

Strategic Communications:

By

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Before the Gulf War had even begun in 1991, the US Defence Department had hired the public relations company, Hill and Knowlton, to manage the communications for the War.

The Gulf War was the first successful use of public relations as a primary weapon of warfare.

While a military war took place in the desert, advances in electronic media and the use of a communications strategy allowed for another war, a war of perception and persuasion, to take place on the airwaves of the world. Thomas Guisto, an assignment editor for ABC Television in the US, states, “The most powerful weapon in the War was not the tanks, the battleships, nor the bombers. The most powerful weapon was the TV camera.” (Guisto, PRJ June, P.10)

During the Gulf War, it was recognised that public relations and communication management was a critical means to achieving political goals. Communication strategies utilised media opportunities to control perception and create credibility for the War.

Strategic management of communications has become a vital ingredient in the development of public relations campaigns. Whether a campaign is designed for business or politics, an organised and strategic plan is now essential to its success. Simply stated, a strategic plan provides a pro-active and disciplined focus of resources and intelligence to achieve a future designated goal. It gives a campaign coherence and time control and is a coordinated process for persuasion. It allows the future, as depicted in a goal, to determine the present.

Strategic Communications management has become increasingly important because information control, image development and the use of persuasion have become so important. Information and communication are what define the new technological age that is developing across the world and with it comes a new awareness of the value of communication management. Newt Gingrich, the Speaker of the US Congress has said, “In 1991 the world witnessed the first war between Third Wave military systems and an obsolete military machine” (Toffler p. 15). Desert Storm was a war between the sophisticated high-technology of a new information based civilisation and the hardware of the old and dying industrial civilisation. It was a clash of cultures. If we did not hear the prophecies of Alvin Toffler in 1981, then we saw them demonstrated for us in 1991.

Alvin Toffler in his books *The Third Wave* and *Creating a New Civilization*, tells us that humanity is currently experiencing the emergence of a new civilization based on information, knowledge and communication. He says the world is facing a ‘quantum leap’ in its social, economic and political realities and that we are facing perhaps ‘...the deepest social upheaval and creative restructuring of all time’ (Toffler, 1995. p.19).

This ‘third wave of technology’ is overtaking the industrialised world with its emphasis on production, consumption and capital. It is creating, Toffler says, not just new ways of doing things, but a new civilization based on information, where knowledge is redefined as wealth. In this world, communications is the life blood of any business, and communications management a necessity for success. Indeed, it redefines success.

In so many ways this new age has come into our lives rapidly. Most businesses, and many homes now have PC computers. People now have fax machines, mobile phones and remote control TV and we have more power and choice in our communication and communication

technology. Yet, PC computers only came on the market in any real commercial form in the early 1980s and the giant company Microsoft Word is only some 15 years old.

The office has been literally transformed by the computer and is going to change even further as the Internet, World Wide Web, and homepage all become familiar features of office communication. It is predicted (on the Internet) that by the year 2010, every individual on Earth between the ages of 25-55 will be able to communicate on the Internet.

It is these kind of changes that are also changing the nature of the media. Greater media options are creating increased audience and buyer choice. People can now choose their information and entertainment from a variety of sources. Consequently, it is impossible to talk of the mass media any more as society is being demassified (Toffler, 1995) and audiences are designated as product, medium or lifestyle specific. For the communications manager, it is now possible to talk of the virtual public, or audience, as messages are developed and directed at target groups.

This personally empowered society places new demands upon communication mediums to know and reach their specific audiences. Accordingly, the ability of a business, or even a politician, to design communication strategies to reach their predicted goals will become the determining factor in its success.

As communications and public perception become increasingly important, so strategic communication must incorporate image management in its scheme. The importance of image and perception control was illustrated in the Gulf War. Still, image management is perhaps nowhere more evident than in politics and in the film industry. In the last US Presidential campaign, Bush and Clinton spent a combined \$155 million on their media coverage. But

Hollywood, the city of image makes, tells the story of the value of image making best. As publicist Howard Bragman explains; "... if you're talking an 'A' grade list star, your talking a \$25-50 million a year business of which a publicist takes 30-40%" (Hollywood Wrap, Webpage).

Image making, however, has become just as important to business as it is to a military campaign or a politician. People now ask questions of companies and their products like, "Is the product environmentally friendly?"; "Is the company socially responsible?"; and "Is it healthy?" The image a company projects is now as important as the quality of their products and their marketing plans.

Strategic Communications is the art of persuasion. It is the marshalling of resources and the formulation of ideas to reach a target audience with a designer message. In an age where communication is becoming so important, and time is money, public relations will redefine itself as communications management and develop strategies that bring discipline to the communications process. In this context, the public relations industry will grow as it is seen increasingly as an important management feature in the new and developing communications age.