

Chapter 15:

E-TOOLS

Pat made no excuses for his belief that the internet, e-mail et al are simply useful tools in the public relations toolbox – when used correctly. He had heated discussions with those who firmly believe that the electronic age will significantly alter how relationships are built and maintained. Pat knew that human behavior is slow to alter – and that relationships based on trust are what move people into new behaviors. And these relationships must ultimately be gained by face-to-face contact and long-term trust building.

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EXPERTS WARN: COMPUTERIZATION IS BECOMING MAJOR PROBLEM FOR
EMPLOYEE RELATIONS, PRODUCTIVITY, CORPORATE CULTURE, CONSUMER TRUST;
PUBLIC RELATIONS SHOULD ANTICIPATE THESE ISSUES NOW

It's worse for computer makers & software marketers -- but these time bombs affect every user of computer technology. Is there, in fact, an organization that hasn't had inklings? Cases in point:

CONSUMER TRUST. People have tired of hearing "our computer broke down" or "it's a computer error," and are heading to court instead. Computer malpractice suits are on the rise, reports High Technology magazine. Erroneous bills or statements are now commonplace. Wall Street Journal reports, "Software defects have killed sailors, maimed patients, wounded corporations & threatened to cause the government securities market to collapse."

PRODUCTIVITY. Tho blue-collar workers are often blamed for reduced productivity, in fact theirs has increased about 5%/yr for the last decade. But 3 of 4 corporate employees are now white collar -- and "white-collar productivity hasn't budged" in that time, says Arno Penzias, Nobel Laureate & vp-research, AT&T Bell Labs. Why? Misuse of computers. "The mind is not a computer and a computer is not brain-like. And until business leaders figure that out, white-collar productivity will continue to stagnate," reports the Albuquerque Journal of his speech at a Sandia National Labs colloquium. 90% of all computers are in white-collar settings -- "a dramatic indictment of information technology."

"No matter how intelligent the machine is, it is not going to be more intelligent than a person. That means -- and this is a little scary -- you're going to have to start trusting people. We ought to set common sense loose as a force in our society." -- Nobel Laureate Arno Penzias

"We have to be very careful what we trust to computers. The vast majority of systems are deeply flawed from the viewpoint of reliability, safety, security & privacy." -- Peter Neumann, computer scientist at SRI International

"Software problems have reached crisis proportions." -- software expert Edward Lieblein

"Most software problems are management problems. When you run into technical problems, that's when you expose weaknesses in management." -- Will Smith, X-chief technical officer, ITT

CORPORATE CULTURE. Computers drive management decisions toward "logic" or number-crunching. This drives out risk taking, creates fear of mistakes. Penzias finds people overestimate the amount of logic they use in decisionmaking and underestimate

the amount of intuition they use. He feels execs, for example, tend to make decisions more on a good presentation than on its content. Computers "work totally in abstraction," based on logic. But logic requires total knowledge of all possibilities! In real life things change constantly so logic is of limited use.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS. Beyond the harm done by blaming workers for falling productivity that's not their fault, and by the attempt to install "logical" cultures, there's the basic issue of evaluating workers by clocks on the computers they work at -- as with telephone operators, machine attendants, reservations clerks. Then there's robotics etc, etc. We've been too quick to assume people & computers approach problems in the same way, notes Penzias, and both are being misused as a result.

THE OUTLOOK. Don't expect much help from computer & software companies. Silicon Valley's response is the California Legal Reform Project -- an attempt to enact the most sweeping tort law changes yet in order to mitigate product liability & malpractice claims against the industry.

This set of issues -- as yet little discussed in public relations -- may be the biggie of the decade, if the experts' predictions are right.

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THE TECHNICAL QUESTION FOR PR: HOW REAL IS “VIRTUAL” WORLD?

Though most hi-tech communications has the danger of luring practitioners into the lazy belief old one-way methods will work *if* they're electronic – for which there is no evidence whatsoever – one development deserves considerable research:

Is virtual face-to-face real, in the sense of letting people share enough of body language and “essence of self” that full-blown relationships can develop?

- Q:** Does being with someone via teleconferencing (the visual kind: note that we use the same word for phone and video meetings) allow the same intimacy as being in the same room? If so, why? If not, why not – is it the sense of smell that's missing, a full 3-dimensional view, or what?
- Q:** If such interactive tv dialogue constitutes a “personal” meeting, why doesn't just seeing someone on film, video or tv? Will acceptance of interactive video get-togethers lead us to perceive one-way video as “real” interchange?
- Q:** If we have *enough* phone chats, do we really know one another – or is visual knowledge of the other person essential?

The issue is critical. Behavior can be motivated only from people and publics with whom organizations have earned trust. Trust can be earned only through building relationships. So – are “virtual” relationships “real”? Please, scholars and researchers, help us find out.

ARE THE WEB AND E-COMMUNICATIONS A 3RD LEVEL OF RELATIONSHIPS?

Traditionally, there have been two types or levels of relationships practitioners strive for:

1. **FACE-TO FACE, PREFERABLY ONE-ON-ONE**, where organizational representatives meet stakeholders of any type in person – “up close and personal” as the cliché says
 - This allows study by both parties of the other’s body language, eye movement and other non-verbal communication – including the undetectable but all-important olfactory intake of pheromones, the good or bad “chemistry” so often described in relationships
 - Certainly no relationship can be as complete as these – but the question is whether *business* relationships between an organization and stakeholders need be this holistic (pr 10/18/99)
 - *A subset is where relationships are built with groups*, rather than individually, but are still face-to-face – as in speaking engagements, for example. Stakeholders see the real person and can make perceptual judgments even if there’s no opportunity to speak to the person
 - *A 2nd subset is telephone relationships*, where the voice and all it can convey make this a true person-to-person affair – but lacking the visual and pheromone elements of a holistic relationship
2. **PRODUCT OR SERVICE USE RELATIONSHIPS**, where stakeholders may never meet a *person* affiliated with the producing or delivering organization – but the product or service becomes a surrogate for this through repeated or habitual use. (How else to explain why AT&T retains the lion’s share of long distance when several competitors offer the same service, price etc?)
 - Publicity or advertising may succeed in putting a human face on the organization – how many Chrysler owners ever met Lee Iacocca? – which deepens the *perception* a relationship exists
 - When put to the test, by a faulty batch of product or disagreement on a public issue, these relationships can more easily fall apart than the face-to-face variety

IS A WEB RELATIONSHIP REAL?

By definition it is “virtual.” But some practitioners detect relationships being built, engendering a

degree of loyalty usually not available in impersonal communication. Points they make:

- *Because it is impersonal* (you wouldn’t know your web pal if you sat next to her on the bus) people may be far more intimate, more candid and revealing – since they can’t be traced. This is the ultimate anonymous conversation
- Evidence this phenomenon is real comes from a grisly source: police reports of the number of rapes, robberies and even murders occurring when web pals decide to meet in person

- ***E-commerce may be a particular beneficiary*** since more data is often available on potential purchases – either from the selling site, competitors’ sites or the manufacturer’s site – and arming consumers with this info may increase their trust, the biggest barrier to *any* type of relationship. Consider the number of retailers that must be visited to get this information
- ***Public policy issues and gripes or complaints*** against organizations, products, services or whatever can build relationships among like minds instantaneously – and sharing a value system or issue position provides an initial level of trust that might take a long time even to surface in other types of relationships

Questions remain about how many people will really make computer living their mode, and how soon. Practitioners need to be wary of the industry’s predictions and find fully researched behavioral indicators. Still, if there is such a thing as an “impersonal relationship,” the e-world may be creating it.

CREATING A BUZZ: TEMPORARY PHENOMENON OR HERE TO STAY? ONLY FOR DOT-COMS OR GENERALLY APPLICABLE NOW?

Backsliding to boiler room publicity tactics for hi-tech startups – in order to create a buzz, as they call it – is viewed by many in the field as pulling pr down to commodity level. Still, it has its logic – even if the tactics are antediluvian (and harshly attacked in a spate of recent books, articles and speeches):

- **Startups usually have no customers**, sometimes no finished product – but lots of venture capital funding, since there seems to be more of that than there are places to put it, particularly when the fad for investment is hi-tech and almost nothing else
- **Startups thus need to** 1) locate customers or 2) bring in folks with a need who may help perfect the product, and above all 3) keep investors quiet by showing *something* is happening, namely publicity and apparent creation of visibility

These are precisely the first-stage jobs publicity does well. Buzz, it appears, while it may be ethically challenged if there's nothing behind it, makes perfect sense in these circumstances. And creating awareness has always been the initial task in every project – and the first step in formal systems like Diffusion Process (pr 1/6/86) and the Behavioral Model (pr 11/4/96).

However, hi-tech companies that survive and attain longevity – H-P, IBM, Intel, Cisco, etc – need all the sophisticated pr tools Old Economy organizations do, whether they be corporations, public agencies or NPOs. Buzz then has a limited role, if any. Reputation or brand now matter, and that *is* another matter where pr strategy is concerned.

IMPACT ON WHO COMES INTO PR

The answer to whether the buzz strategy is ephemeral or not in pr is vital because the

burn-em-out buzzing jobs may be influencing who comes into the field. What they do. Whether they will remain – and mature. Most in the hi-tech pr firms and staffers in e-companies are very young. PR grads can get good paying jobs immediately. So can others with minimal or no pr training.

- **Maybe this isn't bad** – except that the fiery baptism offers little or no insight to what mature pros need to be able to do, so maybe university pr sequences will bend to teaching the field this way under pressure from students eager for jobs
- **But undergrad pr sequences really ought to be considered *pre-pr*** – a la pre-law or pre-med. The few hours of pre-professional coursework available at this level, when basic college education must be the emphasis, argues more and more for either graduate training as the accepted norm or 5-year undergrad sequences

Is the buzz culture leading us away from this professional maturity, simply because it provides jobs for the huge numbers who now study pr?

DOES THE PRIMACY OF INNOVATION SUGGEST BUZZ IS *NOT* TEMPORARY?

If e-tools are not bringing us the Communication Revolution, as is generally thought, but rather are creating a process and

medium that make possible the Innovation Revolution, in every realm of life (pr 3/20/00), could this mean:

- **Buzz will be here to stay** since infinite numbers of new products, services, ideas, systems, etc will constantly be thrown at society – not just more e-toys?
- **The whole world will live in Startup Mode**, not just the e-world, and it will involve not only investment capital chasing new commercial opportunities but parents coveting new education approaches, patients eager for healthcare breakthroughs, citizens tired of old ways of governance et al?
- **Yet isn't this the situation already** – incipient if not fully achieved?
- **Since most new products and ideas fail**, will all the resulting buzz anger stakeholders by adding immeasurably to the overcommunication many already find unbearable – making it even harder for practitioners to break through the clutter?

Predictable – whether buzz is here to stay or a blip (just an ancient idea hyped with a new name) – is continuing bifurcation between “real” full-bodied public relations and “buzz” pr. The challenge remains:

1. **Finding effective ways to gain awareness** and attention in an overcommunicated society
2. **Not letting this lull the field into anointing awareness** as the only or the most important skill of the profession; pr has been there, done that

This is truly déjà vu all over again, as everyone knows who's been in the field for a while. The difference is that the buzzers – and their clients and employers – have not. Like all neophytes, they believe new ground is being broken. Old heads need to gently show them nothing has changed except 1) the terminology and – most important for all – 2) the incredible speed with which innovation comes at us. In that arena, maybe the buzzers will find techniques all practitioners can learn from.

E-startups have advanced the profession in one important way: they recognize the essential role of pr, even if it is basic awareness or buzz pr. *Often the first person hired by them is the pr pro.*

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SORTING OUT E-WORLD AND “NEW ECONOMY” = BACK TO BASICS

Adjacent copy in *The Wall Street Journal* last week showed how trends today *fade* as rapidly as they *start*. A review of *The Coming Internet Depression* (n.b.) appears directly above an ad headlined: “Want to be a winner in the next economy? Going digital is the last thing you should do.”

- The former may be typical e-world overstatement. But the latter can’t be taken lightly, because it’s an ad for another book, *How Digital Is Your Business?* – written by Mercer Management Consulting’s Adrian Slywartzky and David Morrison. The book postulates:
 - **“Start with the critical problems faced by customers, then focus technology on solving those problems.”** *The dot.com collapse, say the authors, is caused by companies with no business plan, i.e. solving no customer problem. Proof: bricks and clicks (online versions of real stores that succeeded before digital because they served a need well) are running away with e-commerce*
 - Their subsequent *Fortune* article titled “Going Digital? Think First” turns out to be a double entendre, meaning both a) think about your basic business plan before going digital – but also b) the major problem with doing things at e-speed is it eliminates time to think, which would appear to be the explanation for the foolhardy, faddish acts by entrepreneurs, Wall Street and venture capitalists the last few years
 - **Organizations, from companies to school systems, should go digital only if they’re really solving customers’ problems.** Digital tools are more-then-ever pull, not push, media. Dot.coms go broke because promotion to get people to their sites is too costly. But where a solution exists, these costs are minimal since once stakeholders use the Website, Intranet or whatever, they come back again and again because it’s in *their* interest
 - Makes sense – and demonstrates why doing anything because it’s “the thing to do” or “everybody’s doing it” is nonsense. Worrying about “real time” in a vacuum can defy common sense (note how often that word appears in this sentence ... for good reason)
 - Authors’ rule: **Don’t go digital until you’re ready**

THE OUTLOOK NOW

Last year at this time the vaunted e-economy was to change everything. Does this twist hold meaning for pr’s use of hi-tech tools as well as for the economy and individual organizations? Council of PR Firms’ study, out two weeks ago, says no – Net will double size of profession ... by 2003. Granted, study was being done before e-economy trended downward – and by one of the firms that was hyping it before.

- But even if only those digital tools that make sense survive, there would appear to be growth here for pr – though maybe not to the extent or date the above study reports

- **The pace may slow, but by all means don't fall off the wagon** (More from www.imtstrategies.com/presentations/PRwhitepaper3.pdf)

HOW BROADLY BOOKS NOW DELIVER MESSAGES AND VIEWPOINTS

How Digital Is Your Business? is published by Crown, but also available as an e-book and as a Random House AudioBook. More info and downloading of excerpts from www.howdigitalisyourbusiness.com. And – it spawned a series of articles in *Fortune*, *The Standard* and other media, plus book reviews. Mercer is, of course, using it in its consulting practice as well. Handled this way, books have become even more powerful tools; instead of destroying books, the e-world has added to their reach with print, audio, ebook, Web excerpts, articles, reviews (and the last two are also on the Web as well as in print).