



## STATE OF THE UNIONS

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The union movement has undergone significant changes over the past few years, but the concepts of negotiation and openness still dominate its communications efforts.

The union movement in the US is in the midst of ongoing, macro-level changes. Membership has declined in some sectors and shifted to others as labor seeks to cope with the new economy. The political clout of the movement has also come under scrutiny. Even the stalwart AFL-CIO saw some of its largest members splinter off into their own coalition last year among disagreements over how to revive the cause.

Despite these changes, organized labor is still a force to be reckoned with for many corporations. And the communicators who manage the delicate interactions between workers, unions, and companies say that new situations require new thinking on behalf of all involved.

Perhaps the most visible development in the field this year has been the establishment of the Center for Union Facts (CUF), an anti-union group backed by undisclosed corporate interests which has undertaken a powerful multi-year, multimillion-dollar push to discredit organized labor. James Bowers, a creative director at CUF's firm Berman & Company, is responsible for the group's public campaigns, which center around an extensive Web site supported by advertising campaigns and national media coverage.

'Some of the information we have (on the Web site) are things that no one has ever been able to find in one place before,' he says.

That information includes databases of information on many large unions, detailing how they spend their money and what their leaders are doing. CUF tries to bring in current and potential union members and convince them their union is doing them no good. To do this, the group has been consistently brash in its ads and public positioning.

'We're definitely trying to get people's attention; we're not selling soap,' says Bowers. 'You're going to have people who already agree with you, and people who are diametrically opposed to you. You're really trying to communicate to the middle, and pique their interest enough to get them to find out a little bit more.'

More open discussion

Today, third-party groups like CUF and, on the other side, the union-backed Wal-Mart Watch, play an increasing role in the debate. But some labor communications veterans feel they represent only the extremes of what should fundamentally be a process of negotiation and openness.

Larry Kamer, North American president of MS&L and a veteran of labor relations work, says many companies are being more open when discussing unions, moving away from their tight-lipped past.

'Some companies are adhering to more effective and progressive principles of communications by framing the debate in a much larger context much earlier (in the process),' he says.

He cites longtime client GM, which he says now talks openly about issues like healthcare costs and broad economic market concerns, and 'not so much limit itself to a percentage increase here, or a contract provision there.'

Kamer also names Safeway, another client, which was involved in a fierce union strike in Southern California in 2003 that inflicted huge economic damage. When the time came, soon after, to negotiate a new contract in the northern part of the state, the company changed tactics, framing the issue far more broadly than a single labor dispute and bolstering its online communications to try to sway workers to its side.

As for the rise of third-party attack groups, Kamer is skeptical. 'I almost think that the kind of debate that happens with organizations like that, and that happens on the ground with individual companies, are in some ways disconnected,' he says. 'Those sides give aid and comfort to people who are just anti-union...I don't think it's particularly effective, for labor or management, to wage these discussions as a kind of holy jihad.'

Gary Grates, who spent five years heading internal communications at GM before moving to Edelman in March, says much of his effort at the automaker was to increase the flow of information to employees, thereby fostering a stronger connection with the corporation. Because 'information is ubiquitous' now, he says, it's all the more important for the company to reach out to workers.

'The goal was to create a habit for communicating inside the organization,' adds Grates. 'The more confident an employee is about his or her circumstance as it relates to the organization, the better they are. As human beings, that's what we're looking for.'

## Better relationships

Some companies have approached the union issue with a simple plan: have a good relationship. One is the rose breeder and seller Jackson & Perkins (J&P), which has had a contract with the United Farm Workers covering its hundreds of agricultural employees since 1995.

'We don't have an adversarial relationship with our union at all,' says J&P's SVP of corporate relations Bill Ihle, noting that company management and union leadership sometimes combine for corporate events. 'We look at it as productivity, a better product, and all that goes with that.'

Of course, more liberal, labor-friendly agencies are also following the evolution of labor communications closely. Bill Wasserman, president of DC-based M&R Strategic Services, says that groups like Wal-Mart Watch show that labor is getting savvier in both new-media exploits and in forming strategic alliances with other cause-related groups for a common goal.

'Corporations try to market the fact that they're good to employees,' notes Wasserman. 'Those that have a great reputation about treating their employees well do better in the marketplace.'