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Communicating With External Audiences During War Time

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Monday, March 17 began a long week. Communicators across the world wrestled with challenging decisions and the uncertainty of war, as we struggle through our own personal opinions while remaining steadfast to the organizations and clients we represent.

As communication professionals in a time of international crisis and strife, what is our duty? How do the words and the actions by the U.S.-led coalition, change our duty?

We are in a sense, the last line of defense and the front line of the organizations we represent. Practitioners are currently weighing the various methods of communicating through a war and global event of highly charged emotions, media eclipses and unpredictable outcomes.

In recent daily interactions with clients and colleagues, it was obvious that even the most experienced practitioner had difficulty discussing strategy or tactics without expressing personal opinions over the conflict in Iraq. This is OK. The conflict is extremely emotional. It is emotional for Americans, Australians and the British; it is emotional for nations in the Middle East; and it is emotional for countries across the globe protesting or supporting foreign troops in Iraq.

The fact that this is emotional does change communication strategies, but it does not change our duty as professionals.

The following tactics and strategies can help manage external communication during times of international disarray.

- Recognize that global events create media eclipses
- Add a level of sensitivity in messaging
- Manage diminished news value
- Include a cancellation clause
- Analyze your targeted media goal and your media market
- Leverage nontraditional media outlets
- Consider whether your message is helpful or commercial

Recognize that global events create media eclipses

When pitching media, consider that this conflict maybe the most important story to the decision makers. That does not mean that they have no interest in what you have to say. When you call, let them know you appreciate that fact.

Such an approach helps you connect with the journalist. Effective media relations is a human interaction, especially during a media eclipse. Be particularly sensitive and gauge what media interest your

announcement may possess.

Val Mellesmoen, director of communication for Alberta Environment in Canada, advises asking a journalist or assignment editor: "To be honest, I was not sure if I should make this call, but are you interested in non-war-related news?"

This demonstrates you are sensitive to their situation and the overriding conflict. It also more appropriately positions your role. If the journalist says no, you can commend the candor and end the conversation. However, if the journalist says yes, you have turned the tenor of the call to a resource for an interested journalist. That reporter is more likely to remember your story and your conversation, having asked you for the information.

Mass faxes and emails waste time and resources during a media eclipse. A personal connection and consultation is more effective than unrelated correspondence.

Add a level of sensitivity in messaging

As you examine whether to communicate, how much to communicate and when to communicate throughout this conflict, augment your traditional checks and balances for approving messages.

The worldwide sensitivity and emotional state of people-journalists included-make scrutinizing messages for appropriate content even more important than before the conflict began.

Audiences are more sensitive now, and audiences for whom you and your organization previously held no interest could be polarized by your messages, disagree with them and protest your organization.

Prevent this by analyzing, revising and tailoring messages to a highly sensitive and tuned-in public.

Manage diminished news value

Bosses, CEOs and clients may have heightened responsibilities in the face of war. Media exposure may not be a primary consideration for them. Reporters are consumed with the conflict.

As communicators, our responsibility is to realize these positions, accept the situation and manage accordingly.

Remind organizational leaders and clients that war and other global events supercede other news. Your organization's announcement may no longer land above the fold or make the evening news. Consider whether your news is timely and vital for release.

For example, before the conflict began, Quebec's ruling party called for their provincial election. Now that the media is focused on the conflict in Iraq, Mellesmoen opined that the opposition party is having difficulty placing messages in the news. "It is becoming impossible for the guys trying to get elected," she said. "The media in Quebec is no longer interested in local politics."

In reviewing media coverage, a few organizations have benefited from the media eclipse. Some travel-related businesses announced massive layoffs in the face of war. Not communicating layoffs can exacerbate the vitriol of the public once the actions become known. Coming forward with the news in a timely fashion is the responsible action. In this case, it also worked in their favor as the news coverage of their announcements

was diminished.

Include a cancellation clause

Cancellation clauses are not a new idea, but they are a vital protection for your organization or clients. BetWWTS.com, an online gaming service based in the West Indies is throwing promotional events around popular sporting events. However, if those events are canceled or rescheduled because of war, BetWWTS.com will not be locked into contracts with venues and vendors, due to the protective clauses negotiated into all contracts.

A sample clause is simply: "The terms of this contract are contingent upon said event occurring as planned. Should said event be canceled for any reason including acts of God, war, natural disaster or terrorism, this contract becomes null and void. All monies will be reimbursed in full."

Unlike other online gaming companies, BetWWTS.com refused to take bets on the war even though they were approached by both customers and reporters looking for odds.

Analyze your targeted media goal and your media market

Before you contact media, establish your target. Do you want international coverage? National? Regional or local?

If your goal is U.S. national broadcast news, Charles Zewe, former CNN correspondent, says, "It is pointless to waste efforts unless you have a direct tie-in. Pitches that are logical tie-ins to this conflict are the most effective."

When asked if organizations should revise a message and try to make it patriotic, he declared, "People see through that, natural tie-ins are the key. Organizations who start funds for local servicemen will be able to make local news outlets. That is fine. People view this as part of an organization's public duty and an obligation that corporations have. And news organizations understand that."

Examine your target market for these tie-ins or resistance to it

In one example, during a campaign to assist the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) in launching a new database (helpingpatients.org) that helps patients find information on obtaining free or discounted medications, our communicators in the states of Maryland and Virginia are finding more resistance placing the same newsworthy but not war-related story than colleagues in the Midwestern U.S.

Jillian de Beer, managing director of de Beer Marketing and Communications in New Zealand, explained that in her area of the globe, it is "business as usual." She indicated her company's plans to operate exactly as usual. However, she commented that in countries where the situation is direr, she expected communicators to reduce or eliminate some corporate events and celebrations out of respect for what is happening in the world.

Leverage nontraditional media outlets

Zewe explained that pitching soft news stories unrelated to war or using the "here is a story that will take people's minds off the war" pitch can be counter-productive. People who do not want to hear about the war turn off their television, turn off the radio and turn off the computer. People who do not want to hear about the war do other activities like go to the movies, read books and visit friends and family.

Look for alternate channels for your messages. After September 11, 2001, non-relief effort Public Service Announcements (PSA) were pulled from television stations throughout the U.S. to afford channels expanded news time. Deveney Communication was mid-campaign for the March of Dimes, educating women about the value of folic acid consumption to prevent birth defects. To recoup the viewing audience lost on television, we placed the national campaign PSAs in movie theatres and film festivals.

The strategy enabled us to continue reaching March of Dimes target audience unlike its competitors whose messages were eliminated or mired in more pressing news

Postal services worldwide will be taking extra security precautions. This inevitably means delays in the mail. If your organization has a direct mail campaign scheduled, you may want to try an email campaign. As more and more people turn to the computer for war-related information, an email campaign may increase your effectiveness.

Consider whether your message is helpful or commercial

de Beer recommends "community-building events and wholesome activities focusing on healthcare, education, arts and crafts." Community-building events in times of war are welcomed and appropriate. "Community events make people feel like a family," de Beer said. In fact, some advertising giants are pulling or postponing commercials, as they do not deem it appropriate to simply promote cars and soft drinks.

Mellesmoen states that this is no different from what communicators normally do. "We have to ask, 'What are the other factors?' We have to do an environmental scan of what we are competing with. We need to ask, 'What do we need to take into consideration? Do we need to hold off? Does this have a risk of backfiring?'"

In a time of war it is important to continue communicating. War does not change the duty of communicators, but increases the need to be strategic and selective. We must decide if our message is still appropriate and if it will get coverage. We must decide if it is more advantageous to postpone a release or to use an entirely different tactic than the mass media. War may lead you to revise your message or change your tactic, but it is important to continue external communication efforts.

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