



Dr. Nicholas Neupauer Op-Ed from Community College Times

11.14.2013

Long before becoming a college president, I doubled as a faculty member teaching public relations and served as a consultant in the field. I enjoyed teaching various PR courses. But what I learned consulting will last me a lifetime.

I had just returned to my office from teaching when I retrieved a voice mail. It was the CEO of a company that retained my consulting services. On the message, he said he was contacted by someone from a TV station ... in the New York City market ... an investigative reporter.

"No worries," the CEO said. "I invited the reporter over, told him I would take him out to dinner and buy him a few drinks. I'm sure the problem will go away."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what happened next.

Insufficiently prepared

I doubt your president is a rocket scientist. But, according to an [American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#) survey entitled "[The American College President: 2012](#)," they're not experts in public relations either. Seventeen percent of presidents responding to the survey said they were insufficiently prepared in media/public relations as a first-time president (up from 8.8 percent in 2006). Only 8 percent said the area they enjoyed most was media/public relations. Perhaps most troubling was that only 4.1 percent said media/public relations was an area that has increased in level of importance.

This article is part of a bimonthly series provided by the National Council for Marketing and Public Relations, an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges. When asked to define public relations, I make it very simple. Public relations is ... the relations of publics. That's it: the relations of publics.

Something so simple, yet so powerful. And certainly not easy. But to be effective, public relations must be practiced at the managerial/strategic level. It is planned, proactive and intentional; not "off-the-cuff" or "last minute."

It's that managerial and strategic part that most college presidents don't seem to comprehend. Perhaps their knowledge of the field conjures P.T. Barnum ("there's a sucker born every minute") or Michael J. Fox's popular TV sitcom, "Spin City."

They have little understanding of the significance of two-way communication with internal and external audiences. Nor do most college presidents know that positive media relations often correlate to positive media coverage. Remember, only 4.1 percent of the presidents responding to the ACE survey said media relations/PR has increased in level of importance.

At the table

At Butler County Community College in Pennsylvania, we have data and examples of exceptional media coverage that validate our strategic approach.

And our leader doing so is Susan Changnon, executive director of communications and marketing. Susan was promoted to the college's executive management team soon after I became president in 2007.

Robert Mathias of Ogilvy PR perhaps best sums up the evolution of this role:

"There was a time when the group of decision-makers was sitting at the table and the PR (person) was outside the door and waiting for the decision to be made. Then they would come out and say, 'This is what we've decided; this is what to say, now go say it.'

"As the industry evolved a bit, the PR (person) was brought in and sat on the edge of the room; able to hear the discussion but had no input on the decision. Then the decision-makers would look at him/her and say, 'okay, now go say it.'

"Today, the PR professional is actually at the table ... and actually part of the decision-making process."

College presidents need to follow suit. As a fellow president, I know the demands of the job. I understand the importance of a solid executive team. But unlike most presidents who responded to the ACE survey, I also know public relations – strategic public relations. Although my training is in the field, hardly a day goes by when Susan isn't consulted to ensure that our relations with publics remain strategic, purposeful and effective.

Come to think of it, that's worth a toast tonight at dinner.

By NICHOLAS C. NEUPAUER