

## Coach's text, Information Technology

As you all surely are aware, the subject matter of information technology is not simple or straightforward and the situation changes under us so fast that it is hard to keep our footing. For this reason, information technology is largely “off the bookshelf” of printed textbooks recommended for study for accreditation. In this session, we will be giving you some additional resources – which are recommended right now, but may change every time this preparation class is offered in the future. Things move fast in this field

*Now, a basic perspective.* Any discussion of technology today must start out with the old “good news; bad news” approach, or “on the one hand; on the other hand”. The contrasts in the situation are well expressed by John Pavlik, who directs the Center for New Media at Columbia University<sup>1</sup>:

To public relations professionals, the World Wide Web is both a powerful tool of communication and a dangerous threat to organizational well being. Properly used, the Web represents the ultimate communication tool for building relationships between an organization and its publics, both internal and external. The Web can deliver messages with a wide variety of media – text, audio, graphics, still pictures, animation, full-motion video, even virtual reality environments where organizations can demonstrate products or services or showcase physical facilities.

Conversely, the Web empowers the individual to create his or her own communication platforms. At least a third of all Web sites have been created by individuals outside any official organizational context. Journalist A.J. Liebling once observed that freedom of the press belongs to those who own one. The Web enables anyone to own a digital press. This may ultimately be good for democracy, but along the way it presents significant challenges to organizations trying to manage the communication function in the age of the information superhighway.

**Back to our own words:** For some of us, the “information superhighway” is a tool; for some it is a way of life. Whatever your job responsibilities may be, every accredited practitioner needs to be well acquainted with this form of communication. The Detailed List of Knowledge, Skills and Abilities tested in the Examination spells that out clearly. In the multiple-choice Examination, only 2% of the questions will be directly concerned with information technology. That's not many questions. But take a look at the listing for business literacy – 10% of the questions – and notice that sections 2.2 and 2.5 speak directly to the field of technology. As a tool, technology will come into play in many other categories. In reality, it is everywhere today. The hazards and the opportunities affect us all. The panelists for your Readiness Review will know this. You will want to be able to reflect your knowledge of technology wherever it arises.

***A bit of real life:***

Before we go very far into web technology, let's pause for a moment and consider an "everyday occurrence" – the kind of thing which could confront any one of us, any morning.

Let's say you are working in public relations for Equifax, one of the major credit reporting agencies. One April morning, while you are peacefully tackling your inbox, a cousin telephones. She has just found in **her** inbox three e-mails from friends, all with the same subject:

**YOUR CREDIT REPORT GOES PUBLIC IN JULY!  
REMOVE YOUR NAME ASAP!**

The messages are identical: "Starting July 1, the four major credit bureaus in the U.S. (Equifax, etc.) will be allowed to release credit info, mailing addresses, phone numbers, etc., to ANYONE who requests it. If you do not want to be included in this release of your personal information, you can call . . ." and it gives a toll-free number and the procedure for "opting out." The messages conclude, in all capital letters, "PASS THIS MESSAGE ON TO ALL IN YOUR ADDRESS BOOK, FRIENDS AND FAMILY." Which, obviously has been happening.

What do you do, now?

As you probably know, standard procedure when you receive this kind of e-mail, or anything that sounds scary and mentions a specific organization, is to first go to the organization's web site to check for a hoax or an authentic situation. You probably have so trained your cousin, but not her e-mail list. So you send your cousin the company web site address, and suggest she transmit it back to the senders of those three e-mails, and hope they will send it back one more leg. And learn something, in the process. On your web site is a warning about this "false" e-mail.

Actually, if you have been working at Equifax for more than a few months, you probably know that incoming message by heart. By the time your cousin called, it had been circulating for several years. Your web site contains a notice; your trade association has issued three previous news releases about it, and the Federal Trade Commission issued a consumer alert, early on.

The telephone number in the message is real. It was established in 1997, to permit individuals to "opt out" of mailing lists for pre-approved offers of credit.

Now, as public relations people, let's think for a moment about why these e-mail chains keep recurring and so persistent. Are people chewing up band-width just for fun? Or is something else at work here?

People value privacy; they are afraid of identity theft. They lack experience in assessing hoaxes and misjudgments. They react fast and may shoot from the hip – on this and other topics which strike at their values and fears, real or perceived.

If this really were you, and you took time to think along these lines, you might make sure that your item on your web page emphasizes how the existing system protects privacy of credit information, and that the opt-out number helps prevent unwanted e-mail offers. This might be an opportunity to glean a little positive reaction. When something like this comes down, it is usually a good idea to take ten minutes and consider values and fears, and whether there is a constructive way to recognize them.

The good news here is that you have a web site on which to make this explanation, and possibly recoup some of the damage. Further along, we'll talk about some other options.

Now let's take a longer look at web technology. These remarks are the considered opinions of competent public relations practitioners with substantial experience in this area, written in 2003.

## **Web Site management**

**Web pages are essential:** Public relations practitioners should have a deep knowledge and understanding of how to incorporate use of the Internet in their public relations and communications. Putting the fact base into one sentence: The Internet is a broad-based global technology that connects people using computers through the use of electronic mail, and through highly visible public "sign posts" known as web pages. Virtually every company intending to do business successfully is generally expected to have a web page where customers, the public, regulators, government officials, and members of the news media can obtain basic information about the company.

**General principles:** Web pages should contain – at a minimum – detailed contact information about your company or, for agency practitioners, about your client. The most basic information that should be incorporated in any web site is information about **how to contact the company**. Most people who use the web complain that this is the most common difficulty they find in using corporate web sites. At one time, web sites were viewed as billboards. Now, people want to know who maintains the billboard and how to contact someone knowledgeable and helpful.

The web site should include a section tailored to the **needs of the news media**. Many companies have very sophisticated press rooms on their web sites. A good example of a media-friendly web site is the press room maintained by the Boeing Corporation, which contains images of its aircraft, video clips, biographies of executives, official photographs of executives, and many other documents including product specifications, white papers and backgrounders.

One major advantage of the web for this type of distribution is that it eliminates the need to send documents and photographs via US Postal Service or overnight courier services – which once kept public relations people pretty busy. Another advantage is that an online press room is available 24 hours a day. A down side is that while online press rooms make journalists' jobs easier they often eliminate the one-on-one personal contact with public relations practitioners.

A study of journalists' expectations of online pressrooms was made in 2002 by Joanna Schroeder APR for her master's thesis. Two reports are available on the Web: One was published in PRSA's *Tactics*; another is on the site of Women in Communication. The URLs, and Schroeder's e-mail address, are given on a handout for this session.

A Web pressroom is not a panacea. One practitioner notes:

"It seems to me that journalists almost never visit your Web site to find out specific information. Those who do are especially likely to misinterpret what they've seen.

"All of our press releases are posted – but I've noticed that the beat reporters are far more likely to pick up the phone and call me to verify simple data (earnings per share last quarter, for example). I find the less experienced reporters are the ones more likely to try to draw information from the Web site; unfortunately [they are] reporters who know little about the company and who leap to conclusions not supported by the information available.

"We are a fairly small company. Someone like Boeing with heavy international coverage may find that posting detailed information allows them to serve the international media."

**Content management:** Public relations practitioners **should direct** content management strategies. Many companies assign responsibility for a web site to the information technology department (IT), but control of the content is properly a corporate communications function. Communications professionals should partner with IT on technology related issues such as

- approval processes
- archiving strategies
- web statistics (WebTrends, CommerceTrends, etc.)
- use of a customer data warehouse (for cross-selling, up-selling)

However, content should be directly controlled by the communications function of the company, and be viewed as an additional channel of distribution to deliver company (or client) messages to multiple audiences.

- **Direct to the audience:** The Web creates opportunities for direct communication to target audiences. A practitioner in a financial firm observes, "Especially during the tech boom, investors went directly to Web sites for earnings updates, rather than wait for traditional news media to report quarterly numbers. I believe this is happening more and more often – especially with press releases – which are often more directed to investors or customers or employees than the news media."

**Web site usability:** Practitioners should understand how to conduct usability testing as a means for making sure their web sites are easy to use and their labeling is appropriate and intuitive.

**Rich media:** Practitioners should understand how to use rich media to enhance the site. Examples of this would be streaming video segments that support the organization's efforts. A caution: It is wise to offer such segments as an option, via a clickable link. It is considered polite, in the web world, to annotate the option with approximate size of the option, so the viewer can make an informed decision about spending the requisite time.

## E-mail management

**News media:** Public relations practitioners need to be especially careful in how they use e-mail to communicate with journalists. While many journalists are extremely conversant with and comfortable using e-mail, many (astonishingly) are not. In addition, many news organizations, particularly in smaller cities, have not upgraded computer equipment sufficiently that journalists are able to download attached documents. The Associated Press web site, in 2003, specified "no attachments" in e-mail messages to it.

It's important for the practitioner to keep track of which journalists prefer to receive e-mails with attachments, or e-mails without attachments, as well as those who simply prefer to receive a fax. This is a rapidly changing area of media relations. Just as public relations professionals routinely keep track of the interests of journalists with whom they communicate regularly, practitioners should also make sure they know the changing e-mail preferences of those journalists.

When distributing news releases by e-mail, practitioners should ensure that the mail addresses of the recipients are kept confidential. It is not only embarrassing, but regarded by most journalists as a "beginner's mistake" when all of the recipients' e-mail addresses are included in the "TO" field of the e-mail, making them visible to all the recipients. E-mail addresses for a broadcast e-mail should be entered in the "BCC" field of the e-mail. Be sure to put one name in the "TO" field, even your own. Some older mail packages still operating in the field will grab names from the BCC field and put them into the TO field if it is empty. This is contrary to technical standards, but it does happen, according to an experienced systems manager.

**Marketing:** Practitioners need to understand the concept of "**permission marketing**," where the consumer first is asked for permission to send e-mail marketing materials before they are sent. Unsolicited e-mail messages to journalists or consumers that are specifically intended as a "commercial" for a client product or service should be avoided.

Maintaining a functional permission marketing list calls for both finesse and expertise, but it is a "solved problem" in the phrase of one experienced system designer. Off-the-shelf software – some of it free – can handle the whole thing automatically for you, avoiding the many hazards of purchased e-mail lists. His full discussion and details are in a handout (#33) we will distribute at the end of the session.

When you set out to control broadcast e-mail promotion, you may find yourself in direct opposition to the mindset of some marketing department staff. One experienced systems manager observes that marketing people are likely to insist that customers "need to

know” about new products or services, whether or not they have inquired about any of them. Three things to remember, here:

- Consumers are becoming **much less tolerant** of unsolicited and undesirable e-mail.
- Eager marketers should check the **contract with the access provider**. All major providers specifically prohibit mass mailing of unsolicited material. Most providers are becoming more aggressive on enforcement.
- E-mail marketing messages are likely to wind up in the consumer’s Inbox alongside various “spam” invitations to enlarge, enhance, or perform better sexually. Is that the company your company wants to keep?

**Promotion:** The advantages of electronic mail for promotion are obvious: Almost no cost, fast turnaround, immediate response. Nearly all organizations now use this method to make announcements to members, to promote events and projects, and to urge action on matters of importance to them.

With this in mind, I invite you to step into the shoes of a public relations practitioner across the Atlantic. You work for a major Humane Society in the United Kingdom. The Society has a number of “concerns” – animal abuse, pet abandonment, illegal trading in endangered species. At the moment, “loud fireworks” lead your list. Every year, your office gets hundreds of calls about pets that have become lost, injured or distressed due to loud fireworks.

You have done your homework: Your survey of veterinarians in England and Wales reports that in the past year nearly 5,000 animals were treated for fireworks-related injuries or were prescribed sedatives because they were so frightened by the loud bangs and flashes of fireworks. In two months, there were 700 reports of such incidents. In a public opinion poll conducted by a research institute – 1,000 telephone interviews – 71 percent of the people questioned agreed that loud fireworks should only be allowed at public displays, and 57 percent agreed that for private use, the public should only be allowed to buy low-noise fireworks.

Now there is a bill in Parliament, which proposes limiting the sale of fireworks to certain times of year and licensing fireworks displays. It is coming up for second reading in the House of Commons. You want people to contact their Members of Parliament in support.

You have bought a list – an e-mail list – which the vendor says consists of cat and dog owners who have “opted-in” to receive related information. Your message has gone out.

NOW your telephone rings, and the caller politely informs you that the Society’s name is under fire on the Internet. One of his friends, not a pet owner, has received several copies of the message. The friend – who says he is not an “opt-in” and had no prior relationship with the Society – has posted a notice on his Internet news group, saying – and I quote – “This is a political lobbying junk-o-gram from . . . the main animal charity in the UK. They have clearly hired a spammer to deliver their message, which is most unacceptable.

If any UK reader can perform appropriate re-education to the decision-makers in this body, please do so now.” News groups being what they are, the discussion is lively and continuing, and none of it is favorable to the Society.

SO—what do you do?

What did the Society actually do? Your counterpart on the staff apparently thought fast. She asked the caller to report to the news group that the Society is furious over the development; to pass on an e-mail address for response, and to post the URL for a public apology on their web site. The apology declares that the Society is “carrying out a full investigation into how ‘spam’ e-mail was sent in its name, and will be taking the necessary steps to ensure that it does not happen again.”

Coming back to this side of the ocean: The obvious lesson about buying e-mail lists is covered more fully in the handout on Permission Marketing. You probably are aware that spammers “harvest” e-mail addresses from Internet traffic, and often invade other servers on the web and transmit from them, to disguise the origin. The sleuths in the news groups determined that the Society’s e-mail was sent from “compromised” machines, one of which was in Argentina.

Another booby-trap crops up in this episode. The Society’s original message asked recipients to write a letter or send an online fax to their Member of Parliament, urging support of the bill. Shortly a different news group is reporting that the Society – and I quote – “brought FaxyourMP.com servers to a standstill for 48 hours by e-mailing people to submit e-mail fax forms, in contravention of FaxyourMP.com’s explicit policy.”

Lesson #2: If you are going to encourage a fax campaign to government officials, check to make sure it is permissible.

The good news: Despite the commotion, the Fireworks bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons unopposed. The bill went to committee; protocol calls for a third reading. In the meantime, the Society undertook an online petition drive. A message from the campaign coordinator to an Internet news group urged them to “ask your friends and family to sign our petition.” Access to the petition was on the Society’s web site.

**Monitoring news groups:** It is easy to monitor what’s being said in news groups about your organization, your product, or issues which are of concern to you. The search engine google.com archives the messages. By its count, it has 700 million – repeating, seven hundred million – in its memory. Since 1981. When you access the Google site, there is a button to click for Groups, and a search box. “Advanced Groups Search” permits you to narrow the search by date, subject, author and specific words, phrases or news groups. Just as in a search of web sites, the system brings up a list of messages with a date, a few words of the content and a link to click to read the message. It identifies the news groups, tells how many messages are in each thread, and offers a diagram of the traffic, showing who responded to whom, with dates. In your Equifax role, you could have learned that the credit report warning was circulating that month on at

least three news groups. One, with the subject “Protect your Identity, This is SERIOUS” had a thread of 24 articles. All this is free.

There are thousands of news groups ricocheting messages around the country, most of them narrowly defined, such as “rec.aviation.homebuilt” – a third-tier group under the category of recreation. Conversation in a group is not limited to its title. Some of the fuss over credit reports came in a group called “rec.gambling.poker.” And there is a big category of groups with unlimited scope, identified with the prefix “alt.”

News groups operate within a structure called USENET. Every major Internet Service Provider such as AOL or AT&T Worldnet operates or offers a news server with software similar to a mail program. Messages addressed to a group on one server are automatically transmitted to other servers’ groups with similar interests, anywhere on the Internet. Possibly this is the world’s fastest forwarding system. When a subscriber signs on to the Internet, new messages appear in an inbox. Subscriptions are free.

In practice, USENET could be called “the world’s largest back fence.” The official term is “a distributed broadcast e-mail system.”

**Public relations tool:** The universe of net users offers possibilities for informal research on products or ideas. One example: the group “rec.woodworkers” is large and busy. The owner of a small tool manufacturing shop that specializes in planes posts a message every now and then describing a new feature in development or under consideration, and asks for reaction. So does a large catalog seller of woodworking supplies. All the groups have protocols and customs and would resent being exploited. If you search out a few appropriate groups and will play by their rules, you can get very fast feedback at no cost other than your time. And, of course, you can use the network to explain how you stubbed your toe, or amplify or correct information and opinion in circulation there. Google.com provides rosters of groups; so does your ISP.

**Subscribing:** This is something you take up with your IT department. The “how-to” varies with your software and your internet provider. You will probably want to set up a separate e-mail account for this activity, because traffic can be heavy. You can subscribe to any number of news groups under that account. In addition to your interest groups, you should subscribe to news.newusers, news.answers, news.announce and its subgroup, news.announce.important. They will help you understand what you are doing. Further information about the functioning groups is given in the handout I keep mentioning.

## **Announcements, Releases, Financials**

You surely are aware of the business news services which handle news releases electronically. You probably also are aware that there is a growing trend to distribute by e-mail many of the reports that publicly-owned companies are required to give to stockholders.

In the financial market, required reports and announcements can be nicely handled

electronically, because the technology of distribution meets the standard of simultaneous information.

An option for stock price or regulatory filing e-mail alerts: A number of outside services such as IREye will handle this for a company, integrated within the company's web site.

Annual reports are frequently distributed in electronic format (Adobe Acrobat PDF files, with Excel spreadsheets for financials) A systems manager cautions that financials created in Excel should always be converted to "locked" pdf format with digital signatures for distribution, lessening the hazard of someone changing the data.

## **Attacks, crises or rumors arising on the Internet**

- A practitioner's crisis plan should always include what the organization would do in the event of cyber attack. When the company **will** respond to "rumors" and when it won't.
- Rumors and attacks in chat rooms and news groups obviously can spread like wildfire – so can your response, if you choose to use these channels. IT people probably can show you how to do this.
- Electronic vandals enjoy breaking into, altering, modifying, and defacing corporate web-sites. If the company's web site has been invaded and corrupted, the immediate action should be to shut down the site and stop the flow of false or derogatory information.. The practitioner would immediately contact IT staff to accomplish this. It may be possible to forward requests for that site to another machine which is uncorrupted.
- Airlines and other companies include in their crisis plans creation and maintenance of a "dark" website. This contains pages specifically designed to hold important crisis-related information that can be used to replace the company's live web site quickly when a disaster occurs.
- A company's plans should also include how they would communicate with their publics via the Web in the event of a crisis.
- For example: At Principal Financial, a spokesperson relates: "On 9/11 we used the Web to explain to customers what we were doing as an insurer of property and lives. We also used it to explain where and how much we were donating financially and otherwise to assist in clean-up efforts."
- On the East Coast, another practitioner recalls that companies with offices at the World Trade Center used the Web in a different way. "Companies like Aon and Merrill Lynch posted regular updates re: how many employees were missing at the site, and asked employees who had no other way to contact the company during the initial hours – when communication was virtually halted in New York City – to log on to the Web site to let company officials know they were OK."

## Summing up

- While electronic communication is now an important part of an integrated communications plan, it is not the end-all, be-all. Using these resources to distribute messages effectively depends on who your target audiences are compared to the demographics of the people who are most comfortable with technology.
- Information technology has forced the public relations practitioner to re-think strategy, tactics and finance. For example, more funds are now devoted to technology, causing a shift in spending away from traditional media. The technology has given rise to whole new segments of audiences or publics for communication. Strategies and tactics differ for those who rely on the Internet and the Web, and those who shun it or skim it lightly. New measurement techniques have emerged, such as number of “hits ” and time spent per visit to a Web site. It’s worth thinking about how this differs from counting print clippings. Budgets, staffing and time allocation reflect these shifts.
- **Online resources:** Experienced practitioners working in technology recommend a free monthly newsletter called NetGain UPDATE. It is published by a consortium of independent communications technology consultants. They allow you to share it with your associates, clients, managers or anyone else you think would benefit from it. The URL is on the handout (#32) you are about to get.
- **The Institute for Public Relations** offers, at no download fee, papers on new technology including the one on the Information Superhighway, by John Pavlik, which I quoted early in this session. That URL, also, is on handout #32.

NOTE: Handouts accompanying this session are

#32, Online Resources

#33, Permission Marketing

#34, Coach’s text

#35, Other considerations.

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<sup>1</sup> “Managing the Information Superhighway: A Report on the Issues Facing Communications Professionals.” A study funded by a grant from The Institute for Public Relations Research and Education, 1996. [www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com)