

These thoughts are from a group of experienced practitioners who contributed to the body of the Study Course session on Information Technology in July, 2003. Many of the ideas will endure; some will fade with time and need replacements. Whenever this session is presented, these concepts should be re-evaluated and updated or supplemented by knowledgeable local professionals in public relations and information technology.

Other Considerations About Information Technology

- Facilitates two-way communications in ways not previously easily possible.
- Accelerates the flow and distribution of information to multiple audiences.
- Moves the communications process from "one-on-one" to "many-to-many" (i.e. no longer a one-way or linear process).
- Accommodates communication in 'real time' with key audiences.
- Makes the management of communication difficult and forces the practitioner to relinquish a certain degree of control. It's impossible and somewhat fruitless to try and manage every aspect of everything that's being communicated via the Web.
- Empowers distribution and capture of vast amounts and types of data.
- Shifts the power of selection and filtering of information from the broadcaster to the recipient. (The broadcaster can "push" material, but recipients can "pull" what they choose to see.)
- Runs the risk of alienating some persons, especially those averse to "push" types of communication who resent the growing proliferation of "spam" junk mail and the fact that more communications are adding to the cluttered communication channels.
- The risk of alienation can be avoided with good design on Web sites. A good site does not bombard the visitor with clutter. It leaves viewers in control of what they get, and keeps it in manageably small pieces so they can pick and choose. "Think sound bite, not speech."
- Can make the spread of false and misleading information an immediate and instantaneous event. Public relations practitioners need to monitor chat rooms, breaking news on the Web and activist Web sites and respond accordingly.
- Web sites are the first place some audiences go to learn about your organization.
- More information is available for research purposes, but is it all accurate?
- Unlike a book, a Web site from which you pull research can disappear from existence, making the research hard to document later.

- **A particular caution:** Writing style for the Web needs to be more concise and attention grabbing since the audience has a shorter attention span.
- News now can "break" at any time of day, not just in the morning newspaper or morning broadcast. We have access to faster and more mass distribution
- Digital photography and the mass availability of digital cameras have an impact.
- Remember the possible use of satellite VNRs.
- Many products are available now for tracking and database purposes (A few: Bacon's Online, Vocus, Factiva).
- Intranets and Portal sites have become preferred methods of tailoring messages to specific audiences.
- Online communications have raised much debate about the value of printed vs. electronic newsletters and publications.
- Web-based seminars (Webinars) for investors and analysts.
- The Internet can be a hostile environment. Users include electronic vandals who delight in doing "nasty tricks" like sending unsavory e-mails with your organization's name as the sender. Faking the name of the 'sender' (the "From: " line) and the organization is a simple task for tricksters. This is often the only information that recipients will use to judge the origin of a message. If you need to do detective work on "suspect" messages, a wealth of other information is contained in the e-mail 'headers' that IT staff can use to establish, with a very high confidence level, whether or not the message in question is a forgery. "Back tracking" to the actual origin of such a forgery is, in most cases, simply impossible. Thus, there is almost 'no chance' of taking legal action against the perpetrator. Unfortunately. If this becomes a real problem, however, the IT department can help you post examples of real and forged messages with all headers on your Web site, to be publicized so that recipients can compare them and check for authenticity.
- Vandals or vengeful persons sometimes organize mass e-mails or initiate high-volume spam to clog your incoming e-mail channels. If your system is operating with Unix servers, free software named "procmail" is available to help cope with harassing messages. It can automatically dump the identifiable spam and respond to other senders with a request to verify the message by a process that requires a human brain. This reduces the congestion and keeps the channels open to legitimate e-mail messages.
- **"Cybersquatting"** involves the purchase of Web domains by individuals not connected with the company or trademark being mentioned in the domain name. Customarily, these individuals expect to sell the domain name back to the company at a profit. Courts are increasingly ruling that trademark or service mark owners have a claim to these domain names. However, when there is a threat that a company's critics might set up an attack Web site, practitioners should consider

advising clients that they acquire preemptively any domain names that include the client's service mark in a derogatory light, such as "FordSucks.com," or "Wal-MartScrewedMe.com." A quick Web search will show you how many such sites exist, for various brand names. Acquiring such domain names in advance prevents their adverse use by groups or individuals opposed to the client.

- Electronic vandals also enjoy breaking into, altering, modifying, and defacing corporate Web-sites, breaking into other corporate computing resources to steal 'sensitive' data for their own financial advantage, or to modify/sabotage/destroy data "simply" to deny the company the use of that data. This is further fodder for crisis plans and collaboration with IT staff.
- 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.
- Federal legislation regarding "no call lists" should be monitored. It could allow consumers to visit a Web site and request that they do not receive unsolicited calls. This legislation could impact the ability to do phone surveys. In mid-2003, the site was being implemented, to be fully available nationwide by late August. Telemarketers are required to use it as of October 1, 2003. We understand that legitimate survey work is exempt. Sales solicitations masquerading as surveys are not. Details:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/edcams/donotcall/index.html> and
<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/alerts/dncalrt.htm>.