

GIBBS & SOELL

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Dealing with the Inelegance of Change

The moment has arrived when accountants dutifully guide us in the task of packing one year into a time capsule to usher in a new one. Balanced books in hand, we bid farewell. However, we also reflect on the world around us and the improbability of forcing months of burning rage elegantly into a vessel and sealing it shut.

From the Arab Spring to the formative Russian Winter and all the Occupy Wall Street franchises in between, the struggle for change has been a messy affair. Disarray seems to be our constant companion these days. And it appears the chaos will press on unabated into the pristine new year.

As it does, a weary world pauses to ask: Where are we headed on this journey?

Patience to Pivot

Communications business leaders have picked up similar signals from employees, clients and industry partners. Sacrifice and cautious optimism have been constant watchwords. Resilient professional communicators, both new and experienced, in-house and agency, have continued to demonstrate uncommon ingenuity in doing way more with so much less.

Operating from a position of abundance rather than scarcity will take a while. But the communications profession is one that loathes the inelegance of change. We are at our best when we anticipate, mitigate and facilitate.

Turning the corner will have to start with changing our vantage point.

The Gin Rummy Model

Pivoting will take nothing short of shifting our own understanding of the customers and stakeholders who form the centers of gravity for our clients.

David Edelman of management consultancy McKinsey & Company recently urged marketers at a gath-

ering of the CMO Council to reconsider the conventional view of the consumer's decision making. For decades, a funnel or inverted pyramid illustrated the sequence for how a person typically selects a product or adopts an idea. The metaphor suggested that strong brand or issue awareness had to be evident at the very beginning of an elimination process, the culmination of which was a purchase or advocacy.

Instead the card game of gin rummy serves as a better model, asserts Edelman. In gin rummy, a player seeks to continually maximize the value of his hand at each turn by discarding less desirable cards for new ones. In a competitive marketplace or an ideological debate, stakeholders are in a perpetual state of identifying which brand attributes or values they connect with most strongly. The exposure to their choices over a period of time becomes far more important than which ones are top of mind closer to the point of decision.

Reputation Shaper

Extolling the virtues of earned media and its newer instruments of engagement, social networking and word-of-mouth, is the tireless work of the PR evangelist within an integrated communications team.

Advertising and marketing may have played more dominant roles in what was once perceived as the critical entry and exit points of the traditional sales funnel. However, with the gin rummy model, PR's value now increases as it plays the



role of the reputation shaper throughout a more complex protocol for determining preference.

Realigning responsibilities to support our audience's evolved decision making experience will require more than assigning exotic new job titles or issuing big pronouncements about structural changes.

How then should communication chiefs start calibrating their organizations for this marketplace?

With a world still gnashing its teeth for answers, even the smallest changes have to be birthed naturally and simply.

Crowdsourcing an Identity

A coalition of communications associations is attempting to do just that. In October 2011, a global alliance, which includes the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators and Arthur W. Page Society, embarked on a quest to define the modern practice of PR.

According to the PRSA's website, "There was consensus among the group that an updated definition not only would be advantageous, but a critical need given the radical changes that have impacted the profession over the last several years. Participants were asked to consider the modern scope of public relations, including the profession's evolution into social media, word-of-mouth marketing and integrated marketing communications."

The group took its challenge to the worldwide community of professional communicators by calling for submissions in a collaborative process. Currently under review are nearly 1,000 entries and comments, which will be considered in formulating three options for the

definition. These will then be put to a public vote on the website of PRSA.

In addition, recent research commissioned by PRSA found that MBA graduates are struggling to appropriately manage communications centered on corporate affairs and crises. PRSA has now undertaken a separate initiative to introduce a PR course for MBA candidates.

Painful Progress


Similar changes are afoot at communications firms. Kathy Cripps, president of the Council of Public Relations Firms, recently wrote in a blog post, "We (PR firms) want to get the word out about our industry's capacity to serve as valuable partners to change. We also need to make sure that we and our clients remain committed to the sometimes painful journey that is innovation."

At Gibbs & Soell, much of the retrenchment undergone by our clients in the consumer home and financial services industries—areas that were hit harder by the economic downturn—has given way to a strategic resolve to get closer to the customer.

Our clients in these sectors and many others see paths to their audiences that aren't lit up with neon signs saying "PR," "advertising," or "marketing." It simply is the path toward progress.

Even more exhilarating is the expansion of the definition of a stakeholder. Once narrowly defined B2C, B2B and B2G organizations are embracing the concept of communicating across an entire value chain. After all, reputations don't get stamped out like tidy cookie-cutter silhouettes. Reputations are multifaceted assets that

are shaped over time through the shared opinions of a group of people.

In the new year, perhaps one item we should bury is the notion that progress is not painful or has to be pretty. Anyone up for a game of gin rummy? 

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