

# PRWeek

## OP-ED Davos puts PR firmly on the map

The World Economic Forum's 36th annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, last week again offered a snow-framed setting for passionate engagement among business titans, activists, government officials, media, and celebrities.

Those in PR can be optimistic that their skills are vitally needed, based on many of the views expressed in Davos. Here's why: This year's theme declared that it "is imperative we learn how to unleash our creative potential to tackle the world's problems." To address global risks, daunting health issues, and the emergence of China and India, participants were challenged to avoid a "failure of imagination" when devising solutions. Much of the creativity sought would help build relationships and break down barriers to understanding – a PR strong suit.

In one session, participants discussed that the "control" era of communications – where message management reigns – is over.

Companies can't promote trust; they must earn it through visible actions. With increasing transparency comes scrutiny. With that, however, comes an upside: better performance. As one NGO leader said, "Large doses of healthy skepticism force us to perform to a higher standard."

In a powerful demonstration of open communications, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf, describing actions taken after last year's devastating earthquake, shared that his rescue operation is posting frequent action reports on a Web site, forcing individual accountability for results.

We know that the ability to dive in at the most local level is a PR strength. One session featured brand marketers frustrated by their mass-marketing efforts. The consensus: Replace "one size fits all" with deeply local approaches.

A beverage company CEO described his global/local strategy as "a tight frame around a white canvas," in which headquarters determines the core truths about a brand and

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charges each geography to make local delivery strong.

Business leaders were concerned about potential reputation damage posed by the now-pervasive "social production" media, such as blogs, Wikipedia, and MySpace.com. They want advice on the disruption these platforms represent, how to evolve company policies, and how to respond when they are negatively framed or when staff post inappropriate information.

At the same time, many crave inspired ways for their businesses to participate in the enormous potential these platforms represent by meeting fundamental human needs, such as belonging to a larger community.

Another area calling for communications is that of building

bridges between increasingly polarized political, geographic, and religious factions. One panelist described what he called a "poverty of curiosity" in which people increasingly focus on their own interests and are less open to learning about others. Or, as Harvard president Lawrence Summers asked, how can we get the one-fifth of the world that is rich to care more about the four-fifths that are poor? Certainly, PR can help open the lines of communications between groups to diminish this form of poverty.

At Davos, the medium is the message: What the world needs most is horizontal engagement across multiple stakeholders to build understanding. That is the very definition of PR: two-way communications to build mutually beneficial relationships. ■

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