

“Credibility is king”

A conversation with Conference Co-chair, John Deveney, APR

Selected New Orleans-based PR practitioners sat down recently with PRSA President and CEO Reed Bolton Byrum, APR, President-elect Del Galloway, APR, and Conference Co-chairs John Deveney, APR, and Dave Rickey, APR, to discuss specific elements of this year's International Conference, “Building Credibility, Confidence and Respect,” in New Orleans, Oct. 25-28. Tactics will bring you excerpts of those interviews over the next three months.

The first interview is with John Deveney, APR, senior counsel for Deveney Communication, an internationally recognized PR firm that uses integrated marketing to make international, national and local clients more successful.

Nicholas Shapiro, one of Deveney Communication's senior communication strategists, interviewed Deveney. Here are excerpts from that interview.

How important is credibility?

Credibility is king. Individuals are more informed, more discerning and more powerful today than ever. When individuals come together either in support of a cause or as consumers of a product, they are a force to be reckoned with. Gaining credibility with these groups is how you can harness this force.

Because audiences are more discerning, they are more selective in the sources of information they use. Any organization or information source that is not perceived as credible is disregarded, or worse yet, attracts significant opposition. Credibility wins the day.

Are most practitioners performing in a credible manner today?

Our profession has a history of being underappreciated, underutilized and absent at the boardroom table for top-level strategic decisions. That is changing. Today's practitioners are capable strategists and are relied on to help corporate, civic and political leaders chart the best courses of action, make the right decisions and build the best possible future for their organizations and the people they serve.

Whether this more significant role is the cause or the effect of our performing credibly is uncertain, but it is certain we are living in a new age for the PR practitioner. PR's power and appreciation are stronger than in the past, and growing. CEOs, statesmen and colleagues from other disciplines are recognizing it and jumping on the PR bandwagon.

In the wake of recent corporate scandals, are today's business leaders turning to PR practitioners to learn and succeed or to duck and cover?

It is easy to spot from the day's headlines which leaders are utilizing strategic communication counsel and which are not.

Organizations that are making gains during tremendous turmoil and market challenges are crafting and following sound communication strategies that revolve at their core around sound ethical, honest actions.

There are excellent examples of leaders clearly incorporating strategic communication counsel in their decisions. NASA's Sean O'Keefe, who will be a General Session speaker at the Conference on Oct. 28, has handled the Columbia tragedy and the investigation that ensued with candor, transparency and leadership.

This caliber of leader is just the perspective you'll see at the Conference. Top corporate, nonprofit and association leaders will provide practitioners with the opportunity to review and challenge the best practices that are fermenting across the globe in response to some of the toughest situations.

How can practitioners gain credibility with vital audiences?

Our industry lives and dies by our ethical behavior. PRSA's Code of Ethics should be second nature to us all.

Research is another powerful resource. Regardless of the industry or environment, communicators manage the challenges of change at unprecedented speed and significance. For us to best counsel leaders, we must have answers: What is the situation? Who are crucial audience members? Who do we need to reach? Who could be our partners? What is current audience perception? What is important to them? What credibility do we currently have with them, and how can we gain greater credibility?

Next, I'd say enlisting the support of credible third parties is another significant factor. Identifying opinion leaders within a community and organizations or authorities that have the trust and attention of the people you are trying to reach can be critical in gaining or retaining credibility.

Ultimately, it is communication. The



manner, frequency and quality of communication between an organization and the public that will gain or gut credibility.

Given the speed and complexity of change PRSA members face, how can professionals remain credible?

Research has shown for some time that the most influential factor in shaping

people's opinions or calling them to action is the news media. That's what makes media relations so significant in our profession, and why our ability to crystallize public opinion and inspire individuals to act is so vital.

Now, the public is increasingly skeptical of the news media. Research indicates that people believe news organizations often get facts wrong and have their own agendas. This reflects a more informed and discerning public. Instead of relying on traditional news organizations, people hit the Internet. They question and challenge the predigested synopsis that we see in the news, which used to be the vanguard of public opinion.

Our application of the Internet, through discussion groups, Web chats, Web sites and other online vehicles represents the new toolbox for practitioners to shape and lead public opinion, but only if we retain credibility. No new tactic replaces the bottom-line necessity of operating ethically.

The Internet is a double-edged sword. Without a doubt, it's a channel to identify, reach and connect with discreet communities. However, online communities have a particularly low tolerance for anything short of complete candor, transparency and fact. Shaped messages online can be the opposite of effective.

The chief challenge for our profession is how we harness the opportunity and information on the Internet. That is why professional organizations like PRSA are fundamental resources, particularly our International Conference. The Conference points people in the right direction, offers best practices and provides the professional development and direction needed in managing this significant change.

What are some of the critical ways to earn the trust and gain the credibility of the audiences you referenced?

Credibility has become a difficult

and moving target. The standard keeps getting higher. As challenging as that is for organizational leaders, it is a hopeful sign that we are becoming a more enlightened society.

Credibility is tied to the communication function. Whether we are talking about Enron or Martha Stewart, people want transparency — they want candid, open, honest communication of business practices.

To gain credibility with one audience, organizations are reviewed on how they treat other audiences.

Cynicism would eclipse an organization that promotes that they care about their customers, if that same organization didn't have a comparable track record with their own employees.

People want to buy from, fly with and invest in companies that are honest with their vendors, supportive of their employees, caring with their neighbors and good to the environment.

Practitioners are the architects and protectors of an organization's brand. Credibility is crucial to brand identity, as are transparency and good business practices with vendors and employees. But you have to look at the whole picture; you have to put the organization in the context of the society in which it lives. Are the executives that lead the organization demonstrated industry leaders and committed philanthropic partners? Are they involved in their community independently as well as corporately?

If credibility is lost, can it be earned back?

Admittedly, it's an uphill battle. Regaining credibility after it has been lost demands candor. Offenders have to recognize the reality of the situation and be open and honest about it. That first step cannot be overstated. If it doesn't happen, then all the smoke and mirrors embattled CEOs may beg for are not going to make a considerable difference. First, you need to be open and honest about what happened, and ask yourself what the causal incident was that lost your credibility.

If an organization and its leadership can do that, then they can start on the path to regain credibility. That path is marked by candid and honest disclosure, an interest in the community around you as expressed through the individuals that make up that community, and a dedication to doing the right thing. **T**