



Ferretting Out Change – The Role We Can Play In Defining The Global Business Architecture Moving Forward

BY ELIZABETH HOWARD

Photographs of protestors, dressed in retro 1960s clothing, with police and security guards poised with fire hoses and tear gas behind hastily assembled wire fences and barricades, have become ubiquitous. Above the fold in international news journals, these images now have the impress of archival footage. We are no longer even remotely jarred by the confrontations, only bemused.

The scenarios also involve, of course, black town cars, and ramrod straight, wing-tipped and pin-stripped business and government leaders and others in a position to drive and benefit from globalization, the integration of information, trade, investment and finance. They gather in Davos at the World Economic Forum, in Seattle at a meeting of the World Trade Organization, in Quebec City at a meeting of the Americas. Power pitted against collective idealism.

The struggle is between those in a position to structure and enforce change (the transnational corporations), who are terrified of getting involved for fear of a misstep, (damage to their brand) and those in a position to recognize and understand the new (activists/nongovernmental organizations) who have more to gain and nothing to lose by speaking out.

Activism against corporations and governments, for their complicity in assisting the corporations, has taken many forms. There are the passionate activists like Edmond Morel, one of the first organizers against both European corporations and government activities in the Congo in the 1890s. One of Morel's staunchest supporters in the United States was the popular writer Mark Twain — who could attract crowds and attention in the newspapers.

Mother Jones, the cheerfully vulgar, Cork-born rable-rouser, dressed in boots, granny glasses and a bonnet, took on the Rockefellers in the 1900s and organized union strikes against their mining operations in Colorado. In the early 1990s it was Ken Saro-Wiwa, a popular Nigerian television producer and globe-trotting author of books and children's stories, who organized the Ogoni people in the Delta region of Nigeria to speak out against the environmental degradation resulting from oil extraction in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa's execution led to an international protest against Royal-Dutch Shell and was effective in bringing the discussion of business and human rights into the boardroom.

In the end what we have, in the oft-quoted line from "Cool Hand Luke," is "a failure to communicate." And when there is a breakdown in communications what follows is conflict. For those of us in public relations, particularly on the agency side, we benefit from the conflict. Our services are retained by those being targeted to either play a role in developing solutions, that include establishing dialogue with those on the other side, or working to keep our clients out of the headlines and off the front page. In the process, perhaps finding the agents who can play a role in keeping the situation quiet.

The new protestors, who are leading the backlash against globalization and free-market capitalism, are subtler and better organized as they have the ability to form alliances through the use of the Internet. However, the backlash against capitalism is really a cry out for leadership and solutions for developing a new framework that will play a role in narrowing the divide between wealth and poverty.

Which raises a fundamental question: What is the role of PR practitioners in the new economy? What role

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do we play in working with business leaders to shape the responses to issues that raise ethical questions? How do we counsel business leaders to speak out about human-rights abuses in China? Do our clients understand the nuances of human-rights issues? How do we work with the pharmaceutical industry to ethically handle the AIDS crisis in developing countries in a fair way? Who takes the leadership position on environmental issues? What role can the telecommunications industry play in addressing the issues of the digital divide?

It seems our role is to create long-term strategy for our clients and to assist in helping them undertake a risk assessment moving forward; to help them create a decision map and develop programs that consistently communicate their position on important issues.

Through a series of conversations with practitioners from across the globe, we will seek to raise the questions, suggest solutions and outline examples of how public relations can play an important role in defining the new in a series of four columns. The articles will look at:

- The program PR practitioners can develop to integrate human-rights strategies into the business planning and implementation process. Currently, there is a trend to retain individuals to hold positions that specifically handle human rights. In the spring 2001 issue of *The Strategist*, Marcela Manubens describes her position as the vice president for human rights at the Phillips-Van Heusen Corporation. Beyond compliance, she has responsibility for communicating with external and internal audiences about what the company is doing — in other words, she is doing our job.

- How PR executives working in, and for, multinational companies can work with country-specific teams in developing countries to create programs that do not

upset the balance within the local cultures. In this case, we will look at programs that have been developed in Africa and India, for example, that raise religious, ethical and human-rights issues for those doing business with American- or European-based companies.

- Identify projects that can be studied as exemplary cases of public relations working with corporate leaders to communicate programs that tackle difficult questions.

- Finally, to identify public- and private-sector initiatives that are viewed favorably by groups that comprise the activists in academia, the arts and nongovernmental organizations.

Markets are cyclical and as exhilarating as it has been to go through a period of acceleration, it is important to remember that the elevator comes down the same way the elevator goes up. Our services over the next year will be more in demand than ever before because companies are struggling to maintain their market capitalization. Yet it is the issues, labor and trade, for example, that are affecting their bottom line. Our role as communicators is to help business leaders understand the importance of not ignoring the trends and to assist in putting them in the context of the global economic/business environment.

Now is the opportunity for communicators to play a role in developing strategy and to make sure that we have a seat at the table when the new frameworks for our global economy are being developed. What are you doing for your clients and within your companies to make a difference? Let us know. □

Elizabeth Howard will be writing this column for *The Strategist*. She welcomes your ideas and information about the programs that your company or your agency has developed. You may contact her at Elizabeth Howard and Company by e-mail (Ehoward@hnyc.com) or by telephone: 212.929.3020.