it was not responsible for the contamination. Since the trial, new technical information became available to support that belief.

The story spawned the best-selling book, *A Civil Action*. Now, a Disney movie by the same name, starring John Travolta & Robert Duvall, will premier on Christmas Day -- which will no doubt turn on the media & grapevine spotlights once again. What can pr do about this?

THE NEW FOCUS: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

According to Mark Stoler, dir env'l safety & health, W.R. Grace used "lessons learned" after the lawsuit & began to focus on **building relationships with employees, the community & gov't agencies.**

Especially important since Grace bought another plant in Woburn in '86.

"We did a bad job of communicating with employees & paid a heavy price for it," says Stoler. "We also made mistakes in not addressing concerns of community & government agencies."

Another wrinkle: company never officially apologized to the community -- per advice of legal counsel.

WHAT THEY DID

- **One-on-one meetings with opinion leaders.** "No press releases -- we said, let's just talk to people."
- **Social responsibility programs.** "Science programs with Woburn schools; training & equipment to help the Fire Department enhance their ability to respond to hazardous materials handling."
- **Worked to establish credibility.** "We demonstrated our commitment to the cleanup. If we promised it, we would deliver it. If we couldn't deliver, we wouldn't promise it."

Some F.A.C.E. members were part of the original lawsuit. But when EPA came out with the original rehab plan, both Grace & F.A.C.E. were against it because neither felt it was an environmentally sound approach. They worked together to arrive at an acceptable Superfund cleanup plan ... & began building a relationship.

- Opened lines of communication with F.A.C.E. (Form A Cleaner Environment).
"We made sure they saw plans & documents in advance."

RESULTS SO FAR

- EPA praised Grace for setting "a new standard for accelerating the pace of Superfund cleanup"
- F.A.C.E. sent a letter commending the company's efforts
- Invitations to work with Woburn community, partnering on projects like Earth Day

**IN PREP FOR MOVIE PREMIERE:
EMPHASIS ON EMPLOYEES**

"Our goal is to minimize damage to our reputation, says Jane McGuinness, dir corp com'ns. "Our biggest concern is

that the movie will wash away what we have accomplished. We feel people need to know the whole story."

W.R. Grace has not yet seen the film, but believes the company is mentioned specifically. Disney did not contact the company for information while making the film.

Employees are the audience to focus on, Grace believes -- since they will serve as the conduit to other stakeholders. Techniques being used for communicating pre- & post-premiere:

- Distribution of "Fast Facts" card to employees
- Website, *civil-action.com*, will provide background facts, 3rd party testimony -- & opportunity for timely "rumor check"
- Selective communication with media
- Advance communication with Boston area opinion leaders

WILL THIS DO THE TRICK?

Stay tuned after December 25th! But during Q&A at the PRSA conference, Grace representatives indicated (a) they have no plans for shareholder communications on this issue; (b) they have not been in touch with community officials to discuss their concerns about the impact of the movie on their community reputation; and (c) they're purposely staying out of communication between the press & lawsuit families. In short, don't bring up the issue again.

Some questioned the strategy of focusing almost exclusively on employees, given the potential impact on a number of important audiences.
(What are your thoughts? Write or e-mail prp for a full discussion.)

Is there a strategy that can deal with Issues Revisited? Greece (NY) School Dist. wonders. Decades ago it closed an unneeded school. The site became the town's leading supermarket. Now, schools are growing again & bond issues are needed for new construction. Every time, the issue of "the supermarket school" comes back in the funding debate. Will it ever die?

WHY PEOPLE DON'T TRUST GOVERNMENT -- & HOW THIS RUBS OFF

Universally, practitioners agree -- there has been a general decline in trust of government. So much so that Montgomery County (Md.) actually banished the word "government" from its letterhead!

In the 60's, more than 70% said they had confidence in the U.S. gov't; while only 17% in 1995 did.

Dr. Elaine Kamarck, exec dir, Visions of Governments for the 21st Century, identifies the contributing factors -- which with adaptation fit any type organization:

1. **General cynicism of the 20th Century.** Not surprisingly, those who exhibited the highest level of trust in gov't were those who voted for Roosevelt & Truman -- a time when gov't got the U.S. out of worldwide depression & defeated the Axis powers
 - Baby boomers & Gen Xers have Vietnam & Watergate -- years of official lying -- to guide their opinion
2. **Press cynicism. Even for positive stories -- like the drop in crime & welfare reform -- the press & people are slow to give the gov't credit**
3. **Problem of scale.** Conversely, gov't screw-ups are quickly reported -- & usually out of context. As all org'ns grow larger, everyone's fair game
 - Example: \$1 million of mistakes in Social Security checks sounds terrible -- but not in context of billions & billions of dollars that Social Security dispenses
4. **There really is a performance deficit in gov't.** Back in '55, the average person's bank experience & gov't experience was the same. Since then, the private sector has discovered "customer service" -- (referred to frequently at the conference as "customer delight") -- which greatly widened that gap. Translation: gov't won't get rid of the trust problem until people are treated like customers.

WHAT GOVERNMENTS CAN DO

- Make themselves accountable. Even when gov't does measure the way it spends money, they're not measuring performance -- & they need to. They should be able to answer the question, "What did we taxpayers buy?"

- **Perform.** The military & the post office are two examples of how performance can turn around negative perceptions of organizations.

Dr. Kamarck acknowledges that while the gov't used to have more fat & could at one time tolerate the non-performers, they're now being forced to operate "lean & mean" like everyone else.

- **Proactive & honest communication with the media.** Including placing the bad statistics in context & not being afraid to talk with the media.