

The More Things Change...

James L. Horton

Issues arise repeatedly in communications because human nature is patterned in its psychology and response. That is why, for example, we can recognize humanity in 3,000-year-old poetry such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or the human reactions of Egyptian pharos, early Chinese emperors and Babylonian Princes. Humanity does not reinvent emotional response and logic every generation. Self-interest and self-preservation are driving forces that result in a wide variety of typical understandings or misunderstandings and appropriate responses or miscommunication.

PR practitioners over time should learn these human patterns and know how to handle typical responses. That is part of the wisdom we bring to clients. One gains credibility through providing wise advice and implementing appropriate action to influence the outcome of events.

Here then are a few insights I have gathered. Perhaps my experience might help in your work, or at least help you think differently.

Verities

Old truths count in communications. Openness is better, and truth is more powerful than “spin.” Truth means the facts and interpreting them plausibly. Truth does not mean making things up that seem plausible and trying to sell the fiction to gullible observers, although many try this approach. This is especially true in crisis communications.

Each year brings scandal of some kind, whether in politics, corporations or from individuals. Most of the time scandal blossoms because someone handles communications badly. The bungle occurs because openness and truthfulness require courage that leaders often do not have, or flexibility that has been denied by events.

Too often those in control dissemble to avoid humiliation, or to avoid damaging their power, or to avoid opening a larger and more damaging issue or because they think with high-powered lawyers and “spinmeisters,” they can get away with anything. Whatever the reason, leaders hide embarrassing stories and usually end by paying a price.

Communicators should be a voice of reason and long-term self-interest in debates over whether to disclose unpleasant facts. They should not be afraid say what is likely to happen. For example, one might hide truth now, but the likelihood is that

facts or allegations will seep into the open later. When they do, loss of credibility makes it difficult to defend oneself. In most, but not all, situations, it is better to disclose now than let secrets fester, especially with intense media attention. Sometimes one can bury something with an expectation that no one will find out. (In fact, we all bury things at one time or another. It is part of “image protection” for clients.) But the pitfalls of hiding things can lead to unpleasant and ugly traps. As a rule-of-thumb, an organization should be biased toward disclosure. This, however, depends directly on organizational leadership. The first person a PR practitioner needs to convince is the CEO.

Communicators should stress that balance is key. Sometimes, there can be a middle ground that satisfies questions and preserves dignity. The mean is not well demarcated, however, and shifts according to the moods of consumers, reporters and voters. On the other hand, there are times when a middle ground is the wrong place to be – especially with allegations of illegality. When there are illegal acts in question, covering up presents grave danger to an organization, individual and society. Openness in such situations is essential because communications enter a dimension in which credibility and reputations can be lost in an instant. Stonewalling excites reporters who scurry to find facts, and prosecutors leak data to rehearse their cases in the media.

Conviction by innuendo is as serious a problem in our day as it was thousands of years ago. Even if one never enters a courtroom, there is a good chance an individual’s reputation will be harmed irreparably. Communicators must remind the media and others that in the U.S., one is presumed innocent until proven guilty and prosecutorial innuendo is not fact. Many a well-known individual’s reputation and business has been ruined because there has been a rush to judgment aided and abetted by zealous prosecutors. The PR practitioner should hew to facts in the face of implication and proclaim facts vigorously to those who would ignore them.

There is yet another verity practitioners should know. The public might forgive an individual or organization once for fooling them, but they rarely do it twice, especially in bad times. In good times, people allow others to get away with more. In bad times, they don’t. People look for scapegoats on which to lay blame for the bad things happening to them. The job of defending an unpopular company or individual is always harder during a recession.

Spokesperson

Since ancient times, the leader has been the spokesperson for the organization and that that has not and will not change. The CEO is and always will be the principal mouthpiece. There is never a time when this isn’t so, and CEOs who duck the responsibility to communicate harm their companies.

Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. hammered this point in a blunt memoir about his experiences leading IBM, called *“Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance?”* Gerstner believed in

keeping everybody updated as he turned IBM around. He flew a million miles in nine years because, as he wrote, a CEO can't run a company from behind a desk. Gerstner largely did his own internal corporate communications with a PR staff to support him.

Good CEOs know how, when and what to communicate. PR's job is to support the CEO's effort. PR should never formulate a message independently, even when a CEO appears to be a hopeless communicator. The counselor's first task is to remind the CEO of the duty to communicate, and the second is to help the CEO accomplish it. It is disappointing how often CEOs fail to appreciate or grasp their role as spokespersons. They give the quarterly financial report to analysts. They show for annual meetings. They don't do much else externally or internally. Sometimes because of their brilliance, they can pull off growth for a number of years before problems rise in the ranks and elsewhere. Ultimately, however, they harm their companies and confuse employees and investors.

After years of serving companies, I am convinced the worst message a CEO can deliver is that a business is only numbers – sales, earnings and stock price. While this can work for a while, sales, earnings and the price of a company's shares come from economic activity – people making, delivering and purchasing products and/or services. Driving employees to think only of numbers moves them from concern for customers to concern for the bottom line in spite of customers. During good times, CEOs become fixated with stock price. During bad times, CEOs focus on operations. When a PR practitioner sees a CEO concerned solely for the price of a company's shares, be prepared for trouble.

Techniques and Technologies

Communication relies on techniques and/or technologies. This has been true since the first cave men blew charcoal on their hands to leave outlines on cave walls. Hence, one should be alert to changes in media and ways to communicate. PR practitioners should be as diligent as their media counterparts in adopting and adapting media. Journalists increasingly use advanced systems to cover and report news. The war in Iraq was an obvious case where everything from satellite phones to online blogs came into their own, but similar advances are taking root in everyday street reporting.

In 2002, the International President of CNN said broadcasters need multi-skilled staffs that deliver stories, pictures and know-how in the field beyond the reach of technicians. Image and sound recording and transmission technologies have become so light and portable that it is easy to send an individual in pursuit of a story and expect still and video images and finished text. This is posted quickly on a Web site, shown on TV news broadcasts and printed in a newspaper.

It is an unfortunate fact of PR that some practitioners believe they do not need skills beyond writing and talking to reporters. On large communications staffs, this might

be true because an organization can keep specialists busy, but many PR staffs are not large, and either a practitioner learns a medium or doesn't use it. This, of course, deprives an organization of a medium that might be an effective outlet for its messages. Unfortunately for the PR practitioner, an organization might then turn the medium over to another department. This is why, for example, many PR practitioners lost control of Web sites. Today, it is not uncommon to find Web Masters without communications skills running Web sites. That's because computer and networking technicians adopted the Web before communicators did.

Idea Source

Some markets adopt and adapt technologies more quickly than others because they are in environments where they are driven to do so. In ancient Greece, for example, the art and craft of rhetoric was an essential discipline for freemen because freemen had to defend themselves against banishment against those who accused them. Personal safety dictated the advancement of the speaking craft.

So too, in our modern era, there are similar arenas where new communications techniques and ideas are tested and adapted rapidly if they are practical. They become good sources of ideas and smart practitioners will keep an eye on them.

Political campaigns adopt communications technologies quickly and often use them well to reach voters and raise money. Campaigning is an expensive, arduous and time-sensitive exercise. One pollster called campaigns "one-day sales." A candidate builds a huge machine to get millions of individuals to perform one action on one day. Campaigning uses virtually every medium from candidate appearances, door-to-door outreach, direct mail, promotional materials, events, radio, television and the Internet.

Some say, for example, that presidential candidate Howard Dean, pioneered successful use of Web sites to raise campaign funds. But, Dean did more than that. He pioneered on his site (<http://www.deanforamerica.com/>) ways to mobilize supporters. His "meetup" for Dean used the Internet to establish impromptu support groups beyond the reach of his campaign apparatus. His event page allowed one to plan an event or identify one within one 100 miles of one's zip code. His "Dean Wireless" text messaging system allows supporters to communicate to one another in a locale. His "House Party" page helped to raise funds. His blog kept supporters up to the minute on his activities.

Most of these communications techniques existed online but they had not been integrated into an effective grassroots marketing package before Dean. Dean's people showed how to make multiple Web techniques work well together toward a common end. PR practitioners should study this kind of success closely and see how it might adapt to their own situations.

Human Nature

PR practitioners through study and observation should know the range of reactions clients might have to communications challenges. They should be prepared to show what is in a client's best interests today as well as tomorrow. They should prepare as well to be ignored because the openness and honesty are not so simple for complex human beings in complex organizations. They should accept that new ways of communicating usually are rejected out of hand the first time because they are new, but they can be adopted eventually. They should accept that culture, ambition, self-interest, disagreement and law get in the way of effective communications repeatedly.

PR practitioners, most of all, should learn quickly that they must build credibility first with individuals to influence them. It is not fawning to cultivate the power centers of an organization. It is common sense. One cannot expect a CEO to take one's advice unless the CEO believes that what you have to say is valuable and useful in solving a business problem. Building personal credibility is self-preservation. Many a senior counselor has been replaced because the CEO disliked what the counselor had to say or no longer trusted the counselor to provide the CEO with valuable advice. It is a risk of the PR business.

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