Marketing communications efforts do not fix organizational problems

This morning, the Washington Post reports that Metro (the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority or WMATA) is hiring two big public relations/communications firms

> *"to help the transit agency rebuild its tattered image in the wake of a fatal Jan. 12 smoke incident."*

The two agencies, O'Neill Associates and Hill + Knowlton Strategies, are expert in crisis communications and will help develop a reputation management communications plan.

The problem for Metro is that it has more than an image problem. It has an organizational problem.

As anybody who lives in the Washington, D.C. area and who rides Metro knows, WMATA has frequent problems, including lengthy delays, broken car doors, broken escalators, and smoke-filled stations. Most of these problems do not result in fatalities, as did the January incident, but they do inconvenience hundreds of commuters every day.

WMATA has also experienced a drop in ridership in the past year (D.C. area sees fewer taking public transit). Although the article attributes this decline to lower gas prices, it is hard to imagine it doesn't have to do with the unreliable and expensive service that WMATA offers.

Most news reports about the January incident detail aspects of WMATA's organizational challenges. There's a lack of internal accountability (why weren't NTSB safety directives followed?) and a lack of cooperation with external parties (first responders did not know where the smoke-filled train was in

the tunnel and their radios did not work underground).

It’s beyond my knowledge to detail the workings of WMATA, but as a rider, I have seen countless examples of poor service. Track work (or “rebuilding” as it is now called) happens nearly every weekend, causing lengthy delays. And the cost is astronomical. At the highest end, a round-trip peak-hour commute costs nearly $12.

Frustration with Metro does not have to do with its image. It has to do with the real, day-to-day interactions most riders have with the system. A crisis communication plan is always good to have (as an aside, several years ago I heard Metro’s then public relations director say that the agency had a plan in case of terrorism on the system, *but not in case of accidents*).

I hope that by hiring outside communications counsel, Metro is admitting it has a problem and that it is ready to seek for a solution. But the solution is not simply *to appear* to have stuff under control (create a positive image). **The real solution would be to address the organizational issues that underlie the image problem.**

What are your thoughts?