2008 ACADEMIC SYMPOSIUM
SUMMARY REPORT

MAY 19-21, 2008
Hanover, New Hampshire

BACKGROUND

The third annual Academic Symposium, hosted by the Tuck School of Business, took place on May 19-21, 2008 at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, jointly sponsored by the Arthur W. Page Society and the Institute for Public Relations. The thirty attendees included thought leaders from the academic community, as well as other leaders with corporate and agency leadership experience, and leaders from the Institute and the Page Society. The objective of the Symposium is to consider a wide range of issues of interest to those involved with developing and presenting curricula in corporate communications, public relations and related fields in both schools of business and communication.

Key Areas of Focus

This year's Symposium considered various responses from the academic, corporate, and agency worlds to the **Arthur Page Society's *The Authentic Enterprise* report** (http://www.awpagesociety.com/images/uploads/2007AuthenticEnterprise.pdf), which examines the core drivers of the 21st century's rapidly evolving business context and implications for communicators.

The Symposium goal was to examine *The Authentic Enterprise* report under a critical lens and test its ideas through a series of discussions between academics and practitioners in the field of communications. The report provided a rich discussion among the Symposium participants and raised interesting new ideas that warrant further examination. This summary document outlines the academic, corporate, and agency responses to the report, as well as key discussion points raised by participants.

The Authentic Enterprise Report: Setting the Stage

The Authentic Enterprise paper was created by the Page Society Mission Task Force as a means to extend the thought leadership and influence of the Page Society membership among the C-suite audience. The paper focuses on three major drivers of change in our modern day business environment:
- Globalization
- Stakeholder Empowerment
- The Digital Network Revolution

These changes are posing new threats to enterprises, including the demand for transparency and the rise of stakeholder activism. The paper emphasizes that an enterprise must be grounded in a true sense of what defines and differentiates it through a clearly stated mission and values that are practiced through everyday action and behavior.

The authentic enterprise must define and instill company values, build and manage multi-stakeholder relationships, enable its people with new media skills and tools, and actively build and manage trust among its stakeholders.

The Authentic Enterprise also provided a platform to survey CEOs, revealing that many chief executives view the CCO role as more important than ever, requiring communicators to have a deep understanding of the business model in order to serve as an integral part of the executive team. CEOs also viewed the communicator's role as one in which interactivity will play an increasingly important role.

One of the desired outcomes of the paper is to encourage a global dialogue among chief communication officers (CCOs), CEOs, and other members of the C-Suite surrounding the notion of authenticity. The paper has already served as a source of discussion at several Page Society and other industry gatherings and will continue to be used in this way in the future. It is also being discussed on the Page Society blog which was recently opened to the public: http://www.awpagesociety.com/awp_blog.

The Page Society is working with the Business Roundtable Institute for Trust at the Darden School to release a subsequent paper that will speak to the foundation of trust, focusing on three principal themes:
- Mutuality—based upon shared values or interests
- Balance of Power—where risks are shared
- Trust Safeguards

In today's dynamic business context, Symposium participants agreed that stakeholders now demand proof of corporate authenticity in the place of authority. There was widespread agreement on the power of the word *authentic* and its great potential to resonate within the C-Suite.

An overarching notion recurred throughout the Symposium: To be truly authentic an enterprise must be grounded in a sure sense of what defines and differentiates it—based on a set of definitive values constituting the groundwork for consistent actions touching myriad stakeholders around the world.

The Implications of Authenticity for Communicators
Throughout the Symposium, important related questions emerged regarding the implications of authenticity for both communicators and marketers:
- Whose job is it to manage corporate authenticity?
- More specifically, where does the CCO role begin and end, and how does it mesh or overlap with a Chief Marketing Officer's responsibility scope?
- Participants noted that such questions have led many communications and marketing executives to struggle with their respective identities.
- In today's environment fears among marketing executives pervade, with worries of the function morphing into something largely advertising-focused.
- Many participants believe that the notion of authenticity does not contradict brand marketing and the aspirational element of marketers' work. To cut through the clutter of today's business environment, delivering a distinctive brand and customer experience will continue to be essential.
- The notion of authenticity requires marketers to not only take responsibility for promise-making, but also promise-keeping.
- In this context, CCOs must be more astute about presenting the communicator's roles and functions to the rest of the corporation.

Many participants agreed that the notion of corporate authenticity is not functional, but must exist enterprise-wide—permeating all levels and areas of an organization—in order to be genuine. This has a number of important implications for communicators:

- The notion of authenticity hands CCOs an excellent opportunity to step forward and assume leadership in defining a corporation's values—the cornerstone of the corporation's character and authenticity—and instilling senior leader commitment and involvement (both formal and informal) to ensure success.
- A sense of mutual respect will facilitate this collaboration: CEOs today view the role of the CCO as more valuable than ever, and likely to increase in value, requiring savvy executives who have a deep understanding of the business model to be an integral part of the executive team.
- CEOs now look for CCOs to move beyond reactive and proactive constituency outreach and help companies sustain and thrive through <u>interactive</u> relationship building.

A **Strong Call to Action for Communicators**:

- *The Authentic Enterprise* constitutes a call for CCOs to *lead* the process of achieving corporate authenticity rather than attempting to *own* the process. This will involve working with all functions—marketing and beyond—to gauge whether or not the corporation is truly authentic and realigning it wherever it falls short in either reflecting or conveying its definitive values.
- This will mark a departure from business communications as usual—today's environment requires an organization to adapt the way it has traditionally managed and communicated with its constituencies. A corporation must relinquish some of its historic control and shift it back into the hands of stakeholders, empowering them with tools to keep them engaged. This may prove to be a disconcerting notion for many companies that must alter their thinking to ensure future success and survival.

THE BUSINESS ACADEMIC RESPONSE

Academics from business schools who teach corporate communication provided the Symposium with the first of several reactions to *The Authentic Enterprise*. They emphasized that the real challenge of the paper will lie in its implementation. Execution will be made more complicated in a modern business context defined by:

- Corporations' loss of control and power
- Increased difficulty in segmenting audiences
- Unprecedented transparency given stakeholders' access to information and communication tools.

This academic response raised a number of questions on how corporations can best manage authenticity under these circumstances:

- Some participants felt the report implies a single, universal corporate identity is desirable while they believe this is not necessarily the case—institutions of any sort have different realities depending on who is looking, from which angle, and what experience base.
- The most critical factor, they feel, is binding together the corporate identity and various stakeholder impressions with a unifying thread—the corporation's values and fundamental character.
- All organizations have metaphors and sub-metaphors and in some cases they can even be antithetical to one another. But a major metaphor must link all facets of the corporation consistently. This central intrinsic identity is what employees can revert to when issues arise and the going gets rough. This is what will enable companies to endure.

The discussion also acknowledged that understandable stakeholder skepticism exists regarding the notion of corporate authenticity and values in the post-Enron era:

- The proliferation of corporate responsibility reports in recent years makes it increasingly difficult to sift through the gloss in search of the substance. Enron notoriously touted its own four values—respect, integrity, community, and excellence—in its Code of Ethics as late as 2000, only one year before its collapse.
- Global corporations are operating at a trust deficit while often critical NGOs are operating as the second most trusted institutions, just behind the armed forces.
- This credibility deficit presents an opportunity for communicators to focus on and lead organizational trust-building. Substantive corporate responsibility is now an important facet of building that trustworthiness. Stakeholders now expect companies to acknowledge extra-financial responsibilities and accountability to the environment and greater society.

Despite these increased pressures and challenges—including the relinquishing of more power to stakeholders—the argument was made that corporations cannot abdicate control completely:

- To do so as communicators would create even more chaos in an increasingly chaotic environment.
- Instead, corporations must continue to manage perceptions by adjusting communication strategies to more effectively convey reality.
- This perception management must occur while staying true to corporate values and identity—serious problems will arise when companies respond to what stakeholders say by changing who they are fundamentally.
- In many ways this will require communicators to utilize skills of influence and persuasion in a dynamic environment. Many communicators today are not trained in persuasion, particularly in a two-way context—a skill that will be critical going forward.

As corporations focus on building trust and being authentic, the essential question was raised: What does "authentic" actually mean?

- The report defines it as "conforming to fact and therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief."
- This involves talking, being, and staying authentic—as well as defending the corporation and its reputation during times of trouble.
- Participants agreed throughout the Symposium that the notion of authenticity underscores the importance of a corporation's core values—not only *having* them, but also *using* them as compass points to both make promises and, more importantly, keep them.
- Building credibility and trust is the smart thing to do. It can act as a protection, granting corporations the ability to draw on a "reputational reservoir" when blunders occur in the future.

THE CORPORATE RESPONSE

While there was general consensus that *The Authentic Enterprise* houses strong ideas, the corporate response opened with agreement that implementation will offer challenges as well as opportunities:

- Corporate reactions to the report might be skeptical, including: "this is a pie in the sky"; "what's in it for me?"; "it's way too idealistic."
- The paper has many potential implications for the research agenda to bring its ideas to life within the corporation in the coming years.
- Qualitative modeling research could help define the future CCO role—mapping out what it looks like when the CCO lives the behaviors expressed in *The Authentic Enterprise*.
- Furthermore, research could be conducted to gauge whether or not the report's ideas are being implemented now—who is doing it and what representative case studies exist to use as benchmarks or role models.

To be authentic, an organization needs to know what its responsibility is—creating a set of crisp expectations that will determine whether its actions are reflective of and consistent with what the organization is at its core. Participants agreed unanimously that the communication function will be critical to engrain the notion of authenticity in a corporation:

- Communicators have the unique ability to reach across all functions and stitch an organization together.
- The discussion proposed the same set of binding and guiding values should be articulated for the communications function itself. This will enable communicators to take control of the function's definition within an organization, communicating what should be expected of communication practitioners while combating traditional criticism and stereotypes.
- In this way, a philosophy of corporation communications could be established to present both inside and outside of the field.
- Participants highlighted the importance of marketing this concept to senior leaders, conveying how companies will tangibly benefit from communications founded on strong values and ethical principles.
- A major challenge will be posed by public relations practitioners' current lack of widespread credibility—in direct contrast to the acknowledged clout of physicians, for example.
- In the coming years, leaders and academics in the field have the opportunity to instill these values in students who constitute the next generation of communicators.

As a key part of the education process, the discussion noted that many professionals with enormous practical knowledge and experience have never gone into the classroom to engage tomorrow's leaders. Participants agreed that it is equally important for professors to spend time in the workplace to better bridge the divide between the classroom and boardroom.

AGENCY PERSPECTIVES

The agency response to *The Authentic Enterprise* focused on the host of communication challenges yielded by today's rapidly evolving business environment. These challenges include:

- A radical shift in the balance of power for stakeholders
- Unprecedented personal empowerment, and
- Constantly shifting definitions of acceptable behavior.

This new environment has an enormous impact on how stakeholders view all corporations, regardless of their authenticity. Notions of who can be trusted continue to shift:

- Some now consider social media to be more trustworthy than professional sources
- "A person like me" is the most trusted spokesperson for many
- Rank-and-file employees are often more trusted than CEOs in a number of countries around the globe.

To boost trustworthiness and protect one's reputation in a world of democratized information access and communication, corporations must:

- Ramp up proactive outreach efforts
- Develop feedback systems
- Infiltrate the opposition to anticipate critiques, and
- Rethink organizational structure to maximize responsiveness.

Much discussion focused on the growing prevalence of blogs and the importance of thoughtfully engaging bloggers who are most influential, in the same manner one would engage and build long-term relationships with journalists. Best practices include:

- Monitoring and engaging bloggers well in advance—responding when negative viewpoints are aired is too late
- The blogosphere should not be viewed as a threat but as a unique opportunity for communicators: it can function as a bellwether, revealing legitimate truths which companies can address before they are picked up and promoted by traditional media sources.
- The blogosphere can act as one of the best listening posts, demonstrating where companies are falling short on stakeholder expectations.

This underscores participants' belief that listening is more critical than ever in communications. A corporation's response to bloggers will fall somewhere along a spectrum of engagement, with systematic listening and reacting to blog posts falling on the less interactive end and facilitating visibility, sustainable word-of-mouth, and community building falling on the most interactive end. Opportunity can also be created by engaging evangelists and mavens to amplify the views of these passionate consumers into more mainstream, mass segments. Employees should not be overlooked when considering strategies for brand education—not only do they serve as brand ambassadors, but they are also personifications of a corporation's values and underlying authenticity.

When considering stakeholders, the discussion noted the importance of recognizing that respective definitions of acceptable behavior are constantly in flux. Listening to myriad sources of information will be critical for corporations to keep their fingers on the pulse of these changing expectations.

While certain watchdog responsibilities can be parceled out, the agency response revisited several questions of ownership central to the notion of corporate authenticity:

- Where does accountability reside within an organization?
- Whose job is it to change a corporation's reality when behaviors are out of step with public acceptance or expectations?
- Accountability and alignment with stakeholder views of acceptable behavior offer communicators new opportunities for leadership and can strengthen the function in meaningful ways in the years ahead.

The challenge of communicating warning signs and consequences to senior level executives may be especially difficult for young communicators new to the field. Senior mentors can play an important role in guiding younger professionals—the next generation of communications leaders—to navigate difficult decisions and establish credibility with an organization's senior executives.

THE COMMUNICATIONS ACADEMIC RESPONSE

Reactions from faculty at the Symposium who teach in schools of communication, journalism and mass media highlighted another measure of the report's effectiveness. Beyond fostering a global dialogue, the report can also serve as a catalyst for additional contributions to the body of knowledge, particularly dealing with the history of the communications function in ways that the report does not address. In particular, there was great interest in mapping the evolution of communications from tactical to strategic, as well as its origins as a management function not merely a counseling role.

Many participants agreed that when tracking history and the current state of the function, reporting lines are not paramount—it is not so much to whom communicators report, but instead the importance placed on the function within the organization.

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For example, only forty-six percent of the current Page Society membership reports directly to the CEO. Clearly they are not the only communicators who are assuming a strategic role. Reporting structure does not tell the full story.

The discussion also considered the underlying definition of authenticity. While the report focuses on the literal definition, the notion of authenticity has important roots in moral philosophy:

- Camus, Sartre, and other existentialists defined being authentic as not being a product of extrinsic forces but rather intrinsic motivations based on one's values.
- In this way, people and corporations can be many things to different people without being inauthentic—the danger only arises when organizations change their identity to accommodate the whims of the public.
- Participants agreed that authenticity hinges on a corporation's ability to maintain an authentic core—articulated by the values of the organization. As Lincoln said, character is like a tree with reputation its shadow. Fertilizing an organization's tree—its core character—is paramount.
- Ultimately, communicators, employees, and management alike must be authentic as carriers of the flame in order for the enterprise and its communication strategy to be authentic. At the same time, we must reconcile the fact that personal/individual and organizational values will inevitably differ at times.

The philosophical debate concluded with a critical question: How do we keep *The Authentic Enterprise* itself authentic?

- How do we keep this from becoming a generic strategy to pull off the shelf and implement?
- The report introduces an interesting paradox—how do we guard against "synthetic authenticity."
- The report equates authenticity with inherent goodness, though some took issue with this concept.
- Participants noted that looking at the intention of an organization will be critical as it is possible to have a core that is "authentically bad."
- It also must be acknowledged that many companies' authentic drivers will be centered on a profit motive: "we are here to make money."
- The intention to do the right thing matters most, involving constant revision based on listening to stakeholders.
- The concept of authenticity for a corporation is not a destination; it is an ongoing work-in-progress. A corporation is always trying to be or become authentic.

Finally, participants raised the report's emphasis on tools and not strategy—the latter being increasingly important given the proliferation of communication channels that practitioners must navigate in today's environment. Rigorously tracking channels and audiences will offer critical information to guide that strategy. Pivotal to its success will be the fostering of a stronger understanding of business among communicators and even greater society.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Symposium discussion concluded with a reinforcement of *The Authentic Enterprise*'s strong call to action for today's communicators and academics:

- First and foremost, participants agreed that communication officers can play a defining role in ensuring that the leadership of organizations manage with an eye toward the "conscience of the corporation." While no one individual can serve as this conscience, the CCO can serve as a leader in this effort.
- CCOs today must tackle the challenge of remaining the objective outside voice even when residing within the boardroom. Though there are many benefits when the role of the CCO is seen

as a decision-making member of senior management (also called the dominant coalition), this also presents a danger in the CCO being seen as the "mouthpiece" for the C-suite.

- Academics can play a key role in exploring these concepts to new generations of communicators, particularly in teaching values within a business context. Their efforts can help ensure that young communicators have a more comprehensive understanding of business, in addition to their essential role as its reputational stewards and guardians of institutional values.

The more effective and integral the CCO is to the core of the organization—both in shaping its definitive values and in preserving its authenticity—the more compelling they will be as role models to strengthen the caliber of future students entering the communication field.