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Rethinking Future Elements of National and International Power

Seminar Series

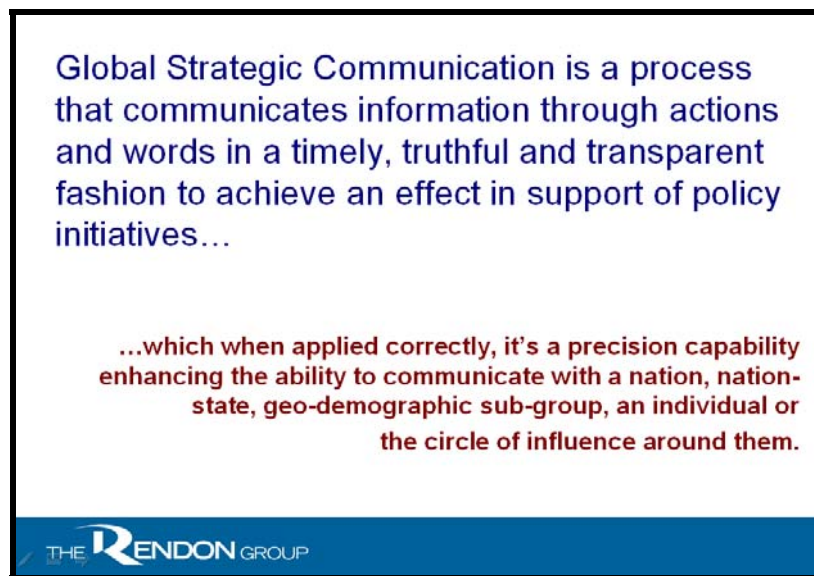
14 December 2007

Mr. John Rendon
CEO, The Rendon Group
Strategic Communications
biography

Notes:

1. Mr. Rendon's presentation, which also contains notes expanding on many of the viewgraphs, can be downloaded separately from the video.
2. You are invited to comment on Mr. Rendon's presentation by going to the Discussions page of the website.

Mr. Rendon began by noting that there are many available definitions for Strategic Communications. His preferred definition was summarized in a slide:



Mr. Rendon emphasized that Strategic Communications:

- Was a process, not a person
- Involved both actions and words
- Needed to be timely, truthful, and transparent

There is a need to put information on targets precisely

- This type of precision targeting is a challenge, but people are assigned to do it without any training
 - Precision targeting would not be done without training for bombing targets
- Need to look at the measures of effectiveness (MOEs) involved

Strategic Communications involve both a proactive and a reactive information environment

- It should be 85-90% proactive and 10-15% reactive
- The government usually has this reversed
 - Rather than defining their environment, they only react to it

Situational awareness is a big part of Strategic Communications

- Ten years ago Rendon identified the CNN Effect
 - There would be an event somewhere in the world and a government sensor would pick up on it
 - The sensor report would report up through the chain of command to the leadership – eventually
 - Another sensor would pick up on the same event
 - That sensor would only report to centers in London, New York and Atlanta
 - Reports from the second sensor would be seen on TVs in the White House long before the government sensor report could move up the chain
- Now the government has its own set of immediate sensors
 - More likely to get reports simultaneously with TV reports
 - Recently have been able to beat out CNN 2500 times in a year
- Leadership may still not know whether the information is completely true but they do know that it is something will need to deal with
 - Still not good enough
 - Need to have a broader group of people looking at new situations
 - Diverse people will see different things while looking at the same information
 - Example: A rare African disease is reported in Northern Italy
 - EUCOM, CDC, and others knew they needed more information about this globalization of contagion
 - This disease apparently came from insects inside tires that were shipped from Africa to Italy
 - While reviewing this “X” disease within “Y” country, Rendon Group came up with related information for a quick point paper
 - Commands were able to learn more about this potential threat and handled it quickly without causing panic
 - Had this gone through the usual chain of command process it would have taken a year to develop the paper

Content generation must be done centrally or you risk cross- or counter- messages

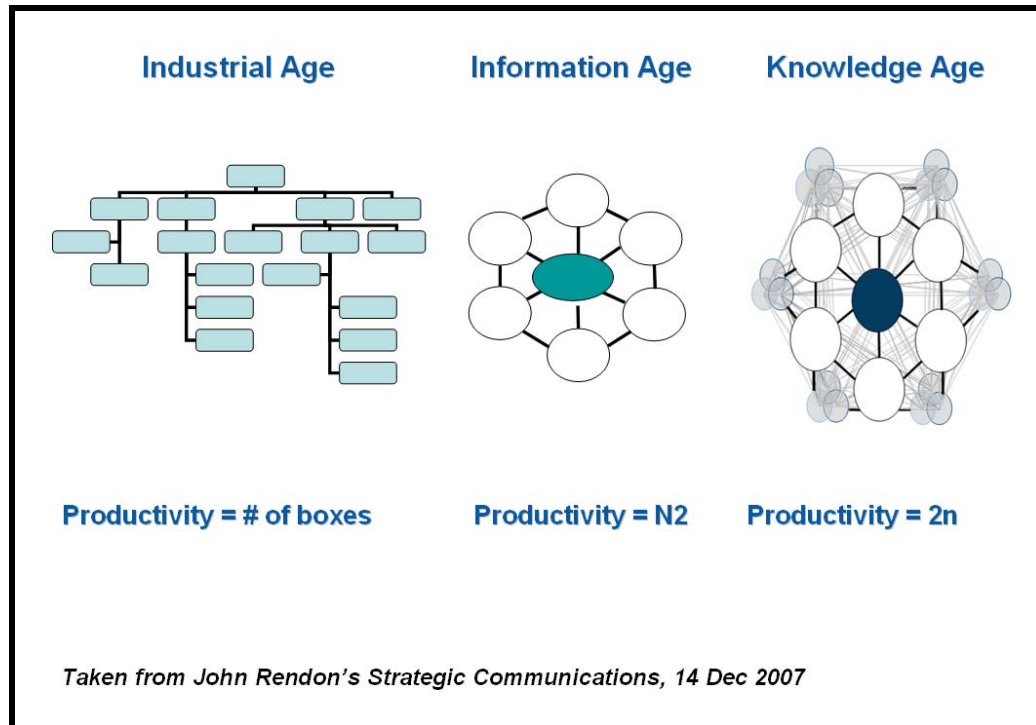
- There are 237 ways to deliver messages in content dissemination
- Real-time reports are important but not everyone needs to work all the problems all the time
 - The news cycle is now continuous
 - Only 3-5 people should be involved in getting a message out
- Rendon Group also employs Wild Cards – people who are tasked to come up with strange challenges
 - One example was describing what would be needed to cause the end of the world during Y2K
 - There was fear that some sort of catalyst – volcanoes or earthquakes – would cause a set of cascading problems
 - It was determined that there was really only one such major vulnerability in the US – it involved the loss of the use of ATMs in Japan
 - Had that happened anywhere else, no one else would have noticed the problem
 - To reduce fears about earthquakes, a well-respected scientist was hired to provide very detailed information about the frequency of earthquakes in general and likelihood of one during the Y2K period

Much of the Rendon Group’s work involves future scenarios

- Example: What will happen when handheld wireless devices are the predominant way of communicating?
 - Mobile phones will become a form of identity
 - The answer to who are you will give strategic communicators an idea about how people will react to the messages they are sent
 - A Nigerian in the 1960s would have identified himself with a tribe, a nation and a family
 - Now that Nigerian would identify himself with a tribe, a family, a religion
 - The nation is disappearing
 - Need to know this concept of identity to provide the right message in the right way
- Strategic Communications involves strategy, planning and coordination
- A global US-based company does more research in a month than the US government does all year
 - May see a lot of motion but not getting any distance

Comparing the structures of Industrial Age versus Information Age communications

- Industrial Age uses the classical org chart to communicate up and down the chain so productivity equaled the number of boxes on the chart (Example: 10 boxes)
- Then in the 1980s Ethernet was developed by Bob Metcalf and productivity jumped
 - Metcalf's Law of the Information Age indicated that productivity was the number of boxes squared (Example: 10^2 or 100)
- Since this arrangement also involves informal networks related to the experiences that individuals in those boxes have, the true productivity number is more like 1024
 - This is the Al Qaeda model – they could not have the success they have had with an Industrial Age model



In the Industrial Age there were traditional ways of getting out information

- The speed of getting out information did improve – first with TV and then with the internet
 - The scroll at the bottom of the TV screen has become very important
- However, there has been no change in the way that government writes its press releases
 - But now people are receiving those messages in different ways

Consider Netizens – on-line members of various communities of interests

- People can probably only maintain close relations with about 12 or 13 networks
 - Number may really only be 4 or 5 networks
 - About the same number as the number of best friends a person can maintain contact with
 - There is only so much time to spend with any one friend
- Information is now the relationship
 - Must always balance trust and risk
 - If your message is coming in on the trust side, you have a better chance of success
 - If your message is more on the risk side, then you are likely to say things that others won't believe
 - Problem: US is currently operating with a credibility deficit

There is a shift in communications going on

- Government information in the Industrial Age was a monolog and involved control
 - The government or the TV station determines what you will hear
- Communicating in the Information Age is more of a dialog
 - User-generated content is the new big driver
 - Example 1: Buncefield Oil Fire outside of London showed this big change – the BBC quickly started showing some of the 6500 images provided by the public
 - Since then, BBC has looked for ways to bring in more material from the public
 - Example 2: Battle at Kruger on YouTube.com had over 8 million hits in 30 days
 - The effect on Africa will probably be more than all the year's tourism combined
 - Example 3: A music video produced by a Navy squadron at sea had more hits than all of the recruiting videos combined
 - Sailors/soldiers should be allowed to blog
 - Example 4: Sony now involved in the music wars since buyers will no longer be content with buying 10 separate songs if they are only interested in one
 - So now I-Tunes is beginning to be a viable business
 - Recognized that revenue for the music industry was dropping and going elsewhere
 - See *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* by Chris Anderson

The new structure to look at is the network – not hardware but social networks

- Craig Newmark, the creator of Craigslist.com is well-known to a certain generation level
 - He and EBay basically destroyed newspapers
 - Newspapers thought that the internet was only about email
 - Newspapers are now news organizations
 - Trying to bring in user-generated content
 - Relates to the concept of the wisdom of the masses
 - *The New York Times* now sees itself as a curator of blogs
 - Many stories in the paper now list links to related blogs
- Problem: People are now only seeking information that supports their existing views
 - This is a threat to the country
 - People need to see the information they need, not just what they want
 - See Googlezon from Wikipedia:

Googlezon is the name of a fictional future company created when Google merges with Amazon.com in the popular flash movie EPIC 2014, released in November 2004. ... Googlezon triumphs and unleashes EPIC (Evolving Personalized Information Construct), a universal, personalized news submission and distribution system that is so popular it effectively puts the fourth estate out of business.

No one in the political arena really understands the communities of interests that are evolving

- They are only using the new technologies to do Industrial Age things such as raise money
- See <http://www.deviantart.com/> where most art transactions activity is now happening
 - Not deviant as such – more in line with the meaning of diverse
 - Provides an intriguing revenue model

The Information Age relies on self-organizing systems

- A turning point was April 1, 2001 – the EP-3 incident in China
 - The first war without government involvement
 - In the US saw benign computer attacks on Chinese interests
 - Some were hacking into systems
 - Nearly all were independent of each other
 - Now with the blogosphere people of a similar mind can find each other easily
 - They can talk about what they could all do together
 - Rather like *Star Trek's* hive mind
- The concept develops that *our people* are being held at risk – may now mean hackers, not someone of the same nationality

- Only a community of interests – not a nation
- The concept grows: “We should protect them by taking down the servers of the oppressors”
- Gets complicated if this happens to a country that is hostile to the US
 - They say that the US is behind the attack
 - US can deny involvement but there is that credibility gap to contend with
- Must be aware that attacks against the US in the future will not be from a military force and maybe not even a government

Dialog becomes necessary

- There could be productive ways to handle these challenges
- Communities of interests do this best – not governments
- To get anywhere the entity involved must already be trusted

Choices and challenges

- Is there really a global war on terror? – No, just a US war
 - 76 countries are involved but unilaterally
- Differences between perceptions and realities need to be brought together
- See the “Tyranny of Real Time” from a 1994 Harvard study by Nik Gowing
 - BBC puts a premium on content – not on who is the correspondent on the TV providing it
 - Each hour the BBC anchor asked his correspondent in Sarajevo what was new
 - Allowed to talk as long as he wanted
 - Not in 2 minute chunks as on US TV
 - Eventually realized that the correspondent did not have a chance to go out and find anything new because he needed to talk to the anchor every hour

Governments have a responsibility to their people to provide truth

- Sometimes they do not have the time to find out what the truth is immediately
- News organizations are more interested in being first than in being right
 - Governments must be the opposite
 - This must be explained to *responsible* journalists
- Governments need to slow down about getting out their information to make sure it is correct
 - Look at the NTSB – National Transportation Safety Board
 - When asked after a crash what caused it, they always say: We don’t know yet. We’ll tell you more in 12 hours
 - They do and then eventually put out a full report months later

In a room full of people we do not know about their individual universes

- Need to know that to provide them with the information they need in the form they will accept

In governments in general there is always a struggle between operators and public affairs people

- Such struggles are harmful to the government
- Fighting will ensure that nothing will happen
 - May be a good idea to slow down and tie up the Leviathan
 - This is not a problem in Iraq or Afghanistan but it is in Washington

Audiences change all the time

- Must understand the locals
- Must understand the identities present and the communities of interest
- Need to find more ways to share information more successfully
 - Example 1: Koran desecration story
 - A billion Muslim voices cried out in anguish
 - US needed to recognize their pain
 - It did not matter whether the story was true or not
 - They were operating on emotions – right brain thinking
 - US government was operating using only left brain thinking
 - Recommendation: US must learn how to understand this right brain thinking

- Example 2: When asked how things are going in Afghanistan
 - US government lists statistics about how well the education system is doing
 - Instead should give narratives to show how important going to school now is to specific little girls

Bottomline: Everyone who works in government starts by wanting to end the war on his or her watch

- Can't win that way
- Individuals can only set the conditions that might allow the next person to improve on the situation and build on more conditions for the following person to build on

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

All governments do have a legitimate need for centrally produced messages, however, there is also now a need for expanded selection of voices

- Example: The captain of the Navy's hospital ship, USNS COMFORT, blogged daily on a recent cruise, but it would have been better if a sailor on board the ship had also been allowed to blog
- The shift to more decentralized messages needs to happen

We will be in both the Industrial Age and the Information Age until all information is more readily available

- On-line discourse is not just moving old-style media to the internet and commenting on it
- Blogs are now polarizing opinions

Rendon Group is not trying to beat CNN's news reports to the general public but wants the chain of command to have the information as soon as the general population does

- The idea is to get information before journalists call so that there is time to craft a response other than "No comment"

In the 12 wars that Mr. Rendon has worked only once did the proper flow of information happen – Haiti in 1994

- Two senior members of national security organizations representing intelligence and operations co-chaired the entire operation
- Policy was articulated and then both sides went out to put out the decided-on message

What needs to be done first to improve strategic communications:

- Training initiatives
 - Interagency training for all new members of the National Security establishment
 - So in 5 years will not need to reset the thinking
 - Also need on-going training to cover changing situations, technologies
- Public affairs officers at combatant commands need to be flag officers to be able to hold their own at meeting tables with senior operators
- Need a recognition that activities work better if people have already worked together
 - Importance of soft networks which must be developed over time
 - Joint assignments are now needed for promotions but that needs to be expanded so that inter-agency assignments must be required for advancement
 - This must go beyond the military to the civilian side, too
 - Need experience with coalition partners, too
 - Get to understand how they teach / train / think
 - They will have a better idea of how US does it, too
 - Will also build up those soft networks

SECDEF Gates recent speech in Kansas discussed strategic communications and public diplomacy

- Importance of this speech is shown by the fact that he wrote it himself
- Calls strategic communications and public diplomacy the modern missile race
 - At least he is using the lexicon to get the resources he wants
 - Really need to change the structure, not just the words

- Decision packages move up and then down chains of command – starting with O-3 level officers and ending with O-3 level officers
 - Those O-3s need to talk to each other
- Recognize that there are at least two on-going conflicts
 - There is the struggle with real terrorists which have involved working with coalitions
 - Much has gone well for struggle and many terrorists have been stopped
 - The challenge is that the enemy has been setting the pace and that has been too fast
- Another big worry is the size of the cohort of potential terrorists
 - Start with 1.2 billion Muslims
 - If only 1% of them are violent extremists upset with the US/West that would still be 12 million
 - Maybe 2-4% support them in some way and that could be 48 million
 - No president would call for a war on such a group
 - Need to handle that larger group that identify with the hostile 1% and we need to find out who they are
 - Need to get the passive observers to become active helpers
 - Must show that the US cares more about their grandchildren than the governments of their countries do
 - US should become an enabler

Exploiting foreign opinion is a bad term – leveraging foreign opinion is a better term

- Has been done best recently by small countries: Singapore, Slovenia, and Estonia
 - They know what they are doing
 - It is easier because they are smaller, less diverse countries
- When Estonia wanted entry into NATO, they pushed their content to all who were ever even remotely associated with NATO and they did so frequently

Public diplomacy should really be the public's diplomacy

- Bad example: A town in the Napa Valley of California raised money to help a town in Nicaragua
 - The only contact the people in Napa had with the US government involved the denial of visas to a group coming from Nicaragua to thank the people in Napa
 - The government should not be involved at all in something like this
- The TV show *The West Wing* was a very useful tool for public diplomacy overseas
 - Rendon Group often used it to explain US interests/intentions to foreign leaders
 - Not as easy if trying to go government to government
- With the ending of the Bush Administration, expect to see a restructuring in the area of public diplomacy but the changes will not be significant

Recommendations to both sides in the upcoming elections cannot be specifically stated here

- Recognize that the threat is real and there is a need to take the fight to the enemy
- Can't be done quickly as in a movie
- Al Qaeda will always be changing – even over a few hours
- Presidential leadership can do some things that cannot be done only through management
- Interagency experience must be a part of the requirements for military promotions and vice versa
- Allow alerts to come from only traditional government systems
- Recognize that lessons learned always face in the wrong direction