

**W**e live in an era dominated by commerce, technologies and communication on a global scale. The Internet and social media have penetrated much of the world, and the day appears to be ruled by speed, standardization and efficiency.

In such a world, it is easy for PR professionals to conclude that information, too, has become more efficient and commoditized — that overarching corporate or product messages can be rendered suitable, with simple adaptations, for people all over the world.

So why have we seen so many crises lately in which the cross-border flow of information, or the lack thereof, has exacerbated the original calamities?

For months, we were bombarded by images of stuck accelerators and auto recalls, followed by visuals of gushing oil, slimy birds and blackened beaches. But missing in most of the coverage was the critical fact that these crises occurred outside the cultural comfort zones of the companies' home nations.

In *The New York Times* on Aug. 21, columnist Peter Goodman dissected the cross-cultural challenges of these cases. He described British Petroleum's former CEO Tony Hayward as "an unfeeling rich guy with a fancy accent" who tried to appease shrimpers fearing for their livelihoods with "a series of tin-eared utterances." When these faux pas contributed to the executive's subsequent departure, a Gulf Coast native replaced him.

Goodman also noted that, similarly, when faced with U.S. demands for accountability, Toyota's CEO Akio Toyoda traveled to Capitol Hill. However, he "read haltingly from his notes as a gray-suited assemblage of minders sat behind him, shifting nervously as he struggled to pronounce 'condolences.'"

Crisis experts suggested in the article that Toyota responded to its crisis in a way that was culturally acceptable in its homeland — but that when the crisis played out on foreign soil, it did not go so well. Both firms, the experts noted,

would have benefited greatly from communication counsel by someone "who really knows our American society."

Both of these corporations faced what many transnational organizations have learned or will inevitably learn: The world is still fraught with opportunities for catastrophic mistakes across national borders. The question is, How can these be avoided — and how can public relations help?

In interviews with global PR experts and through personal experiences, we have observed that organizations, when rolling out PR programs globally, commit three fundamental errors — with each error building on the previous one.

First, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what

# Effective Global Public Relations

## Gearing Up for Change

BY ROBERT IRWIN WAKEFIELD, PH.D.,  
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globalization means, even on a personal level. Gail Thornton, a longtime global practitioner in the pharmaceutical industry, currently at Merck, explains that building relationships and partnerships with regional and local country communicators is an important part of an integrated global communications strategy, which delivers value to the business.

“Typically, many communicators in the United States don’t have a comfort level working day-to-day across different cultures and many time zones simultaneously,” she says. “They think a few multinational projects are exciting, short-term experiences, and they don’t realize that it’s a long-term process to build sustainable partnerships among and within different cultures.”

Second, even if organizations can transcend this first misstep, they fail to realize what it means to carry out a truly globalized PR program. Sue Breach, public affairs leader, Dow Europe, says, “My ability to be effective is to be able to connect to people around the world personally — people who can help support and influence how things are done in the various geographies.”

The final error is failure to establish sufficient resources to help a global PR program succeed over a long period of time. Staffing and maintaining global communications can be expensive, time-consuming and challenging (and all of these are anathema to today’s demands for efficiency), but anything less opens up the organization to major vulnerabilities around the world.

### Striking the balance

In the 1980s and 1990s, multinational PR experts advocated the need to balance global standardizations with local sensitivities and adaptations. Many authors today suggest that the global reach and spontaneity of the Internet have reduced the need for such a balance. However, those who have practiced globally for any period of time understand that this balance is still critical.

“Globalization doesn’t relate to human beings,” Breach says.

“People have their languages, their beliefs and their behaviors, and you can never globalize that. Big mistakes can be made in the cultural realm, and that’s why you need people in place in every locality. Markets are global, economics and some political events have a global reach, but everything else will always be within a country, and I don’t see that changing.”

Kanina Blanchard, president of Opportunity Creation, a Canada-based consulting firm, noted a general failure among PR officers to delineate the nuances of the global-local balance. Most, for example, talk about overall strategy and local adaptation. But both global strategies and local strategies are needed. Implementation of strategies, such as media relations,

community relations and issues anticipation, is also critical at both the global and, perhaps even more important, the local levels.

The direction or extent of this balance, however, depends on the industry or business. “Take the chlorine industry versus the automotive aftermarket business,” Blanchard says. “In those two businesses, it may make sense to have different approaches to localization.”

In the former, a commoditized business, a product price is often set globally and employees in the industry work to essentially the same standards. Cultural variations are limited, and it’s a defined business community.

However, in a business dealing with automotive repair shops, for example, there is more interaction with customers with different languages, cultures, preferences and expectations in a given market. You have hundreds of individual organizations that do business with different audiences and with different expectations and complexities. In the latter example, marketing and communication on a more local level

is critical, Blanchard says.

### Achieving harmony

A delicate global presence with a local touch does not happen by chance. Here are a few suggestions for achieving this balance:

- **Choose the right people**

In our careers as corporate PR managers, we have both lived and worked outside the United States, and we have observed that some individuals flourish in the role of managing local public relations and some fail profoundly. Choosing the right people, whether local practi-

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**“Globalization will never alter the essence of the PR role.”**  
— Sue Breach

tioners or headquarters-based PR managers, is vital. It’s equally critical to properly utilize their talents.

“Many companies have strong and gifted communications talent around the world,” says Thornton, “but few have strategically positioned the value of the communications function and linked their overall strategy to global and regional business objectives, while at the same time, developing extensive relationships and meaningful engagement with country communicators.”

Only a small percentage of companies holistically integrate communications into day-to-day operations and assess its impact on the company. Each of these concepts is part of a tightly interwoven approach, and if these are not employed concurrently, the company’s reputation and brand are both at risk, Thornton says.

Blanchard adds, “Organizations need to put individuals in these roles who understand stakeholder relationships.”

- **Have a passion for the work**

As Thornton says, too many PR professionals aspire to global work for the perceived perks — unlimited travel, new experiences and a change from the routine. But such work can also be challenging and intimidating.

And, aligning global, regional and local communications efforts with a companywide strategy should be a two-way exercise that supports creative thinking and sharing ideas. A real appetite for the work is required, rather than simply a desire to “check the box” on a résumé. Says Blanchard, “Most skills can be taught, but it’s hard to teach a passion for people and communication.”

- **Know what’s happening**

Global organizations must focus not only on the local aspect of their business but also on local cultures, events, values and issues. On a day-to-day basis, operations at a local site might not look all that different from corporate operations. Expats from headquarters might think that if they just learn to convert the currency and speak a few words of the language,

they’ve successfully navigated local culture.

Blanchard observes, however, that if organizations don’t take the time to build local relationships, when things go wrong — and something eventually will — there will be no support system for addressing the problem. When these organizations finally do struggle through the communication process and get their message out, they won’t have the trust and credibility to ensure the message is heard.

An example of this might be a U.S.-based company that insists that all communications “go through headquarters” and hasn’t made the effort to understand how local communication works. So, when a crisis breaks at a remote location, the local PR employees stand by helplessly, waiting for directives.

### **Understand the limitations of technology**

In a world where students learn remotely, commerce is conducted remotely, and plants and equipment are operated remotely, it’s easy to slip into the mind-set that global-to-local communications can be managed through technology as well.

There’s the temptation to simply set up a videoconference or online meeting rather than take a trip, or dash off an e-mail rather than have a live conversation. But virtual communication, while vital in maintaining contact and operations, can never completely replace the human touch: the face-to-face, the nuance, the context and the effort to show that the situation — whatever it is — is important enough for you to talk in person.

So, is striking the balance between global and local communication worth the effort? Absolutely.

As Breach says, “Globalization will never alter the essence of the PR role — which is to build and sustain relationships with key groups. People have their own beliefs and behaviors, and, thank goodness, we can never change that.”

What global and local employees have in common, however, is a commitment to the goals and values of the entities they represent. As those goals and values are practiced in a way that considers and respects all beliefs and traditions, effective global communication can become a reality. ■



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