

DATA ABOUT INTERNET RUMORS – PLUS ONE BRIGHT ANSWER

1. THE ELECTRONIC GRAPEVINE CAN WREAK A LOT OF HAVOC

The first victim of the e-world is factual, truthful info – as the makers of aspartame, a sweetening ingredient, found out. Internet rumors linking aspartame to lupus, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's & Gulf War Syndrome continue unabated – despite assurances from leading health organizations such as the FDA & the AMA saying aspartame is one of the most thoroughly tested additives ever. (See related item, [pr](#) 8/30)

The sweetener is one of several consumer products that have fallen prey to Internet health rumors, reports *Calorie Control Commentary*:

- “Rumors are being spread about a common shampoo ingredient that ‘causes cancer’, new ‘proof’ that oysters are an aphrodisiac, even a certain fast-food taco supposedly containing roach eggs instead of ground beef”
- Of course the food industry isn't the only target that gets hit, *Any org'n* can be fair game – & sometimes you have to wonder if the attacks aren't substitutes for therapy for some of the snipers

2. SCHOOL USES WEBSITE TO MEET RUMORS HEAD ON, INVITE DIALOGUE

At U Texas med school, rumors are rampant. So the school devotes a section of its website to address them, even invite them. The web page, called “Rumor Central,” welcomes “rumors and trumors.”

- **The strategy:** “Submit them & researchers will track down the truth & post it. Your rumor query will be answered, and awarded either a spaceship symbol (“You want to buy some swampland?”) or one to three ‘kernels’ of truth. This website was created to address the rumors you hear making their way around the halls & water coolers of our campus. Have you heard a good one? Send it to us, and we'll track down the truth – good or bad – and post it here.”

For example, someone posted, “I have heard that the Pulmonary Care Department is being phased out & that nursing will take over that function. Will all respiratory therapists be let go or will they be offered other jobs. I've also heard that TDC is eliminating their ICU. Will the staff be given positions in other units?”

- **The answer:** “FACT: There are many institutional efforts under way to identify more efficient & effective ways to deliver patient care, but there are no plans to phase out the Pulmonary Care Department or close the ICU in the TDCJ Hospital.” The rumor was awarded a spaceship because it was “way out there.”

ADDRESSING QUESTIONS, FEARS WITH A LIGHT-HANDED APPROACH

Website is cartoonish & cute with acknowledgements such as “we know the hive is buzzing...” But the whimsy underlies a serious attempt to impart honest information. It notes the President's Office states that the website is part of its commitment to open, honest communication. “It's understandable that during challenging times as these, there are questions & concerns, and some of these give rise to suppositions. It's crucial, though, that we each have access to good, reliable information. This is it: *Your pipeline to the facts.*”

BIG, SLOW-MOVING ENVIRO ISSUES THORNY CHALLENGES FOR BOTH PRESS & PR; HOW TO WORK TOGETHER TO COMMUNICATE

Journalists working the green beat are grappling with a host of environmental causes, a group of them told attendees at PRSA's Environmental Conference. The reporters said they not only have to discern which topics are truly critical to public health & public policy, but must also weed thru a number of associated issues & agendas from both sides of the playing field. Their coverage, and pr's response, can impact how the client is perceived in the court of public opinion. Their counsel to practitioners:

PILES OF FAXES VS. SILENT COMPANIES

The reporters all complain of being inundated by environmental leads, piles of faxes, thousands of calls from enviro activists wanting to get their stories out. (See last week's [pr](#) for rising grip of enviro issues.) “I get weary of that,” *Wall Street Journal* enviro ed John Fialka says. “We're looking for examples. *What does this issue mean to people?* What are the examples?”

The flip side is that industry & institutions don't really want to speak. Science coverage critic Mike Fumento, author of *Science Under Siege, Balancing Technology and the Environment* notes his own experience working with editors who would purposely slam the company that wouldn't call back.

George Lobsenz, exec editor, *Energy Daily*, says one side seems too quick to put its views forward, while industry people are always on the run. “Enviros want to offer their viewpoint,” he says. “We have to beat on industry to get theirs.” That includes hospitals, universities & others with pollution problems – EPA recently fined several colleges for not abiding by disposal rules.

ADVICE FOR PRACTITIONERS

1. **Realize This Is the Era of the Soundbite.** One of the factors peculiar to the 90s, says Fialka, is the fact no one wants to focus on anything that requires time. “*There has been a dumbing down. If you don't have a four minute explanation, your fax won't find its way out of the pile.*” Fumento agrees. “No one wants to go digging (into, say, a study). It's too easy to go to the electric media to find the quote.”
2. **Understand the Hysteria Trap.** Along the same line of thinking is the problem of editors who only want hype. *Newsweek* enviro ed Mary Hagar adds, “There are always two sides, science and hysteria. Unfortunately, a lot of editors want the soundbite with the hysteria.”

Fumento warns that industry is not the only player with an agenda. Even the scientists could have an eye on publicity, the prize, or the research funding gravy train. “*It's the positive study (the study that finds a factor causes something rather than the opposite)* that seems to find its way into news coverage,” he told [pr](#). This slanted science feeds the hysteria. “Remember the heterosexual AIDS explosion? It never happened.” He says that coverage of such things as “Gulf War Syndrome” has been similarly distorted.



The hysteria causes some reporters to search for middle ground. The panel disagrees with the merits of this tendency. Fialka says enviro issues aren't black & white. Fumento is annoyed by the common mantra of the press that "the truth is somewhere in the middle." "Sometimes, one side is completely wrong."

3. **Keep up with the Elephant Mambo.** Fialka notes that overseas, coverage of environmental issues evolves because there, lawmakers address the problems. "In Europe, governments are actually doing something to address the global warming issue; here we are still playing yes or no." He compares covering U.S. enviro policy to watching a slow elephant mambo.

Sara Thurin Rollin, enviro editor, Bureau of National Affairs, notes that tho the spotted owl lives far outside the Beltway, keeping up with what's on the Congressional agenda is key for practitioners & reporters. "It's important to know, where will politicians go? We still don't know the Senate's environmental agenda." She notes the importance of *discerning the difference between pre-election politics & real issues* that will actually end up on the docket. She also points out that sweeping trends, such as new trade policies, will bring about international changes that will affect domestic enviro policy (see pr last week re WTO Seattle meeting later this month).

4. **Avoid "religious thinking."** Lobsenz points to the "religious thinking" of some environmentalists, habits which creates stumbling blocks to communication, consensus & progress. "Tho nuclear energy takes care of the global warming problem, they (enviros) don't want to promote that. They are twisting themselves into pretzels so they can avoid saying this."

5. **Communicate with the Press.** The panel agreed that industry has to do a better job of talking to reporters. Fialka tells practitioners to tell their industry clients: "Put your best people forward. Have them call the reporters. Put them in a proactive role."

Fumento says such response is key. "Return the phone calls, return the phone calls, return the phone calls. Unless you work for Beelzebub Inc. and are distributing poisonous lollipops to children, call those reporters back!" Rollin says *industry & institutions would fare better in the press if they would acknowledge environmental risks & explain them.*

PARTNERING WITH ATTORNEYS: WHAT PR NEEDS TO KNOW

Whether it's public affairs, community relations, crisis communications or financial issues like a merger & acquisition or IPO, practitioners increasingly find themselves in a working partnership with attorneys – often bringing different perspectives to the table.

Recognizing attorneys tend to focus on the court of law while pr pros focus on the court of public opinion, the relationship can be contentious. What can be done to work toward harmony?

PR pro Lynn Doll & lawyer Coby King, both from Rogers & Assoc (Los Angeles), offer 3 basic ground rules:

1. **Identify common goals by establishing common business objectives** – while recognizing that approaches may differ
2. **Identify areas of sensitivity & conflict.** (see box below)

3. **Adopt strategies for effective partnering**, such as:

- **Understand the language barriers – and come up with creative solutions for dealing with them.** Attorneys cringe at words like "We're sorry" or absolutes such as "We take full responsibility." "You can still convey compassion & sympathy without admitting guilt by using phrases like 'Our hearts go out to the families. Here are the steps we've taken to address the issue'" says lawyer King

Conversely, pr pros are frightened by words like "exposure", "discovery" and "any of the Latin phrases." They prefer plain English (& according to King, most judges do also)

- **Honor privileged communications.** As a rule, attorney-client privilege applies almost solely to attorneys & clients. Divulgence to any third party destroys the privilege

Exceptions: attorneys communicating privileged information to persons assisting on a case (e.g. private investigators, pr firms)

- ◆ However, even this gets tricky. For example, the privilege is protected when pr account exec gets privileged background info while the attorney is present – but if the account exec goes back, without the attorney, to brief staff, privilege is gone

Note: This question of privileged communications & related issues stimulated the most questions & debate at the session

- **Gain credibility with lawyers.** Ask about legal matters you don't understand; understand legal limits on communication (e.g. gag orders, confidentiality agreements); demonstrate an understanding of the legal process & previous experience working with attorneys
- **Involve attorneys by getting their input on best ways to communicate PR goals – with parameters.** "Attorneys shouldn't be responsible for wordsmithing," says Doll. "But get their input on your pr strategy – as you look for the opportunity to have input into the legal strategy"

WHAT ATTORNEYS DO THAT DRIVES PR PROS CRAZY

1. Focus almost exclusively inward – on the judge & jury vs. the outside world
2. Withhold information from pr team
3. Use legalese when acting as spokespersons
4. Try to wordsmith the pr work product. (Doll challenges this by asking, "tell me the legal argument for not saying it that way")
5. Take too long to review documents
6. Try to muzzle the organization so important messages can't be delivered

WHAT PR PROS DO THAT DRIVES ATTORNEYS CRAZY

1. Disclose too much information
2. Mistakenly cross boundaries of privileged information
3. Oversimplify
4. Overstate
5. Inadvertently impact litigation negatively (by sharing inappropriate information)