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Three Vital Attributes

An Interview with Chris Stellwag, Director of Marketing Communications, Defence and Security, CAE



“Be proactive and look for opportunities for how communications can support the company’s strategic goals.”

Responsiveness, attention to detail and trust are three attributes that Chris Stellwag considers vital to help him successfully communicate his company’s corporate strategy, strengths and capabilities to the outside world. Chris is Director of Marketing Communications for CAE’s Defence and Security business, which delivers training centres, training services and simulation products to more than 50 defence forces around the world. The trio of attributes is not limited to CAE, but can apply to any company, anywhere, anytime.

Responsiveness

The press is vital to getting the message out to CAE's publics, Chris says, including:

- Customers and potential customers
- Suppliers
- OEMs
- Investors and potential investors
- Partners

He says, "Helping the media do their job is also very beneficial for the company you represent."

Chris tries to respond to all press enquiries within 24 hours – in the first hour whenever possible – either with the information the reporter needs or at least an acknowledgement. It does help if the reporter lets him know when the deadline is, but not knowing does not change his reaction time.

Although much of the media he deals with may be weekly, monthly or bimonthly publications, things have changed as magazines developed a significant on-line presence, he says. "There is now some urgency to some inquiries."

Chris credits a mentor from his first job at NCR. His boss was a former reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspaper and knew the urgency of deadlines. He ingrained the quick response time into Chris' professional DNA.

"You really have to be proactive to set the course," he advises, not waiting until the media comes to you. And give the media what they need to tell your story.

Attention to Detail

Chris juggles many activities, including regular media events. He prefers to hold events at customer sites and have the customer help tell the CAE story. "They are much more credible," he explains. "As the end-user of the products and services we deliver, the customer comes from a different perspective and therefore is seen as more neutral than if CAE said the same thing. The media benefit because they hear from the people who are on the front line doing the training."

The event has to be beneficial to:

- The customer
- The company
- The media person

Military customers involve more planning than non-military because it is necessary to secure clearances. "Sometimes I have to sell the military on the benefit of the media event," he says. "It usually works out to a win-win situation." Negotiation, budgeting, reservations, agendas and supporting materials all have to be prepared. Chris manages half a dozen media events a year in different regions of the world, in addition to media engagements at numerous trade shows, and considers the effort well worth it. "They offer tremendous value to CAE and our customers."

Similar attention to detail is necessary for all activities whether a trade show, conference, press release or anything else that falls within his bailiwick.

Trust

Chris has been with CAE for 15 years and over that time has proven himself. He knows the company and the company and its executives know him. Whatever he proposes is intended to back up the company strategy and priorities.

“Trust takes time to build.” Asked what he would recommend to someone starting out in communications, Chris says, “Tell what you see as the situation, not what the executive may want to hear. If you’re a communications professional, your job is to provide counsel and guidance.”

“Never be afraid to speak the truth, and ask for the truth,” he says. “Give me the facts, good or bad, and then I can help guide how we communicate. It serves your company best if you are forthcoming and honest in dealing with the media.”

“Also, don’t wait to be told what to do. Be proactive; look for opportunities for how communications can support the company’s strategic goals.”

Internal Communications

Although Chris is not directly responsible for internal communications he feels that “all of CAE’s 8,000 employees around the world are ambassadors for the company brand and reputation, probably more so than any press releases or advertisement.” Responsiveness, attention to detail and trust are important here too.

The internal comms vehicles most commonly used by CAE:

- A digital newsletter
- Town hall meetings with group presidents (military / civil / healthcare)
- Quarterly CEO management meetings
- Webex and video / teleconferences

Often when the CEO or any of his direct reports visit a CAE location outside Montréal, they do informal exchange meetings with employees at the site, Chris says. “Two-way dialogue is important internally as well as with our outside stakeholders.”

Chris is based in Tampa, Florida USA.