

# Goodman teaches how corporations should communicate

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Michael Goodman never thought he would become an expert in corporate communication. In fact, his degrees are all in English, from his bachelor's at the University of Texas in Austin to his master's and doctorate in literature from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. "I like to tell people that anyone who can read and understand, interpret, analyze and then comment on Moby Dick and the novels of Mark Twain and Faulkner should be able to figure out annual reports and memos and things like that," he says.

Before he obtained his doctorate, Goodman did some work developing a business communication component for the SUNY Continuing Education Program. "Through that I worked with Grumman Aerospace and many other corporations on Long Island. I was able to take the writing, the communication, the analysis piece of literature and transform that into corporate communication. The training in literature was not all for naught; it gave me a great analytic base and a great understanding of how quality communication works." Now Goodman is a professor and the Director of the MA program in Corporate Communication in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

When asked what he thinks are the major challenges we face in communication today, he is categorical. "I think the major challenge is how to be civil and representative in a world that seems less civil and less representative as we look at what social media has done to make factions of the audience. A corporation's challenge is how to speak to everybody and represent them in a civil way," he explains.

That does not mean that many large corporations don't continue to make some obvious mistakes, like the case of the response by United Airlines to the video of a passenger being forcefully dragged off a plane. "That case is interesting," says Goodman, "because if you look at the structure of United Airlines, the head of Human Resources reports directly to the CEO, while the head of Corporate Communica-



Dr. Goodman at his office.

tion reports to the human resources person. In the airline industry, the biggest constituency of Human Resources is the unions that represent the pilots and the flight attendants, mechanics and so forth. So, his advice to the CEO—which was the wrong advice—was to reassure the employees that you're on their side, which is absolutely the wrong thing to do."

That mistake is particularly true in today's world of social media—which brings us to another example of bad corporate communication: BP and the oil spill after the Deepwater Horizon incident in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. "BP was positioning itself as beyond petroleum, as a green company. They didn't do their due diligence on all of the oil spills that they had at the refineries in Texas and the pipelines in Alaska. Their CEO is British and did not get enough coaching on how to deal with a crisis and how to

reassure the public that they are doing everything in their power to try to stop the blowout in the Horizon well that had polluted the Gulf and to this day still pollutes the Gulf, because most of the oil has fallen to the Gulf floor," explains Goodman.

However, we are seeing a new trend among corporations, which are starting to take a position on social issues by condemning hate groups, as with the recent racial incidents in Charlottesville. "Many corporate leaders are voicing behaviors that they expect in civil society, and that's a good sign," says Goodman.

In fact, some corporations have come up with models of good responses to crises. In 1982, seven people died in the Chicago metropolitan area after ingesting Extra Strength Tylenol that had been deliberately contaminated with potassium cyanide.

Johnson & Johnson, the manufacturer, responded by pulling thirty-one million bottles of tablets back from retailers, stopping all production and advertising of the product, joining the Chicago Police, FBI and FDA in the search for the killer, and offering up a \$100,000 reward, all while discontinuing the capsules and developing tamper-resistant gel caps. "Certainly Johnson & Johnson were well-positioned. They did not really have to tell their representatives to take the bottles of Tylenol off the shelves, says Goodman.

Another issue is how universities communicate, since more and more they seem to follow the corporate model. "An advanced degree, a higher degree, whether it's a bachelor's degree, master's degree or a Ph. D., is not a commodity," explains Goodman. "I think that's the business we're in. We are influencing the behavior of a generation of leaders, particularly in our graduate program in corporate communication; we're influencing the leaders of the councils to corporations and their leaders as they go forward. So, it's a little different than selling potato chips and Corn Flakes. It has a heck of a lot longer shelf life."

He has also studied corporate communication in China and has some insights to share on that subject. "The research that we've done in China suggests that the most important thing for corporate communicators is their marketing communications: selling products, which is essentially the way that the United States was. Our focus has turned on creating reputation and communicating that reputation to the outside world. The Chinese are moving along that path."

Goodman leaves us with great food for thought. "Corporations recognize that their power comes from the societies they're in, and that their license to operate is given or revoked by the societies they're in. It's a very important thing for them to have that positive relationship with their societies."

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