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## THE INTRIGUING WORLD OF PRINT MEDIA

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**During the Kargil conflict, one magazine carried this:**

...The colonel was most gracious. Invited us (journalists) into his tent, gave us tea and apologised for his 'field conditions' bathroom. To make inane conversation while waiting for our papers, I asked him: "So how long have you been here?" "That is a military question." "Sorry. How long do you think it will last?" "That is a military question." "Oh! Do you think the Pakistanis will withdraw?" "That is a military question." "Hmmm...Which was the last movie you saw?"

Though a majority of companies now recognise that talking to the media is part of doing business, and that they have a responsibility (and an enlightened self-interest) to create a dialogue with the media and to respond to their questions. A 'no comment' attitude reflects the basic apprehension amongst executives of being misquoted or being quoted out of context. On the flip side as Tom Cooper, former president of Bank of America noted, "Business people complain like hell about what's in the newspaper, then they turn around and refuse to talk to reporters."

What one says vs. what appears in the newspapers; righteousness of corporate marketers vs. that of newspapers – the debate is ongoing. How can business fulfill its responsibility to answer press questions, yet have confidence that the comments attributed to them and their companies will not be embarrassing? Is the credibility of the media an issue with people?

***Part one of this article examines some basic guidelines for corporations to communicate effectively. Part two looks at some recent credibility issues facing the American press. Key findings of surveys commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors<sup>1</sup> (ASNE) and Columbia Journalism Review are highlighted.***

### **PART I COMMUNICATION IS WORRY?**

The responsibility of conveying the company's strengths and weaknesses to its internal and external audiences rests solely with the CEO. Simple and tangible communication is most effective in keeping an organisation focused, motivated, and confident about what steps to take next. Externally, customers and shareholders benefit when clear communications come from the CEO.

Jack Welch of General Electric is a CEO widely acknowledged as successful in communicating his company's direction. In 1981, shortly after taking over, Welch declared that no GE business would be closed or sold. Welch's transformation of GE is seen as the textbook case for corporate restructuring and aligning internal and external stakeholders behind a clearly stated vision. Just as important, he clearly communicated his vision in a way that could be told and retold by media, management experts, business school professors and other professionals.

Communicating well is hard work. For CEOs, it involves listening to what is on stakeholders' minds, trying to find a common ground and building support. Persuasive CEO communication needs to connect on both a rational and emotional level. It works best when goals are expressed through lively speech, interactive dialogues, and real-life stories.

Communicating with the media is always a tough one? However, simple things can help organisation communicate effectively: Talking before thinking is an error that cuts across all levels of an organisation. It can arise from the unrestrained exuberance of management, exaggerations by line personnel or the release of unverified information by staff people. Intelligent comments in the press most often are the result of accurate and up-to-date information combined with forethought and preparation. While some embarrassing comments in the press are the result of inadequate preparation. Any dialogue with the media should be taken seriously, and briefings by media relations professionals can help management tell their company's story more effectively and focus their comments on the interests of the reporter.

Some companies have complex and cumbersome organisational structure that restricts a timely response to media inquiries. In these instances, a newspaper could go to press with a story leveling charges against a company, noting that the company response was "No comment." In some companies, communications is placed under the marketing or legal function. Under marketing, corporate comments may tend toward the promotional, while the lawyer's natural urge to protect against liability by saying little, can result in corporate comments that seem obtuse or unresponsive.

Some organisations seek to control information, particularly bad news, with the goal of limiting negative reaction. But attempting to hide the facts of a story only puts a company in a position of covering up, severely damaging its reputation.

An enlightened approach to the media is not universal. Some managements do not accept the legitimate right of the media to ask questions of public companies or large private entities. This attitude often is combined with a lack of appreciation for the power of the media to influence, for good or bad, the perception of the company. Talking to the media can help an organisation build a reservoir of understanding and goodwill with constituencies and the public.

Some management fall into the trap of saying, "Have the communications people talk to the media." Reporters are quite willing to talk with knowledgeable sources, but they also want access to the people who are managing and operating the company. There are issues and concerns which

management must be open to discuss with the media. Otherwise, the organisation looks foolish or appears to have a siege mentality. Management can help reporters write from an informed position, and more readily assure accurate, fair and balanced coverage.

Most CEOs would not consider a financial issue without input from the chief financial officer nor make a legal decision without the general counsel's advice. However, many a management is known to make policy and operating decisions with vast communications implications, with little or no involvement by the company's public relations professionals. In USA one company, for example, made a quick personnel decision to have employees sign a silence agreement as part of their severance package. The furor rapidly escalated to a nationwide story based on the company's alleged attempt to stifle first amendment rights.

Contrary to popular culture, the core of media relations and press communications is not the "spin doctoring" of messages. Communication that best helps an organisation achieve its goals is based on a foundation of accuracy, honesty, completeness and candor.

Certainly, the press is not perfect and errors inevitably will arise in stories. However, an efficient organisational structure, effective communications staff, and appropriate policies and practices can decrease dramatically the instances of good companies saying inane things in the media.

And here is a classic:

Byron Acohido, **Seattle Times** reporter and winner of the 1997 Pulitzer Prize (*His award came for a series of articles on problems Boeing was having with rudders on its 737s. The stories led to new FAA requirements. Boeing refused to deal with Acohido and aggressively lobbied his paper's management to have him removed from the story. Acohido's stories ran without official comment from Boeing.*)

"My relationship with Boeing was more adversarial than it needed to be and their efforts to prevent me from doing my job didn't impede me at all. It just made me more determined. Whether Boeing's refusal to answer legitimate questions served them well, I don't know, but it would probably make a good corporate communications case study. I was unaware they were trying to get me off the story because *Times* management didn't tell me. Before we published the five-part series, we made a serious effort to get them to fully respond to everything we were writing about. They continued with their "nobody here trusts Acohido" line and refused to cooperate. When the series began, they sent a press release, which was essentially a personal attack against me, and requested that it be published in its entirety inside a black border. The newspaper refused.

*The communications professional should view reporters as customers and realise giving access to reporters provides their companies with a forum to tell their side of the story. Too many companies set up corporate communications departments as deflection shields for senior executives who have a view of the world that doesn't include talking to journalists."*

## PART 2

### SECTION I – WHY NEWSPAPER CREDIBILITY HAS BEEN DROPPING

A central component of the three-year long Journalism Credibility Project of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was a comprehensive study of public attitudes about media credibility. The research was specifically designed not to replicate the numerous surveys that have measured the extent of declines in public confidence in the media over the past ten years, but to probe more deeply into the *underlying causes* of the "disconnect" between journalists and their audiences. The findings of the research, ASNE believes, will help editors' review their practices and standards, and the data will provide a baseline against which the effectiveness of new approaches to build journalism credibility can be evaluated.

With special attention given to newspapers, this research identified **six fundamental reasons** why the public's perceptions of media credibility are so low:

- The public sees too many factual errors and spelling or grammar mistakes in newspapers.
- The public perceives that newspapers don't consistently demonstrate respect for, and knowledge of, their readers and their communities.
- The public suspects that the points of view and biases of journalists influence what stories are covered and how they are covered.
- The public believes that newspaper chase and over-cover sensational stories because they're exciting and it helps sell the newspaper. They don't believe these stories deserve the attention they get.
- The public feels that newsroom values and practices are sometimes in conflict with their own priorities for their newspapers.
- Members of the public that have had actual experience with the news process are the most critical of media credibility.

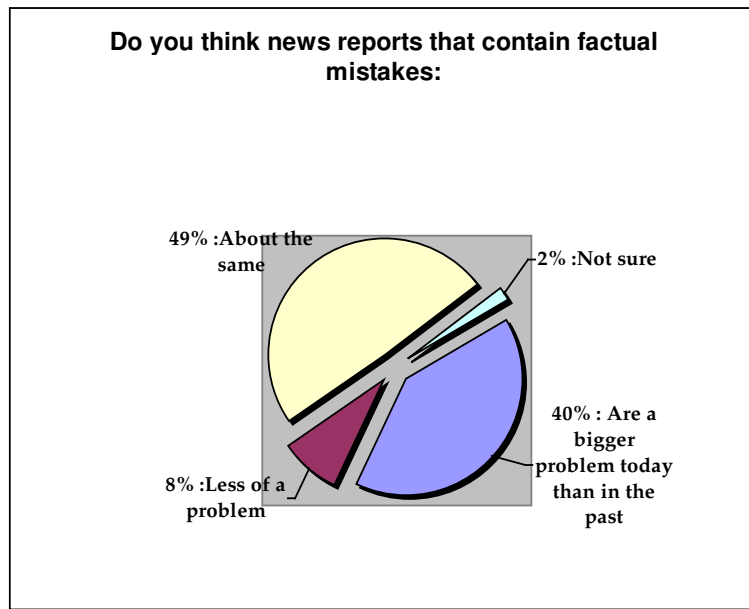
ASNE has taken on this long-term challenge to better understand the scope, dimension and causes of the credibility challenge. As part of the Journalism Credibility Project, eight daily newspapers have agreed to serve as 'test sites'. Starting spring 1999, each introduced strategies and content innovations in four major areas the research identified as areas where newspapers might build reader trust: accuracy, sensationalism, bias and connecting with readers.

### SECTION II – HANDLING CORRECTIONS

In a 1690 prospectus for America's first newspaper, Publick Occurrences, editor Benjamin Harris promised that in his publication, ". . . nothing shall be entered, but what we have reason to believe is true . . . . And when there appears any material mistake in anything that is collected, it shall be corrected in the next."

Ever since, journalists have wrestled with the problem of how to deal with mistakes that creep into their reports. How prominently should errors be acknowledged, and how expeditiously? What mechanisms should be in place to assure that inaccuracies are scrupulously corrected? What clear, standard operating procedures work best?

To find out how journalists around America feel about mistakes, miscues, misprints, miscalculations, and missteps, the **Columbia Journalism Review**, with the nonprofit, nonpartisan research firm Public Agenda, polled 125 senior journalists nationwide (U.S.)



Some key findings:

<b>The newsroom culture needs to allow for more open and candid discussion of mistakes</b>	91%	6%	3%
<b>Too many news organisations lack clear standard operating procedures for handling corrections</b>	54%	25%	22%
<b>News organisations need to give more prominent play to corrections and clarifications</b>	52%	34%	14%
<b>Many mistakes are the result of poor editing or misleading headlines</b>	52%	33%	15%
<b>Today's news organisations are too reluctant to publish corrections and clarifications</b>	36%	52%	13%
<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>	

While many of these issues may not be plaguing the Indian media industry yet, there is no statistical evidence to prove on the contrary. However, corrections and mis-reporting continue to be the biggest bane with journalism on the whole.

As Steve Hayworth, vice-president of public relations, CNN sums up: "I have to behave honestly, responsibly and truthfully. I have to answer all questions and all questioners. I try to put the best face on things but I wouldn't be worth my salt if I didn't. A news organisation has only one asset and that's its credibility. When I first started at CNN, the news department said to me that whether we are in crisis or not, whether we made an error or not, we have to be open to press scrutiny. People will forgive a screw-up but they won't forgive a cover-up. Ninety-nine percent of journalists are extremely professional and work hard. However, with a greater proliferation of news sources, journalists are under great competitive pressure to get an original angle."

<sup>1</sup>The American Society of Newspaper Editors, with 875 members, is an organisation of the main editors of daily newspapers in the Americas. Founded in 1922, ASNE's focuses on the professional development of its members and journalism-related issues, including the First Amendment, newsroom staff diversity, editorial innovation, and the newspaper's role in providing information necessary to the informed practice of citizenship.

*(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop - Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)*