

This strategy makes sense if a zero-sum game is assumed – one in which one company's gain is the other company's loss. But Firestone's retaliation makes this a lose-lose game. It publicly divorced Ford and told the media, "But when we ask Ford: 'What have you been doing on the vehicle side...?' It's like butting your head up against a brick wall, said Firestone's CEO John Lampe."

Trying to shift responsibility onto Ford does not restore confidence, as previous crises by other companies indicate. Sears was not exonerated when its automotive division allegedly cheated customers and the company blamed California consumer protection officials for political motives. Nor did it help Jack in the Box when it blamed its meat supplier, Vons, for the death of a child who ate one of its hamburgers. People want to know, What are you doing to solve the problem?

- **Crisis Rule No. 3: Don't let litigation concerns swamp your public relations efforts.** Without restoring consumer confidence, Firestone will not survive. Lawyers simply think differently from public relations people. Rather than being adversarial as in a court of law, pr people focus on the court of public opinion: maintaining successful relationships with customers and other important publics. Sears learned this. After hiring a law firm noted for its trial work, to solve its dispute with California's attorney general, it used a better approach, which was to examine consumer complaints and to change the system in the repair shops. Firestone has to demonstrate what changes it has made to make better, safer tires. Lloyd Newman's advice should be taken seriously: "Your lawyers should be your advisors (or your defenders), not your strategists." (See "Lessons from Bridgestone/Firestone," *Business & Economic Review*, Jan-Mar 2001, p. 18)
- **Crisis Rule No. 4: Renewal efforts require a review of organizational cultures and possible restructuring of corporate governance and operations.** More is needed than "we care about the consumer" advertising messages. Organizational cultures must be penetrated so that TQM is practiced on the factory floor: no more cut tires coming from Ford assembly plants because no one noticed that the wider undercarriage of the new Explorer rubbed mounted tires against the assembly frame, and no more inadequately trained and uncommitted workers at tire plants.

ITEMS OF INTEREST FOR PRACTITIONERS

- ¶ **To Effectively Persuade Teens, Adults Should Hone Listening Skills, Study Suggests.** A survey sponsored by the Uhlich Children's Home, a youth social service org'n in Chicago, finds that teens give adults poor grades in persuading them to stop drinking and using drugs. Teens were also critical of adult's ability to get rid of gangs and run the government. The survey, a type of "report card," was sent to 1,028 teens 12 to 19 nationally. Adults received a D+ for their inability to stop young people from drinking. The teens also gave C- scores for adults' poor listening habits, preventing young people from using drugs, getting rid of gangs and running the government. According to pres Tom Vanden Berk, the results present a wake up call. "We hope that this year's results will once again inspire adults to hear teens out. Adults need to solicit and hear the opinions of teenagers and listen to them before passing judgment." On the plus side, adults were given a B for creating job opportunities and a B- for providing quality education, spending time with their families, fighting AIDS and for "being a lot of fun."
- ¶ **High Pace/High Peace** is today's pattern, as time becomes a major problem for Americans, says Roper Reports. High Pace is seen in the huge increase in demands on people's time, e.g., since 1991, three times as many American say they "often" spend leisure time getting ready for work. They therefore need more High Peace – taking time out, making space, creating "blank slates," and relaxing. People have integrated many products & services into their lives to gain control over their lives: e-mail and answering machine (control over when to communicate), catalog shopping, takeout food culture and "insta-foods" such as PowerBars.

ALERT FOR PRACTITIONERS IN EDUCATION; AS TESTING COMES UNDER FIRE, QUESTIONS ARISE ABOUT HOW TO MANAGE ISSUE

Imagine cramming for your GMATs, then, after weeks of anticipation, receiving a rejection letter from the school of your choice. A few months later another letter arrives. This one is from the testing service informing you that the test had "a bug"; your score is actually far higher than the initial results had indicated! Such a scenario was reality for nearly 1,000 grads last December when they received letters from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) about a glitch that could have made a difference of 80 points. That incident, and many others like it, has called into question the validity of standardized tests.

The New York Times ran a 2-part piece on testing debacles blaming, in part, quality control problems brought about by increases in volume and complexity. "If you give 250,000 tests a year, something is bound to happen," says David Wilson at the ETS (McLean, Va). Stuart Kahl, pres Measured Progress (Dover, NH), agrees that the demands on the testing industry have become enormous and the challenges manifold. "There is so much more emphasis (these days), not only on testing but also on getting a quicker turnaround," he told *pr*.

Mistakes aside, many call into question the test's ability to measure knowledge or aptitude. "The pressure to produce higher scores has driven some teachers to a) exclude curricular content not covered by the high-stakes test; b) drill students on items akin to those on the test so that the love of learning is extinguished; and c) engage in dishonest preparation and administration practices," writes NEA's W. James Popham, U of California. And, tests are flawed not only because of quality control but also because of a host of biases, such as whether the school curriculum is keeping up with the vocabulary words, and knowledge that the child may or may not have acquired outside the home. Consider the question:

The fruit of a plant always contains seeds. Therefore, which of these isn't a fruit?

- A. peach B. celery C. pumpkin D. lime

Popham points out that the question is biased towards students whose families have the finances and wherewithal to purchase fruits and vegetables, including celery, or to carve a pumpkin at Halloween.

CHALLENGES FOR TESTING INDUSTRY

Historically, the only "standard" tests given to students were the old stand-by tests, with a new series issued every 7 or 8 years. Recent years, however, have spawned a proliferation in new tests, new state standards and huge expectations on the part of the public. Special challenges, according to Kahl:

1. **Expectations for a quick turnaround.** "It has become a matter of squeezing into months what used to take several years." It isn't unusual for a service to be expected to develop 10,000 questions over several weeks.



2. **Variations in state programs.** “There have been a lot of new commissioned tests because the state departments of education find that off-the-shelf tests were not designed to address the particular needs of the states.” Demographic differences, for example, may affect the use of English in a given test.
3. **Testing pervasiveness.** An increasing number of companies are getting in on it, issuing more and sundry forms. “The big concerns are what legal ramifications will result from those practices.” Though there are federal guidelines and professional standards, they don’t have any real authority over students.
4. **Accommodations,** including those for learning disabled students.
5. **Expectations.** “The general public and legislatures feel testing solves problems.... [But] it really only provides information that can help solve the problems. It isn’t a solution in itself.” The Bush administration wants kids in grades 3 to 8 tested annually. “We’re moving into a testing frenzy.”

HOW PR CAN HELP

Popham thinks state involvement, though costly, is a good thing. “Lobby for the use of custom-built statewide standardized tests

that: 1) accurately reflect mastery of a state’s most important content standards; 2) provide appropriate instructional targets for the state’s teachers; 3) yield evidence from which valid inferences can be drawn about the instructional effectiveness of a state’s educators,” he suggests. His ideas for the NEA provide insights for pr:

1. **Initiate assessment literacy programs for teachers and administrators.** If a state’s educators do not understand why certain high-stakes tests not only yield invalid estimates of instructional quality, but also are likely to lower educational quality, those educators cannot inform parents or policymakers about such problems.
2. **Brief policymakers regarding ways of evaluating schooling.** At the state level, sessions for state board members, district board members and state legislators can be planned. At the national level, NEA can work with executive and legislative branches of the government.
3. **Provide briefing sessions for the media.** As the intensity of public interest in students’ test scores increases, we can be certain that members of the media will attend to important events, e.g. briefing sessions, in this arena.
4. **Implement assessment literacy programs for parents.** As soon as educator-focused assessment literacy programs have been concluded, NEA’s state affiliates can provide outreach programs tailored to the interests of parents. Parents will almost always be supporters of assessment programs that are good for children, but moms and dads need to truly understand the key measurement concepts involved.
5. **Foster establishment of autonomous parent-action groups.** If nonpartisan parent groups protest a poorly conceived accountability program, the views of those parents will be given serious consideration by policymakers.

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NO MORE SPIN DOCTORING: REPUTATION MANAGEMENT MEANS GETTING INVOLVED ON POLICY LEVEL, SAYS COUNSELOR

Too many pr firms tout “reputation management” skills when all they really do is tweak an organization’s image. “It’s glorified pr,” says Alan Towers, pres. TowersGroup (NYC). “They’re not changing corporate policy, they’re only managing image.” True reputation management involves getting in on policy, he says, and that means moving beyond the role as communicator.

Towers, who made his remarks to the Conference Board last month, says that image spin under the guise of reputation management sank the introduction of AZT, which should have been a “pr dream” but instead turned into a nightmare because of public outcry concerning price. “Do you think they asked a pr person if the pricing of AIDS drugs was too high?” Instead, pr was called in to patch things up after the damage was done. The oil industry, too, called on pr too late, after pricing decisions were made. “Product pricing pushed the oil industry into public scorn.”

“Have recent price increases of gasoline caused any financial hardship for you or others in your household, or not?” 48% say “have”; 52% say “have not” – an ABC News.com Poll, conducted April 24-29 with a nationwide sample of 1,020 adults.

BE BUSINESS PEOPLE FIRST, COMMUNICATORS SECOND

The problem is that too many firms are still focusing on communication. “If we want to restrict ourselves to being communicators, we don’t need a role in shaping corporate behavior. But if we want to manage reputation, we have to influence what our [organizations] do, not just what they say.... Reputations can be carefully managed weapons,” says Towers.

Examples of companies that manage reputations with consistency and achieve competitive advantage include FedEx, Charles Schwab, McDonald’s and Walt Disney. “These companies know a great reputation begins with aligning culture and behavior with customer needs. Customers know what to expect from the providers and management knows these predictions are worth billions.”

PR has to win back reputation management from the branding and identity firms that have taken it over. “They’re seen as more strategic. It’s up to us to become professional business people first. Being good at communications alone won’t get us a policy role.”

FINGER-POINTING BY FIRESTONE AND FORD REVIVES CRISIS MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

Ford and Firestone have managed to get widespread media attention again since their announcements a month ago – Ford saying it was recalling 13 million Firestone tires and Firestone declaring its divorce from its 95-year-old partnership. This and other actions violated several crisis rules:

- **Crisis Rule No. 1: Get all the news about a crisis event out fast** so that media reports dwindle or disappear. By awakening people’s memories about last summer’s Firestone tire recall and questions about Ford Explorer’s safety, both companies again placed themselves on the list of active crises, and the media have acted accordingly with extensive coverage.
- **Crisis Rule No. 2: Don’t play the blaming game.** One of Ford’s apparent motives for the recent tire recall was to reinforce its legal defense against lawsuits by blaming Firestone for the accidents.