

Five Cs for Communicating in this Crunch

By Jack Horner

Jack Horner Communications Inc.

The woeful economy has brought a frequent new PR assignment, one that doesn't thrill me or anybody.

Strategic counsel for communicating layoffs, hiring freezes, salary reductions, store closings, plant shutdowns, project postponements and overall spending constrictions has become a popular agency service of late. How to inform key audiences of your organization's economic position and resulting actions is on the minds and plates of companies daily.

Many times we've heard this criticism of company leaders: It wasn't what she said, but rather "how" she said it. It wasn't what he did, but rather "how" he did it.

We've developed a gut-check list of "Five Cs" to help guide communications on dire economic subjects, from news releases to corporate Web sites to internal communications. Remember that employee communications are always shared outside the organization and nothing is ever "off the record." Presidents, CEOs and all organizational leadership, more than ever, must have the courage of their convictions and speak with one voice.

1. **Cutbacks.** Don't wrap this word in pretty paper or dance around it. If you've touched a newspaper or turned on a television in the past 30 days, you've grown accustomed to the concept and the realities of today's economic crisis. One thing that won't be appreciated right now is sugar coating. *If you're cutting back, plainly say so; specify who, what, where, when and how.*
2. **Context.** Draw the connection between national, and even global, economic conditions and your business. Sometimes it's not obvious, particularly for employees. How does a blighted big-three automaker in Detroit have any impact on Pennsylvania? Windshields made by a Pennsylvania-based Fortune 500 company are installed in many car models. That manufacturer employs thousands, plus it generously hires local talent and small businesses in markets where it operates. Suddenly, what happens in Michigan is impacting your backyard. *Identify and explain your specific ripple, in the rippling economy.*
3. **Compassion.** Blame no one and no entity; for no one is singularly to blame. Resist human nature to point the finger. Instead, have and communicate empathy around the resulting condition. No one is immune, and households that seemingly are unaffected still have friends and families who are. It hurts and creates strife when hard-working people suddenly have the financial rug yanked from under them. When businesses have to shrink to stay alive, the employees who helped it grow in the first place feel punished, even deceived. *Respect and proactively acknowledge these natural emotions.*
4. **Candor.** The truth may hurt, but any attempt to mislead is unforgivable. And long remembered. If you're in a meeting where anyone suggests taking liberties with the facts, verbalize an immediate and permanent expectation that smoke and mirrors will not be part of your organizational communications strategy. Desperate times call for desperate measures, but not that one. It was true in kindergarten, and it's true in the boardroom: *A lie is a lie is a lie.*
5. **Consistency.** There have been highly publicized and very negative stories about industries rallying for and receiving government "bailouts," then holding company-sponsored executive retreats at luxury hotels. Everything communicates. Organizations cannot say one thing and do another. Austerity programs don't have exceptions, most importantly for high-profile executives. *Expect all organizational decisions and actions to be scrutinized and always be above reproach.*

Here's a crucial, parting thought: After communicating with the Five Cs, resist temptation to provide a sixth one: Comfort. No organization can make promises or speak in absolutes right now. Any attempt to do so implies that your crystal ball is working. Leadership's primary commitment is vigilant monitoring of economic conditions and open, ongoing communications. No guarantees.

The good news is that every roller coaster ride stops eventually. And next time, hopefully we'll remember not to eat so much beforehand.

Jack Horner, APR, is president of Jack Horner Communications Inc., with full-service offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. For more information about his award-winning public relations and marketing communications agency, please visit www.jackhorner.com or contact jackh@jackhorner.com.

Reprinted with full permission of the author.