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## The Way To Better Media Relations

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COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

## **The Way To Better Media Relations**

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Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Assistant Professor Eric Zitelli

Adjunct Assistant Professor Michael Kravitz

By

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**A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Corporate  
Communications**

**1991**



## COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

### Table of Contents

Chapter	Professor Michael Castro, Chairperson and Advisor	
I. STATE OF THE PROBLEM	Adjunct Assistant Professor Eric Zitelli	1
	Crisis of business/press disharmony	3
	Adjunct Assistant Professor Michael Kramer	6
	Attitude survey of PR executives and press	11
	Why this project is needed	13
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE		15
	Hard lessons learned during Corporate crisis	15
	Grunig's theory of strategic media relations	31
III. SELECTIVE REVIEW & RESEARCH EVALUATION		34
	Profile of media reporters	37
	Situational model of public relations	38
IV. & V. DISCUSSION		41
	Why most press releases are thrown away	41
	How to prepare news releases that will be used	47
	Using editorial boards	49
	Preparing executives for a media interview	54
	Author's crisis communication experience	58
	Implementing strategic public relations theory	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY		84

## CHAPTER 1

### Table of Contents

#### Chapter

I. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM.....	2
Causes of business/press disharmony.....	5
Organizational fear of the media.....	6
Attitude survey of PR executives and press.....	11
Why this project is needed.....	13
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	15
Hard lessons learned during Corporate crisis. . .	15
Grunig's theory of strategic media relations. . . .	31
III. SELECTIVE REVIEW & RESEARCH EVALUATION	34
Profile of media reporters.....	35
Situational model of public relations.....	38
IV. & V. DISCUSSION.....	41
Why most press releases are thrown away.....	41
How to prepare news releases that will be used. .	45
Using editorial boards.....	49
Preparing executives for a media interview.....	56
Author's crisis communication experience.....	68
Implementing strategic public relations theory. .	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	84



## CHAPTER 1

Business is vitally interested in the subject of media relations. Very early in the Industrial Revolution business found that the press could be influenced or persuaded to promote the sale of business products by newspapers publicizing and getting them into print. In the early days of American commerce, opportunistic corporate heads saw the need to employ staff members who would act as publicity agents, hawking the stories about the latest and greatest company products to the news media. An industrial public relations person was charged with drumming up publicity about the company's products and promoting favorable publicity events and galas and getting them into print, whenever and however they could.

Generally business and the press got along amiably until newspapers began to expose some of the excesses of big business, such as monopolies, and the poor working conditions in many industrial plants. The malaise that resulted from the press taking a critical appraisal of American business was the

genesis of Public Relations, or Media Relations as we know it today. Media Relations became more crucial with the advent of the 1960's and 1970's, with many of America's youth rejecting their parents idea of business as a benign benefactor of us all. With Watergate, the Union Carbide accident at Bhopal, India, and other scares, the press began to view business' ethics and responsibility in a more ominous light. In reality, the press which now includes television, radio and specialized media, has tilted toward a more critical view of business and tries to cover business news now more than ever, believing that business affects all of our lives and is "everybody's business."

The problem facing business and the press to some extent, is that they have a credibility gap to be bridged. There now exists an adversarial relationship between the two that is not likely to go away anytime soon.

The press and big business look at the problem of how to improve media relations from vastly different perspectives but business has more to lose by ignoring the problem. Chester Burger was aware of media relations problems when he wrote in



the July-August issue of the Harvard Business Review: "My own experience, first as a television network news executive and later as a management consultant, convinces me that there is no more mysterious reason for management's failure to communicate effectively with the news media than that it simply does not know how" (Burger 61).

Business people are nervous about talking to the media and that can negatively affect their company image. Burger, having worked as a journalist prior to becoming a public relations consultant feels that businesspeople should be confident:

Although businessmen are as intelligent as members of the working press, they are unskilled in the art of effective communication. As Bos Johnson, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, says, "Businessmen are often so frightened or wary of the reporters that they come across looking suspicious. And there's no reason to be. They should put their best foot forward, speak out candidly, assuming they have nothing to hide." (Burger 61)

Businesspeople have a basic misunderstanding of the role of the press which only complicates matters. Burger says that one misunderstanding is what is newsworthy and what is not:

Business managers know from experience that

newsmen will not hesitate to cover (i.e., write or film) a story that may be damaging to their company. From this perception, it is easy to conclude that the reporters are basically hostile to business. However, management often fails to understand that the reporter's first responsibility is to produce a newsworthy story that will interest his audience. The reporter frankly does not care whether that "public interest story" will help or hinder the company. The reporter will select, from his bag of techniques, whatever method he believes will produce an interesting and informative story. (Burger 63)

Business has had to redefine their motivation in relation to the media. Cooperation and coexistence with the media is now advised as the way to relate to the press for a win - win situation. Business doesn't agree as to what media relations means, but Donald Blohowiak in his book No Comment!, shares his advice as to how corporations should conduct their media relations program:

Even without grand plans for sophisticated image crafting and expensive publicity campaigns, many companies pay employees or consultants to deal with the press. Their mission usually is to anticipate, prepare for, and intercept media inquiries and to generate a little positive publicity about the company. A press-oriented public relations function is virtually a necessity for public companies...private as well as public companies are subject to media scrutiny. The proliferation of business coverage in the mass media generates more press interest in companies. Employees



trained in the ways of the news media can help a company successfully negotiate routine inquiries and assist the corporation in times of crisis when rumors or unsubstantiated and conflicting information threaten stability (Blohowiak 69).

In reality media relations are more often than not characterized by disharmony, distrust, and dissatisfaction on both sides. From the business perspective the media doesn't understand how business operates and that the media has an anti-business bias. Writing in Business Month magazine, influential writer Leonard Silk says business has mostly a negative attitude toward the press:

In the mid-1970' s. . . I attended...a series of closed door conferences of top business executives. . . I found extreme antagonism in the corporate world toward the press, which it blamed for the low public esteem of business. The executives strongly felt that the public would give the country's corporations better support if it really understood business, but that the press ("the media") denied the public that knowledge. "What good is it have a story to tell if the media won't let you tell it?" said a businessman.

Business believes that the press wields great power to shape public opinion, but that its power is consistently used, as one CEO put it, to "defame those in authority, promote dissension and political division" and to "use the poor performance of a few to castigate the entire business community." Other characteristic views expressed were these:

"Even though the press is a business, it doesn't reflect business values." "The press is forever at war with the creative minds of free men." "Unless the

press stops tearing down our system and begins telling the public how it works, business leaders will not be permitted and future participation in the formation of social goals."

"The media are simply destructive and misinformed." I am afraid little or nothing has changed in business attitudes toward the press in the years since. (Silk 93)

In general, business' reaction toward the press is one of paranoia. In order to improve media relations between business and the press we have to examine attitudes held by each side, seeing the problems and possibilities inherent in each side's statements.

Business' fear of the media is compounded by other public figures being burned by the press in the past. At the close of the Vietnam War, General Westmoreland was ambushed in a TV interview for which he thought he was prepared, having been given a list of questions that would be asked. What he didn't and couldn't know was that some questions buried near the end of the list became the focus of the interview and inevitably the press made Westmoreland look like a fool. Leonard Silk goes on to paint an accurate picture of the fear that business feels when they have to deal with the media:



The press in a capitalist society is inherently a schizoid institution; it must make money to survive and grow. The split or tension within a given newspaper, magazine, radio or television station or network is that while it asserts its dedication to the public interest, it also pursues its own interest. For that reason, the best news media have always sought to enforce a strict separation between their editorial and business sides, while the worst allow the business side to dominate and manipulate the news and editorial functions...the press itself needs to be criticized, without fear or favor; it does too little of that itself.

Many business executives live in mortal fear of the press, anxious about what it can do to their companies or themselves. Margaret Longley, president of Gramercy International, a public affairs adviser to business, says businessmen are often apprehensive in discussing their companies' affairs with reporters because they are not sure how they will be understood and projected. "They are worried about the mind-set of the reporter," she said. "They are concerned about their personal image-they want to come across as a 'good guy', sincere and real, so people will accept what they're saying. Some business executives are titans inside but scared when they go outside-scared of being misquoted or misinterpreted." (Silk 94-95)

What business doesn't understand is that the public, rightly or wrongly, depends on the media to help them understand big business. Too many past events have happened which have stirred public curiosity about business. With the advent of Reagan's deregulation of many industries and the



spread in the 80's of merger mania, many Americans feel they need to know what business is up to; a fearful curiosity nonetheless.

Bart Mindszenty, director of corporate public affairs, C.I.L., Inc. - Canada, writes in a Public Relations Journal excerpted article from the Business Quarterly, March 1987 writes:

The argument about whether or not organizations can achieve a peaceful and productive coexistence with media has been going on for years. What is seldom understood, let alone accepted, is that the media are perfectly entitled to gather information, digest it, and regurgitate it in a way that they find best. Of course, there are abuses on the media side, too...

A surprising number of both career-conscious public relations people and critical executives have justified a negative attitude towards media because that is the most expedient and comfortable attitude to have. But I think all that is coming, an end. (Mindszenty 15)

Business' affairs are coming under greater public scrutiny and no comment, doesn't mean that there isn't a story. On the contrary the story most often will be written anyhow, usually from the unfavorable perspective of the company's competitors or detractors. Mindszenty goes on to explain how a

fundamental shift has occurred in the public's attitude toward business:

People have an intrinsic curiosity about things. We are a society that feeds on huge doses of information--useful and irrelevant--via the media. And since part of the intent behind most stories is to find out who is to blame and what went wrong. We have developed a high level of doubt and concern about organizational credibility...More and more, organizations are realizing that they operate by public consent. If the answers to questions and concerns are not forthcoming, with and through the work of media, the public will reconsider its consent. It can withdraw consent through boycotts or political pressure. (Mindszenty 15)

Corporate media relations problems are as much the result of business insensitivity to the needs of reporters as they are just philosophical differences. Business public relations people have offended the media by their incompetence and their manipulative approach. So naturally reporters have a different view of the cause of the impasse in business-press relations. Roger Ricklefs, reporter for the Wall Street Journal gives three versions of the status of business' relations with the press:

Research & Forecasts Inc. conducted a survey for the American Management Association which illustrates the confusion existing between executives



and the media.

The survey gathered the opinions of chief executive officers, public relations directors and business reporters.

Some 36% of the business journalists think executives "often lie" to reporters. While only 7% of the public relations directors think so. Similar 71% of the executives polled consider themselves "usually accessible" to the media, but only 27% of the reporters think executives are this easy to reach. . . Some 25% of the PR directors think they are "very open" in discussing sensitive issues with the press. Exactly 2% of the journalists agree. . .

Some 35% of the PR directors think that when a reporter calls an executive for information, he already has a 'slant' on the planned story. About 20% of the reporters agree. . .

But 83% of the PR directors think sloppiness is a greater cause of inaccurate stories than bias. Nearly as many (82%) believe that reporters don't research their topics thoroughly -and 64% of the reporters agree.

Some 73% of the executives polled believe that fewer than half of the reporters understand the subject they are writing about. Some 38% of the executives say reporters should know more about finance. Only 1% want them to know more about ecology, however.

But in one area, the reporters get lower marks from themselves than from the companies. About 6% of the PR directors say reporters are "dishonest about their intentions when interviewing business people" -and 14% of the reporters agree. (*Ricklefs Wall Street Journal* 1)

Even though media relations is still viewed as far from harmonious, editors are willing to work with business, provided

surprising things. Both sides seem to agree that business is not that it realizes the needs that the press has. Frederick Andrews, especially open with the media, (75% business vs 85% media) the business and finance editor of the The New York Times More openness to scrutiny on the part of business, more trust offers his advice to Public Relations executives who want to building trust from the press and organizations seems to be the right know how to better relate to editors. Andrews who was interviewed by Randall Poe, The Conference Board's director of communications, had this to say in the Public Relations Quarterly:

The most effective public relations departments are those that can put the right people in contact, even when there is conflict. I have no doubt that PR people are working for their clients and not for us, but even in difficult situations, I don't think it's terribly useful or beneficial to stonewall or turn away inquiries. I think that large organizations in our society are expected to go about their business in ways that can stand public scrutiny, and that they will be better off addressing this public concern in some intelligent and organized way. (Public Relations Quarterly 8)

Although corporations may like to complain about a liberal anti-business bias, the Ricket's survey this reveals that they don't really believe it. Their real complaints have to do with reporter's sloppiness or lack of knowledge about business' operations.

Ricket's Wall Street Journal survey reveals some



surprising things. Both sides seem to agree that business is not especially open with the media, (75% business vs 98% media). More openness to scrutiny on the part of business, more trust building from the press and organizations seems to be the right direction to head in to ease tensions.

Dealing with the real causes of poor media/business relations is all the more important now that the public is becoming more curious about how organizations are accountable to their publics.

One positive step towards promoting ongoing communication between business and the media is to establish a bi-partisan task force to report on business/press relations and offer suggestions for improvement.

Considering the preceding articles and my own research and observation, its clear to me that relations between business and the media need a lot of improvement. Organizations have much to gain by initiating positive changes in the way it approaches and deals with the media. They can expect more accurate coverage of their position and more opportunities for

corporate image enhancement. I propose in the balance of this paper to examine the progression of media relations to the current state of affairs, and offer a positive how to approach to proactive media relations that will produce more effective results for business and the media.

Business is more interested in media relations because of the critical attention that it has received in the press. This trend was propelled by Watergate and the downfall of then president Nixon. The term crisis communication was not part of media relations much before that time. Now crisis communication is the buzzword in public relations.

There are several crisis communications case histories which illustrate how business has learned to relate to the power of the media. The 1982 Tylenol case is one of the most famous examples. Peter Miller, writing in the January 1989 issue of the *Public Relations Quarterly* gives the background:

The 1982 Tylenol poisonings in Chicago illustrate the best way to handling emergency. Here, in an actual example, a lunatic had laced drug capsules with cyanide and several people died. In full view of the public, the manufacturer removed capsules nationwide from store shelves and took back capsules purchased by consumers. The cost to the company may have been as high as \$250 million, a staggering expense. But not much later Tylenol was back in the market as a bestselling painkiller. The public saw that the manufacturer had acted quickly, they it was willing to take tremendous losses to protect its customers and that in a sense it too was a victim. A marketplace catastrophe was turned around, in large measure by the manufacturer's

## CHAPTER II

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willingness to deal openly with a terrible problem and by the widespread sense of trust which followed as a result. (Public Relations Quarterly, Miller 30)

When companies have turned a negative situation to their advantage, most learned the hard way that a bunker mentality not only didn't make the press go away, it did more harm than good. You cannot protect a company's image any longer by stating no comment. When a business representative says nothing to the news media, reporters instinctively sense that he has something to hide. Donald W. Blohowiak describes the reluctance on the part of business leaders to talk to the media as a "Mother Hen" theory of press relations:

Contrary to the gains that apparently would be made by fostering an atmosphere of corporate approachability, many companies employ media relations personnel as tight-lipped palace guards rather than as information facilitators.

For these businesses, good PR is not measured in the column inches or minutes of air time devoted to covering the company or its products, but rather in the lack of same. A good week is one where the company name was successfully kept out of the news. Press curiosity be damned; no news is good news.

This approach gives rise to the "Mother Hen" theory of public relations. "We try to function more as a screen than an open window for access to corporate executives," says a spokesperson for a large manufacturer. . . Companies subscribing to the Mother Hen method instruct their employees to have all press inquiries directed to the public

relations staff (Blohowiak 79).

Some companies have had to learn the hard way that they can't ignore the media, hoping that they will go away. A case in point is the Adolph Coors company, which for years had reflexively said no comment when it came to talking with the media. Fortunately for Coors, they learned that by cooperating they had at least a chance to communicate their side of the story. Blohowiak explains that Coors' recent experience with the press in a situation of crisis changed their whole media relations philosophy:

The Adolph Coors company, a privately and closely held brewer, shunned media contact for years. But in 1982, the company found itself the subject of a boycott movement resulting from serious allegations made by union organizers. The charges against Coors included physical searches of employees, confiscation of workers' personal property, misusing lie detector tests of potential employees, and racial prejudice in hiring. This attracted the attention of CBS's "60 Minutes."

Coors consented to cooperate with a request for an interview because it was confident that a full examination of the company and the charges against it would vindicate the brewer completely. After intense internal preparation, the firm gave the "60 Minutes" team carte blanche access to the company's employees. Mike Wallace, the quintessential TV interrogator, queried employees and executives alike. The resulting story was very pro-Coors, full of



glowing testimony from real working people as to what a wonderful employer the company was. Had Coors not consented to (and not prepared for) the "60 Minutes" interview, Wallace and company may have run a Coors story anyway, but painted a radically different picture, (The once reclusive Golden, Colorado, company ran ads in journalism magazines inviting queries from reporters under headlines like "Silence is no longer Golden" and "We used to say no comment. Now we're asking for your questions." (Blohowiak 100)

Case histories of other companies are a vivid way to teach public relations practitioners, because they give a real life example of how actual companies have dealt rightly or wrongly with the media. Not too many years ago few examples of crisis communication were available but now there are many.

Nowhere have the blunders of poor media relations been more evident than in the area of crisis communication. The reason is that when a crisis hits, even the best prepared company may not be prepared. The full extent of a crisis is usually not apparent in the first crucial hours. Most companies do not have a crisis communication plan. Those companies that do have a plan are at an advantage, but only if they follow their plan. This is made more difficult by the speed at which crisis events occur.

Tom Lester writes in Marketing magazine that confusion is the order of day when a crisis occurs:

Crucial decisions affecting the company may have to be taken there and then. The public, provided by the media with a ringside seat, will judge the managers and their actions as they are presented, not as they really are, and official attitudes will reflect that image. Not surprisingly, PR companies specializing in these affairs find no shortage of customers.

Michael Regester, joint managing director of Charles Barker Traverse-Heal, whose cause celebre was the explosion of a super tanker while unloading at Gulf Oil's Bantry Bay terminal (he was the public affairs manager at the time), points out that in a disaster of that magnitude, the management is simply overwhelmed by the speed of events and the volume of enquiries. It may be called upon to respond to 2000 calls in a day, from the media, concerned relatives, customers, suppliers and officialdom...

Communicating with the media in such circumstances can easily be given a low priority - the management's task is to save lives, etc., and the company image has to have a lower rating.  
(Lester Management 34)

Communicating well during a crisis is difficult for business leaders but it also represents an unprecedented opportunity to project a positive image of the company or control damage to their image precipitated by the crisis. One of the more difficult crisis communication scenarios is a takeover battle in the press. Paul Bernish writing in the July 1989 issue



of Across the Board gives a corporate executive's account of how Kroger stores staved off a hostile takeover attempt. It focuses light upon how the press and business often have a fundamental conflict over how a takeover should be covered in the news media:

In hindsight, I think the coverage of Kroger's restructuring was pretty good. Looking back on the hundreds of clippings we accumulated, I find little to complain about in terms of overall accuracy. Some of the interpretations and analyses, however, we were spectacularly wrong, and some of the "experts" who were quoted about our situation were so consistently off target as to be laughable.

From the outset of the crisis, most analysts were quick to write off our ability to remain a public and independent company...A few months later, when it became clear that we would not be taken over these same analysts were singing our praises as an aggressive retailer with many advantages that would undoubtedly carry us through our restructuring. (*Bernish Across the Board* 25-26)

The media cannot understand a company's perspective as well as the business itself because they are on the outside looking in. What all this means is that corporations need to work with the media, giving them their side of the story ; both the good and the bad. It doesn't do any good to hide unpleasant truth because it will usually come out in a a way less desirable

than the way it could have been presented. Bernish goes on to explain what Kroger learned about relating to the media in a crisis:

One thing about a takeover, it dramatizes the fundamental clash between the press and business. Reporters are attempting to cover an extremely complicated story while the corporation is trying very hard to manage the flow of information. Let's not kid ourselves: This is a real conflict. A threatened takeover is a crisis for the targeted company. In our case, we were fighting for our very existence as a public corporation. As a result, once Kroger was perceived to be "in play", we put into effect a specific game plan--one that included extensive communications component--and for the next two months we stuck to it . . . normally responsive companies--as I like to think Kroger is most of the time--tend to clam up until the crisis passes . . .

It was essential for us to keep reminding everyone--the media included--that the broad scope of our plan was the logical outgrowth of strategies we had been following for at least the past two years. (*Bernish Across the Board* 26-27)

Two companies that approached the media differently in the midst of a crisis are Exxon and Ashland Oil companies. In both companies' case each was culpable, but rather the way they shared the unpleasant facts determined how intact their corporate images came through the crisis. One factor in hindering better media relations is that a company's legal



council are likely to tell leaders to clam up and shun any liability. The question becomes to whom does a CEO listen, how quickly and well he communicates is of critical importance.

Progressive organizations communicate well--with their employees, shareholders, managers, customers, vendors, the press, and their communities. Some have learned the hard way--when a crisis makes good communications essential, or when a poor public image proves that they are not doing it well. Ashland Oil and Dow Chemical are examples of how to cooperate with the media during a crisis, but Exxon is not. Both Ashland and Dow chose to confess their mistakes and, in effect, ask for public forgiveness. Because of this, they both dramatically boosted their images. Jeani Nelson-Herchler writes in the April 16th issue of Industry Week comparing how Exxon and Ashland differed in handling their problems:

Why did Exxon fail and Ashland triumph in the arena of public opinion? It was not because Ashland was blameless. In fact, "we admitted some embarrassing facts," concedes Dan Lacy, vice president of corporate communications. For example, Mr. Lacy says, the company had to publicly



acknowledge that it did not have written confirmation of all the permits before construction of the ruptured tank began, that normal welding practices were not followed, and that the tank was not subjected to a full hydrostatic test in accordance with current American Petroleum Institute standards.

It was initially humiliating. But Mr. Hall's decision to publicly acknowledge all mistakes-as soon as they became known to management-was a major key to Ashland's public relations triumph. "What we didn't want to happen was for some outside investigation to reveal unpleasant information," says Mr. Lacy. "Then, charges of cover-up could undermine a company's credibility overnight."

By being proactive in admitting mistakes, the company was able to convey "the genuine concern of Ashland's management," believes Mr. Lacy. "As a result, much of the natural public anger and frustration was dissipated..." The cornerstone of all Ashland's successes--in legal communications, and crisis management--was the immediate decision by top management to be open and to accept responsibility for the spill, says Mr. Lacy. (*Nelson-Herchler Industry Week* 21-22)

The media holds up Exxon's chairman Lawrence G. Rawl, as the classic example of how not to handle a crisis. Exxon's chairman did not accept responsibility; and even more damaging than Exxon's verbal stonewalling was their delaying an interminably long time before starting a cleanup. For Exxon, the tarnished reputation persists to this day, even after spending billions on trying to clean up the spill.

For an industry spokesman to say they're sorry is not

necessarily an invitation for lawsuits. Still, most lawyers would recommend against admitting fault for fear of an avalanche of litigation. Ms. Nelson-Herchler rounds out Mr. Hall's comments on the more forthcoming approach of Ashland by saying:

As might be expected, Ashland's lawyers advised against admitting any mistakes. After all, the press at that point was saying that millions of people had been affected by the spill, and God only knew if that would translate into millions of claims and lawsuits.

But, after gathering information for about 60 hours, Mr. Hall believed he had to be candid about the company's mistakes and that "it was only right" to say he was sorry. "I'd like to apologize to all of you, as citizens of Pittsburgh, for the inconvenience we've caused you," the chairman humbly said in his soft Southern accent in opening several public talks.

In contrast, after its oil spill, Exxon's Mr. Rawl was quoted as saying, "It's not really clear to me why everyone is so angry." (*Nelson-Herchler Industry Week 22*)

Not only oil and chemical companies have the media to contend with in a crisis, but corporations and banks do as well. Although at first glance their problems may not seem as dramatic as a chemical spill would be, a crisis can effect stock prices and consumer confidence in disastrous ways.

As an industry, banks demonstrate their aloofness too



often by stonewalling the press, but that approach will not make the press go away as Michael Stedman advises in his article entitled "Stonewall or Stroke the Press? in the March 1988 issue of Bankers Monthly:

For too many bank CEOs, crisis management - the thoughtful and responsible supervision of an unexpected or developing problem with urgent proportions - is an art form beyond their capacity to appreciate.

Allan Cox, author of *Inside Corporate America* and head of an executive development firm in Chicago, attributes the way several of the more well-publicized bank crises have been handled.

"People stonewall, thinking the bad news will pass," he said. Since the public expects answers in crises, "I didn't know" is unacceptable. Under fire, a CEO might do better to say, "This was my decision. Perhaps a mistake was made but I entered into it sincerely." Whenever you make a fortress of yourself you make an attack inevitable," Cox added. (Stedman Bankers Monthly 67-68)

Depositors and investors have an obvious interest in knowing what direction their bank is headed but reporters want a story and if they are treated badly or lied to by financial institutions they can and will retaliate. Stedman goes on to relate how journalists react to stonewalling and what the results can be:

Journalists are especially incensed at those who conceal the facts of a public relations emergency.

Perhaps part of the problem is that many bank CEOs and chairmen don't have a fully developed understanding of where operating responsibility becomes synonymous with public relations policy.

Bill Zimmerman, an editor of a New York newspaper, was clear on the issue. "It always hurts when a bank doesn't come right out in the early stages of a crisis and tell its own story. It ends up being very damaging since reporters will be forced to go to outside sources to file their stories, disgruntled employees or customers, competitors and regulators," Zimmerman explained. (*Stedman Bankers Monthly* 68)

Some of the most influential writers in the field of media relations are Michael Stedman, Frank Seitel, James Grunig, Donald Blohowiak, and James Robinson. Michael Stedman and James Grunig's writings were the most useful to this study. Stedman has talked to many reporters and shares his insights gained from gathering the news media opinions on how to improve media relations. James Grunig's writings were very helpful because he has through extensive research identified some very important emerging trends that will effect future media relations by asking the question is there really a mass media anymore?

Some emerging trends that I discovered in my study were the dawning of the spin doctors; academic preparation for new



MBA's in how to face the media, and approaching editorial boards; advocacy advertising; and how corporate communication is shifting to new mediums to reach the public.

The term spin doctor is a relatively new term and refers to political or business spokespersons putting their own spin or version of how an event should be interpreted before the media has the chance to define the issue. Former President Reagan's public relations operatives were masters at it. David Shaw of the Los Angeles Times relates how the new "spin doctors" work when called to control damage:

When a client comes to John Scanlon's New York office wondering how to put a favorable "spin" on media coverage of a cause or company, Scanlon often starts with a simple exercise.

"I always try to write the reporter's lead," Scanlon says. "I actually sit down and . . . try to write the first two or three paragraphs, and then I . . . try to convince . . . (the reporter) that, in fact, that is the story." (Shaw Los Angeles Times 24)

A new proactive approach to improving executive media relations skills is training MBA's students for prime time. Allen Shaw illustrates how Wharton School of Business is preparing students to face the camera:

"Our primary concern is to get our students polished," says Dave Wolford, assistant director of communications programs at the Wharton School of Business. "If you make a mistake in any type of communication encounter, it's noticed. Our job is to teach students how to avoid making those mistakes."

Business professors acknowledge that communicating with the public and media is fast becoming the primary measuring stick by which executives are evaluated - and that many of today's top managers are unprepared. Executives from every level of an organization, they note, are now likely to face-off with print and broadcast journalists many times during their careers: how well an executive handles the media spotlight could very well determine how high he or she climbs on the corporate ladder (*Allen Shaw Public Relations Journal* 29).

Another trend that looks like an end run around editors to get in print is advocacy advertising or "advertorials." Donald Blohowiak calls advocacy advertising *face* advertising because it represents corporations attempts to frame their image or issue the way that they want to. Mobil Oil company has been using advertorials since the oil crisis in the 70's and the attending media criticism over what the media characterized as the immoral profits of the big oil companies. Mobil used the advertorials to take on the media, taking them to task and even attacking the media through paid full page ads in newspapers



and magazines. Blohowiak says that reporters are not great fans of face advertising though:

What I call *face* advertising is what many people refer to as image or identity promotion. Image to me, connotes something something false or illusory, so I prefer not to use the term. Better to think in terms such as reputation or public perception. Face ads promote the corporation as a folksy corporate citizen, a great place to work, a concerned environmentalist, or as possessing other self-aggrandizing characteristics.

Critics of this kind of advertising are not hard to find. *Advertising Age* suggests that many corporate image ads look as if they're created by "refugees from some positive mental attitude symposium."

E.F. Hutton, after admitting it committed felonies in the way it managed its money, used face advertising to say thank you to its customers and employees for their loyalty during the "trying times of these past few weeks." The full page ads addressed the company's skeptics in both the public and private sectors by saying, "If you judge us on our merits, we are confident of your conclusions." (Blohowiak 174)

Advertorials are not welcome from a journalist's point of view though. Joel Pomerantz writes in the Winter 1990 issue of the Public Relations Quarterly that journalists see advertorials as an encroachment on their territory:

The increasing use of so-called advertorials—normally prepared by a public relations specialist—is another irritant that sets journalists to grumbling. They are seen as devious attempts to encroach on



newsman's terrain by blunting the reader's ability to distinguish between bona fide editorial matter and a public relations message. Although, from a client's perspective, they can be useful in counteracting unfair and misleading reportage, they are not all helpful in changing media attitudes. (*Pomerantz Public Relations Quarterly* 13)

Another emerging trend in media relations is approaching and working with newspaper editorial boards. An editorial board is made up of the senior editors and contrary to popular opinion are generally receptive to hearing from companies that have a well researched opinion to express.

James Caudill writes in the March 1989 issue of the Public Relations Journal that editorial boards are great to work with once you know how:

To many public relations practitioners, editorial boards represent a "great unknown..." Actually, influencing editorial boards is not as difficult as it might seem. These boards generally consist of the publisher, the senior editors (including the editorial page editor, if the paper is large enough to have one), and other editors who are called in when their expertise is wanted...Contrary to the normal portrayal of the practitioner-journalist relationship, the editorial page is one section of the newspaper that actively seeks assistance and insights from public relations professionals. Most editorial boards want to hear from experts and those involved in issues, and they depend on public relations people to help identify issues and arrange for people to share ideas.

They think of PR personnel as an issues "Yellow Pages." Editorial boards recognize that, whenever a controversy erupts, there are at least two sides to the story. Because most publishers and editors take their responsibilities very seriously, they want to hear from everyone before advocating a position...What editorial boards definitely *don't* want is to meet with "a dynamic company that will change the face of America by introducing Product X" (*Caudill Public Relations Journal* 31).

The last emerging trend that I uncovered was that of Grunig's theory that the mass media may not be truly reaching the masses now. He goes on to propose that a corporation's publics may be communicated in a more efficient way by targeting them through specialized media or personally.

One of the reasons why Grunig believes media relations is due to change is that public relations is becoming a more sophisticated profession. He feels this is being fueled by rapid advances in academic theory and research. Grunig proposes a situational approach to communicating with the public. He relates that there is really is not a single public per se any longer. The population is segmented by many more social factors than has been the case in American history. The recent science of Demographics is devoted to discovering and mapping



out how the public is segmented into various interest groups. All of this means that the public is less homogenous than ever before. James Grunig explains that the practice of media relations has to change because the public has changed:

Recent theory suggests that practitioners should rely less on the mass media than they have in the past. At the same time, it shows that public relations should have an interactive rather than a manipulative relationship with the media—a relationship that would drastically change and minimize the effect of public relations on the media...In the early years of public relations, practitioners strived nearly exclusively to get attention in the mass media for the organizations they represented. Most would have described their target audience as a mass audience or a general public. Competition for space in the media was intense, and journalists experienced many abuses from public relations people. Yet many of these practitioners have been and continue to be successful; several studies done in the 1960's and '70's showed, for example, that about half of the content of the average newspaper comes from public relations sources (Cutlip, 1976, pp. 19-21). (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 18-19)

Grunig's situational theory of publics will defuse much of the tension now in media relations since using better research and working through specialized media will lessen the pressure for space in the present mass media.

E.W. Brody, writing in the Summer issue of the Public



E.W. Brody, writing in the Summer issue of the Public Relations Quarterly, extends Grunig's discussion that media relations is about to undergo a major change in the way it relates to the mass media:

We live in the midst of a communication revolution of a magnitude that defies comprehension. There is accelerating deterioration in the efficiency of mass media...

What changing conditions? Public relations traditionally has been focused on mass communication. Practitioners' primary responsibility has been to induce behavioral change by transmitting information through mass media serving a homogenous society.

Unfortunately, neither the monogenous society nor the mass media now exist. Society has fragmented into a host of special interest groups. Media executives intent on their own survival have responded by reshaping channels of mass communication. Broadcasting has been supplanted by narrowcasting. Metropolitan, general interest newspapers have become specialized in local news. Those seeking national, international or financial information must turn to *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, or *Wall Street Journal* instead of or in addition to once-dominant dailies . . .

As the words "mass media" increasingly tend to become an oxymoron, traditional public relations strategies will play diminishing roles in organizations' communication programs. With change inevitable, interpersonal, behavioral and environmental communication become logical extensions of public relations practice. (*Brody Public Relations Quarterly* 20)

### CHAPTER III

Two of the most important authors I surveyed were James Grunig and James Robinson. Grunig is important and notable both because he uses reliable methods of research and because he postulates a visionary proposal for change in media relations based on the theory that the mass media don't reach mass numbers of the public like they once did.

Robinson is the other most important source because he provides the missing perspective of the reporters, editors, and other members of the mass media. He explains their side of the story making vivid the frustrations the media encounter in dealing with public relations representatives.

Robinson gives a psychology of the media that would be helpful to any public relations practitioner. He tells us what we can expect from the media:

**Skepticism:** Rather than overtly displaying political or ideological bias, reporters approach business and government with an attitude of skepticism and irreverence.

**Arrogance:** Many reporters believe they are on a daily mission to ferret out what they consider the objective truth in a world where all viewpoints except theirs are subjective.

**Strain:** Reporters usually are under great pressure.



Pressure to meet a deadline. Pressure to get the facts straight. In most cases, they will not be experts on the subjects at hand

**Competitiveness:** Many reporters are greatly influenced by their peers. They fear missing a story that everyone else is writing about, yet at the same time they dream of discovering a story that no one else has found.

**Ambition:** Visions of fame and fortune affect most of us-so too with reporters. In the aftermath of Watergate, journalism schools were flooded with would-be Woodwards and Bernsteins, all bent on uncovering the next great scandal. (Robinson 23-24)

Robinson also examines the issue of whether the news media is biased and he asserts that is indeed the case and cites a survey done in 1981:

I'm surprised there is any debate at all about whether the press is biased. While there is a healthy diversity of media throughout our country, media opinion-makers do, in general, inhabit the left side of the political spectrum.

Of the many studies of the press that have been conducted, one of the most frequently cited is that of S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman. In 1981, they surveyed 240 leading journalists, along with middle-and upper-level news executives. Their conclusions are clear:

*We found that the media elite does have a more liberal and cosmopolitan social outlook than either business leaders or the general public. On economic issues, they are well to the left of businessmen. They are also suspicious of and hostile toward business, are far more critical of American institutions, and are much more sympathetic to the 'new morality' that developed in the 1960's.*

The survey draws this picture of the handful of people who decide what is news and how it will be portrayed:

- 95% are white in 1964
  - 79% are male Humphrey in 1968
  - 93% are college graduates McGovern in 1972
  - 46% earn over \$50,000 in 1976
  - 54% say they are liberal
  - 50% have no religion
  - 84% voted for Johnson
  - 87% voted for
  - 81% voted for
  - 81% voted for Carter
- (Robinson 20-21)

While the Lichter and Rothman survey seems to point toward a *left* political persuasion for journalists, it should not be forgotten that only a computer records information objectively. A reporter isn't so much a sponge that soaks up the stream of current events as a piece of cheesecloth through which the stream flows invariably filtering and editing the news.

James E. Grunig is the most important author in the area of media relations because he has through extensive research identified a trend that he believes will revolutionize media relations. Mr. Grunig has been conducting his research over the past 20 years. Grunig and his five colleagues have researched organizational effectiveness through a literature review. The



literature review he and his associates conducted was for the IABC International Association of Business Communicators *excellence* project. The colleagues were David Dozier of San Diego University; William P. Ehling of Syracuse University; Larissa A. Grunig of the University of Maryland; Fred Repper, a retired vice president of public relations for Gulf States Utilities; and Jon White of the Cranfield School of Management.

A central focus of Grunig's theory is on what he call the strategic theory of publics:

The strategic approach to public relations shows, in contrast, that there is seldom a good reason for an organization to communicate with a mass audience. Only when absolutely no research is available to segment the mass audience into publics would the practitioner resort to *mass* communication rather than communication with *publics* (Grunig, 1989a). A practitioner who has done formative research to identify publics could use that research to choose specialized media, other specialized channels, or interpersonal communication to communicate with strategic publics. The result is less pressure for space in the mass media and less influence on the media.

(*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 19)

Mr. Grunig makes a distinction between active and passive publics,

a characteristic that takes into account that some segments of the public could care less about a particular issue while another group will feel strongly enough about it to get involved personally.

Active publics are the opinion leaders on an issue. They define what issues are important for organizations and threaten their autonomy. Passive publics may hear about an issue but they may not understand the implications or care one way or the other. Grunig stresses that the active publics are the ones that organizations should direct their messages to:

The situational theory of publics implies that only the unsophisticated public relations practitioner would try to communicate with active publics through the mass media. Mass audiences do have segments embedded in them that communicate actively, and messages directed at an unsegmented population may reach the active segments. In general, however, mass audiences consist primarily of what I have called apathetic publics (e.g., Grunig, 1983)-the most passive and unresponsive publics. (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 19)

Grunig goes on to describe how in a strategic public relations model organizations do not need to depend so much on the mass media for communicating their message:

Although organizations and their public relations



practitioners do want to influence the culture of which they are a part, they are much more concerned with publics that create problems for them now. The conclusion: Strategic public relations does not need the media so much as traditional public relations, and the pressures of public relations on the media should decline...

I believe that much of the practice of public relations has been built on a set of presuppositions that has made it less effective than it could be, has led to unrealistic expectations for the effect of public relations, and has limited its value to the organization it serves. In addition, the unrealistic expectations often have forced practitioners to pressure and to abuse the media system. (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 20)

What Grunig proposes as a theory is workable, but much depends on how organizations will respond. Are they prepared and do they have public relations personnel that have trained themselves academically to excel at communicating to the new multifaceted publics. For organizations to succeed in communicating effectively with segmented publics, they will have to be sophisticated enough to do the research to know how to communicate well and which segments to target and who cares about what. Grunig illustrates how building in excellence in public relations will change not only how

organizations communicate but also lessen their dependence on a less efficient mass media:

Many public relations practitioners believe that the fate of their organizations and of their careers "live and die with the media." That perceived life-and-death situation leads many practitioners to take desperate means to control what and how the media report about their organizations. Ironically, the better public relations practice becomes, the less public relations practitioners will need the media. If they practice public relations strategically, they will communicate with key publics about problems and relationships long before they become issues that interest the media. The final irony, therefore, is that excellent public relations needs the media less than does poor public relations and as organizations depend less on the media the better their relationship with the media will become. (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 23)

Other than James Grunig, all other research sources used their own experiences in the media or interviews with members of both business and the media to put their articles together.



## CHAPTERS IV & V

The results of my study on how to improve media relations were that in order to propose a solution one has to see clearly the positions of both corporations and the media. As with any problem there are two sides of an issue and before meaningful solutions can be offered the full scope of the issue has to be surveyed.

From the press' perspective they grudgingly admit that they benefit from the information and material from public relations practitioners but they find the manipulative methods of PR people rub them the wrong way. The savvy media relations representative of any organization would be wise to listen to what the media is saying about the problems in press relations today as well as heed their advice for improvement. One article that I discovered that portrays the dilemma faced by reporters when dealing with organizations was an article by Charles Honaker in the March 1989 issue of Association Management, entitled *Bad News for News Releases*, explains why most news releases end up in the round file and what

communications professionals can do about it:

I am convinced 90 percent of all releases are not used. Here are a dozen deadly sins that doom releases to my round file.

1. Out-of-date mailing lists. I discard unopened all releases addressed to long-gone staff. One organization still sends releases to the attention of a former editor who is now a New York City taxi driver.

2. A request for a tear sheet and/or return of photos accompanies the release. Why should I have to do extra work for covering their news?

3. The release says "For Immediate Release" but is undated, with an announcement of something said or done "today."

4. Failure to differentiate between a country weekly and a metro daily. Small local papers want dean's lists, the association's officers, and the like - big dailies generally don't.

5. Missing basic information. For example: No telephone number or name to contact; release emanates from an association for a particular industry but omits a boilerplate identification of the constituency and its composition; a press conference is scheduled but the site or date is not included.

6. Releases that are too long. One page is best. A two-page release must be airtight, with a lead that has a very low fog index. Adding a punchy, clear headline can grab attention.

7. Downright illiterate. How can I cover your story if you can't communicate clearly what it is?

8. Cutesy leads. Just present the facts, using standard news story criteria: the five W's (who, what, when, where, and why).

9. Sending the same release 10 times to 5 different people at the same publication. Find out who your contact should be and direct the news to that person.

10. Blatantly promotional pitches for publicity in



lieu of paid advertising.

11. Releases that arrive after the embargo (release) date and/or the event.

12. Releases with busy, fancy printing, die-cut paper, or other expensive gimmicks. Let your information sell itself. (Honaker Association Management 87-88)

Honaker and other journalists agree that some press releases are tarnished by all or most of these problems. Honaker goes to point out that another more significant problem with news releases is the sheer number of them. With many reporters and editors drowning in mountains of press releases and press kits, more often than not the vast majority end up being thrown away. Obviously quantity does not mean quality.

There wouldn't be such a barrage of releases if public relations people were practicing strategic public relations; those designed to communicate to narrowly focused active publics who need to hear the organizations message the most. A refrain I heard again and again in my reading was that journalists decry the absence of local angles, rail at the inaccuracies and poor writing, and contend that this avalanche of babble serves to either drastically reduce, or even eliminate

the chance of a good release being used.

PR agencies came under especially heavy fire for shoveling out releases and press kits on behalf of clients. A familiar complaint was often the PR agency didn't know their clients business well and didn't tell their client what they should reasonably expect from a media relations campaign:

Merit Kimball, a former PR person who defected to journalism, is now an editor with *Healthweek* newspaper in Washington, D.C... Kimball loathes the releases and blames the ineptness of PR agencies. Not only are their releases shallow and promotional of products in general, she says, but the agency staffers are notoriously derelict in responding to a reporter's request to interview an expert.

Says an editor at the *Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram*, California: "I have the impression most press releases are written (by PR agencies) for clients and not for reporters. This is a dumb practice because it lessens the effectiveness of PR people in dealing with news people."

This is the heart of the problem. Public relations is still too much press agentry and puffery.

Jon Van, a *Chicago Tribune* medical writer, says he just wants "straightforward releases-not fancy press kits."

These writers and editors, representing the majority viewpoint among journalists, all stress the importance of personal contact. During 16 years as director of communications for a medical association in Chicago, I was successful in booking scores of members on talk shows, national television (one on the Donahue Show), and radio, and the coverage of our meetings was excellent... I learned



very early that mass mailing of fat kits was a waste of money. It is far cheaper and more rewarding to place a story on the Associated Press wire through discussions with a reporter than to mail 1,000 releases nationwide and have them all end up as rubbish. (*Honaker Association Management* 88)

What Honaker and other journalists seem to be saying is that they might use the news releases sent to them more often if they were well written, and most of all, relevant to the media's audience. Honaker interviewed Beverly Lawrence of the Washington Post and she offered constructive guidelines for preparing news releases that have a good chance of being used by reporters. Quoting Ms. Lawrence Honaker shares her advice:

The best releases are "timely and of news value, tied to larger issues, such as the deficit and the environment...explain the timeliness," Lawrence explains.

Lawrence welcomes backgrounders and releases of substance and quality, but also seeks personal contact, via a breakfast or lunch, and the open-ended rapport this provides. (*Honaker Association Management* 88)

Honaker closes out his advice on how public relations personnel can avoid having their prized news releases end up in the round file by urging them to understand the media person and outlet that they are sending their release to:

Here are few guidelines:

1. Know the media. Before you contact an editor, be sure you read the publication. Tailoring your release to the food editor or to the aviation editor, for example, with knowledge of his or her style and special interests, will increase chances for usage.
2. Prepare fact sheets instead of releases.
3. Keep your mailing lists up to date. Send the release to the right person. (*Honaker Association Management* 89)

Another author who has interviewed influential journalists is Michelle LoDestro. Writing in the July 1990 issue of *IABC Communication World*, LoDestro describes how editors put the fear of God in publicists and what PR people can do about it:

Knowing what it is you do for a living is critical in getting editors' attention. Frederick Andrews of the *New York Times* describes publicists as "facilitators who put reporters and sources together. Sheila McCann, senior vice president for Janet Diederichs & Associates, Chicago, ILL., agrees: "The role of publicist is that of a liaison between the client and the media. More than just selling an idea, you are building a relationship."

Michael Klepper who now owns his own New York, N.Y. public relations agency and is author of "Getting Your Message Out-How to Get, Use and Survive Radio and Television Air Time" says, "I think what started me out in public relations was that I was the recipient of pitch letters that were self-serving and poorly written. No matter who the editor is, less is more . . .

Klepper says, "The pitch letter should be newsy, not groveling. It shouldn't read 'respectfully



submitted' or 'I need this one' or 'my client is breathing heavy.' You are never asking for a favor, you are submitting good topical, newsworthy material that is directed to a decision-maker." Follow up the letter of equal caliber. (*LoDestro Communication World* 17-18)

Once a public relations representative does get to talk to a reporter he or she needs to have something knowledgeable to talk about. One of the greatest turnoffs to a journalist is finding out that the publicist doesn't know his client well or the subject that they want the reporter to publish.

One truth that comes out of the reading available on the subject of media relations is that, sadly most agency and corporate public relations personnel don't know how to relate to the media. The good news is that by understanding what the press' needs are and what the ingredients of a good news release are you can become effective in media relations.

Ms. LoDestro advises publicists to read, listen and watch the particular media you want coverage in:

Equally important to knowing your subject matter is studying the people and venues who benefit most from it. That means doing your homework...

Gene Honda, assistant program director WLIT-FM radio talk show "Sidelines," says, "I don't care if people listen to our station, but they better know

who *does* listen because that's critical. The Public Service Directors Association publishes listings of radio shows and station formats. That's important for publicists to know. That knowledge catches my attention." Honda compares a misdirected pitch to a record promoter telling him a rap song is perfect for his soft music format. "The promoter's only concern is to get the record played, not understanding at all who we are," he says, "A person who doesn't do their homework and who doesn't know what kind of presentation we do here tells me two things: Someone is not doing their job and some client got cheated." (LoDestro Communications World 18)

The art of media relations is easier to master if you as a publicist are prepared, know the media you're targeting, know what your objective is, and the right person to direct it to. Mustering your confidence before calling the media will help you gain the media's respect and maybe the coverage you want. Realizing that the media need you and the information that you provide go a long way toward alleviating the fear in calling the press. Ms. LoDestro addresses PR stage fright and what editors have to say about it:

Armed with knowledge of your subject, your target media, as well as the rules of professional courtesy, you need only go forth with confidence.

Laurie Scanlon, senior account supervisor in the Travel, Tourism and Entertainment Group at Edelman Public Relations makes talking to the



media a motivating experience. How? Confidence inspires confidence. "Our job as publicists is do everything before we make that call to an editor," she says, "because if you have confidence behind your client and behind your information, you are going to do a great job."

Joe Barr, editor and publisher of *Chicago Advertising & Media*, agrees. "If a person is really nervous to talk to me, then I don't have a great respect for them. I want them to be confident. That means they have a good story to tell. And if they have a good story to tell, I want to hear it."

Media relations is an art never wholly mastered. Here are suggestions to help refine your craft: Abandon hype for objectivity; make resources such as research, expert interviews, photographs, competitive information and quotes readily available; listen carefully; be sensitive to tone; stay relaxed; be creative and be available. (*LoDestro Communications World* 19)

An emerging trend in media relations that I uncovered in my research addresses the problem of how to improve press relations; working with editorial boards. James Caudill, a media relations professional with Ketchum Public Relations in San Francisco, has met with success in working with editorial boards. He has learned that an editorial board is looking for issues to write about and generally are receptive to using your firm as a resource. What editorial boards definitely *don't* want is to meet with "a dynamic company that will change the face of America by introducing Product X."



Contrary to what some PR practitioners might think, the editorial page is one section where their company's opinion on controversial issues would be welcomed as long as it's objective and well researched for accuracy. Caudill explains how he has worked with editorial boards to communicate his clients messages to the public. Writing in the March 1989 issue of the Public Relations Quarterly, Caudill writes that editorial boards can be quite receptive:

Actually, influencing editorial boards is not as difficult as it might seem . . . Contrary to the normal portrayal of the practitioner-journalist relationship, the editorial page is one section of the newspaper that actively seeks assistance and insights from public relations professionals . . .

Editorial boards recognize that, whenever a controversy erupts, there are at least two sides to the story. Because most publishers and editors take their responsibilities very seriously, they want to hear from everyone before advocating a position. (*Caudill Public Relations Journal* 31)

Getting your message across by means of a newspaper editorial, is a proactive media relations approach that will accomplish several key objectives of PR operatives, including publicity, putting your "spin" on the story, and management of sensitive public issues by giving your version of the story before detractors do.



Another factor to consider about communicating through an editorial board is the credibility that is built into editorials. The smart organizational communicator will also send background information that will help the editors bone up on the issue before a meeting takes place. A way to gain their trust is to include insights from the opposition and counter-arguments. This strategy will enhance your credibility immeasurably with the editors. Mr. Caudill finishes his article by giving the mechanics of setting up and conducting a meeting with an editorial board:

Before ever setting foot inside the newspaper's office, you should have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish with the meeting. Is it to gain an editorial supporting your cause? To balance negative views of your company by demonstrating that you are accessible, concerned, and honest? To put your company and its executives on the paper's list of frequently-contacted expert resources? . . .

Because editorial boards hear so many things from so many people, it's critical that you keep your message down to three or four key points. Repeat these points in different ways throughout your presentation to be sure the message sticks.

Visual aids always help the presentation. These can include overheads, boards, charts, maps, and the like. Keep these aids simple, though. You don't want them to distract from your presentation, and you also don't want to come across too slick and corporate-minded...

The best time to meet with an editorial board is long before the editors come looking for you. Once you get on the "wrong side" of a story, one editor noted recently, it's tough to get back to neutral. Public relations means understanding the environment and your organization's role in it. It's critical to get in front of the issue before it becomes one (*Caudill Public Relations Journal* 32).

A reality and a constraint to improving relations between business and the media is the reluctance that most executives have when interviewing with the media. Former president Reagan, the great communicator, displayed a reluctance to meet the media but because of his position and power he was able to speak out on the issues and influence the masses by manipulating the forum for communication. Reagan structured news conferences in such a way that he could frame an issue the way that he wanted. He was also well prepared, although toward the end of his presidency he faltered a bit in front of the cameras. The lesson here is that even in the most hostile environment you can get across your message if you make yourself available to the media, are committed to telling the ugly truth at the appropriate time, and roll with the punches that reporters will send your way.



As I discovered through my literature review, business's reluctance to talk to the press may be on the advice of their corporate legal council. Lawyers and public relations spokespersons usually differ greatly in how they see communication strategy during a company crisis. Some executives have learned the hard way that no comment doesn't mean there will no discussion of the issues. Michael Stedman, one of the more knowledgeable writers that I surveyed, writes in the March 1988 issue of Bankers Monthly

that in one case study, listening to the lawyers was the wrong move:

Many observers still recall the days in 1985 when Boston's former First National Bank was led by chairman and then CEO William L. Brown into the night horrors of bank public relations - an indictment. Bad enough that the Treasury and Justice Departments were pressing criminal charges for failure to report large cash transactions, but Treasury official John M. Walker, Jr., was testifying before a congressional hearing that when the bank accepted \$500 million in small bills it should have known that it was actively involved in "the laundering of drug money."... Rather than facing the situation head-on and preempting the government's cause, Brown balked. His press release, drafted by the bank's lawyers, argued hollowly that the Bank Secrecy Act does not require banks to invade their customers' privacy. The bank was fined \$500,000... reporter Chris Chipello writes: "The publicity and the bank's combative and unapologetic handling of the problem tarnished its reputation." To be fair to Brown, he was in uncharted territory

as the first banker indicted for currency transaction violations. He relied on his attorneys and excluded the public relations office. After all, this was an indictment... "If we've learned something, it is that if you're going to avoid crises in the future, you've got to make your communicators part of the process and keep them up to speed," he said (*Stedman Bankers Monthly* 69-70).

In all fairness to the executive who has been burned in a media interview, sometimes the press will admit savaging the reputation of a company, but for good reason they contend. Continental Illinois Bank was in a similar crisis as First National-Boston. Stedman quotes an officer responsible for investor relations, at a National Investor Relations Institute luncheon who blames the management of Continental Illinois Bank for the run on Continental and its subsequent nationalization.:

"We had pleaded with the bank's top management to open up to the media, but the bank was so old, so prominent, so important, I guess they felt we were above it. So when the story broke, the press relished the chance to savage the bank. But by then there was no solution. The problem was historic. We weren't there when they came calling in the past; likewise, when we knocked on their door for understanding and sympathy, the shoe was on the other foot...and they kicked us in a soft spot." (*Stedman Bankers Monthly* 70)

More times than business leaders would be willing



to admit, they and their organization have blown it. Some leaders think they can control the damage done or keep the unpleasant truth out of the media. The textbook definition of public relations is *the truth well told* but what a burden on practitioners, when they are charged to hoodwink the media or at least conceal the facts. Occasionally the media is right on target in blasting a company that has been guilty of wrongdoing. Stedman quotes a well respected leader of one of America's largest public relations firms that it's to a company's advantage to fess up, and as early as possible to lessen the damage:

Richard E. Cheney, chairman of Hill & Knowlton, the country's largest public relations firm, and one of the most knowledgeable bank public relations experts in America, gave this prescription to bank CEOs who wish to avoid making bad problems worse. "First the CEO and chairman have to face facts, then address those facts. Nobody can expect public relations to put a gloss on facts or change them," Cheney counseled. Public relations, he explained, must address the facts, and for that there has to be a total fact-finding mission: there has to be a conscientious, responsible effort made to address the facts. Then the besieged bank must explain why and how it acted responsibly.

"A lot people say, 'The press misunderstands us.' But they should be asking, 'Does the press really misunderstand?' A lot of the time the press might understand them only too well," Cheney added (*Stedman Bankers Monthly* 71).

In media relations few activities have to be as carefully thought out and prepared for as an interview with the media. There are many dynamics at work in an interview, especially if it is before a live television camera.

A reporter is looking for something newsworthy in the interview while a company CEO or spokesman will be wanting to communicate his message within its own context-- the way he sees the issue. The problem for the unsophisticated executive is that they have been trained to explain all the methodical steps that they have taken before stating their conclusion: the bottom line. Radio and TV are media that communicate quickly and to the point so as to hold and keep the listener and viewers interest. A broadcast media reporter will want the businessperson to tell him the bottom line first and, if there is time or interest, include the preliminary material. Newspaper reporters are trained to write and structure their story with a technique called the inverted pyramid style. The reason for using this style is to catch and hold the reader's interest by giving them the most important facts "up front" and filling in the



details later. Chester Burger writing in the July 1975 issue of the Harvard Business Review, clarifies how an executive should conduct himself in a press interview:

State the most important facts at the beginning. Years of training and experience, often without conscious thought, have accustomed the typical corporate executive to respond to questions in a particular way. If the executive is asked, "What should we do about our new product?" he will frequently respond along these lines, "We are facing shortages of plastics. And their cost is rising so fast I don't think we can price the product at an attractive level. Moreover, we recommend we don't take any action now to develop the product."

The executive's format lists the facts that lead his final conclusion and recommendation. But such organization of his material will fail when it is used in talking with the news media. There are both psychological and technical reasons why.

Psychologically, we tend to remember most clearly the first thing that is said, not the last. So when you speak to a reporter, you should turn your statement around to begin with the conclusion, "We don't plan to develop the product. We are facing materials shortages. Our costs are going up, and we also have a shortage of skilled labor." In such a reverse format, the most important statement is likely to be best remembered: "We don't plan to develop the new product." (*Burger Harvard Business Review 67*)

Preparation before an interview will help allay the fear that an executive is likely to feel. A public relations practitioner can help the executive better prepare for a press

interview by using a technique that sales trainers use-- mock interviews. In the same way that salespeople are trained how to respond to objections and stalls in trying to close a sale, executives can practice in a mock interview setting . A mock interview will give the company spokesperson the "feel" for an interview, and if made realistic enough give them a chance to answer tough questions before the press arrives. Leonard Silk writes in the December 1988 issue of Business Month that executives need to be fully prepared to deal with the press and gives some sound advice:

How can an executive facing an interview, especially when there is some unfavorable news about his company, best deal with the press? The short answer is to prepare for the interview carefully, thinking through what he'd like to see in print. He may be well advised to write out the questions he can expect to get and his answers to them.

As one who has been on the receiving end of countless interviews, many instructive and valuable and many useless, annoying or worse-and potentially damaging to the interests involved--I would urge the businessman to be as open as possible, and as truthful; rather than lie, it is always possible to say, and have a reporter accept such responses as, "I can't comment on that" or "I'll get back to you on that later."

The businessman inevitably knows a lot more about the matter at hand than the reporter. So the executive should be clear, clear, clear, and not hesitate to declare and explain the obvious-obvious



to him. He should point out the connection between this development and that development, explaining them if they are relevant to story and can help the reporter--and the reader or listener--to avoid misunderstanding. It may not all get in the story, but there is at least a chance that it will if the executive explains it all. And it will enhance his or her credibility . . . don't try to do a "PR" or hype job on the reporter. If he's any good at all, he'll see through it and you will do yourself and your company only harm. You will do much better to tell the truth and not sidestep tough questions. Any experienced reporter will tell you that a company in some kind of trouble will help, not hurt itself by being straight with the press. If the top guy and his spokesman are honest, it will be very disarming. Conversely, nobody--not only reporters but their readers, including other business people--wants to be duped by hype or falsehoods. "Oh, boy," they'll say, "we were really had." And if they were, they'll be looking to get even. (Silk Business Month 96)

The more information that a company can give a reporter before and during an interview the less likely hostile sources or competitors will be consulted. It would be an unreasonable expectation to believe that a reporter will be prepared for the interview. Specifically, he or she may not have much knowledge about your firm. All the more reason to provide the reporter with background information.

Donald Blohowiak, in his book No Comment! An

Executive's Essential Guide to the News Media, writes that another part of interview preparation is knowing the media personalities that you're dealing with and if possible know the individual reporter's style and past performance:

Understand with whom you'll be dealing in your interview. Most media interview requests come on short notice. It's to your advantage to have someone in the organization (or on retainer) who's familiar with the media you may encounter.

You'll want to have the answers to the following important questions. Who is the reporter? Is he or she familiar with the company? What is the reporter's and publication's reputation for fairness? What audience is reached by the publication? Should we expect a cordial or combative session? If the interview will be broadcast, ask: Is it a live broadcast? Will the interview take place before a live audience? Who else will be there? Are they assumed to represent an opposing viewpoint? Know thy potential adversary. (Blohowiak 105)

In a press interview there is an opportunity to achieve more than just coverage of your event or a chance to answer the reporters questions, so that you can give your side of the issue. For the well prepared spokesperson there is a way to proactively set your own communication agenda: put your own spin on the story. Blohowiak goes on to explain how this can be accomplished:



You don't have to restrict yourself to just answering questions. Use questions as an entree to effectively communicate your side of the story. Give reporters the facts you want them to report. Before the interview, write down from one to five positive message points you wish to interject into the conversation. Rank them for priority. Create a few quotable remarks, using illustration, analogies, and witticisms to convey that information. You don't just want to talk in an interview - you want to impress your ideas upon your audience. (Blohowiak 108)

A press conference called to make a new product introduction or to comment on some newsworthy corporate event is easy when compared to the special skills needed to communicate to the media in the midst of a major organizational crisis. The field of crisis communication is the fastest growing in public relations today. The reason that there is so much attention being given to crisis communications is that during a time of trouble there is a lot at stake. An organization stands not only to lose its good name if it is found to be at fault or causes harm, but the crisis could cause the firm to close if consumer confidence is lost. A good corporate image is critical to the survival of the company.

Public relations practitioners that deal with the banking

industry have had many opportunities in the past few years to test their crisis communication mettle. Michael Stedman and Fraser Seitel both have closely observed how to respond to the media when a crisis occurs. Even though Mr. Seitel admits to dreading a media face-off in a crisis, he gives a few of his own ideas for confronting the media in the January 1989 issue of

United States Banker:

**1) Flexibility is the key, particularly when you're on the defensive.** When you're on the wrong end of things, having a crisis plan can be a great help in preparing for the inevitable shock waves. But when a crisis erupts, pandemonium follows. Most of the time, you can't even find the crisis plan, much less follow it. That's when you need to be flexible.

**2) The media may prefer many spokespeople, but provide them with only one voice.** In a crisis, it is best to have one trained spokesperson communicate the official bank position to the public. He or she should be available to one and all in the press. And everyone in the bank should understand that it is that person's job and his or hers alone, to convey information to the outside world.

**3) While the media insist on speaking to the "top man", don't let them.** Sometimes, exposing the chief executive to the media is the worst thing you can do. It is much better to offer a trained spokesperson, knowledgeable and experienced in dealing with the idiosyncrasies of reporters and the media.

**4) Don't always take lawyers' advice.** A lawyer's job is to protect the organization from challenge in



a court of law. But a lawyer's advice often may not be responsive to the likely perception of the institution in another critical court - the "court of public opinion."

**5) Don't wait to respond until you've got all the facts.** If you sit there waiting for all the data, you may still be sitting after the public has branded you "guilty as charged."..If nothing else, a quick response shows the public you are not going to accept the accusations without a fight.

**6) Just because the media ask doesn't mean you have to answer.**

**7) Squawk if you are wronged.** If the media have printed inaccuracies about your bank, blast them back. Call the reporter and demand a correction. Correct the public record. If you don't, the inaccuracy...will become a "media fact."

**8) Don't always keep the media at arm's length.** A journalists's job is to get a story, whatever that entails. Your role is to be an advocate for your bank. As long as you both understand and respect each other's position, cooperating with a journalist can often be in the bank's best interest.

**9) Share information with your allies.** Employees, customers, even stockholders are your allies, and they can be valuable agents in the community to convey your point of view. They've got to be briefed on the issues involved and the bank's position.

**10) Remember you can lose the media battle but still win the longer-term war of retaining your credibility.** Sometimes, if you're wrong, the most sensible thing to do is admit it. (*Seitel United States Banker 53*)

Fraser Seitel's advice on how handle the media in a crisis shows that preparation is the key to confronting the media and winning, or at least not losing.

I am in agreement with one important point that he makes. While no organization cherishes its bouts with reporters, the fact is, business needs the media.

As important as it is to know how to deal successfully with the media during a crisis, it's more productive and longer lasting to build a long term relationship with reporters. The fastest and longest lasting way to develop a relationship with the media is to help reporters with special feature story ideas that you generate and document. I discovered in my reading that one effective way to develop an idea which a reporter or editor will use is to research the literature in the appropriate field to see what is being covered. Then look for an idea that will shed light on the industry, including such aspects as the expected governmental and regulatory response and local issues of significance to the reader.

That approach will signal the fact that you understand what the reporters need and you are a professional who looks beyond your organization's profit agenda to the global scope.

Proactive media relations need to have an up close and



personal aspect to it as well. While it would not be practical or desirable to lunch with every reporter and editor in town, getting to know them personally can be an asset. Like investing money for future emergencies, investing in building constructive relationships with media personnel is a handy resource to be able to draw upon in good times or bad.

While knowing the media and building constructive relationships with reporters is important, a more significant issue is, does a better way to reach the publics that your organization wants to communicate with besides using the mass media exist.

The most significant results of this study on how to improve media relations, is the implications of James Grunig's research on the changing definition of the mass media. Does the mass media reach and communicate on a meaningful level with the public? James Grunig defines what strategic public relations is, how this method puts less pressure on the mass media, and does not need it as much as traditional public relations models that smack of publicism.

James Grunig writes in the Fall 1990 issue of the Public Relations Quarterly that the publics that *count* are the *active* ones:

An organization that practices public relations strategically develops programs to communicate with the publics, both external and internal, that provide the greatest threats to and opportunities for the organization. These strategic publics also can be called "stakeholders."

Strategic public relations is essential because organizations strive for autonomy from publics in their external or internal environment that limit their ability to pursue their goals.

Organizations also try to mobilize publics that support their goals and thus increase their autonomy. Having the autonomy to pursue goals is important to organizations because they are more effective if they are able to choose goals that are appropriate for their environmental and cultural context and help them achieve those goals.

Autonomy, however, is an idealized goal that no organization ever achieves completely. Thus, organizations work toward this idealized goal by *managing their interdependence* with strategic publics. They manage interdependence by building stable, long-term relationships with key publics (Grunig Public Relations Quarterly 18).

Strategic public relations in practice, according to Grunig, is therefore analogous to using a rifle to hit the mark instead of hoping something will hit the target by using a shotgun.



Since most public relations people came from journalism, it is not surprising that they gravitate toward using the mass media to reach their intended audiences. The outcome of this relationship between public relations and journalism is that it continually produces conflict because many PR staffers will do whatever it takes to gain exposure for their client or organization in the media.

In the same article, Grunig calls this model of manipulation of the mass media by PR practitioners as the press agency model:

The *press agency* model applies when a public relations program strives for favorable publicity, especially in the mass media. A program based on the *public information* model uses "journalists in residence" to disseminate relatively objective information through the mass media and controlled media such as newsletters, brochures, and direct mail. Both press agency and public information are one-way models of public relations; they describe communication programs that are not based on research and strategic planning. Press agency usually produces conflict with the media. The public information model usually produces a more harmonious relationship although it, too, tries to control the media agenda through information subsidies as described by Gandy (1982). Press agency and public information also are asymmetrical models: they try to make the organization look good either through propaganda

(press agentry - or by disseminating only favorable information (public information) (Grunig, 1989b).  
(Grunig Public Relations Quarterly 21)

Media relations from the corporate side of the issue is characterized by constant pressure being applied to public relations practitioners to get our message in the media. Practitioners are expected to fill the outdated role of publicist, using hype and hucksterism to produce media clippings. The measure of success for most corporate media relations staffers is how many times they got favorable publicity for the organization and conversely how often they were able to deflect media curiosity or criticism. Thankfully with new research coming to light like Grunig's, that may be changing.

My own experience as manager of public relations for a medium size financial company, taught me how a company can cause its own media and public relations crisis. My former company, American Security Financial, specialized in credit card and catalog sales to consumers who are down on their luck; poor credit risks. I believe that any business can and should learn from other companies mistakes. American Security



Financial's problems were the result of deliberate deception by leadership. I wrote these observations about the external and media communication crisis at American Security Financial for Dr. Michael Kramer's class on *Organizational Communication*:

Another external communication crisis of a different type was already being played out in the National Media as consumer complaints poured in to newspapers carrying "gold card type" ads promising everything from erasing an individuals bad credit to promising major bank cards for everyone, even bad credit history consumers. American Security Financial quickly amassed a large negative file with Better Business Bureaus Nationwide as a result of complaints of hundreds of disillusioned customers who quickly saw the luster leave their "gold cards". Large national newspapers including the Dallas Morning News and the Boston Globe refused to run anymore "gold card type" ads. Major consumer organizations and newspaper columnists began to blast the gold card scams.

Earlier in my tenure at ASF I was told that we should develop a proactive approach in relating to the Media but now with the fallout of misrepresentation just beginning to settle in, a "hold the fort media strategy was demanded by leadership. As the manager of public relations at a firm as trustworthy as the Titanic, it would be tempting to jump ship in a communication crisis of the company's own making.

Initially the company president declared that as a part of our proactive media stance, we should send out positive press releases to newspapers and magazines around the country. When after many attempts there were no takers on that proposition, ASF got some press releases published as a result of virtually buying them. American Security Financial was approached by the National Business



The article specifically uncovers misrepresentation by Opportunity Journal to place a large display ad in the publication for a six month period with the incentive that ASF would receive two free PR articles as part of the deal. So ASF got some favorable publicity, *but at a price..*

A published article that points out deceptive external communications practices on the part of American Security Financial is found in the Thursday, October 11, 1990 article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Epps, 1990):

Postal inspectors are investigating a Maryland Heights company over complaints involving its offers to issue a credit card that can be used only for items in the firm's mail-order catalog.

A civil complaint filed in U.S. District Court by the Postal Inspection Service asked that the company's mail be held up pending an administrative hearing scheduled for Nov. 28.

The company, International Home Shopper, offers a credit card called the IHS Gold Card, authorities said. The card, offered nationwide is good for purchases from the IHS catalog, which offers jewelry, appliances, electronic equipment and other items.

Postal authorities said many Gold Card holders were unaware of the card's limited use. In addition, authorities contended in an administrative complaint filed in May that IHS misrepresented to Gold Card holders that they were qualified to get a Mastercard or Visa credit card.

Lee Harrison, a postal inspector here, said that customers cannot get a major credit card "just on IHS's say-so."

John Weigel, who is named in the complaint filed Tuesday, said he was contesting the allegations.

Weigel said he was chief executive of American Security Financial Corp., which has the same address the complaint show for IHS. "We do feel we are right, or we wouldn't be fighting it," Weigel said. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch)



The article specifically uncovers misrepresentation involving misleading customers that they were pre-qualified to receive an unsecured Visa or Mastercard. Prospective customers might not be as attracted to the "Gold Card" if they knew up-front that they would have to charge and pay off *completely* \$500.00 in merchandise on their Gold Card before they could start the process of qualifying for the major bank credit card. In addition, consumers can't be late even once in paying the \$500.00 requirement or they will have to wait to be eligible again by having at least three months of on-time payment history before they can re-apply.

What was not made clear by American Security Financial was that if a person has been turned down for a Visa because of bad credit history or no credit history then applicants can't qualify for an unsecured major bank card with anyone, including IHS Gold Card (American Security Financial a.k.a. Credit Plus).

Another Post-Dispatch article shows that ASF's external communications problems have netted them imminent litigation. The Wednesday, October 17th issue of the Post-Dispatch carried the news of legal action by the Missouri Attorney General (William Webster) against Tri-State Financial (American Security Financial) (Epps, 1990):

A St. Louis catalog-sales company with more than 200,000 customers was accused Tuesday of luring consumers with false promises to issue Visa and MasterCard credit cards.

Missouri Attorney General William Webster filed a civil fraud suit Tuesday against Tri-State Financial Corp. of Maryland Heights.

The company sells the "IHS Gold Card", a credit card that can only be used to order merchandise from the company's catalogs. The suit was the second legal action taken against the company by government agencies.

U.S. postal inspectors are asking a federal judge to halt the companies mail - a move that Tri-State's attorney say might put the firm out business.

The postal inspectors charged that many people who paid for the IHS Gold Card weren't aware of the card's limited use. The inspectors said customers were falsely led to believe they were eligible for major credit cards.

The IHS Gold Card is marketed across the nation by the company and network of local distributors.

Brochures promise Gold Card customers "Approved credit!!! Regardless of previous credit problems."

The card costs \$79.95. The company promises buyers \$80.00 in credit toward purchases from its catalog, which offers jewelry, electronics and other items.

The company brochure promises customers a pre-approved application for a Visa or MasterCard with no security deposit required - if they buy \$500.00 in goods on their IHS Gold Cards.

Webster said customers never received the promised Visa and Mastercards.

We contend that consumers were misled with false promises of a major credit card," he said. Our investigation indicates the company neither had right to sponsor unsecured Visa and MasterCard credit cards nor did it ever do so."

Some customers who bought the IHS card received a brochure from a New Jersey company called Access Financial Services...

Named as defendants were John L. Weigel, and his wife, Sally Morrisette Weigel, of Chesterfield, owners of the IHS Gold Card operation . . . Weigel referred questions to his lawyer, Richard Greenberg. Greenberg declined comment, explaining that he hadn't seen the suit.

Greenberg said hearings on the postal inspectors' suit have been delayed until next month "with the intention



of working out a resolution..." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

The outcome of the postal inspectors hearing was that there was *no* hearing per se, but American Security Financial, on the advice of corporate council Mr. Greenberg, signed a consent decree prepared by the postal inspector. While not admitting any wrongdoing or guilt, they would agree to cease and desist from the questionable activities that the postal inspector alleged.

The organizational communication breakdown at American Security Financial is not without precedent regarding Mr. Weigel. Approximately three years ago St. Louis TV stations were reporting an exposé on the illegal activities of a certain Second Chance Auto business that attracted the attention of authorities because of a scam involving auto loan "massaging." Specifically, Mr. Weigel was a silent partner and bankroller of the infamous Second Chance Auto loan program. Second ChanceAuto offered to arrange a deal whereby a consumer who was about to have his auto repossessed would allow Second Chance Auto to arrange for another customer to take over the payments and possession of his soon to be repossessed car. All of this was done without the consent or notification of the bank or financial institution that originally financed the loan and had a vital interest in the whereabouts of the auto that they held lien to (Epps, 1990a).

Being a public relations manager at American Security Financial during its crisis was an experience that taught me how *not to* conduct a public relations program. Some companies like ASF have gotten into the throes of a media relations crisis

by their own doing. What Mr. Weigel did was to sabotage any prospect of handling his company's crisis, by not allowing his public relations staff to be involved in the very type of activity where they could be the most help; a crisis. Mr. Weigel's response to the negative publicity and legal proceedings was to let only his lawyers speak to the media. When the media contacted the law firm they were stonewalled and stalled. Stonewalling, in this case, as in most, proved ineffective.

Although Mr. Weigel didn't consult me regarding the company's public relations and legal crisis, he did get advice from all of his top managers that he should admit that there were problems that the company should correct. Instead Mr. Weigel decided to pursue a truly reckless course of action; take on the Attorney General. He tried to hire the services of two top public relations agencies, Hill & Knowlton and another top firm the name of which I was unable to discover. Neither PR firm upon closely examining the facts of the situation decided to take American Security on as a client.



Mr. Weigel's bizarre plan to influence the authorities and the media was to send out a customer newsletter aimed at Missouri customers only. His reasoning was since his legal problems centered around the fraud allegations from the Missouri Attorney General, he only needed to influence Missouri customers. If customers in the show me state could be influenced to think well about ASF, then when the bad news reached them by means of a letter from the Attorney General's office, offering customers a complete refund they wouldn't want to cancel their Credit Plus Card. What Weigel wanted to avoid was having to refund all the money that he had made off sales of the Credit Plus card and catalog. As I learned from first-hand observation this was not the way to practice public relations or deal with the media.

The way ASF's president wanted public and media relations practiced was the press agency style. His ploy to gain employee cooperation was to persuade them that the assistant Attorney General and his competitors were out to get him. He demanded that favorable press releases be sent to publications

nationwide. I learned that good public relations practice is the truth well told, not hoodwinking the public and the media.

One of the most surprising aspects of this study of media relations was that much of the advice meant for business executives who want to prepare for a media interview was so vague and general as to be of little importance. In reality an interview with the media is a very important occasion for a company spokesperson. What is needed is solid battle-tested advice based upon real life situations. One source that had solid advice based on in media interviews was the book No Comment by Donald Blohowiak. Blohowiak is a former journalist familiar with the tactics of reporters. In order for this study to be of the most practical value possible I have included his recommendations for conducting a media interview:

*Show Respect for Your Interviewer.* The very presence of a reporter seated across from your desk or on the other end of the telephone may remind you of your troubles, but don't shoot the messenger. The reporter is doing his job...a favorable impression from your contact with the journalist can help. A negative impression certainly will hurt.

*Resist Temptations to be Overly Familiar with Your Interviewers; Don't Patronize Them.* You may have seen their bylines, pictures, or televised images in your home a million times before, but that doesn't



make them your acquaintance. Rather than addressing your questioner as Dan, Dianne, Tom Barbara, or Peter, respectfully refer to him or her as Mr. or Ms. Jones.

*Don't Insult the Reporter By Questioning His Professionalism.* Do not demand to know all the questions the reporter plans to ask before the start of the interview. Do not ask the journalist to read your quotes back to you. Do not stipulate that you must see the story before it is printed or aired.

*Never Remind the Reporter That Your Company Spends Big Advertising Money with His Publication.* First, the reporter doesn't care; the argument means nothing to him. Second, he probably doesn't like the advertising department guys anyway. And third, you've just implied a threat. When threatened, one's instinct is to retaliate.

*Record the Interview.* Your well-placed trust in the reporter need not be blind faith. It is acceptable for you to record the interview for your reference. This quietly signals your concern for fairness and accuracy to a reporter without being offensive.

*Allow the Reporter to Record the Interview.* The recording should aid the reporter in quoting you accurately, and that of course, serves your best interest.

*Listen Carefully to What You Are Being Asked and Answer with What you Want to Communicate.*

*Keep Your Mind Focused on What Is Actually Being Asked.* Listen to the whole question, really think about it as though you've never heard it before, and then answer.

*If the Interviewer Makes a Mistake in the Premise of His Question, Let Him Finish the Question, and Then Immediately Correct the Error.* If he offers you an incorrect statement- "You must be discouraged by fourth-quarter sales" -clearly and firmly disagree. "No, not at all. We're quite pleased."

*Schedule an Interview to Last No More Than a Half Hour.* You can only stay fresh and alert for so long.

mental threads. If the reporter needs more time, offer to schedule an additional session for another day, or even later that day, but take a break.

*Keep Your Cool.* Even if you're facing the firing squad using the "I'll tell-you" and lay-a-trap interview styles, stay calm and alert. Think your way out of this; don't shout, argue, name call, or punch your way out.

*Redefine the Issues When Your Interviewer Strays into an Area You'd Like to Avoid.*

*Use simple Sentences and Simple Language.*  
(Blohowiak 109, 110, 111, 112, 113)

The essence of what Blohowiak is saying to those who want to be well prepared for a media interview, is that people usually don't remember the specific arguments in an interview. People form an impression and give nearly as much emphasis to how you say something as to what you say. Body language is important because if a spokesman fidgets or squirms during an interview the viewers may feel that he has something to hide.

From my research I've learned that the way to improve media relations is to: personalize the relationship between PR practitioners and the media, redefine who strategic publics are, and use the most effective mode (mass media or other non-traditional mediums) to transmit the message.



A truly professional public relations person should make it a priority to at least meet the reporters and editors with whom they will work.

Much of the acrimony and tension now present in media relations would be dissipated by organizations adopting the theory and practice of strategic public relations proposed by James Grunig. Grunig says that it will take some rethinking of past methods but knowing who your publics are and tailoring your message to active members of the public will result in clearer and more effective public relations:

Many public relations practitioners believe that the fate of their organizations and of their careers "live and die with the media." That perceived life-and-death situation leads many practitioners to take desperate means to control what and how the media report about their organizations. Ironically, the better public relations practice becomes, the less public relations practitioners will need the media. If they practice public relations strategically, they will communicate with key publics about problems and relationships long before they become issues that interest the media. The final irony, therefore, is that excellent public relations needs the media less than does poor public relations and as organizations depend less on the media the better their relationship with the media will become. (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 23)

Much of the focus of this study has been on causes and effects of strained media relations and on methods of improving those relations for the benefit of both business and the media. There is however, a missing element in this discussion of improvements. It is the underlying factor of organizational structure and style: how they tend to influence media relations, and how they tend to condition how business views its responsibilities to its publics. The type of organizational structure, corporate philosophy, and management styles of key business leaders has a profound effect on the way that the organization defines its communication objectives. Autocratic leaders often create dictatorial corporate cultures and prefer manipulative press agency public and media relations methods. According to Grunig the best type of organizational structure for effective harmonious press relations is participative management:

Organizations with participative cultures are more likely to have a set of organizational presuppositions that favor symmetrical public relations. They also are more likely to appreciate the value of a public relations program with the potential to practice that excellent public relations



(as described by the characteristics reviewed above). If the public relations department has the potential for excellence, the head of that department also is more likely to be included in the dominant coalition where he or she can influence how public relations is practiced. When the department has little potential, public relations programs are chosen by dominant coalitions with little understanding of modern, sophisticated public relations. When that happens, relations with the media as well as with other publics reaches the state of conflict and manipulation that so often characterizes relations between public relations people and the media. The reason: Dominant coalitions without a public relations executive from an excellent department generally choose a nonstrategic, asymmetrical model of public relations that maximizes the potential for such conflict. (*Grunig Public Relations Quarterly* 23)

The implications of Grunig's model of excellent public relations and smooth media relations is that expert power and organizational commitment to power sharing are the main elements for practicing excellent PR.

In order for excellence in media relations to happen, public relations practitioners will have to be committed to improving their skills: This may mean getting further education, training, professional recognition--whatever is needed to surpass themselves. Status quo media relations is no longer a prescription for successful results or secure employment either.

The latter should be motivation enough for all us. The choice is excellence out a fear of doing otherwise or confident assertiveness based on knowing who your strategic and important publics are, tailoring your message to opinion leaders in special interest groups out in the public and seeing your organizational objectives met.

My own thinking and rationale for improved media relations is this:

1. Press agency media relations is no longer making a significant impact upon the media the way it once did.
2. Media relations staffers should adequately prepare leaders to communicate effectively with reporters.
3. Get to know media reporters and editors and know what their needs are.
4. Study, research and practice strategic Public relations.

Your organizational communication goals will be met better by using "narrowcasting" more often than broadcasting by means of the mass media.



The future of media relations as a field of professional interaction needs to be enhanced by practitioners realizing they must excel in the disciplines of psychology, demographics, psychographics, and conversant with the approaches of interactive media relations.

The need for improvement in media is well recognized by those who interact daily with business or the media. An immediate improvement is possible by applying an awareness of how companies and the mass media approach the subject and what each side's needs are.

A more significant but more long range change needs to occur by implementing the findings of professionals like Grunig who have pointed the way for a new era in media relations in which it will be practiced strategically and more effectively.

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