

Hoog: Let's Return to a Values-Driven Culture

During its 43 years of existence, PRSA's Counselors Academy has grown to embrace a broad range of initiatives and programs that attract and benefit PR practitioners in PR firms of all sizes as well as other practice areas of the profession.

This May, the Counselors Academy held its Spring Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. The Strategist talked with Counselors Chair Tom Hoog, chairman, Hill & Knowlton/USA, about a variety of issues impacting PR counselors and the profession today.

The theme of the Spring Conference was "Creating Your Own Reality." How would you describe the reality right now for PR counselors and agency leaders?

Hoog: The economic downturn and the crash of the dot-com business created an unreal reality. If everything is reasonably stable, the question everyone should be asking is, "How can I ensure that I continue to keep my best people, provide the best service and be contemporary?" Because things are changing so quickly, you can't afford to sit still. All of this creates the reality that we are faced with decreased opportunities, increased competition — both for our clients and in keeping our best people — and if we don't do everything just right during this down period, we are not going to be ready to take advantage of the turnaround when it arrives.

What lessons have agency leaders and PR counselors learned over the past few challenging years?

Hoog: We let our culture become more focused on growth and the bottom line than on the values-driven culture that we should have stuck with. You are going to find that when the economy gets healthy, companies are going to remember that it's important to stay true to whatever its culture is. Whatever your culture is, stick to it, and don't get driven by the fad of the time. I am afraid that's what happened to many of us during the boom period. We got off of our game plan. We probably didn't staff as well as we could have, and we didn't pay as close attention to clients as we could have and should have because we were so interested in growth. We will all be stronger from this experience, but it was tough for a period of time.

What are you hearing from other agency leaders whom you meet with around the country?

Hoog: I hear that spending is lower while the expectations and the competition to get the business are higher. I'm finding that more people are asking how they can ensure that they are giving total quality service because, during these

competitive times, they recognize the importance of keeping a client as opposed to chasing a new one.

On the people side, it's the same thing. In order to deal with decreased budgets, yet with no change in overhead, they want to know how to continue to pay the people what they have been paying and still keep them happy. That's become a challenge for all of us — none of us wants to lose our people. They also ask how they can provide incentives to their people to ride through this tough time. You don't want your best people to choose another career just because it may look more lucrative right now.

What is your vision for Corporate America in the workplace?

Hoog: Things moved so quickly during the last growth period that I don't think we managed ourselves as well, and I don't mean just in the PR industry. Now that we've settled down into more normal times, we have had a sense of reality brought back to us where we're refocusing on a values-driven culture oriented toward people. People are still our most powerful asset, and we need to focus more time and attention on that issue. At Hill & Knowlton, I said that nobody else needed to worry about the bottom line. I'll do the worrying about that. Everyone else needed to worry about keeping clients happy. If you are running an office, keep employees happy, and the bottom line will take care of itself. And I think that's true across the board in Corporate America, which needs to return to a values-driven culture.

What skills do PR counselors need today to develop and advance their career and the profession?

Hoog: The PR industry as a whole would like to have greater impact in the corner suite or CEO's office. That's a worthy goal, but in order to do that, the most senior people in the company have to be capable of providing the strategic counsel that recognizes they know someone else's business nearly as well as that person does.

At the mid-level and below, the recognition that our audiences are changing, as well as the mediums we use to get to those audiences, requires a different skill set. When I first started in this business, it was thought that if you were a journalism or communications major, you were automatically qualified for the job. I'm not sure that's true today. An understanding of audiences is just as important as an understanding of good communication skills.

Where does the Counselors Academy fit into all of this?

Hoog: The Counselors Academy represents the best and brightest in the PR industry. And it has always had the culture of being willing to share its knowledge. The combination of those two things is what makes it special. Like

me, most of the Counselors have made every mistake there is to make. We're willing to acknowledge that, and then we're willing to say, "This is what has worked." Sharing that with younger professionals benefits all of us. The Counselors Academy is the vehicle to push best practices into the PR industry. The stronger the PR industry is as a whole, the stronger it is individually.

For more information on the Counselors Academy, please visit www.counselorsacademy.org.