

DERAILING

the **blame** game



A Seattle native, Sue's idea of a good time includes dogs, books, shade, and yes, rain. Toss in a complex problem for her to mull over and she's a happy camper. Sue, director of the agency's research division, helps clients find the root causes of complex business issues, then collects data that provides the foundation for solutions. She also manages professional services clients and oversees public outreach and education. Sue's writing skills are exemplary, although her quest for the perfectly written word borders on the obsessive. She holds a B.A. in business administration and sits on the board of Homeward Pet Adoption Center.

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Sue Gillespie | FRAUSE

Friends and Colleagues,

This is the third in a series of essays by Frause thought leaders. Each installment is intended to shed a little light on subjects that affect you and your business.

I hope you find these insights and musings of interest.



Bob Frause
Chairman and CEO

Today's business climate is making it increasingly difficult for organizations to claim ignorance of or offer excuses for their actions. WorldCom, Enron, Union Carbide, Pacific Gas & Electric are all examples of the growing demand for transparency. Being accountable isn't just smart business, it's becoming downright cool.

Ah, accountability. The A-word. The driving force behind CYA, throwing colleagues under the bus, the blame game, and passing the buck. It's as much an issue in public relations as it is with any other profession. Sometimes even more so.

There are two perspectives from which PR accountability can be explored. First are the roles played by everyone involved in the PR process. Second is the intersection of measurability and accountability. Both are key to ensuring the success of any public relations initiative.

Before we delve into these two aspects of accountability, let's make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to public relations. If you're reading "PR" and translating to "media coverage," STOP! Allow me to point out that PR is much more than just publicity.

Public relations is based on communication with clients, the media, shareholders, employees, partners, the public, and every other stakeholder within an organization's universe. Successful PR recognizes that communication is a permanent commitment. Those who embrace their responsibility in this regard also increase their chances of controlling communication outcomes.

Let's look at a hypothetical scenario that illustrates the impact of accountability.

Both Acme Services and Main Street Products want to secure media coverage for their respective firms. Acme and Main Street meet with their PR partners to brainstorm story ideas to pitch to the media. The PR firms separately pitch local newspapers, and reporters express a lot of interest. Deadlines are short, though, and more info is needed right away from Acme and Main Street.

When contacted by a reporter, Acme immediately pulls together and emails the requested details. Main Street is also called by a reporter who has questions. Main Street doesn't get back to the reporter with answers for two days.

Of course we know how the story ends. Acme is the topic of a nice feature article on the front page of the business section. Main Street is out of luck. By the time the firm gets back to the newspaper, the reporter who had questions has moved on to other stories and is no longer interested in pursuing the article.

Sure, this scenario is overly simplistic. But not uncommon! By failing to be accountable, Main Street missed out on a great opportunity for media coverage. The firm spent money to hire a PR consultant and then essentially wasted this investment by dropping the ball. Perhaps most damaging, Main Street has compromised its value as a resource that reporters can count on and turn to.

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The Acme/Main Street example focuses on the publicity component of public relations. From a broad communications standpoint, being accountable means consistency and accuracy. When the lines of communication aren't efficient – when communication is infrequent or doesn't happen at all – key stakeholders will either (A) forget about your organization entirely, or (B) fill in the gaps themselves with information that is almost always inaccurate (this often happens with employees).

Being accountable also means never having to say you're sorry. (I've been watching too much cable TV...) Seriously, accountability goes a long way to enable control of the messages you wish to convey. It's also invaluable in enhancing client satisfaction and loyalty. For example, a customer newsletter that consistently delivers on its promise of providing educational information will help build trust within your client base.

communication



Within its own industry, public relations has a long history of struggling with credible accountability. PR manufactures communication, not widgets. Being accountable for widget production is fairly easy: measure widget sales, widget price points, the effect of sales promotions on widgets, and so on.

Communication, on the other hand, is a little harder to get your hands around. Sure, a review of media coverage will reveal how much ink your organization has received. A public outreach audit can tally up the number of stakeholders who were touched by your message. And click-through tracking is a good indicator of the effectiveness of a new Web site.

None of these measures is easily correlated to incremental sales, new clients, increased market share or greater top-of-mind awareness. And therein lies the accountability challenge for PR.

The industry has used a couple of methods to help organizations place a value on print or broadcast coverage. Ad equivalency ratings and PR multipliers are two such measurements, although both are educated guesses at best. Market research may be the best bet for public relations accountability, since it can be designed to measure many variables – brand perception, behavior change, etc.



Accountability often comes into play in less-than-positive situations. Product recalls, client misunderstandings, on-the-job accidents, and employee complaints all offer an organization two choices. One, take full responsibility and strive to correct the matter. Or two, duck the blame by making creative excuses.

In these circumstances, the right decision is to take full responsibility and move forward. Opting for choice #2 often has dire consequences. Compare the tampering case of Tylenol, when Johnson & Johnson immediately recalled all at-risk products, to the recent pet food scare that allegedly wasn't reported by the manufacturer until four weeks after tainted food was confirmed. Today Tylenol is one of the most popular over-the-counter analgesics. We'll have to see how the pet food industry fares.

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The bottom line when it comes to accountability is recognizing that it enables you to shape the path your organization takes. And the great thing about being accountable is that it's contagious. A leader who never backs down from accepting responsibility for his or her actions will eventually find that an entire culture of accountability has emerged. Good stuff.

Being accountable can be scary - whether we're talking PR or life in general. It can also be liberating and highly rewarding. Best of all, being accountable will set you and your organization apart. Hopefully one day the opposite will be true.