

A major public relations concern of every company, regardless of size, is the effectiveness of its employee communications. That became an increasingly important consideration of General Motors (GM), Detroit, MI, when a 1975 survey revealed that its employees felt "left out" so far as getting information from the company itself was concerned and, quite often, got more from the media.

Contributing factors were that only 70 of its 160 U.S. operating facilities had in-plant publications, with a majority of these of poor quality. They lacked what GM calls "the reason for the existence of the employee publication": objective coverage of business-related information which is of high interest to both management and employees.

These and other shortcomings prompted the launching of a formal internal communications program. Although GM had been using a variety of channels to communicate with its 600,000 employees, the new program's emphasis, explains Alvie L. Smith, GM's Director of Internal Communications, has been on the printed word, because GM considers this "the most cost-effective approach." Fundamentals are (1) a regular and timely flow of business-related information from headquarters to the local publication and (2) improving the latter's quality by importing new techniques and strengthening the skills of the editors.

Editors can dial a tape-recorded "News-line," changed as many as three times a day, that summarizes GM and industry-related news. (Examples: activities of competitors, statements by GM Chairman Thomas A. Murphy, price of GM's stock) . . . Letters (signed by "Alvie") encourage the editors to make full use of recently-issued press releases, Newsline items, economic forecasts, and other material. . . "Information Briefs," a bi-weekly, six-to-eight-pager with amusing cartoons, contains short items (that can be used as fillers) on inflation, energy saving, a survey on dismemberment of large companies, risks of overdoses of medicines, safer driving, housing costs, the expanding government payroll, etc.

Quality is upgraded by these activities:

There's "GM Editors' Resources Guide," introduced in 1976 and updated annually. The latest issue, tabbed and 152 pages long, is a course-in-print for the publication editor. It describes his or her role ("a bridge between the management and the work population" whose responsibility is "not only to pass along the word, but to interpret it for the internal public which is being served"). Then follows a section on corporate goals and standards. (It recommends, for example: establish information priorities "in consultation with your management"; emphasize local news; go easy on the trivia; test your readers regularly; and select volunteer reporters carefully and give them good training.) The Guide also contains sections on: writing; design and layout; graphics; photographs; printing; distribution and merchandising; and reader surveys ("report results to your management and readers and take all reasonable, bona-fide, constructive action which the results tell you should be taken").

"Inside Information," a four-page monthly letter, names editors whose publications have shown marked improvement, describes what they have done, lists personnel changes, reports awards from outside organizations, and gives useful ideas derived from books, surveys, etc.

An annual conference for editors is held . . . The first, staged in May 1976, was attended by 100 persons; the second, in March 1977, drew 125; and 150 (90% of the all there then were) came on May 3 and 4 in 1978. . . The 1977 event, for example, featured workshops conducted by GM personnel, such as experienced local editors and outside communicators. (One of the latter, Phil Douglass, Director of the Douglass Visual Workshops (Swarthmore, Penn.) commented that the GM publications were 20 years behind the times -- a remark later reported in "Inside Information"). . . GM's President Elliott M. Estes and seven other officers also participated. The former stated that "sound corporate communications programs -- skilfully planned and executed -- can

result in a bottom-line payoff that benefits nearly everybody." Another officer, Anthony G. De Lorenzo, Vice President-PR, characterized employees as "a high priority public." Smith, in closing the meeting, stated that "significant progress" had been made, but much remained to be done, and stressed that "internal communications at too many locations is still a low-level priority without adequate manpower, management understanding, or management support" . . . The 1978 conference again featured workshops (largely on topics suggested by the 1977 participants) and speeches by top GM executives. De Lorenzo this time stressed that the editors "have an important responsibility in helping us communicate as effectively inside GM as we do to the outside world." He urged them to approach public issues with the same positive and confident tone and content used in the company's PR program and outlined these immediate goals: securing greater public awareness of GM's technological leadership; developing better understanding of GM's concern for consumers; and responding effectively to the corporation's critics.

Evaluation is a new part of the quality-improvement program. The positive and negative aspects of each publication are analyzed by a team of five members of GM's Internal Communications Staff (part of the PR Department). Their conclusions are reported semi-annually to the respective editors. Decisions are based on: content (e.g., balance of news and credibility); appearance; and writing skills. Praise is given where due. (Example: "These publications more than exceed the recommended minimum guidelines for printed employee communications.") But criticism is frank and to the point. (Example: "This publication .... appears to have no editorial policy or goals. The layout and typography are old-fashioned and unattractive. The writing is not professional and speaks down to employees. Perhaps even more important, the content does little to enhance understanding of employees about management goals and problems at either divisional or corporate levels.... For the money now being spent.... there is no reason why the division should not have a quality publication.")

The evaluations are the foundation for

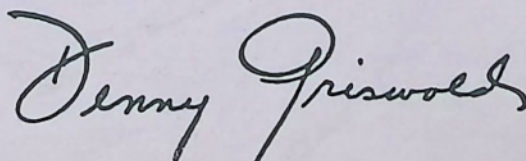
awards conferred at the annual conferences. The evaluators choose 25 of the publications they consider outstanding. Each editor attending then votes for what he considers best in each of five categories -- tabloid, magazine, daily newsletters, semi-weekly/weekly newsletters, and bi-weekly/monthly newsletters. Winners win plaques and the "rest of the best" receive certificates.

Success of the program is evidenced in several ways. . . The employee communications network has increased by 100 and now numbers 170 publications. . . Calls to the tape-recorded Newsline exceed 1,200 a day. . . Editors are making greater use of priority corporate and local management information. . . It has been found that 60 publications have made "significant improvement". . . Of special importance is the fact that the program has earned increasing support by top management. . . And commendation of the program has also come from outside GM. For example, in 1978, the International Association of Business Communicators awarded GM its Gold Quill of Merit in the all-around employee communication category and the East Central District of Public Relations Society of America placed GM's program best in the category of Internal Relations.

\* \* \* \* \*

For Your PR NEWS Idea Library, write to: Milton B. Dolinger, Asst. Vice Pres., PR & Adv., Chessie System, Terminal Tower, Cleveland, OH 44101, for "1978 Annual Report"; it uses the company's appealing and well-known sleeping-kitten symbol as spokesman to explain the specialized language of accounting in the "Notes to Consolidated Financial Statements" section of the Report. . . David P. Reynolds, Bd. Chmn. & CEO, Reynolds Metals Co., Richmond, VA 23261, for "Foundation Of Our System," reprint of eloquent speech on the importance of personal human dignity in our society.

Proud to Serve PR,



Editor