

**“Our survey indicated that the tension that once prevailed between communications officers — whose first impulse in a crisis is to share information with stakeholders — and legal counsels, who are trained to be cautious in such matters, is easing. But it also revealed in equal measure that the hectic conditions of a crisis are no time for building bridges.” (story on page 2)**

The unfolding story of the difficulties facing the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation put into sharp focus a number of factors that determine how effectively an organization communicates with its key stakeholders — both internal and external.

I've written often in *Got PR?* about how crisis situations create PR headaches for those deemed at fault. Without fail, the problems stem from errors of omission or commission. As the 2010 Gulf oil spill reminds us, if you're BP, you can't control circumstances that lead to a crisis, or when it may occur. But you can create a culture of risk avoidance and have processes ready for implementation when things go wrong. As BP demonstrated, the lack of these measures invites errors of omission.

Komen's undoing, though, falls under errors of commission. They made a conscious decision to take a certain course of action and then, bowing to certain special interests, changed their mind a few days later. Of course they got drilled by other special interests for doing so. They're now in a no-win situation that has sullied the group's otherwise sterling reputation.

The examples of BP and Komen are great examples of how developments that undermine an organization's positive reputation can lead to severe legal liability. BP has paid billions of dollars to settle legal claims against it. Komen does not have that worry, but the hit to its reputation has already caused a big drop in donations and overall goodwill, which may affect its bottom line for months or even years to come.

Komen's ills, and the piece on climate change, also point to the sad truth that, regardless of the debatable merits of any factual position or personal belief, we take sides on important issues based on politics, which is reported by media outlets. In fact, politics often shapes the nature of the issues themselves, as in Komen's case.

With 2012 being a presidential election year, get ready for a steadier and heavier diet of politics, with few if any healthy choices.

Errors of omission and commission cost the New England Patriots another Super Bowl victory. But let's hope the Red Sox bounce back from last season's historic collapse and make the upcoming Fenway Park centennial year truly a cause for celebration.

## Komen put politics before people, and is paying the price

Executives of the embattled Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation are faced with the task of restoring credibility to one of the strongest brands in the nonprofit world after a public relations fiasco surfaced this month surrounding Komen's off-then-on-again decision to fund Planned Parenthood.

The foundation stated on January 31 that it was no longer going to fund Planned Parenthood's breast cancer screening because of a congressional investigation into whether the group was using federal money to pay for abortions. Komen reversed course three days later after overwhelming critical public reaction to that news. Planned Parenthood is again eligible to apply for grants, Komen said.

Komen Founder Nancy G. Brinker and President Elizabeth Thompson have spoken with executives from Komen affiliates across the country about ways to apologize to supporters and about what needs to be done next, according to a Komen official.

“People may now question the role political ideology plays in their decision-making, and that didn't enter into people's minds in the past,” said Lee Lynch, who heads health-care advocacy and does crisis management for the public relations firm Edelman. “So they're



**Walkers turn out in droves to raise money for the Susan G. Komen Global Race for the Cure, held in cities across the country. Now the nonprofit is struggling to regain positive momentum in face of recent difficulties regarding its position on grants**

going to have to deal with that perception.”

Some corporate sponsors are reviewing their partnerships. Komen affiliates have already lost donations and Race for the Cure sponsorships. In New York, the Tocqueville Restaurant e-mailed a “note of concern” Saturday to patrons, notifying them that it was no longer donating proceeds to Komen from an upcoming special dinner because of “the recent events.”

*“Komen” (cont. p. 2)*

## What drives public opinion about climate change?

Politicians and the economy are more influential than media coverage or even scientific research when it comes to shaping public opinion on this key topic, according to analysis of public-opinion trends published this month in the journal *Climatic Change*.

Using the results of 74 public-opinion surveys conducted between January 2002 and December 2010 — which asked a total of 84,086 people 14 questions about their perception of climate change — researchers created a

“Climate Change Threat Index” that allowed them to map the swings in public opinion over the course of eight years.

As reported in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, following stable, tepid concern from 2002 to 2005, apprehension over climate change began to climb in 2006, peaked in late 2007, and then fell back to where it was in 2002. The study's researchers wanted to know why, so they gathered data on five likely influences: extreme weather

events, scientific information, media coverage, congressional attention, and advocacy groups on both sides of the issue. They also looked at four control variables: unemployment, gross domestic product, war deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the price of oil. The team then compared that data to changes in the Climate Change Threat Index.

They found the most important factors that influenced public concern were public

*“Climate Change” (cont. p.2)*



## Reputation management seen as guarding against legal liability

In a corporate culture where companies must pay attention to legal concerns and regulatory compliance, an equally important form of liability — potential damage to one's reputation — can easily be overlooked. But leading companies have learned two lessons, writes Micho Spring, global corporate practice chair of global PR firm Weber Shandwick.

One is that reputational liability must be added to legal liability as a top-line risk management concern. The second is that the aftermath of a crisis is too late for an organization to strike that balance. The culture it establishes in advance is just as important as — perhaps even more important than — how it reacts in the definitive first days of a crisis. Those are also among the lessons of an in-depth survey of crisis-tested communications and legal officers recently undertaken by Weber Shandwick.

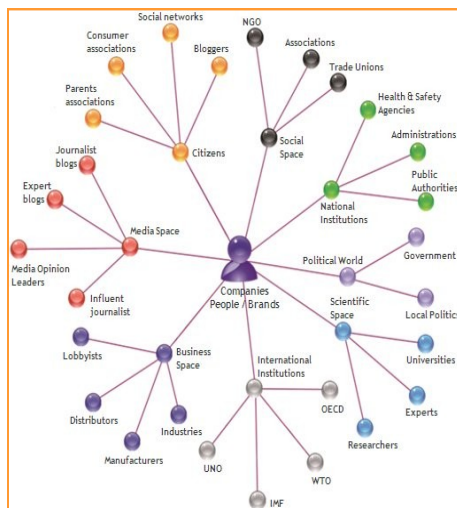
### Komen (cont.)

I don't know how much time Komen spent fact checking Planned Parenthood (PP) on the reasons behind their initial decision. But here are the facts, according to PP. Abortions represent three percent of total services provided by the organization, and roughly 10 percent of its clients received an abortion. The group does receive federal funding, but the money cannot be used for abortions by law. The other 97 percent of services were for contraception, treatment and tests for sexually transmitted diseases, cancer screenings, and other women's health services.

"The greatest fallout from the Komen crisis may be that the organization has lost something more valuable than money, more costly than lost time, and perhaps more precious than reputation and trust.," says communications consultant Larry Kamer.

"In the span of 36 hours it has, for many, lost the benefit of the doubt," says Kamer. "That's the ingredient that determines the difference between a swift ascent out of crisis or an agonizingly slow slog. Will people believe what you say or will every little thing be challenged, debated, and nit-picked?"

He says Komen has gone from being widely regarded as an organization singularly focused on eradication of breast cancer to one that's viewed through the lens of abortion politics. From a reputational standpoint, nothing hurts an organization more than an apparent division between its stated mission and what its actions convey.



The irony is that organizations are often thinking of protecting their reputations when they guard against legal liability at all costs. Yet it is precisely that kind of thinking — elevating legal over reputational liability rather than thinking of the two as closely intertwined — that often gets organizations into difficulty.

The challenge is enhanced by the fact that lawyers are often trained, and understandably so, to consider legal liability above all else. Moreover, they are right to see legal liability as a threat to an organization's reputation. But as one battle-tested former legal counsel put it in the survey, "Your voice is not the only voice. ... Legal issues are clearly important, but not the ones that necessarily should rule the day."

The Weber Shandwick survey indicated that the tension that once prevailed between communications officers — whose first impulse in a crisis is to share information with stakeholders — and legal counsels, who are trained to be cautious in such matters, is easing. But it also revealed in equal measure that the hectic conditions of a crisis are no time for building bridges.

Of course, preparation is nothing new in the world of crisis response. But one of the most important insights from the survey is that the most time-honored form of preparation — gaming out contingency-specific scenarios — may be the least useful. Instead, organizations should seek to establish a culture of anticipation that facilitates information sharing, balances priorities and can adapt to the details of any crisis.

Several of the crisis experts surveyed offered the crucial but often overlooked observation that the essence of a crisis is that it is

**Interactions with numerous external groups all have a bearing on an organization's perceived public reputation. (Diagram property of Spotter)**

unforeseeable. But the mechanisms and relationships that are vital to effective crisis response — and its close relative, prevention — can be foreseen, and must be. That is not to say that attempting to predict scenarios is never useful. Often, it is an effective means of stress-testing one's crisis architecture. But the architecture itself should be the priority.

A culture of anticipation includes making a high-ranking officer, preferably a CEO, specifically accountable for reputation. Moreover, anticipation requires that close relationships be built between communications officers and legal counsels well in advance so that each understands the necessary — and two-way — synchronicity that should govern their relationship.

### Climate Change (cont.)

statements by Democrats in support of addressing climate change; anti-environmental votes by Republicans; unemployment; GDP; and the number of times *The New York Times* mentioned the film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Media coverage was an important, third-order influence on people's perception, but like public opinion itself, it too was "largely a function of elite cues and economic factors," according to the analysis.

The importance of the media should not be minimized. The study found that "the greater the quantity of media coverage of climate change, the greater the level of public concern," and that "the importance the media assigns to coverage of climate change translates into the importance the public attaches to this issue." (In other words, front-page treatment means readers will take an article more seriously.)

The authors acknowledged that they could track only the long-term, rather than short-lived factors that affect public opinion. They also cited the need to study a wider variety of variables, such as the public demonstrations and advertising by advocacy groups and climate coverage of cable TV networks, talk radio, and comedy programs like *The Daily Show*.

I think this study underscores that the molding of public opinion will always be an immensely complex process that defies simple explanations.