

Issues Management: The Link Between Organization Reality and Public Perception

By Kate Miller

On August 4, 1997, 185,000 Teamsters walked off their jobs at United Parcel Service and staged the biggest labor strike of the decade. The strike was noteworthy not only because of its enormity, but also because it demonstrated the increasing influence of the media in employer-labor relations. The highly politicized way in which this strike was waged made good public relations not just an asset, but a necessity. UPS learned the hard way that it is not the issues themselves, but the public's perceptions of the issues that ultimately determine who wins. In the war of public opinion, UPS lost.

Despite appearances to the contrary, lack of preparation was not the cause of UPS's public relations disaster. Prior to the strike, UPS seemed to be well-prepared for a labor dispute. A crisis manual for dealing with a labor strike was written, distributed throughout the company and ready to be taken out on a moment's notice. Media lists were updated, spokespersons were trained, and relationships with industry beat reporters were established long before the first picket sign was raised. So what happened? Though it may seem like an extraordinary case of bad luck, in reality it was an "ordinary" case of a company's failure to monitor its operating environment. Ordinary because, unfortunately, the role of issues management in contemporary crisis management is often undervalued by organizations practicing crisis management.

Issues Management

One possible explanation for this undervaluing of issues management is the erroneous understanding, shared by many organizations, regarding the bedrock of crisis management — planning. For years public relations practitioners that specialized in crisis management preached the virtues of

extensive planning. "Identify your weakness, assemble your crisis management team and write your crisis manuals" became familiar battle cries heard throughout the business world. Crisis management became commonly misunderstood to be a one-time thing instead of the on-going process it must be in order to succeed. Today many companies wrongly believe that by putting together a crisis manual, they are fully prepared to handle any crisis that comes their way. "Although such manuals may provide detailed 'how to's' during an incident, they are rarely if ever, practical 'living' documents".¹

Keeping crisis plans current and effective is a challenge faced by all crisis managers. One of the most effective methods for keeping a crisis plan "living" is issues management. Defined by Coates, Coates, Jarratt and Heinz in their 1986 book, issues management is "the organized activity of identifying emerging trends, concerns or issues likely to affect an organization in the next few years and developing a wider and more positive range of organization responses toward the future."² Though often confused with crisis management, the two are not the same. "The difference between crisis management and issues management is that in issues management corporations try to eliminate any possibility of outrage. This is done by identifying and dealing with issues as they emerge before they become public knowledge."³ Without outrage there is no crisis.

Public Relations and Issues Management

Public relations practitioners play important roles in issues management — including environmental scanning. Within the context of public relations, environmental scanning is "the gathering of information about publics, about reactions of publics toward the organization, and about public opinion toward

issues important to the organization."⁴ Through such structured activities as media content analysis and stakeholder focus groups, and through more informal methods such as establishing and maintaining relationships with members of the media who cover a particular area, practitioners can identify and help the organization adapt to emerging social trends and issues in the organization's internal and external environment before they become a crisis.⁵

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Environmental scanning is not inherently strategic.⁶ Scanning alone does not help the organization adapt to its environment. "It is only within the context of issues management that the gathering of information is translated into strategic decision making."⁷ Unfortunately, PR managers are often excluded from this decision making process despite the fact that they must formulate the resulting communication programs. Research suggests the participation of public relations practitioners in the issues management process often correlates into more power within the organization and consequently more influence in "dominant coalition decision making."⁸ This influence is especially important in time of crisis when communication programs with key publics are vital. Without the influence and power derived from active participation in issues management, practitioners "must execute less-than-excellent communications programs."⁹

The UPS labor strike is a perfect case study for contemporary crisis management. It clearly illustrates the "less than excellent communications programs" that can occur when issues management is neglected and public relations practitioners are excluded from the strategic planning process. Had public relations managers at UPS scanned the environment for trends in labor relations prior to the crisis and communicated their findings to management, the two groups could then have worked together to address these issues before they evolved into a crisis. At the very least, they could have prepared an appropriate response to address these trends and issues if a labor dispute was unavoidable. Instead, public relations managers at UPS were caught off-guard not only by the actions of the union, but also by the attitude and decisions of management.

This article first examines the role of issues management in crisis management, followed by a closer look into the role of public relations in the issues management process. An analysis of the impact of negligent environmental monitoring on the effectiveness of UPS communication strategies during a highly publicized labor strike follows. The researcher concludes that had UPS kept abreast of trends and issues in its immediate operating environment, the negative effects of the strike on the company's reputation might have been substantially mitigated due to more effective communication strategies.

Research consisted of a collection of news articles concerning organized labor and the UPS strike appearing in the national media the month of the strike, August of 1997, and the 18 months prior. Articles were chosen through a key word search of InfoTrac (Expanded Academic and Business Indexes) and First Search databases. Articles were excluded if they did not directly address the strategies of organized labor or the company's reaction to the strike.

Also included were UPS press releases dating from July 31 to November 17, 1997. All press releases were found on the company's web page. One interview with UPS national media spokesperson, Norman Black, was conducted in April of 1997.

Overview of a Changing Environment

Under the leadership of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization's (AFL-CIO) new president John J. Sweeney, organized labor underwent radical changes in the two years prior to the Teamster's strike. Sweeney, who had previously served as president of the Service Employees International Union for 15 years and had increased its membership from 625,000 to 1.1 million, was known for his aggressive tactics.¹⁰ With his new position as head of this high-profile union, Sweeney aimed to make his tactics a standard for unions throughout the nation.

These events were not confined to small gatherings or even traditional rallies.

At a National Press Club interview in early 1996, Sweeney warned businesses they would see "a more aggressive labor movement" under his leadership.¹¹ Sweeney's means of achieving this aggressive reputation were laid out in a highly publicized AFL-CIO manifesto that same year, more than a year before the UPS strike. In this manifesto Sweeney discussed four new tactics that businesses around the country would soon know well: political involvement, union

salting, flooding the community and corporate campaigns.¹² Though Sweeney envisioned most of these new tactics replacing the traditional labor tool of striking, one tactic, corporate campaigns, was intended to be used in strike situations as well.¹³

Corporate campaigns existed long before Sweeney, but these are no ordinary campaigns. With pooled resources, larger advertising budgets and mass marketing programs similar to corporate marketing, these new campaigns are much more effective in tarnishing the reputations of their targets.¹⁴ Targeted companies find fighting these campaigns requires a large quantity of both money and time. Legal maneuvering is often fruitless.¹⁵

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One union boss paying especially close attention to Sweeney's plan was the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Ron Carey. By 1996, Carey was in a precarious position. Elected in 1992 by a landslide, his popularity and influence within the union was slipping.¹⁶ Carey needed a highly publicized win to regain lost ground within his own union. Ironically, one of his biggest humiliations was a largely ignored 1994 wildcat strike against UPS — a perfect place to stage a comeback.

In addition to these labor trends, there were other issues in the pre-strike environment with obvious potential for playing an influential role in a labor dispute. Economic turmoil during the recession of the early 1990s heightened the workforce's distrust and dislike of big business.¹⁷ Residual cynicism, skepticism and fear made it easy for Carey to play to the emotions of working America regarding the "threat" of part-time work.

Industry trends, especially the phenomenal growth of the overnight shipping industry, had in fact led shipping companies such as UPS to vastly increase the number of part-time employees. But it was industry trends, not selfish management, which led to the increase. Because overnight shipping requires short bursts of intense sorting, usually four to five hour shifts, these part-time employees are needed in order to keep packages moving.¹⁸ Despite the fact that the need for part-time employees was real, the numbers were high and could easily be manipulated by the media.

Finally, there was the enormity of UPS, the giant of the parcel shipping industry. Because the company

delivers 80 percent of all ground-shipped packages in the nation and handles goods with the equivalent to 5 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, the strike would affect much of America directly, leaving millions of business owners and customers searching for answers as to when they would get their goods.¹⁹ The media would be the obvious source, adding even more public scrutiny to the company's response than would normally be present in a labor dispute.

A Contrast in Communication Strategies

Pre-Strike

Ron Carey and the Teamsters' union began preparing for a corporate campaign in the spring of 1996, more than a year before the actual strike. It began with a survey sent out to all union member UPS employees asking them to list some of the issues that would be most important in negotiations. Ninety percent of respondents listed not enough full-time employment opportunities as a main concern.²⁰ Finding his angle, Carey began mobilizing union members. In the spring of 1997, Carey traveled around the country preparing Teamsters for a showdown with UPS. By the end of spring, Carey's audience had grown to include not only union members, but also the media. This would be his most potent tool throughout the strike.

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True to the AFL-CIO strategy, Carey blitzed the media with press releases and monthly news events to attract national attention and sway public opinion to the union's side. These events were not confined to small gatherings or even traditional rallies. Carey was all over the place. In May of 1997, for example, Carey planned a global day of action in which European labor unions, who had met with Carey earlier in the month, agreed to hold rallies and picket UPS facilities in support of the Teamsters. That same day Carey appeared in a rally of workers in Atlanta at a UPS distribution center which was covered by the media.²¹ All of these events and press releases had one message: "Part-time America doesn't work." This message played well to the insecure American workforce, just as Carey knew it would.

In sharp contrast to the flurry of activity on the part of the Teamsters, UPS remained low-key and virtually silent until the contract expired on July 31. The few comments made by UPS spokespersons regarding Carey's springtime activities were dismissive and unconcerned. "They're trying to stage a Broadway production of 'Les Miserables,' and what we're seeing is a high-school production of 'Annie Get Your Gun'," said spokesman Mark Dickens when asked about a May Teamsters' rally in Atlanta.²²

Even after the company realized a strike was imminent, the issues Carey raised were not faced. Not only did the company not consider these issues before the actual strike, it also failed to devise a communications strategy if and when a strike occurred. Instead, in the *days* preceding the strike, public relations managers in the UPS Atlanta headquarters began planning a program "aimed at giving the media the company's positions on key contract issues."²³

According to Norman Black, a national media spokesperson for UPS, the company failed to take the union's threats seriously until mid-July. Even then, the motives of the union were not understood. "We failed to pick up on the fact that they were preparing for a political campaign," Black said.²⁴ The company finally issued its first press release on July 31, the day the union's contract with UPS expired. It hardly mentioned the issues raised by the union, focusing instead on the Teamsters refusal to accept UPS's offer.²⁵

The Strike

Almost immediately after the strike began on August 4, a media frenzy ensued. A born orator with 20 years of union politicking under his belt, Carey proved to be a very effective spokesperson for the Teamsters. Using catchy slogans such as "America doesn't want throwaway workers," and "People don't have part-time children or part-time mortgages," Carey appealed to the emotions of working America to support the "plight" of the

hard-working, unappreciated Teamsters. After months of courting the media, Carey already had his main points across. During the strike all he had to do was feed the media frenzy with soundbites.

Because of the company's silence in the months preceding the strike, UPS's position was almost completely unknown when the strike began. Formulating the company's message was no easy task. The first problem UPS public relations managers encountered was an unexpected management decision that forbade the spokesperson to attack Ron Carey or the Teamsters' union despite their repeated attacks on the company.²⁶ Instead the company framed their message around what it felt was the true issue behind the strike: UPS's threat to pull out of the union's multiemployer pension plan.²⁷ A complex and often boring issue, the pension plan was totally unsuitable for the soundbite war Carey was waging and did nothing to win public sympathy. While the company was emphasizing the complicated points of its pension plan, it was sitting on facts that could have disproved Carey's case. Facts such as:

- 50 percent of all part-time UPS employees are under 25²⁸
- 40 percent of all part-time UPS employees are college students in need of flexible hours²⁹
- Only five percent have been with the company more than 10 years³⁰
- UPS is one of the few companies to offer part-time employees health benefits and partial pension benefits³¹
- Part-time jobs through the national economy have held steady at 12-18 percent for 20 years. Only 3-4 percent are involuntary³²

A strike isn't as much about economic issues as it is of perceptions.

Through the strike, the company struggled to find a convincing spokesperson to communicate its message. The company crisis plan did not designate a national spokesperson. Initially, UPS chose its chief negotiator in Washington D.C. as its spokesperson, but the company soon found this ineffective due to the large amount of media attention. As CEO, James P. Kelly seemed the obvious choice, but because he had been in office only seven months when the strike began and was unprepared for the media spotlight, it was decided not to designate him.³³ By the end of the strike UPS had used numerous spokespersons, including at least a dozen from human resources, to answer questions from the press.³⁴

In addition to its spokesperson difficulties, UPS also struggled to develop an efficient way to distribute its message. As part of its crisis plan, the company had meticulously planned a communication network to be used in a strike situation, but it soon proved ineffective. The plan called for trained spokespersons throughout the company's 60 districts to handle local media and customer inquiries. "This system works if you're negotiating at the table and don't have to give PR updates every five minutes to the public," said Black.³⁵ But because the company did have to constantly update the media, it was forced to rely mainly on its nine national spokespersons at the company's Atlanta headquarters to field 20,000 press inquiries a day.³⁶

The results of the communication efforts by both sides could be seen in the polls. By the second week of the strike a *CNN/USA Today* Gallup poll found 55 percent of Americans backed the Teamsters as opposed to the 27 percent that backed the company.³⁷

Post-Strike

By the time the strike ended 18 days after it began, the company had suffered a revenue loss of almost \$775 million.³⁸ Its effort to regain customer confidence began almost immediately. Utilizing the locally aimed communication system it had planned to use during the strike, UPS called or personally visited 200,000 customers in the month following the strike. "We told them 1) we were sorry, 2) we were getting the system back up, 3) they could trust us again."³⁹ As of April the company was still implementing new programs in an attempt to win back customers.⁴⁰

According to Black the company has already made changes in its crisis plan concerning communication strategies during a strike. Changes include a designated national spokesperson, instructions on how to conduct a media campaign, and improved communication between management and public relations representatives.⁴¹ This new plan was tested earlier this year when UPS pilots threatened to strike. It was avoided.

Lessons Learned

The greatest lesson learned in the UPS/Teamsters strike is the importance of issues management in both preventing and managing a crisis. The issues and trends in organized labor that ultimately led to this new kind of labor dispute were neither subtle, secret nor spontaneous. It is especially surprising that these changes were not noted in the months leading up to contract negotiations between the two sides, when the company should have been especially sensitive to such changes.

UPS officials were clearly aware of the continu-

ous possibility of a labor dispute as shown by the detailed crisis plan created for such an occasion. Had UPS public relations managers monitored the environment for new trends and issues within organized labor, they would have realized how outdated and ineffective this plan was. Instead they were left fighting a new war with an old battle plan.

Such highly publicized and public relations driven labor disputes are the wave of the future. The following lessons learned offer some tips for avoiding the public relations disaster that befell UPS:

1. **Establish/Conduct/Implement an issues management program.** No organization operates in a vacuum. Changes in the environment today could easily affect the organization tomorrow. Organizations must monitor these changes and adapt to them before they turn into a crisis.
2. **Keep communication lines open between the public relations department and management.** Communicating with external publics during the times of crisis is difficult enough. Add to that a guessing game between public relations and management concerning the message of communications strategies and you have extreme frustration. Public relations managers at UPS "didn't expect" the management decision that prevented them from directly attacking the

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Teamsters or Ron Carey.⁴² When organizational values are communicated and agreed upon, on all levels, the foundation of all crisis communication is already laid. In times of crisis, the fewer the surprises the better.

3. **Don't let a smoldering crisis within the organization go unchecked.** Smoldering crisis are often difficult to detect. UPS official conducted a formal survey of all Teamster employees regarding their satisfaction with the company. Surprisingly, the UPS reports there was no indication of dissatisfaction with the company including the issue of job security.⁴³ Obviously formal surveys don't always reveal very real problems. Constant monitoring of the situation is required.
4. **Don't underestimate the opponent.** UPS wrongly assumed that the reputation for corruption and violence that was often associated with the Teamsters and specifically Ron Carey would be enough to sway public opinion. The company didn't count on other factors, such as anti-big business sentiments and public sympathy for his part-time work message, which would ultimately outweigh this reputation.
5. **Don't be afraid to improvise and adjust crisis plans as needed from the beginning.** Even after actions dictated by the crisis plan proved ineffective, the company struggled to improvise. Organizations must realize that no crisis plan fits perfectly for every situation. Public relations managers must learn to improvise and adjust to the situation at hand, but in order to do this they must first understand the situation at hand, i.e. issues management.
6. **Use the media spotlight to highlight company strength.** Because UPS was so busy engaging in reactive defense strategies it missed a wonderful opportunity to showcase what the company is really about. Not only were Carey's allegations concerning part-time work at UPS exaggerated, the company actually has a very good record concerning employment opportunities. Unfortunately, most of the nation is still unaware of this.

Conclusion

These research findings support earlier research findings that a lack of an issues management program within an organization's public relations department ultimately leads to communication campaigns of lesser value.⁴⁴ The numerous ineffective communication strategies utilized by UPS during the strike demonstrates that without issues management even the seemingly best prepared companies cannot successfully overcome negative environmental influences in its quest for public sympathy in times of crisis.

What the Teamsters and president Ron Carey knew, and what UPS and chairman/CEO James P. Kelly didn't (or forgot), is that a strike isn't as much about economic issues as it is of perceptions.⁴⁵ From the outset the Teamsters clearly had an advantage over UPS due to their understanding of the issues and concerns of the public. Though often only half-true, the Teamster's message was received and accepted by the public because it addressed their concerns, not the concerns of the union or the company.

As more and more organizational crises are played out in the public arena via the media, it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to understand the trends and issues that influence public sympathies. As UPS learned, these trends and issues are not always driven by reality and cannot be prepared for years in advance. They can only be understood by constant environmental monitoring.

Since the public's perceptions are influenced greatly by environmental trends and issues, so too should public relations communications strategies. Without issues management and a clear understanding of environmental conditions, public relations managers cannot expect to effectively address the concerns of the public on whose support the success of the organization depends. PRQ

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Letters

PR People Can't Write

Bully for you — the column on writing. Howard Penn Hudson, Spring 1999 *Writer's Notebook*.

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— John F. Budd, Jr.
New York City

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