

**ONE FAIRLY FAIL-SAFE METHOD**

Use Gap questions: 1) On a scale of 1 - 9, how much do you trust org'n X? 2) Explain why or why not. 3) On the same scale, rate your confidence in the orgn's capabilities/products/service/whatever. 4) Explain your response.

Now they've divulged the usually missing ingredient: the reason for their attitude toward the org'n (& with specifics you can take action on).

**ANOTHER LOOK AT PRESENTING YOUR SIDE TO THE MEDIA**

Among advice counselor Alan Towers (NYC) gave in a speech to the Conference Board:

- Anticipate what the other side will reveal; reveal it first
- First information will become fact, make sure it's right
- Avoid "corporate speak" -- it's okay to be emotional & human when it's needed
- Reserve your CEO as the "ultimate weapon"
- The best media training is a rehearsal interview with an ex-journalist
- Cut a deal with reporters based on your giving them access & their contacting you for comment each time an article on your company is written -- "The worst thing is to be surprised"
- If you're on the defensive, avoid photos & visuals -- they emphasize; use visuals when on the offense
- Avoid photos that are shot from below the head -- they can be mocking
- The influence of Internet chat rooms & bulletin boards as a source of info for major business media is exaggerated, tho they are important; use services that monitor sites to stay ahead of rumors

**ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS:**

¶ When the ad mentality creeps in, even good deeds become counter-productive. Quoth the Chicago Tribune about a charity dinner: "It was a nice event except for the reminders everywhere that the party was sponsored by BlueCross BlueShield, including this especially tacky bit: 'BCBS' was painted in chocolate letters 2-inches high on all the dessert plates."

¶ Some estimate 1/3 of pr dollars today are spent on hi tech. Others have a right to be envious of what those promoting the world's new toys can get away with. As USAToday tech columnist Kevin Maney noted in a story about unfinished products put on the market: "If drug companies worked like software companies, half of us would be dead by now." Query for practitioners: Is the computer industry creating a pent-up lack of trust & anger? If so, when will it explode -- & how will those now getting away with things act under the conditions the rest of us face?

**REPUTATION MANAGEMENT IN OUR TURBULENT TIMES: A MODEL**

Current events show what is predictably the pattern for protecting reputations for years to come. A few among countless examples:

- How will schools achieve it after Columbine High & numerous copycat threats? As if they didn't have a tough enough time before this.
- Electric utilities after the mandated June release of pollutant data coupled with the confusion of dereg?
- Federal research labs after the "Chinese spy" incident & 9 Congressional committees jumping on the investigatory bandwagon -- predictably ongoing until the elections in Nov. '00?

Add Y2K problems & predicted post-millennial irrationality. The gut-level fear the economy & stock market must fall at some point. Etc etc etc

**TRUST IS THE ISSUE**

Call it skepticism if you prefer. The clash of 3 deep & longterm trends drives people's sense of loss of control:

1. Constant, often wrenching change -- No one can keep up with it
2. Demand for a voice in decisions that affect us -- Quest for regaining some control, seen in the global move toward democracy & renewed activism
3. Unbelievable overcommunication -- The possible solution to #1 & #2, by providing the information we need, is taken away by the diffuse clutter

A 4<sup>th</sup> trend is emerging in response -- the move back to community, coupled with the desperate need for work/life balance. But it is ephemeral enough at this point that it exacerbates skepticism & outright distrust.

**1. RELATIONSHIP CONSIDERATIONS MUST BALANCE FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

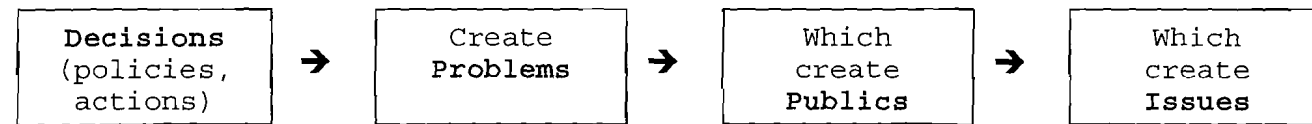
Most org'l actions & policies are decided on dollars. But dollars aren't the bottom line; they're merely how we keep score. Relationships are the bottom line, because they determine the flow of dollars in & the disruptions that waste dollars.

- PR's #1 job in protecting/enhancing reputation is to see that decisions become 2-dimensional: costs, yes, but also impact on relationships



How often short term "savings" end up costing far more in the long term -- because only money was considered -- not the harm to essential relationships. (See research supplement with this issue). Ask GM, for one quick example (pr 5/10).

Grunig's Paradigm makes it clear why pr must be advocating relationship impact at the decisionmaking table:



Too often practitioners are expected to fix things in the 4<sup>th</sup> box, which could have been avoided by applying pr principles in the 1<sup>st</sup> box.

## 2. HI-TECH, HI-TOUCH DICTUM TRUE: SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION IS WHAT WORKS

As our ability to disseminate info & data get faster, if not better, our ability to communicate trustworthiness declines.

- Internally, "I sent the memo" is replaced by "I sent the e-mail" -- but result is the same
- Externally, few read or hear our rhetoric, even fewer can believe it

**Actions** that symbolize our meaning & our values can break thru the clutter. These may be policies. They may be creative ways of expressing what we want stakeholders to understand thru acts not words. They may be behaviors of engaged employees or members or opinion leaders. Words don't cut it anymore in most cases.

## 3. SYMBOLIC COM'N IS USUALLY A FACE-TO-FACE, OR AT LEAST VISUAL, ACTIVITY

It is most often focused on a person, a "face" for the org'n or the mgmt. Constituency relations & derivative programs are becoming the core of pr:

- Classic Constituency Relations** identifies the opinion leaders among key stakeholder groups, assigns volunteers to make regular contacts & report to database -- providing an ongoing view of what the decisionmakers are thinking, doing, feeling; Unbelievably powerful
- Envoy Programs** assign trained volunteers to keep in touch & meet with organizations or specific groups
- Ambassador Programs** empower the employee body to build relationships, sell products, mount grassroots pa efforts, handle community relations & focused philanthropy et al; Key to Total Relationship Management

CEO's & sr mgr's outreach & MBWA activities remain critical as well. But they must feature symbolism, not just speeches. Even in speeches, the stage prop is back big time to make them effective.

## 4. FRONTLINERS' DELIVERY OF CUSTOMER DELIGHT IS MAJOR CHALLENGE

Too many times pr isn't involved in customer satisfaction/delight projects. Marketing, sales or hr is -- & this isn't their skill level as a rule.

- PR programs & reputation pay the price when frontliners don't deliver satisfaction, badmouth the org'n to friends & other negative behaviors
- Therefore practitioners have a right as well as an obligation to be involved in designing & implementing programs that can change frontliners' actions so they enhance, rather than damage, reputation

## PR RESEARCH CONUNDRUM: HOW TO MEASURE TRUST

How do you research a complex component like trust? Asking straight out "Do you trust org'n X?" will get useless answers in most cases because, among other reasons, a) it assumes respondents have formed that strong a feeling, when b) many may have doubts but haven't completely given up on the outfit in question. In short, it goes too far. Some considerations:

- Asking the question after a series of intermediary questions that probe the process of forming/losing trust may work -- providing it isn't leading people to a conclusion they haven't reached on their own
- Using other terms like "confidence" or "skeptical" may get more accurate responses -- since these are likely to fit more respondents' true state
- Asking about distrust may be a better indicator. Since a majority usually withhold judgment, & then act only on triggering events, probing this negative reveals who has really gone over the edge. In this circumstance, the negative (distrust) is more prevalent than the positive (trust). Respondents willing to claim it have taken a stance -- & today it's hard for most of us to say we trust anything or anyone.

### NEED IT BE ASKED AT ALL?

Questions about trust can be dangerous because many respondents quickly go negative on hearing bad news, but rebound equally quickly. This makes only long term, deep-seated probes about trust useful.

- Since asking generic trust questions can be expected to elicit negatives in today's untrusting climate, ask about specifics instead: "How much do you trust org'n X to do such-&-such, or on topic so-&-so?"
- If you determine to ask "trust", however, use the alternating word technique: ask trust of half the sample, then ask confidence of the other half, & compare. This line of questioning is weighted toward the positive, but there's an important difference between claiming to trust an org'n & having confidence in it -- particularly if the research deals with a specific issue or situation.