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NEXT FOR OBAMA: 'EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT'

By Richard E. Nicolazzo

"Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed."

— Abraham Lincoln,
Lincoln-Douglas Debate, 1858

Now, a week after the election, Barak Obama the great "campaigner and orator" must become Barack Obama the great "communicator" as he attempts to rebuild confidence and trust with the American public and the world.

After capturing more than 64 million popular votes and thrashing John McCain, 365-162, on the electoral scorecard, Obama assumes what is arguably the toughest job on the planet.

Like a new chief executive officer who steps into a multibillion-dollar company on the precipice of business collapse, our new president, with no real executive experience, has to manage two wars, protect the U.S. from terrorists, rebuild a staggering economy and fulfill all the other campaign promises he's made during the past year.

In the world of communications, one might call this entering the realm of "expectation management."

Let's be realistic: PR executives like me (and hundreds of others who frequent this website) like to drive the argument that communications is at the heart of any successful endeavor. It's never been more real.

Rick Stengel, *Time* magazine managing editor, may have put it best recently when he said, "Obama's main job is to be communicator-in-chief."

The millions of Americans who voted for Obama, and even the 53 million who voted for McCain, will likely show patience as the new president gets his feet on the ground and tackles an agenda that is similar to Franklin D. Roosevelt arriving in the capital in the depth of the Great Depression.

Early indications are that Obama and his new chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, get the picture. On November 7, only three days after the vote, Obama held a press conference. What better way to start directly speaking to the public?

Three days later, Obama and his wife met at the White House with President Bush and the First Lady. Even though the visit – the earliest in recent presidential history – did not produce major policy statements, it stands as a symbol of our democracy and underscores the importance of communication between the man on the way in and the man on the way out.

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People Respond to Structure

Obama can take a page from the modern crisis communications playbook:

- Develop a situation analysis encompassing the short-term problems that must be addressed immediately;
- Establish goals and objectives that are achievable;
- Define the audiences;
- Develop key messages and positioning strategies that will resonate with the public (no spin);
- Execute tactics; and
- Measure results along the way through reliable polling.

It's this "structure" or "framework" that can create order from chaos. With this communication plan, Obama "takes control" of the situation and establishes that he's at the helm with a steady hand.

This process should manifest itself in bite-size messages that the public can easily absorb. Taking small steps is the strategy for success. Past presidents have described the cocoon-like effect that occurs when the commander-in-chief gets into the Oval Office.

No human being can deliver everything at once. Obama must tackle the problems one by one and lay out a clear, concise strategy to deal with each. One way to describe it would be "breaking the bubble" and creating a dialogue with the American people.

News Media is Not the Enemy

Today's blazingly fast media environment takes skill and sophistication to master. So far, Obama's troops seem on top of their game. No candidate has used TV, radio, print, online, and cell phone media better than Obama. His administration should keep the same tempo.

Working the news media game is also critical. Jon Friedman, who writes the popular Media Web column for MarketWatch.com, suggests Obama loosen up a bit from this point on.

The best way to deal with potential adversaries is to embrace and listen to their concerns. Those who were around at the time must remember the way President Kennedy quipped along with those that opposed him. In more recent times, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton had great karma with the media.

The key point is to create an environment where a message can be delivered (without clutter) directly to the American public.

With the benefit of more than 35 years in the business of strategic communications, I offer the new president some short and long-term recommendations to become the "great communicator":

- Unlike previous presidents who focused on radio, Obama should consider monthly TV addresses to the nation on Sunday nights at 8:00 p.m. My hunch is there will be plenty to talk about every 30 days. At a minimum, cable channels are likely to

broadcast Obama's full remarks.

- Maximize email communications. The Obama campaign has amassed the email addresses of millions of supporters who can be reached almost immediately. This communications tool creates awareness, understanding and ultimately builds public support for his policies and legislative initiatives. On a frequent basis, his administration should dispatch policy updates and general progress on his initiatives. On election night, Obama's email message to supporters included the line, "...We have a lot of work to do to get our country back on track, and I'll be in touch soon about what comes next."
- Maintain an active website between now and inauguration day on January 20, 2009. <http://www.change.gov/> has already been established as a gateway for the transition. It is clean and simple to navigate. The trick now is to keep the site fresh.
- Embrace the so-called new media. Four years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a president to appear on Facebook or be part of the LinkedIn generation. Now, it seems almost essential to be part of these communications channels. Here again, a message can be emailed and reach each key audience at minimal cost.
- Conduct "Town Hall" meetings. While not a breakthrough idea, this format is the right tactic at the right time. The administration could pick a town somewhere in America and get the president out to connect directly with the public. This creates a dialogue with the American people...not just one-way communication.

Nobody can easily predict how things will turn out for the new commander in chief.

As Leon Panetta, the former White House chief of staff who has been advising the transition team, said, "Mr. Obama has little choice but to put his arms around the chaos and make the decisions that involve pain and sacrifice up front."

In my view, proactive communications and expectation management will play a major role and help define Obama's success and presidency.

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