

Again with public perception

In today's *Washington Post*, Steven Pearlstein writes about Wall Street executives (more specifically AIG executives) who are so blind to public perception that they keep stumbling and looking worse. In case you have been avoiding the news, AIG gave some of its top executives millions of dollars in bonuses, while on the receiving end of government/taxpayer money. Nobody but AIG is happy about this. Currently and mostly due to the economic crisis, there is a tremendous amount of populist rage and ill will toward Wall Street and "fat cats" such as Bernie Madoff, who seem to be living the high life while many people are down in the dumps.

Yesterday I wrote about the Facebook redesign and many others have been writing/complaining across the blogosphere and in real life.

What do AIG and Facebook have in common? Not understanding how they are perceived and that perception matters. Both companies have proceeded with business as usual without so much a look in the rear view mirror. Perception is currency, in the most real, dollar sense, which is why the practice of public relations exists. Companies hire PR agencies to help them manage and in most cases improve the public perception of them.

Sometimes, as in the case of Facebook, there seems to be a complete disregard for how core audiences will react to news and changes. There are simple ways to prevent this: testing in the form of focus groups or surveys or even simple conversations with current users. It's about getting outside the bubble. Come to think of it, don't bubbles always burst? Soap bubbles, housing bubbles, tech bubbles to name a few.

In the case of AIG, it has much to do with Wall Street culture, in which greed is good (as the movie *Wall Street*

pointed out) and money is king. The more money, the better. After all, Wall Street is not some nonprofit organization with some altruistic purpose in mind. The whole raison d'être for it is to make money. So it stands to reason that the only thing AIG execs understand is money. Something soft and unmeasurable like public anger is a small price to pay. Except when it isn't. I think the fat cat era may be nearing its end (at least until the next bubble forms).



Time to sharpen your online skills

The bad news for print continues to pour in. New research from Pew indicates that many Americans do not consider having a local newspaper important. It is as if management knows this. McClatchy, the owner of the *Miami Herald* and other newspapers, just announced personnel cuts this week. The bottom line is that newspapers are hurting and many people don't care. Why? Because many people get their news online or from TV.

Recently, I read how a PR guy was lamenting the downfall of trade publications. I read this on his BLOG. He, like many PR folk, schooled in the "old" days, learned that to do media relations you reached out to print journalists. A nice, print piece in a trade magazine was truly a prize for the client. I also learned to do PR this way. And nothing was more exciting than seeing your client's name in the newspaper, especially on the front page. But the reality has shifted. More and more, the news is being reported on and broken online. Many people do not read the newspaper, and during the day, certainly do not watch TV. What these people do however, is access the

Internet. Many offices allow unlimited Internet access, and certain folk, do their work ON the Internet. In any case, it is time for PR people, and advertising people, and in fact, all communications people, to accept this reality.

Instead of lamenting that blogs now are main sources of information, and that no one is reading trade publications, you must ADAPT to the new realities. Of course, newspapers are not quite dead yet, but teach yourself how to use the online world. Here are a few suggestions:

1) Are there **influential blogs** in your area of expertise? Find out and follow. Not every blog is created equal. The PR guy I mentioned before made the blanket statement that blogs are unreliable. How wrong he is. Very few people would call The Huffington Post or Politico or the Daily Beast unreliable. Yes, they contain opinion, but it is LEADING opinion.

2) **Learn where your potential clients/customers/target audience goes to get their news AND entertainment.** After all, the Web is not just about information. Lots of people play games on the Internet, listen to music and find out about their hobbies.

3) Enhance your **web writing skills**. Writing for the web is not the same as writing for print. You have to be more concise. You have to be more choppy. People read differently online than in print.

4) **Explore multimedia.** People are more visual on the web. And the web allows for video/audio in addition to text.

In sum, stay ahead of the game. Nothing is to be gained from wringing our hands and lamenting the end of print. Instead, find new opportunities. I am sure in the late 1940s, PR people everywhere were concerned about the box in everyone's livingroom. By now, most PR agencies are experts at B-roll and media training. Right?



Overuse syndrome

You've probably seen or heard some words or phrases in ads/commercials so much that they have become meaningless. They do nothing to bring you in or tell you anything about the product or service. Yet, you will continue seeing and hearing them. Why? Because copywriters and in certain cases the advertising manager is enamored of the word or words and can't think of others.

At the top of my list of most overused words in advertising (and thus most meaningless) is the word **unique**. You've heard things like "a unique product," "unique way," etc. BTW, this is also overused in PR. Very few things in this world are unique, and then ad folk decide that some things are not only unique, but truly unique. Truly? (as opposed to fakely?). Other words/phrases that are overused as to become meaningless are: special, best, time of your life, out of the box, outside the lines, and so on.

If you find yourself about to use an overused phrase, think to yourself, is this a cliché? What other thing can be highlighted about my product? What is its USP—and that can't be that it is unique, but what MAKES it unique. No, it is not easy, and that is why we see these words and phrases used over and over. But if you want your materials to communicate the essence of what you are trying to sell, then you will benefit from being unique in avoiding this word.

What are your most overused words?



A little old-fashioned PR (for the airlines)

Yesterday was a good news day for the airlines, specifically for US Airways and United Airlines. Why? Because both apparently have engaged in some good, old-fashioned PR. Both companies released good stories about themselves, that then translated into major and positive coverage. Just like it is supposed to be.

USAir posted a story about how it is going to bring back free soft drinks to its economy cabins as of March 1. The news was reported across the board, from wire services to the evening news. And, USAir released this out as a news item before it sent out a notification to its frequent fliers. The company was seeking to get as much good mileage as it could out of this trite bit of news. USAir “admitted” that it miscalculated the negative impact of charging for beverages and that this negative coverage undermined its gains in on-time performance and baggage handling. I am sure it is also undermined employee morale as people silently shook their heads when asked to pay \$1 for a cup of lukewarm, ill-tasting coffee on board.

United did USAir one better. NBC Nightly News ran a piece about how United is now really cleaning airplanes between flights, something that had gone by the wayside. The piece talked about a guy dubbed “Mr.Clean” who has a title something like Director of Cabin Appearance. The point was to show that United is taking steps to improve customer experience onboard its aircraft. Again, this is classic PR. I am sure the airline pitched the angle that most airlines are filthy (they are) because in these economic times, airlines are cutting

corners on cleaning crews or the amount of times a plane gets fully cleaned. United is bucking the trend because United wants to enhance its passengers's experiences. Here's a link to NBC's Daily Nightly' blog discussing the story.

Bottom line: A bit of positive news can go a long way. Proof positive that PR works!

[polldaddy poll=1398136]



Information dispatch

In case you haven't heard by now, Facebook had silently changed their terms of service a few days ago and then, when caught by a media observer and reported all over the news, was forced to backtrack because of public outrage over the ownership of information. What is interesting about this is that yet again, Facebook shows a complete lack of awareness about public opinion, and more importantly, how to handle such public opinion. It may have something to do with the very young, and obviously not media savvy, CEO Matt Zuckerberg. Facebook is a new concept and a new company, and as such, does not have methods in place to disseminate information effectively to both its members and the public at large. It does not seem to understand that there is always someone watching and that you must have a plan to deal with issues as they arise.

Unfortunately, this is the second time that Facebook is being reactionary because of public outrage. The first was last year when it announced a rather invasive advertising plan based on various items on people's profiles, and then selling things

to their friends based on those profiles. There was outrage over privacy. In fact, privacy seems to be Facebook's Achilles' heel. The company cannot seem to find the right balance between protecting its users' privacy and the needs to grow revenue and membership.

It hurts any company's credibility to have the media inform its customers of a change in terms of service. It hurts Facebook to have to retract and retrace steps. Many people are now confused about what is private or not private on their profiles. It will cause some people to get off Facebook and others to change the way they use Facebook. In short, a failure to communicate clearly and directly has created a load a negative publicity for Facebook, and has alienated its core customer base.

I hope that this time Facebook reconsiders its public relations program, if indeed it has any. I would advise Facebook to hire PR counsel and to focus on how to best communicate with its public.

Vatican is a bit late in the PR game

By various reports over the past week or so, it was clear that Pope Benedict does not understand PR. Why? Well, the Vatican recently revoked the excommunications of four priests, one of whom has publicly denied the Holocaust ever happened, going so far as to claim that Jews were never gassed and that at most 300,000 Jewish people lost their lives not the 6 million. Now, Holocaust denial is outlawed in certain countries, most notably Germany and Austria. Holocaust deniers

in other countries such as England, have been taken to court. Jewish groups were outraged and Angela Merkel, Germany's premier, spoke out against the Pope. Finally, today, the Vatican called for the priest to recant and retract his statements about the Holocaust. (Here's the NYT Times article)

In my opinion, the damage is done, and in more ways than one. First, it makes the Vatican appear callous in the face of an outraged public. And second, it makes the Vatican seem to finally buckle, but only under pressure. Either way, it is not good public relations practice. Public relations is concerned with how your publi

To extract for more real world/corporate settings, here are a few thoughts:

- Vet your candidates properly (this goes for President Obama too)
- If there is a problem with someone you are publicly supporting, immediately look into the matter. Do not pretend everything is A-OK.
- Do not let others dictate your response—then you have lost credibility
- Deal with problems as they arise, especially with sensitive matters

Speaking off the cuff

Sometimes speaking your mind, especially when you are in the public eye, is not a good idea. Media trainers really hate the idea of their proteges saying whatever comes to mind, and for good reason. President Obama may have just learned this the hard way. Yesterday, prior to talking about the economic stimulus package, he “joked” with reporters about how

Washington, DC is not as tough as Chicago when it comes to snow. I saw the exchange on live television, and I thought to myself that some people (namely Washingtonians) would be insulted by this. Sure enough, the comment was carried on tons of Internet sites like DCist, WJLA.com, and even on the network news. Some people did not see what was so funny about icy, slippery sidewalks, especially when they figured the President does not have walk outside to get to work at all.

Of course, of all the things that Obama could have said, this was not close to being the worst. However, it should teach him that nothing is off the record and that joking comments are not always seen as such. Obama has been in such a bubble of adulation that it was almost refreshing to see people bristle at this comment. He will have to adjust to the idea that people will be listening to his every word, and many will be looking for missteps and mistakes.

So to wrap up PR 101—don't speak off the cuff, ESPECIALLY if there are journalists in the room.

How did that movie win an Oscar?

If you have ever wondered how some movies end up getting Oscars and others don't, the answer just may be public relations. There are people devoted to publicizing movies to Oscar voters. This pretty much guarantees that smaller budgets will not likely get Oscars unless they are "sleeper" hits that everyone watches and loves. It takes money to make sure every Motion Picture Academy voter sees your movie, or at least hears good buzz. The Washington Post had an excellent article

on this topic, called: For your Consideration: The Oscar Publicists.

When a client asks you if public relations has any value just point them to the Oscar movie you love to hate (in my case, it is Brokeback Mountain, which I thought was terribly made). There is a good chance the reason it won is because it had the best PR/publicity campaign.

How not to do p.r.

Public relations practitioners are generally good about getting their pitch across. There are those who do it with a soft touch, and then there is this story I had to share with you: <http://tinyurl.com/3ka5h8> I found it through Peter Shankman's twitter feed, regarding a woman who calls herself a PR person, but is really a list provider/spammer. And she's nasty (probably bitter). Public relations is about building positive relations with your target audience, generally using media as a go-between. Insulting the media is never a good idea!!!!