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PRESS RELEASE

Apologists Take Spotlight as Best/Worst Communicators of 2008

Ketchum's annual ranking becomes a "sorry" affair

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TORONTO, ONTARIO, Dec 08, 2008 (MARKET WIRE via COMTEX) -- From choked up business leaders to shell-shocked sports stars and bleary-eyed Barenaked Ladies, 2008 was unquestionably the year of the apology. Faux penitents and the truly sorrowful fill this year's list of Canada's best and worst communicators - the fifth annual ranking by Ketchum Public Relations Canada that recognizes skillful, colourful and effective communication as well as the verbose, crassly manipulative and downright stupid.

Every year, Ketchum PR professionals track hundreds of spokespeople as they deal with potentially damaging issues in the fields of business, government, spot news, sports, and the arts. The results are used to track trends in communication and to identify valuable lessons. This year the trend was the apology and the primary lesson was that when authentic it can be a powerful piece of communication.

"For decades people in public life have studiously avoided apologizing, fearing that it would be used against them in a court of law or in the court of public opinion," said Geoffrey Rowan, Partner and Managing Director of Ketchum Public Relations Canada. "But there's plenty of evidence that proves that's the wrong strategy. In fact, an appropriate, genuine apology can inspire civility, humanity and forgiveness, while a fake or absent one is more likely to provoke cynicism and lawsuits."

Two apologies that set the gold standard this year were the government of Canada's to Aboriginal peoples for its residential schools policy, and Maple Leaf Foods CEO Michael McCain, to everyone affected by the listeria contamination at one of its plants that was linked to 20 deaths.

1. Mr. McCain solidified his credibility and our respect when he said early on: "Going through the crisis there are two advisers I've paid no attention to. The first are the lawyers, and the second are the accountants. It's not about the money or the legal liability. This is about our being accountable for providing consumers with safe food."

Subsequently Mr. McCain spoke directly to the public in a television ad, heartbreak clearly evident on his face and in his voice, and acknowledged that Maple Leaf products had been linked to illness and death.

"To Canadians who are ill and to the families who have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain," he said, adding "This week our best efforts failed and we are deeply sorry ...I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first."

A real apology acknowledges the harm done, takes responsibility, includes a believable statement of regret, and a commitment to ensure that it doesn't happen again. Mr. McCain did all of those things and just may have saved the Maple Leaf brand in the process.

1A. In a related apology, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz proved that comedy is hard but saying you're sorry isn't. He had crassly joked on a conference call about the listeriosis outbreak that the tainted meat crisis was "a death by a thousand cuts - or should I say cold cuts." He also jokingly expressed the hope that Liberal critic Wayne Easter was among the 20 victims.

"I want to offer an unreserved and heartfelt apology," he later said in a news conference, offering his "most humble and heartfelt regrets to the families of those affected by this tragedy ...I did not intend to add to their suffering and I very deeply apologize for that."

He acknowledged the harm he was responsible for, and expressed sincere regret. We think it's unlikely he'll attempt crisis comedy again.

2. At least as powerful as Mr. McCain's apology on behalf of Maple Leaf was Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology, on behalf of the Canadian government, to all Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Delivered in Parliament, it was an important step toward healing the immense damage done by the government policy of assimilation that was enacted through residential schools. Mr. Harper said, in part:

"I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system ... Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country ... Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. ... Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others

never returned home ... The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry."

The long overdue apology was gracious and sincere; the forgiveness offered in response by so many Aboriginal leaders and victims of residential school abuse was cathartic.

2A. A few months later we were reminded that regret and a commitment to change has to be consistent throughout an organization. The effectiveness of Canada's apology was undermined when an aide to then-Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon was caught on videotape telling a group of natives in Mr. Cannon's Quebec riding that they could have a meeting to discuss their grievances "if you behave and you're sober."

Mr. Cannon's office later issued a weak apology, "for any offence given." Not good enough. The offence was real and quite specific. To be taken seriously, the apology should have matched.

3. Also in the realm of the political apology, Conservative MP Tom Lukiwski had good reasons to issue an apology after an old tape of him making offensive comments about gay people surfaced. The offense was 17 years old but there is no statute of limitations on being a jerk. (Don't people working in the public sphere understand what 'public' means?) To his credit, Mr. Lukiwski seemed genuinely sorry.

"The only explanation I can give is that I was stupid, thoughtless and insensitive," he said, and went on to list the people who were likely hurt by his comments. "The comments I made should not be tolerated in any society. They should not be tolerated today. They should not have been tolerated in 1991. They should not have been tolerated the years previous to that. The words I used are more than just hurtful. They are words that should not be allowed to be spoken today, either publicly or privately. I will spend the rest of my career and my life trying to make up for those shameless comments."

4. There is a difference between offering "a heartfelt and sincere apology," as it seems Mr. Lukiwski did, and saying that you are offering a "heartfelt and sincere apology," as it seemed Syncrude CEO Tom Katinas did after 500 ducks died in a toxic tailings pond at the company's oils sands operation in Alberta. He danced around the issue of responsibility, but the bottom line is: if it looks like an oily duck, and it walks like an oily duck, and it quacks like an oily duck, you guys screwed up.

"Syncrude offers a heartfelt and sincere apology for the incident on April 28th that caused hundreds of migratory birds to die after they landed on a tailings pond at our oil sands operation. We are now investigating the factors that led to this regrettable occurrence, and are cooperating fully with government authorities as they conduct their own reviews.

To be clear, there was no "incident" on April 28th that caused the birds to die. Syncrude caused the birds to die by maintaining a big lake of toxic sludge out in the open.

5. Some folks are so uncomfortable with the idea of apologizing, or are advised so badly, that they make the apology about themselves. It's not. It's about who you hurt. All we want to know from you is how deep your regret is and how strong is your commitment not to do it again. Barenaked Lady Steven Page apologized "to all of those I have hurt or embarrassed during this episode," after being granted an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal of the drug charges against him in New York state. Then he launched into a statement about how,

"the respect and responsibility I have earned over the course of my life and career thus far are important to me, and I am moving forward from this with gratitude and hope."

OK, whatever. Some times the better part of valor is just to shut up.

6. Likewise, fashionista said Robin Kay, president of the Fashion Design Council of Canada, made hundreds cringe as she delivered a rambling drunken speech. Acting as if she was the victim, Ms. Kay admitted she had had too much to drink. "I was exhausted and I didn't realize what was happening to me," she said, nor apparently did she realize or care about what was happening to her audience. "I can only hope that the clothes will speak for themselves and that my two minutes will be ignored. It was all pretty freaky for me, too. It was horrible. I guess I'm not Iron Woman."

We're so sorry that it was horrible for you. (See how ineffective an insincere apology is?) Not Iron Woman. Just Hammered Woman.

7. A real iron man, Olympian Adam van Koeverden, had no need to apologize but he did anyway, demonstrating humanity and humility while building his own brand. After one especially poor performance in China he said he had no excuses.

"All I have is an apology. I'm sorry. I hate watching people apologize after bad performances, but I know now why they do it. Because there was a lot of pressure on me and that pressure amounted to expectations of people back home and I always talk about how great performances by Canadians athletes can be inspiring and motivating. I didn't contribute to that at all today."

He did the next day, winning a silver medal. Adam could have said a lot of things after his poor performance, or he could have said nothing. But apologizing to Canadians whose hearts were riding with him out there on the water cemented our loyalty.

8. The RCMP proved that it gets it and in the process prevented an ugly PR battle that would have dragged on when it acknowledged a mistake and apologized to the family of murder victim John McKendy of Douglas. The McKendy family had raised concerns to the RCMP that Nicholas Baker might harm a family member and kill himself. He was charged with Mr. McKendy's murder and killed himself. An RCMP spokesperson had repeatedly told reporters that family members didn't approach the Mounties before the killing with concerns over anyone's safety.

"I have since realized that this is not the case," said Assistant Commissioner Darrell LaFosse, the RCMP's commander in New Brunswick. "I have personally apologized to the family on behalf of the RCMP in New Brunswick and I am here today to publicly offer my apology for us saying they did not raise concerns. They did. We were investigating those concerns. Any perception they did not make us aware that there were concerns is false. I offer my apology to them for us saying otherwise."

By coming clean, the RCMP did right by the McKendy family and it protected its own reputation, which would only have been hurt by bickering with a grieving family.

9. But no one apologized to Brian Sinclair, or his family, after the homeless man was left unattended in a Winnipeg hospital's emergency department for 34 hours. Another patient had to tell medical staff that Mr. Sinclair looked dead. The medical examiner called Mr. Sinclair's death, caused by a treatable infection, completely preventable. Instead, the regional health authority ducked responsibility, saying: "I wouldn't say that anyone made assumptions that weren't reasonable in this case."

Once you untangle the double negatives, what that means is that the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority thinks it's reasonable for trained health care professionals to assume that a legless man slumped unconscious (or dead) in a wheelchair for the better part of two days is just fine. Sorry.

While the Health Authority clings to the decades-old practice of "deny and defend," more forward-thinking institutions like Johns Hopkins and Stanford have found that by promptly disclosing medical errors and offering earnest apologies and fair compensation, they make it easier to learn from mistakes and dilute anger that often fuels lawsuits. The University of Michigan Health System found that full disclosure with an apology reduced lawsuits to 83 in August 2007 from 262 in August 2001. They also found that improving patient safety and patient communication is much more cost effective than defensiveness and denial.

10. And speaking of defense, still no apology from Conrad Black for feloniously misappropriating shareholders of Hollinger International Inc. for his own benefit. Now he's seeking a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card from Pres. George Bush. Sorry?

The Best and Worst of 2009

If you would like to get in on the fun for Canada's Best and Worst Communicators of 2008, send nominations to geoffrey.rowan@ketchum.com. Each nomination must contain the quote, its speaker, the date it was spoken and a verifiable reference to the media outlet where it was reported.

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