

## **Davis-Martin Public Relations: Negotiating Organizational Responsibility**

Barbara Shwom

Penny Hirsch

Judith Messick

*Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*

**F**OR THE PAST TWO YEARS, Rae Severns has worked as an assistant account executive for Davis-Martin Public Relations, a small but highly regarded agency with about 40 employees. During her two years with the agency, Rae rotated through three different accounts. Last year she spent eight months working for one of the agency's oldest clients, the State Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber is a not-for-profit organization that provides a broad base of services to businesses statewide. In addition, the Chamber promotes business interests in the state, lobbies for those interests in the state legislature, and provides support services to local chambers of commerce.

As her first assignment for the Chamber, Rae worked on a public relations campaign designed to persuade businesses to become members of the Chamber and to support its mission. Rae also developed a series of seminars for local chambers to help them project a more professional public image and to publish higher quality newsletters. Rae's experience with the Chamber was professionally valuable to her. The work was challenging and instructive; it taught her a good deal about the business climate in the state and allowed her to meet a number of influential business and governmental leaders.

### **A Dilemma for Rae**

Early on Wednesday morning, Rae checked her voicemail and found a message from her supervisor, Ken Davenport, who had left the night before for a three-day conference with a client in Washington, D.C. Ken had good news to report: Just before he left on Tuesday evening, he had talked to the Chamber's Executive Director, Roger Corbett,

who was so pleased with Rae's work that he was offering her a new assignment. The Chamber wanted Rae's help with its campaign against two bills that the state legislature would be voting on during the upcoming congressional session. Both bills mandated that employers provide additional employee health insurance benefits. The first bill required that plans include an option by which employees could extend some of their coverage to non-employees, specifically in-laws and grandchildren who were members of the employee's household. The second bill required coverage of pregnancy costs and routine check-ups for employees' children. The proposed bills would raise annual healthcare expenses approximately 10 percent and would reduce businesses' flexibility to tailor benefit plans to meet employees' special needs. The Chamber planned to oppose both bills. To assist the Chamber with this effort, Roger wanted Rae to consult with the Chamber's lobbyists, helping them sharpen their arguments against the proposed legislation. She would also be responsible for writing letters to legislators and opinion pieces to newspapers.

At the end of his voicemail message, Ken said he knew Rae would do a great job on this new assignment with the Chamber. He promised to enlist some additional staff support to assist her with her other accounts so that she could get started on the Chamber assignment next week. He also told her that Roger wanted to meet with her on Friday morning. "I'll be in meetings all today and tomorrow. If you need to reach me, Ginny has my hotel fax number," Ken concluded.

Rae's stomach churned just thinking about the new assignment. She knew she should be pleased. It was a sign of her boss's and her client's confidence in her abilities. It was also an indication that she was doing well in her job, perhaps even well enough to be promoted ahead of schedule. Nonetheless, Rae was not at all happy about this opportunity. Although she enjoyed working with the Chamber, she did not always support the political positions they adopted. In fact, she had particular problems with some of the Chamber's positions on issues impacting women and children.

Although Rae rarely talked at work about her involvement in community service, she was politically active in the area of children's rights. For several years, she had been a volunteer for *Children First*, a local group that campaigned for community support to improve education and healthcare for children. As part of her work with that

group, she got to know Pat Sitwell, the state senator sponsoring the pending bill requiring employee health plans to cover pregnancy costs and routine check-ups for children. Like Senator Sitwell, Rae believed that businesses should assume more of the cost of providing health-care for employees and their families and that there should be less financial burden placed on individuals and government. Thus, Rae supported the two pending healthcare bills and had contributed both time and money to Senator Sitwell's most recent re-election campaign.

Given her views and activities regarding children's healthcare issues, Rae wished she had been offered the opportunity to decline the Chamber assignment. She did not want to do this job, but she suspected that Ken would not be sympathetic with her position. More than once, she had heard him complain that government regulation and unfunded mandates were devastating to small businesses, including Davis-Martin. "I've been in business for 35 years," Ken once said to her, "and each year the government tries to pull the strings a little tighter. If those politicians have their way, they'll have all our money spent before we make it."

Rae mulled over her problem. "Now what am I supposed to do?" she thought. "I'm a professional. I should be able to separate my work from my politics, but in this case, I don't think it's possible. How can I allow myself to use my rhetorical skills to help defeat these bills? If I can't do the work, what are my other choices? If I turn the assignment down because I disagree with the ideas, I may jeopardize my promotion. Yet, if I take the assignment, I doubt I'll be able to do a good job because I don't believe in the cause. Is it fair to my client and my company if I don't reveal this conflict of interest? I need to find some way to get out of this."

Rae knew she had to either get in touch with Ken as soon as possible or be prepared to meet with Roger on Friday morning. She had little time to plan her strategy.

## **Assignments**

### **Assignment 1: Advice to Rae**

You are an account executive at Davis-Martin and Rae is your closest friend at the firm. Rae told you she does not want to accept the new assignment for the Chamber. If you agree that she should try to get out of the job, advise her about her communication strategy. How should she approach Ken Davenport? If you think she should accept the Chamber's assignment, persuade her to do so.

### **Assignment 2: Fax to Ken**

Assume the role of Rae. You have decided to turn down the new assignment; therefore, you need to contact Ken Davenport before Friday morning. Write a fax to Ken.

### **Assignment 3: Strategy for Ken**

You are an assistant to Rae. Rae has persuaded Ken to give the Chamber assignment to someone else. Ken asked you to help Rae plan his communications with Roger Corbett. What should Ken's communication goals and main message be?

### **Assignment 4: Meeting with Roger**

You are Rae. You have been unable to get in touch with Ken, but you are scheduled to meet with Roger Corbett. You have to decide what to do on your own. Will you call Roger to cancel the meeting or go to it? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action? What could you say—in either the phone call or the meeting—to protect your interests and those of Davis-Martin?