



ISSUES FACING TODAY'S COMMUNICATORS

In June 2004 Maine Street Marketing Director, Bob Crawshaw attended the annual Conference of the International Association of Business Communicators in Los Angeles.

The 1400 delegates were treated to three days of the latest information on global marketing and communications from speakers from around the world.

Five issues in particular caught my eye:

- Corporate Crisis
- Communicator's Challenges
- Brands
- Media Analysis
- Internal Communications

Corporate Crises

"If CEOs can be fired and go to jail, in future will communicators face dereliction of duty to protect their companies' reputation?"

In the wake of the recent Parmalat, Enron, World Com, One Tel and HIH collapses, conference delegates explored the question "Has ethics departed corporate communications?"

Speakers noted that whistleblowers were centre stage in all of these corporate crises, yet not one of them came from corporate PR offices. Do corporate communicators concentrate more on spin than substance?

These corporate collapses have also impacted staff loyalty. Many conference presentations dealt with internal communications and what managers must do to gain or rebuild worker trust.

Communicator Challenges

Why didn't they involve me earlier? is the common communicator's lament.

Around the world it seems that communicators still stand outside the boardroom door, waiting to be heard.

One popular presentation suggested that, as a profession, we need to stop whining and start:

- Understanding our organisation's needs and challenges better than anyone else.
- Anticipating the future through ongoing "soft" research that tracks emerging issues with stakeholders.
- Presenting communications solutions before our managers starts feeling pain.
- Focusing more on changing external and internal behaviours rather than just increasing awareness.
- Using measurement processes for all communications tools.
- Being ready when a crisis hits, because this could be our big break to move from functionary to strategist.

Four Ideas on Branding

The view from some North American commentators is that global communications is moving out of fashion.

Strong local brands are rising up to challenge global brands in regional markets. The clever global players are responding to local markets but it may be too late for some of the West's corporate superstars.

Region-specific brands may be the next wave. Have you heard of the rise of Mecca Cola? (I hadn't either, but evidently it is a brand rising up to challenge US soft drink manufacturers in the Middle East).

The coming big thing in branding is social responsibility. In future it may be more profitable to talk to our consumers about our behaviour rather than our prices.

Women will dominate tomorrow's marketing. Women make the majority of consumer purchasing decisions yet are ignored by many of today's marketers. To survive in future traditional male brands will need to recognise the importance of women.

Media Analysis

The conference devoted a whole "stream" of activity on communications measurement. And all sessions attracted large audiences.

Measuring media performance is becoming increasingly important around the world. Today's media metrics include measuring volumes of coverage, take up by targeted publications and broadcast outlets, favourability ratings and the quality and quantity of relationships with journalists.

Presenters urged integrity in media evaluation. Media analysis should track real world results against projected outcomes as well as checking that a company's backroom media processes support frontline efforts.

Internal Communications

US-based HR company, Towers Perrin, recently researched the attitude of US workers to their bosses. And it seems that American companies are losing the credibility battle when it comes to employee communications.

- 20% of workers do not believe their employers usually tell the truth.
- Senior leaders are seen as less credible than front-line managers
- Staffs often believe their companies are more honest with shareholders and customers than they are with them.
- The longer the service, the more sceptical a worker is likely to be about company communications.
- Pay and benefits are the most trusted types of information. Issues like company strategy and financial results generate the most gaps in misunderstanding.

The research goes on to report that firms can tackle this situation by:

- Taking it from the top: with senior executives being seen, accessible and above all serious about internal communications.
- Using surveys, focus groups, feedback channels and other objective measurements to understand workplace audiences and not just rely on "gut feel".
- Training managers to communicate. Communications is a learned skill but not traditionally emphasised as people move through the ranks.
- Telling staff the whole story in important issues.
- Regularly providing staff with opportunities for two way communication.