

A variety of stories – from consumer safety issues, to the Maxime Bernier affair, to city hall's 'Sewergate' – have played out before our eyes since last month's column.

This latest round of political scandals and corporate challenges again highlights the new, instantaneous reality and changing rules of issues management for public affairs professionals. My broad definition of public affairs includes media relations, issues management, strategic communications, some aspects of brand marketing and government relations.

Issues explode in an instant and from my experience, the best organizations, be they corporations, governments, associations or NGOs, come out on top when they adhere to the following principles of assertive and advocacy-based communications:

Principle #1 – Treat each issue as a mini-crisis. A crisis can be defined as a condition of instability or danger which usually leads to decisive change – an inflection point, if you will. Approaching issues as a crisis helps an organization focus and marshal appropriate resources (both human and financial), and people should always be mindful of the cardinal rule: don't do anything to make the crisis worse.

Principle #2 – Tell the truth. Ideally, tell it consistently with either one spokesperson or a tightly defined group, but the severity of the issue will determine the appropriate management level from which you should draw your spokespeople. Anyone who talks about 'spinning' your story should be shown the door. Tell the truth and tell a compelling story for sure, but spinning insults the intelligence of the intended audience for your message, and is, frankly, disrespectful.

Principle #3 – Silence is not golden, it's deadly. "No comment" is no good and a no-go in a 21st century world where communication is not one-to-many, but many-to-many, collaborative, perpetually evolving and omnipresent. Of course you must gather all facts and check contentious issues with the legal folks, but transparency, responsiveness and sincerity in your communications or lobbying efforts are paramount and your best strategy.

Principle #4 – Like or love the Internet, don't loathe it. Yes, its open nature can lead to urban legends, misinformation and online grassfires that can erupt in minutes or hours, as opposed to days or weeks. But it's also your real-time window to changing information, shifting public opinion, changes or attacks on your corporate reputation and is the most cost-effective vehicle to communicate your position to niche audiences, or even the entire planet.

Principle #5 – Put your skin in the game and your butt on the line. Some corporate cultures and even large associations still look for third-party validators and industry peers to rise to their defence when things get tough. While coalition responses and independent groups, academics and think-tanks can bolster and buttress your communications effort, if your company or group is not prepared to fight its own battles your chances of success are dramatically diminished.

Principle #6 – A closed corporate culture belongs in a museum. This is tough for many large organizations, especially transnationals with global reputations to manage, communications protocols to follow, and multiple levels of approval to hurdle. But even in these constricting environments, CEOs and chief spokespeople must be comfortable, or become comfortable, to 'speechify' on the rubber chicken and service club circuit and engage critics (especially advocates) in the public domain. And autonomy must diffuse down to local units, so they can flexibly and quickly respond to emerging public affairs issues.

Principle #7 (perhaps the most important) – A live, human face is still the best vehicle. While this is wholly self-evident, it is often overlooked or discarded. And despite my earlier counsel about the ubiquitous nature of the Internet (and blogs, RSS feeds, social media, etc. which have their place in a communications toolbox), there still is no substitute for a live, credible and knowledgeable person to engage the media, meet with customers, advocate before policy-makers, respond to the investment community and explain good or bad news to the public.

For your best chance of success in the public affairs sphere, following and adapting the seven principles of assertive, advocacy-based communications, is, in this scribe's opinion, the way forward.

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