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PR TECHNIQUE ORGANIZED LABOR

Using PR to strike before the union does



Strikes... "you get into a spitting match with a union, and the best you can get is a tie—and it's a down-and-dirty tie"

Any labor action could potentially damage a company's image. John N. Frank finds how to use PR to minimize problems while staying sympathetic to the employees

Tim O'Brien, principal with O'Brien Communications in Pittsburgh, has worked on his share of labor issues over the years. That experience has taught him that unions go into such actions with a distinct edge over most companies.

"Organized labor has an advantage because they are primarily communications organizations," he explains.

Companies facing labor actions have to become as adept—if not more so—at communications as the unions if they hope to emerge without long-lasting scars on their businesses, O'Brien and others agree.

"One of the biggest mistakes that businesses often make is they go into hibernation" in terms of communications during a labor action, cautions Bill Murray, SVP in public affairs and crisis communications with The MWW Group. "You can't."

Another mistake CEOs often make is to take any labor action against the company as a personal affront. Rather than try to communicate their side of the issue, they become defensive and attack either the union involved, the workers, or both. That can be a formula for long-term labor and business disasters, experts agree.

"The mistake many companies make is they fight back," says Eric Yaverbaum, president of Jericho Communications in New York. "You get into a spitting match with a union, and the

best you can get is a tie—and it's a down-and-dirty tie. Unions play a great game; they know exactly how far to push without stepping over the line."

Communicating during labor actions means reaching out to key audiences—workers, customers, suppliers, and others—with factual statements about a company's position and why that position makes sense for those key audiences.

"You're trying to position your company in the court of public opinion and at the bargaining table," says Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department, in Farmington, CT. Mike Lake, a managing director with Burson-Marsteller in Dallas, adds, "Don't have that siege mentality. Articulate your points of view factually, not emotionally."

A company facing a union organizing drive, for example, can give information to workers about the history of unions and discuss the loss of flexibility that might come from having a union, says Yaverbaum.

If a unionized company is facing a strike, it should build relations with the media to ensure its side of the issue is getting fair play. "To engage the press at the same time as labor is important," says Murray. "There are sessions you can have with the press so you can guide the facts."

Being aware of every opportunity to engage the press helps as well. Dresner, for example, advises having a company PR person near union picket lines so

that when a TV crew shows up for worker comments, they can hear from the company too. "You want to create the opportunity to tell your side," he says.

Often the company's story will be told by managers and other workers not involved in the labor action, so companies need to communicate key messages to those groups. Internally, everyone should be briefed on how to refer press calls to the PR staff, for example. "You tighten up your modes of communications," says Dresner. Reach other workers and managers through special websites set up for that purpose during a labor action, through newsletters and through company meetings, experts say.

Another key consideration is selecting and training a company spokesperson. Often a CEO is the last person to take that role because of the risk he or she may take some union comment personally and become publicly hostile.

Dresner recalls working with a company facing a union organizing effort in which the company CEO wasn't conveying the right tone even after media training. Dresner opted to select a second spokesperson from the company's board.

Leza Raffel, president of the Communications Solutions Group in Jenkinstown, PA, works with school districts facing strikes. She often selects a school-board member who also is a parent in the district. Such a person can be compassionate to

parent concerns and appear more genuine in doing so than a superintendent or a district attorney who may be the chief negotiator, she reasons.

While attorneys may not be the best spokespeople, they are important parts of any labor action team, so PR people need to work closely with them on all communications. Law firms working with companies often are the ones that hire outside PR firms. They understand the need for communications, so they don't view them in an adversarial light, experts agree. "They know what we're trying to do here," says Dresner.

The best time to start communication efforts surrounding a labor action is before the action comes to a head—be it a strike, a union vote, or a labor slowdown or sick-out. Jonathon Bernstein of Bernstein Crisis Management in Monrovia, CA, has worked with a roofing company that twice beat union organizing attempts. "It's my belief that the reason the union action didn't expand was because this company was prepared," he says.

"Contingency planning should begin the moment you have any indication a crisis could occur."

For his client, that happened when a union notified it of its intention to try an organizing drive. Bernstein helped the company develop messages to customers on the benefits of the company remaining nonunion. He also addressed the fact that workers already said they didn't want the union in a first vote. A website was prepared with key messages for customers, prospects, and the media.

When the union began picketing client job sites, he put up cameras "that served notice to the unions that everything they did was on the record," Bernstein recalls. That can prevent unpleasant incidents or, if they occur, document who started them.

Once a company that has faced a strike or other labor action has settled, it then should strengthen labor-management communications to smooth over lingering animosity, as well as to prevent or mitigate the severity of future actions.

Technique tips

Do take the high road, discussing facts, not emotions
Do select an appropriate spokesperson— who may not be the CEO
Do be prepared; start when signs of possible trouble emerge, if not before

Don't get into a spitting contest with union leaders, trying to show who is tougher
Don't go into a comms bunker and refuse to talk to the media
Don't neglect to prepare consistent messages for all key audiences