

## **Managing sentiment in times of change... *Prema Sagar***

The economic downturn, the pink slips, the offloading of young MBAs ... those of us who believed that corporate India was at a safe distance from these ugly events had their misconceptions rudely rectified last year.

Companies buckled to the pressure of thinning bottomlines and used every conceivable strategy to counter this tide. While everybody fought the fire, few remembered to communicate these changes effectively to their stakeholders. The result: 2001 spelt widespread insecurity about when the axe would strike home.

As we step into 2002, the overriding challenges of the new millennium are becoming clearer. Economic Globalisation is ensuring that no country is isolated from the recessionary winds blowing out of the west. Nor is anybody sheltered from competition that could creep in from the other side of the globe. Add on the new age mantra of 'Corporate leanness and meanness' and reality bites: "Nothing lasts forever, certainly not your job."

If this battle isn't hard enough, you have Big Brother and his entire family watching how you fare. Sudden shifts in public opinion are ignited by instantaneous communication, challenging the ability of communicators to respond to fast moving events. There is a media explosion and nobody, not even the best of PR professionals, can control the media. Anybody who claims otherwise needs to watch their step.

But it's not all bad news. It is only a time crying for experienced players - communication specialists that can see opportunity rather than dark clouds.

This is the time for consolidation, an opportunity to recalibrate both HR and PR. A Voluntary Retirement Scheme may be bad news for HR but PR can smoothen the edges with the right messaging in the internal communication pipelines, transforming it into a well-planned strategy rather than a knee jerk reaction.

All organisations accept that good communications is central to success. Having accepted that, it is then relegated to the sidelines as peripheral - as an "optional bolt on" to the "real" job.

Yet in times like these, it is communications that manages sentiment and addresses the fear of the unknown.

If people are not receiving your changes the way you want them to, it is not because they can't hear you. But you may be saying one thing and they are hearing another. A bigger megaphone will not assure audience attention. Understanding how your stakeholders listen will.

Identifying different audiences - be they consumers, employees, investors, influencers, or any other interest group - and their varying interests is key to a good communications programme. A communication specialist would tailor both the message and the vehicle to suit each audience and its concerns. One size definitely does not fit all in communication.

A good Change Communication strategy is also based on certain crucial factors like the stage of development of an organisation, the external pressures on an organisation or the competitive offer that it makes to the customer.

Parallel to change communication planning is the need for Crisis Communication preparedness. A good crisis communication plan is a must in the prevailing circumstances. We are all tightrope walking even though the R word is still followed by a question mark in India. There are no fireproof suits in today's economy and no company is immune to crises. Even a Coca Cola needs to be



prepared.

An effective crisis plan embraces a proactive, transparent and honest communication policy. Bad times have bad manners and do not knock at the door. And when the shit hits the fan, its all about experience and preparation. It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.

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