



Current Issue
Archives
Advertising
Print Submission

PLUS CA CHANGE* by John Deveney, ABC

"Things are going to change." After the horrific events of September 11, 2001, this was a phrase heard around the world. As survivors of the tragedy, we re-evaluated our lives, commitments and time spent with family and friends. Businesses and governments have been forced to reckon with new priorities too, including heightened security, increased public scrutiny and global operational concerns - all leading to new roles and rules for communication.

CW Online SEARCH:

Search



More with Less

As gatekeepers of communication, we are managing a drastically changed industry. Although our industry was already in a state of flux before 9/11, this devastating event proved to be a catalyst for change. The ninth annual Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research Public Relations Client Survey, which was completed before Sept. 11, 2001, reported a 29% reduction in average annual PR budgets. But anecdotal evidence indicates that 9/11 had a further chilling effect on business expenditures in general.

"In the larger sense, business has become more cautious," said Jeff Schultz, managing director for Golin/Harris Singapore. "They are becoming more short-term, defensive and opportunistic. This affects planning and budgets, which are less ambitious."

The demand on communicators to do more with fewer resources has been hard on many in the profession. "Many colleagues-for example those promoting international travel destinations-have had to regroup and retarget," observed Penny Poole, ABC, a Canadian development communication specialist in Southeast Asia. "Many of my colleagues working in commercial applications have suffered terribly. The impact of Sept. 11 on the economies of other countries will be impossible to measure."

Hong Kong-based Anne Forrest, managing director-Asia for Golin/Harris International, concurs. "The war on terrorism and Enronitis have definitely changed the business sector," she said. "It's made business execs much more cautious... and more inwardly focused on cleaning up their act."

Renewed Emphasis on Communication

Despite the downward trend in business expenditures in general, some industries report an increasing share of organizational resources devoted to communication. In travel and tourism sectors faced with the daunting task of restoring consumer confidence, some communication budgets were increased rather than cut. A legion of organizations took a barn-raising approach to bring New York's tourism industry back on track, and many other cities around the U.S. and the world took note.

"There was a shock wave effect in the economy, and tourism was one of the hardest hit sectors," explained James E. Smith Jr., president of tourism conglomerate New Orleans Hospitality Companies. "Businesses had to restore a degree of normalcy and consumer confidence. We needed to take a proactive approach in adapting to the new reality and respond in a way that anticipated visitors' concerns. Media relations, public relations and partnerships were crucial."

Following 9/11 in New Orleans, conventions were cancelled, travelers stayed home and hotel occupancies plummeted. But Smith and other civic and industry leaders rallied to minimize and reverse the economic hit, increasing budgets and emphasis on public relations and employee communication. Employee communication was crucial, as one out of every six New Orleans residents was directly employed by the industry. "Employees

are the heart of the tourism industry, and communicating with employees was a major part of the solution. We had to address the reality that the economic blow would have layoffs, downsizing, lost income, reduced pay- while also inspiring optimism and keeping employees' eyes on the future." The approach proved effective: New Orleans' 3% drop in tourism post-9/11 is considered negligible by tourism standards, and helped New Orleans make a faster recovery than many other U.S. cities.

Media Relations: Changing Approaches

For many communicators, the biggest change from business as usual came in their relationship to media. As the media's attention shifted to terrorism, tragedy and the prospect of ongoing military engagement, many PR professionals recognized the need to reassess their strategies and took a hiatus from press release dissemination. Media tours and launches scheduled for after the event were quickly cancelled. Videoconferencing, online presentations and satellite media tours increased in frequency and popularity.

Despite much guesswork about which types of stories would be favored by the press in the post-9/11 climate, a winning story formula has yet to be identified. "It's more difficult to predict what will interest the media next week," said John Kerezy of Kerezy Communications in Ohio. "Relationships are more important, and authenticity is a requirement." Kerezy suggests that corporate mythologies such as e-Bay's fabrication that it was founded to satisfy the founder's fiancée's desire to trade Pez dispensers would be "rejected and vilified today, instead of helping the company make the cover of major news and business publications."

Reporters' interest and receptiveness to stories remains changed a year later. "Pitches must be shorter, stronger and more relevant," noted Kerezy. "Cut all fat and go straight to the meat of why this journalist should be interested. We're doing more by phone. Being brief, powerful and asking for a 'yes, no or maybe,' so we know where we stand."

According to Kerezy, logistical and budgetary issues have further complicated media relations efforts since 9/11. Kerezy had organized 20 North American PR firms to handle the U.S. and Canadian launch for Land Rover's Freedlander SUV, planned for Sept. 23, 2001. But within hours of the 9/11 tragedy, it became clear Land Rover could not keep its ambitious schedule, since ports were closing to tighten security as the vehicles were crossing the Atlantic. The revised strategy was delayed, and considerable budget cuts reduced the firms from 20 to three. Then the Kansas City anthrax attack further derailed major promotions, events and media in Missouri.

Media attention was also understandably elsewhere: "We were immediately sensitive that the news hole for an SUV introduction would be considerably smaller versus war coverage," said Kerezy. Yet despite all the challenges, the advance planning and quick thinking made the launch a success. "The advance work by all the PR consultants paid off," Kerezy noted. "We secured \$15 million in media placement, even with the war coverage media eclipse. More importantly, sales have been better than projected."

Online communications become a touchstone

In 1906, William James said that "great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed." His meaning became clear in 2001, when the Internet made possible a crisis response of previously inconceivable speed, magnitude, and effectiveness. Online technology enabled the American Red Cross to provide updated resources and facts for media outlets across the globe, coordinate 4,000 volunteers, accept US\$541 million in donations and respond to a media inquiry deluge and rumor monsoon that lasted for weeks.

Online tools also became a critical means of communication with employees and their families in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. "The experiences of Aon, Merrill Lynch and others in the World Trade Center taught us an enormous amount about how to stay in contact with employees and their families regardless of where they are in the world," said Tudor Williams, ABC, of Vancouver-based Tudor Williams Inc. "These

companies transformed their Web sites from commercial online marketing functions to vital employee communication tools. Within hours, they were able to find, establish contact and then communicate with employees and their families wandering about the streets of New York, stranded in aircraft diverted to Vancouver or working in their European or Asian offices."

In those first few weeks after the disaster, online communication provided a global network of support and sympathy with colleagues, vendors and co-workers worldwide. "Online communication provided not only the sense of immediacy and the means for us to express our innermost feelings, but it provided the means for so many people around the globe to connect," said Jillian de Beer of de Beer Marketing & Communications in New Zealand.

Longer-term, technology-assisted communication has also enabled businesses to adapt their approaches to meet new challenges. Prior to 9/11, much of the business conducted by Arxcel, a New York-based prescription benefits management consulting company, required extensive travel. In the face of the new reality post-9/11, Arxcel adjusted its market focus to minimize travel and concentrate business development in its local area. The new model pioneered by CEO Chris Robbins uses additional sales staff and comprehensive succession planning to grow the company, slowly minimizing the CEO's sales role and travel requirements. Arxcel's national media relations strategy has been adjusted to maximize regional exposure and encourage Web and telephone contact with national media.

Global Communications: New Sensitivity

While the tragedy of September 11 in many ways bound us together in loss, it has also underscored how much further we need to go to establish a meaningful understanding of one another. Many in the U.S. were baffled by the attack, while their counterparts in Asia and Europe understood the attack as part of a broader global conflict. "In the Philippines, where I've lived for 10 years, terrorists still hold certain geographical districts perennially hostage," shared Poole. "The Abu Sayyaf of the southern Philippines has long claimed Al Qaeda connections. It was startlingly close to home, even though we were halfway across the world and several time zones away."

"While employees empathized with the U.S., many also felt that it was more of a wake-up call to the U.S. of what has been occurring around the world for decades," said Alan Raby, of Alan Raby Communications in Sydney, Australia. "Some really felt that the U.S. was engaged in too much nationalistic jingoism. For internal communicators with employees overseas, it is an object lesson of how U.S. corporate values may not be shared by non-U.S. employees. When different audiences perceive events through different value systems, then real communications - or 'meaning making' - does not take place. We should adapt our message in the light of these many different non-U.S. perceptions."

Lessons Learned

The practice of communication has changed since 9/11 - and if the recent past is any indication, there may be more challenges still ahead. Organizations must be prepared to respond to periods of increased public interest and scrutiny. Comprehensive crisis and response plans that identify various crises can extinguish fires before they ignite. "Contingency plans are more important than ever," notes Kerezy. "Forward-thinking communicators have in place a process to execute decisions quickly and move forward." Below are some key learnings to help you put a flexible, sound plan in place to cope with the unexpected.

Trust-building

During periods of governmental or legal attacks, public protests or distrust, or a weakened competitive position, maintaining credibility is difficult-and an absolute necessity. Be sure to:

- Tell internal constituencies first.
- Prepare protocols and establish who will deliver them.
- Train clients for interviews from every medium, assuring accurate, appropriate coverage driven by your

message, not media questions.

- Don't build or launch strategy around a single day.

Organize a crisis clearinghouse

Crisis plans must include systems to receive and respond to inquiries. Make sure you:

- Segment specific resources to manage communication with different stakeholders (media, public, employees), but make sure the messages are consistent.
- Respond as quickly and completely as possible. Do not frustrate audience members with lags or gaps in information that send them to the rumor mill.
- Use Web sites and posting areas as clearinghouses for information and resources.
- Update and refresh the information on a regular basis, labelling new information and outlining how and when information will be updated.
- Commit to addressing larger issues and continuing open communication after the crisis. Pundits say organizations that do are better able to control issues and stories following a crisis.

Coordinate Collateral

If you use a variety of communication vehicles for different purposes or discrete audiences, make sure all these are coordinated in your response plan as follows:

- Clearly outline what Web sites or communiqués will be primary, and establish a chain of command or clearinghouse for information and inquiries.
- Explain how traditional communication vehicles will be used, especially in the event of technological blackout or breakdown. What should your response team do if phone lines are down, cellular service is interrupted or Internet access is unavailable?
- Consider using telephone hotlines, an effective low-tech, high-touch tool for gathering and disseminating information.
- Be sure to have effective back-up for all computer-based processes, e.g. off-site servers.

Distribution methods

In the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax mailing scares, postal distribution was slowed and sensitivity to unexpected packages heightened. To ensure delivery:

- Use semitransparent envelopes that facilitate inspection have become more popular.
- Set mail drop dates earlier and think through packaging and unexpected mailings, especially to media.
- Check with the media you work with and update media preferences. Media's preferred method of contact has changed dramatically toward e-mail and fax, according to PR Newswire.

Crisis Web Sites

As part of your response plan, consider developing a Web site that can replace your site in response to a crisis. Build a site that can:

- Handle heavy traffic.
- Address only the situation at hand.

- Disseminate information efficiently.
- Minimize navigation and graphics, which can burden and crash the site (just ask cnn.com).

Accommodate Cultural Differences

Communication practitioners must be the vanguard of sensitivity for the groups they represent. This means making cultural sensitivity your standard business practice, with particular sensitivity in:

- Local businesses with immigrant workers.
- Companies who distribute services and products globally.
- Discussing passion-inspiring topics like terrorism, which are multifaceted and culturally defined.
- Handling multicultural workforce issues.

Stay current

Issue scanning can uncover crises in the making and provide intelligence to develop appropriate responses. When instituting your own issues scanning process, consider these pointers:

- Make use of subscription and free online resources to identify emerging trends and issues. (A list is available at www.deveney.com.)
- Once you are in the midst of a crisis, monitor media Web sites, chat rooms and other resources that track and feed a crisis.
- As part of your plan, have resources to identify and gauge key audiences' attitudes, needs and reactions.
- Use electronic news clipping services to harvest relevant online and traditional media coverage daily, and address emerging issues quickly.

John Deveney, ABC, is a member of Deveney Communication (www.deveney.com), a team of communication strategists specializing in strategic planning, Internet marketing, community relations, crisis communication, media training and media relations for a host of nonprofit, public, corporate and dot-com organizations in the United States and Canada. Contact him at jdeveney@deveney.com.