

Preface

Volume 6, Strategic Communications Management (2009)

As co-editors of this special issue of the McMaster Journal of Communication, we are pleased to present papers authored by seven students in the initial two classes of Canada's first Master of Communications Management program.

We are all public relations practitioners and, in our professional roles, we provide strategic communication leadership to a variety of organizations and companies. But, while we have experienced success in our careers, we came to the MCM program seeking an opportunity to broaden our knowledge from a business perspective, while exploring some of the biggest challenges facing the public relations profession today. We were attracted by the program's novel curriculum as well as its academic pedigree - a unique partnership between the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York.

We believe that the articles in this issue of the MJC showcase some of the most interesting outcomes of this scholarly adventure.

Brittany Cadence provides a case study that delves into how an American tragedy has impacted communication practices in Canada. She analyzed the response by a university in Ontario to the Virginia Tech massacre, and discovered that lessons learned south of the border are indeed changing crisis preparedness practices here at home. Among those lessons was the recognition that a crucial factor in readiness to respond to a crisis is leadership mindset.

In her exploration of corporate citizenship, Heather Ferguson tests how an environmental scan tool she designed can help organizations decide how to fulfill civic responsibilities while staying competitive. Although she notes there are clear gaps between theory and practice, her analysis points to the value of using the scan as it helps corporate leaders expand their concept of success.

Colleen Killingsworth examines the attitudes held by municipal government leaders about the role and function of communicators. In her study of government leaders in a large western Canadian city, she found that communicators are not included in the dominant coalition. She also determined that, unless the leaders have past, personal experience with effective communicators, they are unlikely to perceive the function as strategic or valuable.

Kim T. Morris offers a unique perspective on crisis communications in remote and rural communities. Using a decentralized health organization in north eastern Ontario as her case study, she asked a wide range of staff members to identify key communication strategies. Among other conclusions, her results confirmed that conventional strategies are not considered adequate, and that creativity and innovation must be high priorities.

Heather Pullen's article provides an updated look at the long-standing turf war between public relations and marketing. Her case study focused on analyzing the relationship between the public relations department of a large Ontario hospital and the foundation that fundraises for the hospital. What she found was that while tension is felt and disagreements occur, leaders on both sides agree that compromise and cooperation are vital to the organization's success.

In his article, Donald L. Smith uses established mass communication theories to interpret a current communication challenge - how to change the behaviour of taxpayers who overload the government's on-line filing system by waiting until the last minute to submit their returns. He proposes a new theory, the theory of unrealistic expectations, to explain that when people cannot see the lineup in front of them, they don't think it's relevant to them.

Natalia Villegas has contributed an article that looks at the relationship between a company's reputation, internal communication within the company, and employee perceptions about the company. She interviewed four business managers and the leader of a nonprofit agency in a south central Ontario community. They all described internal communications as a relatively narrow service function, however they also agreed that good internal communication translates into improved reputation and financial performance.

The theme threading its way through all these articles is the spirit of inquiry that characterizes the Master of Communications Management program. As the first academic offering of its kind in Canada, its students are challenged to ask questions that have never been asked in a Canadian context before, and to test theories that are helping to shape a field of study that, in this country at least, is still in its infancy.

It has been exciting to be pathfinders in this program and we would like to extend our gratitude to the MCM faculty. In particular, our thanks go to Dr. Terry Flynn, director of the MCM program, for inspiring us to grow as public relations practitioners and as academics.

We also feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with Dr. Alex Sévigny on the development and editing of this issue of the McMaster Journal of Communication. His vision and encouragement were essential and have been appreciated tremendously.

As the Art Editor, Parker David Martin has created an outstanding cover design for this special issue, and we thank him for sharing his talents with us. Thanks also to Laura Strong who helped us with the copy editing for the print edition of this special issue of the McMaster Journal of Communication. And last, but certainly not least, we would like to extend our appreciation to McMaster University's Digital Strategies Librarian, Nick Ruest, for his guidance and patience as we worked on this project.