

The Control Conundrum

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A PR practitioner suggested a story idea to a CEO. His idea was to get a columnist in a major newspaper to feature the CEO, the CEO's leadership and the CEO's progress in turning a company around. The problem was that the columnist was uncertain whether the turnaround was accomplished. The PR practitioner addressed this by maneuvering the CEO and columnist together in a situation where they could talk without a formal interview. The columnist was impressed and inclined to write but in no hurry. The PR practitioner fed the columnist e-mail after e-mail with tidbits of information to encourage the columnist to write. This lasted four months.

It happened that the company's year-end numbers were outstanding and proof the CEO had done what he said he would do. The columnist relented and went ahead with the story. The columnist interviewed the CEO with the PR practitioner listening in, and the column appeared a short time later. The PR practitioner thought it balanced and favorable – a coup after all the hard work. The CEO, on the other hand, hated the column and everything about it. He said the column set back his reputation and that of the company. The practitioner, smarting from the CEO's anger, sought advice from the CEO's peers. They thought the column was good and supported the practitioner. But, that didn't matter to the CEO. The CEO said the article got into things it shouldn't have. It rehashed old news and compromised the CEO.

Regrettably, this is a true story. In picking through the ruins of a "PR triumph," we concluded an old bugbear had struck again – message control. The CEO thought he and the PR practitioner had controlled the journalist and guided the reporter to write the message the CEO wanted. Obviously, neither had done so, nor could they.

Business people believe in control. They control processes, people, logistics, systems and purchased media like advertising. They speak in control terms, think in control assumptions, measure to maintain control and dream of new ways to reduce uncertainty in the business environment. They reward one another for controlling business and punish leaders who let operations spin out of control.

Is there any wonder why many businesspeople are anxious about uncontrolled media? Is there any doubt why message control is a source of tension for PR practitioners? One would think business executives would understand the uncontrolled nature of third-party media by now. They don't, and they won't. Worse, PR practitioners have played along with the desire for control. A

practitioner will tell a CEO that the practitioner can guide results, that the practitioner knows this reporter or that editor, that the practitioner can train the CEO to stay on message and that the practitioner can express a concept in such a way that it is likely to remain untouched. Of course, the practitioner is careful to hedge claims with a statement that one ultimately cannot control reporters. But, the implication is the practitioner has a semblance of control. And, CEOs believe it.

There is reason for CEOs to believe beyond their bias for control. Some PR messages are more controllable than others in uncontrolled media. But, CEOs often do not understand distinctions between what can be guided and what can't. For that matter, executives below a CEO don't understand the differences either, especially marketing executives. The primary medium of marketing is advertising -- messages expressed precisely to well-targeted audiences through planned media buys. Aligned with advertising are trade shows and promotions designed and built with controlled expression in mind. Allied to these are brochures, fliers, Web sites, e-mail, direct mail, catalogs, presentations, giveaways and banners, events and more. Directing all these controlled media is a master control -- media integration.

Publicity enters this mix and is successful under certain circumstances. Success comes from the type of information purveyed to the media, such as product and service descriptions, specifications, features, functions and benefits. Journalists tend to use this information as-is because it is factual and readers want to know it. Only a few media test products and services to see if they live up to stated claims. (To maintain control of these media, engineers will prep a product or service for testing -- common in high-tech publicity.) Product testers like *Consumers Union*, the nonprofit publisher of *Consumer Reports* are considered uncontrolled and risky, because they buy products and service anonymously and test them independently. However, there are few such organizations like *Consumers Union*.

Marketing publicity goes farther when it attempts to insert controlled phrases and imagery into uncontrolled media along with product and service information. If a company is the source of imagery, there is a good chance media will use it, especially trade media that document what a company says about itself. Further, unsophisticated media will take controlled marketing messages because they have no other way of expressing the concept.

On the other hand, publicists can press limits and make claims that are so far out the media reject them. "Vaporware" was a common term during tech mania of the 1980s and 1990s. "Vaporware" included companies and products that would deliver amazing features, functions and benefits if they arrived, but they rarely did. Microsoft, especially, engaged in "vaporware" promises that eventually turned reporters into skeptics. As the tech industry matured and industry reporters became sophisticated, it became harder to make promises that cannot

survive analysis. That doesn't mean companies have given up "vaporware." In computer gaming, for example, there are a number of companies that promise new games or updates for months and years before they appear, if they ever do.

Other semi-controlled publicity also tends to survive the editorial process – high-interest or popular news. For example, new cures for diseases tend to get column space and airtime quickly because personal health is a popular issue. Community events may also show up regularly. For example, when the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus visits Manhattan, there are one of two events that get into newspapers and on TV – an elephant parade through the auto tunnel beneath the Hudson River or clowns visiting City Hall. These staged events have happened for decades and are covered each time. The same happens with many parades, charity benefits, society functions, awards banquets, etc. It is as if there is unspoken agreement between a medium and organization to take what the organization presents. But control can break down if something out-of-bounds occurs. One year during the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, a gust of wind pushed a large float balloon into a light standard that fell and crushed the skull of a female spectator. Suddenly, the parade with its controlled messaging did not matter to the media. Several trumpeted cures for cancer over the years have later been proven ineffective and widely debunked in the media.

A third form of message control is momentarily in disrepute. This is an attempt by companies to guide what is said about them as financial investments. Neither PR practitioners nor investor relations specialists drive these controlled messages: Investment bankers do. During the high-tech Bubble of the late 1990s, numerous "concept" companies were taken public at high stock prices for which investment bankers and stock analysts "flacked" cynically. Journalists interviewed analysts and investment bankers and faithfully recorded opinions and stock picks. Television anchors on *CNBC* and *CNN/fn* invited analysts onto the air to talk about sure-fire stock winners of today and tomorrow. PR practitioners entered this unholy alliance through relationships with journalists, but for the most part, they were a sideshow in a stock marketing circus. Since that debacle, controls have been put over stock analysts to isolate them from investment bankers and prevent investment bankers from influencing analysts' decisions. But, this doesn't mean such controlled message sending won't happen again. It will because there is a lot of money riding on a successful initial public offering of stock.

The irony of controlled messaging, of course, is that readers and viewers invest the most credibility in uncontrolled media. The irony is enhanced by CEOs' desires to be featured positively in uncontrolled media precisely because the media have greater credibility.

But, CEOs frequently do not understand journalistic independence. They have difficulty with reporters who ask hard questions and are not satisfied with stock

answers. They don't like reporters who are skeptical of marketing messages. They get annoyed that careful reporters, to get both sides of an issue, look for critics of a company and use extensive research resources and contacts to validate a company's claims.

There are controls for such uncontrolled reporters, but they don't work in all cases and sometimes, they don't work at all.

- **Cherry picking:** A CEO only talks to media that lean toward the company. This can work well until a determined and critical reporter goes after the firm.
- **Silence:** A CEO does not deal with the media at all. Surprisingly, this tactic works for companies out of the news stream. Firms that perform sensitive work especially have kept to themselves, their investors and customers. Avoiding the media can work as long as a company avoids controversy. The difficulty in the Internet age is to avoid controversy. There are many self-appointed critics.
- **Cowing:** One well-known CEO has practiced this craft and gotten away with it for decades. If a reporter writes anything critical about the CEO's company, the CEO crushes the reporter with facts that the CEO is careful to give to the reporter's editors.
- **Structured interviews:** The CEO states in advance questions a journalist may ask.
- **Parrying:** The CEO simply does not answer some questions. (This appears to have been the mistake the CEO made at the beginning of this essay. The CEO answered questions about personally sensitive topics and was unhappy the reporter picked up on them.)

The Limits of Control

One can maintain message control as long as independent reporters and analysts do not ask questions and do not publish reports. There are still industries that have poor or no coverage in either trade or general media. One of the most surprising is insurance, which is too large to be covered so poorly. On the other hand, one cannot maintain message control if a company is the subject of news stories, whether or not the company solicits them. Companies with large public exposure fall into this category, as well as organizations deemed of public importance. Thus, it would be impossible for General Motors, IBM or Microsoft to hide from the media. Reporters will cover them. In addition, it is impossible for a public utility to disappear because of the electricity and gas it provides to consumers. On the other hand, a coal company that provides fuel to the power company might not deal with the media much at all.

There is no perfect solution for message control in uncontrolled media. It will continue to bug CEOs. One point PR practitioners need to understand is that engaging with the media is a CEO's preference and not a duty. There are CEOs who do not talk much to the media. Others are media sophisticates. Further, PR practitioners should neither claim to control the media nor pursue a *laissez faire* approach. Either way, they limit their usefulness as counselors. PR exists in a zone between a CEO and the media. The practitioner leans toward control or away depending on circumstances.

The CEO at the beginning of this essay still hasn't reconciled himself to the column that appeared. He still believes the reporter got it wrong and emphasized the wrong messages. There may be nothing anyone can do to get the CEO to read the column objectively.

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