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The Smithson Report: Removing Issues Management From Its Strait-Jacket

By Kate Smithson

When it comes to issues management, corporate public relations is working in a strait-jacket. It is unable to participate in the new communications environment because of an archaic mindset, ineffective use of technology, and obsolete information packaging.

The Problems:

1. Public relations departments package information in much the same way they have done for decades. Their key focus is the news release, sent to traditional media for a generalized audience. Granted, the news release can now be sent via email or posted online, but information is still packaged using the same template developed in the 1940s. (1)
2. Special interest groups and activists have moved beyond the news release. Yes, they still use it as one way to package their message, but they also tap into new technologies to create new ways of packaging information. They reach many audiences using many mediums, using multiple versions of their message. They have become their own media. (2)
3. A new communications environment now exists, but too often corporate public relations speaks in the wrong language. Far too many of our communications are couched in the stilted language of "corporate-speak." The Cluetrain Manifesto (3) tells us that "...people are inventing new ways of sharing relevant knowledge with blinding speed." Markets are smarter and better informed, and they have abandoned corporate-speak.

4. Public relations professionals are unable to participate in the new communications environment because of an over-reliance on obsolete information packaging, and ineffective use of technology. The current approach is archaic and wasteful. Even worse, it is hindering their clients' ability to be heard.

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Solution: New Communications Model

The solution is to create a new communications model for the public relations industry providing a new mindset, better use of technology and new ways to package information.

Mindset

Old

Closed system

One-way

Reactive

New

Multi-system

Interactive

Proactive

Technology

Old

Paper-based

Focused on traditional media

New

Web-driven

Become our own media

Information Packaging

Old	New
Text-based	Multi-media
News release	Multi formula
Corporate-speak	Human language

1. Mindset

This model would move the current public relations communications mindset away from its current closed system, one-way, reactive philosophy, and towards a multi-system, interactive, proactive approach.

Closed System -- to Multi-system

The current closed system allows information to flow to audiences through one approval system, after it has been put through exhaustive approval procedures. The good thing about this system is that all information is approved by everyone in the organization by the time it gets to its audiences. The bad thing about this system is the information is released on a corporate timetable, which means missed opportunities. The information is often not meaningful to its audiences, which means the company's messages are not clearly being heard. This means the information is mistrusted, misunderstood, and ineffective.

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A multi-system approach would see the creation of many different types of approval systems, depending on the situation. A flatter, more flexible, accountable approval hierarchy would allow a company to respond to information challenges much more effectively, in much the same way emergency communications occurs.

From one-way to interactive

The current public relations model of communicating is one-way: we make announcements, stage events, conduct tours. We have something to say. We say we are successful at getting our message out when we see our work reflected in traditional media. We had a certain number of column inches, we made the front page, we were first or near first in the television news line up, we were the lead story on all the radio stations. But do people hear us, really? Do they believe us? Do they have enough information on the issue to make an educated judgement when a special interest group uses its varied and more successful approach? No, no and no. The new public relations model would be interactive. We would ask people, we would go directly to our own audiences. The technology exists. We would no longer rely solely on media clippings to prove that our message is being heard. We would no longer rely on polling companies. We can get specific real-time information(via the Internet) to determine for ourselves what our audiences think of our message.

From reactive to proactive

The current public relations model is to make announcements sometimes, and to stay silent the rest of the time. Our job is to keep our clients out of the limelight, and to provide damage control if the limelight finds them. A new public relations model would incorporate a paradigm shift. Instead of being reactive, the new model would become overtly proactive -- it would seek the spotlight, talk about everything the company is doing, provide a constant stream of factual information to the world. The new public relations model embraces accountability and accessibility. It advocates engaging the planet with an unexpected and unprecedented vigour.

2. Technology

Technology can provide huge opportunities to provide new value to the public relations industry. Using the skills that public relations professionals already have as a starting point, it is time to begin cranking those skills up several notches so that they develop a talent for communicating using multi-media technologies. This will put them ahead of the curve.

The technology used by the public relations industry is currently paper-based. Even though documents are transported electronically and posted online, paper is where we live. Public relations also focuses most of its technology energy towards traditional media. In a new model, public affairs technology would become web-driven, and public relations firms would become their own media.

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From Paper-based to Web driven

The current public relations model uses technology as an electronic filing system, and as an electronic way of distributing its paper documents. We send paper documents to ourselves and to the media using faxes, e-faxes, or email, and we post our paper online. We still work within the 8x11 space, even though we write using word processors.

The new public affairs model would tap further into technology, following some paths already taken, and perhaps forging new paths. A web-driven public affairs model would respond quickly to emerging information campaigns; it would converse with its audiences, create databases based on feedback, evaluate demographics, create content designed for specific audiences, deliver its messages very efficiently, ask for more feedback, and tabulate the results. And that's only for the responsive kind of communications. This new model would also create proactive, web-based information based on its new mandate to engage the world.

From Using Traditional media to becoming our own media

The dominance of traditional media is being eroded by new technology. People are moving to other sources for their information, Web usage is growing, and traditional media is gradually becoming less efficient at reaching target audiences with effective, meaningful information. Audiences are fragmented, and this fragmentation is accelerating. Many special interest groups understand the world of media has changed. Their new credo is "Don't hate the media, become the media!" These groups

stopped relying on traditional media as their sole vehicle for communications several years ago. They view traditional media as only one way to get their message across. They might stage an event for the evening news and issue a news release, but they don't stop there. They also have their own videographers, photographers and writers there. They create their own version of events, post it online, produce documentaries, show films to coffee house groups, launch information campaigns, mail e-newsletters, and discuss their views in chat rooms and discussion groups. They no longer rely on 15 or 30 or 60 seconds of exposure once or twice in a news cycle. They see that as a place to start -- and they use it as a springboard to do their real communicating, face-to-face, online, to many different audiences.

A new communications model for public relations would use traditional media as one of many tools; but it would also become its own media, targeting its own audiences, and delivering its own messages.

3. Packaging

Around the world, the existing public relations method of packaging information continues to be text based. It focuses on the news release, and it uses language as a barrier. A new public relations model for packaging information would be multi-media, providing many versions of the message, in many different formats. It would also use simpler, more human language.

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From Text-based to Multi-media

In the new model, public relations professionals would work with audio, graphics, video and text to create web pages, video news releases and diagnostic databases. They would be equally comfortable with satellite technology, the use of real-time information, information synthesis, and analysis of information in any form. They can operate digital and video cameras, create multi-media presentations and work with all the associated software applications.

They would produce a wider variety of products using this expanded base of raw materials -- the data is no longer text -- it is multi media, and new products are created to reflect this new technology.

From News release to Multi formats

In the old model, the template for the news release is unchanging, static, sterile. In the new model, new templates are developed for each media, and updated regularly. They include audio, video, text and graphics.

From Corporate speak to Human language

The old model uses a form of corporate speak that is now obsolete. People have an aversion to the soothing, humourless monotone voice of corporations. Recognizing that technical, scientific and academic language has its place, the new model uses plainer language that is natural, open

and direct. In the new model, public relations professionals help their clients to develop a new voice.

New Era communications

A digital divide exists in public relations communications methods. Still stuck in the middle of the 20th Century, the way we communicate now means we are the "have nots" of the digitally communicating world. Most of us don't spend a lot of time researching issues on the internet; we don't know how our issues are being dealt with by alternative media; and we don't converse in anything but text.

If the public relations industry were to move in the following directions:

- train public relations professionals to be leading edge knowledge workers
- value the ability to communicate in audio, video, and text - at will
 - become its own media
- work with technology to inform and to interact with many different audiences anywhere in the world, anytime, and in any medium

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Then it will build its own pipelines to the world, establish direct contact with the global audience, create an unfiltered avenue for feedback, and conduct its own dialogue with the planet.

The challenge is to embrace the idea of engaging the world. Another challenge is to remember that content is the key: technology is the means to distribute the content. The public relations industry must change its intent, its language, its role. Public relations must also adhere to the highest journalistic standards. The service it provides its clients is simple: it provides them with the ability to participate in the global discussion, using clear words, accessible information, and complete context. There is no spin here: there is only openness, accountability, and transparency.

The corporation or entity that understands and applies this concept could become a global magnet for high tech investment, growth and job creation - to develop a computer literate, highly skilled workforce, with a broadband communications infrastructure, and a competitive business environment that would be the first of its kind.

Imagine creating a leading edge public relations system - using highly skilled knowledge workers and new technologies. Now imagine you are the first in the world to have formally created such a system. You have created the best public relations communications system on the planet. Is there a business application there? You bet. Now you build partnerships with other governments and corporations who can see their public relations efforts are stuck in the last century. Imagine training centers, partnerships with universities and colleges, and having a stake in developing a new career economy that would open a whole new era of opportunity.

Best of all, public relations companies could move into the 21st Century, and

their clients could truly communicate with the digital world.

(1) Arthur W. Page wrote the first press release on August 6, 1945, after President Harry Truman dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

<http://www.prmuseum.com/welcome.html>

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/small/mb10.htm

<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/teacher/abomb.htm>

(2) The independent media movement is now a global phenomenon. Check out the Seattle Indymedia site, and check the links to similar sites.

<http://seattle.indymedia.org/>

(3) A plea for corporate communicators to speak with a human voice.

<http://www.cluetrain.com/>