

BUSINESS MAJOR

P.R. messages should be short, simple

“Right company, right place, right time.”
 “We’re on time, we’re on budget, we’re on schedule.”

When crafting public relations campaigns, the best, most effective messages are often — like the two examples above which will be described later — the simplest. Such words of wisdom were conveyed recently to College of Charleston communication students by longtime public relations professional C. Richard Yarbrough.

Having worked more than 40 years in public relations, Yarbrough has plenty of experience to share. The Georgia native spent most of his career in Atlanta with telecommunications giants Southern Bell, AT&T and BellSouth. In 1993, he retired as BellSouth’s vice president for public relations.

After “retirement” he took on his greatest P.R. challenge when he signed on with the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta as managing director of communications with the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. The bombing at Centennial Olympic Park would test all of Yarbrough’s public relations skills and savvy. More on that later.

P.R.’s classic role
 Yarbrough spoke at the College of Charleston as the guest of Dr. Vince Benigni, assistant professor of communication. While earning his doctorate at the University of Georgia, Benigni taught some courses in the P.R. lab at Georgia that’s been named for Yarbrough. Benigni invited Yarbrough to be the featured speaker as part of

C of C’s First Annual Communication Week.

Speaking to students in one of Benigni’s public relations courses, Yarbrough said that the “classic role” of public relations within an organization is to represent the inside out. He quickly added that the opposite, not always done as effectively, also should be a role — “representing the outside in.

“Be a counselor to your boss,” he said, explaining that just as a company’s CEO or president might be briefed by lawyers on the legal implications during a decision-making process, the public relations staff should be involved in providing input on the external implications.

Yarbrough said P.R. professionals should be able to gauge how the company’s various publics will react or be affected by a decision. He cited the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker disaster in Alaska as an example of a crisis that may have been well-handled legally, but seriously mishandled in terms of public relations.

Tylenol, on the other hand, was commended by Yarbrough for its handling of its public relations nightmare in 1982 when seven people were poisoned to death by Tylenol that had been tainted with cyanide. Yarbrough said the company moved quickly to remove all medication from store shelves and then successfully rebounded after exhaustively promoting its new tamper-resistant packaging.

Keep it simple
 “When conveying information

to the public, keep it simple,” Yarbrough told the students. In the early 1980s when the federal government forced creation of the Baby Bell phone companies, Yarbrough helped his BellSouth baby learn to crawl, then walk tall by helping craft the aforementioned P.R. slogan “Right company, right place, right time.” Those six words became a catch phrase that was incorporated in BellSouth’s marketing initiatives and public statements, sending a message of confidence and stability that resonated throughout the Southeast. According to Yarbrough, the simple message helped BellSouth become tops among the new new regional phone companies.



Patrick Harwood

He used a similar approach in his daunting duties as the Atlanta Olympics’ top P.R. official. When criticism began to mount about the pace of construction of new athletic facilities, Yarbrough helped the organizing committee launch a counter-attack with a phrase that would become a mantra delivered by officials at all press briefings and other media events and activities: “We’re on time, we’re on budget, we’re on

schedule.”

When a reporter jokingly asked Olympic organizers at one such news conference why they hadn’t recited the by-then familiar slogan, Yarbrough recalled chuckling and thinking, “Hey, this stuff really works.”

The ultimate crisis

The bomb explosion at the Atlanta Olympic Games that killed one person was a nightmare on all levels, particularly public relations. Should the games continue? Will fans be afraid for their safety and stay away from the venues? Talk about serving your publics — the world public, not to mention the 15,000 journalists covering the games, wanted answers — fast. For Yarbrough, it would be the ultimate test after 35 years in the business.

He said the Olympic organizing committee, made up of “Type A” hard-nosed, opinionated corporate leaders, gave him the ultimate professional compliment by letting him, with no interference, implement his plan of action to try to get the games back to normal.

“If you don’t have influence before the crisis, you won’t have influence during the crisis,” he recalled. “They had enough confidence in me. This is how the discipline is supposed to work.”

Through communication with the public, the Atlanta Games would go on with ticket sales surging rather than slumping. Yarbrough and his staff deserved their own gold medal for effective crisis management on a truly global scale.

(Yarbrough has received his share of professional awards. He has twice been awarded Silver Anvils, the public relations industry’s top honor. PR Week Magazine recently named him One of the 100 Most Influential Public Relations Practitioners of the 20th Century. Also, he’s writing a book about the 96 Atlanta Olympics.)

P.R. today — light years more difficult

Yarbrough said the ultimate public relations goal — How am I going to tell you about my company? — is much more challenging today than when he entered the field. Back then, a media market may have had one or two key newspapers, three TV stations and a handful of radio stations.

Today, he said, there are too many outlets that churn out instant information. The threat of misinformation being disseminated on the Internet is another variable in today’s world that can test even the best at damage control. In this category Yarbrough cited a recent bogus Nike shoe recall that began with a posting on the Internet. “This misinformation can be very malicious,” he told the students. “That’s what you’re going to have to deal with.”

With that, this highly decorated veteran of four decades of PR wars left his young audience with an ominous — but challenging — warning: “Your job will be harder than mine by light years.”

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