

3. How do you separate real complaints from nerds using the Web as cheap therapy when they ought to get a life?

- If you've made substantive efforts to address legitimate gripes or to explain erroneous ones, and the attack continues, practitioners have the classic Hobson's choice: ignore the bastards; or find legal or technical means to dismantle the rogue site, or persuade the hosts of chatrooms to take action
- Dunkin Donuts had to purchase the domain name from a critic who beat the company to www.dunkindonuts.com. Tho the company has a site, with a place for complaints, many were getting to the rogue site -- where the company had to go to respond, causing confusion
- Criticizing a brand name on the Web is generally protected by free speech rights, so attempts to claim trademark infringement usually don't work

4. Key question is how many of your stakeholders pay attention to the Web. If complaints there get into the media, that's unnecessary magnification -- but still not the end of the world

- Unless the complaint is really pernicious, e.g. product is dangerous or company is anti-minorities
- But the old Coke research (dissatisfied customers tell 13 people, satisfied tell 3) is the rule: **find the dissatisfied & remove their gripe**

In that sense, even rogue Websites are an advantage -- for org'ns who want to listen to stakeholders. Instead of losing their cool, org'ns should consider Web complaint venues key Issue Anticipation tools.

ITEMS OF IMPORTANCE TO PRACTITIONERS

¶ **Media health columns may be dangerous to health**, reports Canadian Medical Ass'n. Study of medical columns found 50% of advice was inappropriate & 28% "may have been dangerous & potentially life-threatening." Among problems practitioners with health clients should avoid are 1) advising medications or therapies when evaluation by a physician should come first; 2) attempting to deal with complex subjects in media's short timeframe. Editing by non-medical journalists is cited as a cause of misinformation.

¶ **NYTimes quietly banned tobacco ads** as of May 1 -- at least it wasn't widely reported. Rationale is the harmful effects of smoking, same reason it won't take ads for handguns, tear gas or mace. However, ads about sponsorship of events, issue statements etc by tobacco firms will be accepted -- as long as they don't promote smoking. *Seattle Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Deseret News* (Salt Lake) & all Knight Ridder papers also refuse tobacco advertising. Other media owned by the Times are not affected, e.g. *Boston Globe*. Apparently First Amendment has its limits in the view of these editors & managers.

SHELL CHEMICAL'S EMPLOYEE AMBASSADORS ADD PERSONAL ELEMENT TO COMMUNITY RELATIONS -- & HELP ASSURE PLANT SURVIVAL

Shell Chemical's Geismar site (Ascension Parish, La) does a lot to help its community: sponsors career days at area schools, Adopt-A-School programs, local theater groups & an African-American center. Shell is also actively involved in advancing minorities & women in careers in the engineering sciences. According to Noel Wheeler, external afms mgr, the community is generally receptive to Shell's efforts. "There is empirical evidence, in talking with teachers, school administrators & community leaders, that there's a high level of awareness & appreciation," he told pr.

BUT -- HOW TO STAND OUT IN THE CROWD ?

Still, the community is inundated with chemical factories -- Shell's plant is one of 17 in the parish -- and public resistance to factory expansions is on the rise. At stake are permits for expansion projects & the ability to operate without interference. While the site was grappling with this issue, Shell Chemical announced plans to divest a third of its businesses. Each plant's profitability is under scrutiny. "The community relations aspect is immediately tied to the plant's financial performance."

PEOPLE TRUST PEOPLE, SO AMBASSADORS FIT

Wheeler felt it was imperative to spread the word about what Shell does for the community. He knew from an opinion poll of 600 residents that when it comes to news about the plant, people tend to trust non-managerial plant workers.

- Asked who they would believe in matters regarding a chemical plant's impact on health, safety & the environment, 68% said they would believe plant workers "a lot" or "some"

- Only medical doctors and the federal EPA got more favorable ratings

He used this data to leverage a program to keep employees better informed of the company's activities -- turning workers into goodwill ambassadors both inside & outside the plant.

FIRST, GAUGE AWARENESS

"We wanted to find out what employees knew about what we're doing in the community. We knew they were the most credible source we have & that they spread the word among their neighbors, friends, churches, etc." Wheeler put together a questionnaire comprised of 22 questions and distributed it among 539 employees. The return rate was higher than expected, with 65% of employees across all job categories completing & returning the survey.



SURVEY RESULTS

- 1) 64% saw a correlation between community relations programs & financial performance
- 2) 78% felt it important or very important to work in a community-involved company
- 3) 64% felt Shell was very involved or involved
- 4) 68% thought the company's reputation was above or way above average

But, the survey also indicated that most of the workers were aware of only 3 of the company's 20+ community relations programs. Only half knew how to sign up thru the company for volunteer work.

FIXING THE PROBLEM THRU EMPLOYEE LEADERSHIP

Wheeler formed 7 subcommittees made up of employees from different work areas: administrative, technical, etc. The goals are to:

- **Raise awareness & disseminate info** to employees about the plant's CR activities and events. This includes designing a *website* and erecting a *CR display case* in the plant's lobby
- **Develop stories** for the plants employee newspaper
- **Present** volunteer opportunities to the employees
- **Manage & publicize** plant educational activities
- **Work closely** with the local community

He plans a follow up survey next month to find out how the initiatives have raised in-house awareness. "The project does not have a beginning or an ending, but one that is evergreen & ongoing."

Wheeler initiated the project as part of a practicum for Boston College's Advanced Certificate in Honors in Leadership Strategy. "I wanted to have a practical, hands-on project that was not just academic." (More from Wheeler at 225/473-4261)

BUILDING & MAINTAINING BRAND VALUE: PRACTITIONER'S ROLE IS KEY

For years brand mgrs felt only advertising mattered & shrugged off pr as insignificant. Today they consider pr a vital component for building brand value, maintaining brand vitality & establishing brand credibility, finds a study by M. Booth & Assoc (NYC). Booth surveyed 100 brand mgrs from several industries. "We wanted to capture how they view pr & how they think it contributes to building brand," mng partner Brad Rodney told pr. Specifics:

- 51% of the brand mgrs believe **pr is "very important"** vs. 44% who say advertising is, 21% opting for sales promotion & 17% favoring new media

- **pr leads the way as the most effective mktg com'ns discipline** when editorial context is important. 51% said pr was "very important in targeting editorial context," 30% said advertising was, 15% opted for sales promotion, 14% new media
- **pr is best way to garner third party endorsement.** 39% said so, compared to 17% for advertising, 13% for sales promotion & 10% for new media
- Over a third of all brand managers believe that **pr is "very important" for return on the mktg dollar spent**, followed closely by advertising (32%), sales promotion (30%) & new media (28%)

OPPORTUNITIES ON THE NET

Brand managers tend not to use the Net. 66% say they use it "not very extensively" or "not at all." Only 3% say they use it "very extensively."

PR, however, leads the way for those who do use the Internet to build a brand (42%) followed by advertising (32%), marketing & database at 35% and sales promotion at 29%.

Also, more than 9 of 10 brand managers are using pr in an integrated approach to achieve brand presence. It's important to note that the respondents were actual brand managers, not pr practitioners. (More from M. Booth at 212/481-7000)

ARE ROGUE WEBSITES DIFFERENT FROM THE GRAPEVINE?

Reports of org'ns being very upset & sometimes taking dramatic action because of chatroom comments or Websites devoted to slamming them are common. Is this an overreaction? After all, this has always gone on via the oral grapevine. Is e-land different? Consider these elements:

1. **Grapevine is random.** While product defects or poor service may activate the old grapevine all over the place, there's usually no location where complainers can check in -- so a list of who's upset can be made & turned into an organized force. The Web makes this possible, but...
 - Will anyone make the effort to organize a campaign against the company or org'n?
 - If so, what shape might it take beyond what the Webbies have already done -- enter a gripe?
2. **Web's virtual community can be useful.** There's no way short of going public with the complaint -- which sometimes can spread the cancer -- to acknowledge that you're heeding those heard on the grapevine
 - But you can communicate directly & personally, or to the group, when gripes are on the Web -- a huge advantage
 - Yet practitioners say even when they've done that, rogue sites sometimes continue & no one seems appeased