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## EDITORIAL

### IS ANYBODY LISTENING?

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After working with more than 50 consortia over the past fifteen years, I am left with the sad realization that the only two times when a consortium can be guaranteed to get some attention from the press is when it is born, and when it dies.

Even then, there are conditions. At birth, a new organization must be able to announce an impressive and influential list of founding members in order to be "news". In such a case, the hook is that the group of founders is sufficiently powerful to indicate that the group's objectives may be achieved, and the course of the market affected. If the new alliance was unexpected and causes other companies to reevaluate and scramble, so much the better. At death, the winding up of the effort may also be news - but only if this indicates that the effort has ended in failure (see, for example, "[Memory Consortium Fades Away](#)"). Sadly, declaring victory and going home may not be seen by the press as "news".

Part of the problem is that (how to say this delicately?) standard setting is not a riveting spectator sport. As one technology reporter once said to me as I tried to pitch him a consortium story, "Whenever I hear about standards, my eyes begin to glaze over." What's a standard setting organization to do?

In this issue of the *Consortium Standards Bulletin*, we look at how consortia and official Standards Development Organizations (SDOs) try to tell the news, based upon a survey of the websites of 159 such organizations. But before diving into the data, it is worth taking the time to ask a few questions:

**What's it all about?** Before one tries to gain an audience, it's important to define who you want to address, what you want them to hear, how you will persuade necessary intermediaries to pass the word along, and how you will inspire the ultimate reader to read. Each of these questions deserves a closer look.

**Who should a standard setting organization address?** Looking beyond the membership of a consortium, the logical answer to the first question is "potential members, potential adopters and requirements authors, and those who may influence the first two categories".

**What do you want them to hear?** In the case of members, the message is "you will benefit from participating". In the case of non-members, it is "you will benefit from adopting and/or specifying our standards". In the third, and most difficult category, the message is "your readers will be interested in what we have to say."

**How do you persuade intermediaries that what you are doing is "news"?** The most important lesson to learn here is realism: either information is "news", as defined by the press and analysts, or it is not. Helping them understand why you think what you have to announce is newsworthy is necessary (and essential), but not sufficient. If there is something that you need the targeted interest groups to know, and it is not "news" -- as the press would define it -- then no number of press releases will be effective in delivering that message. You will need to find other channels to use to get the message through.

**How will you inspire the reader to read?** This one is both easy and difficult. If a press release is picked up or an appropriate reporter or analyst is otherwise persuaded to write, then the odds are in your favor. Of course, the presentation of the facts and the message delivered will be as the author prefers it to be.

Patience, clarity, availability and the other cardinal virtues of working with the press will increase, but not guarantee, the likelihood of a happy result.

***Dealing with Reality:*** As a military strategist once famously observed, "Diplomacy is the science of the achievable". One might reasonably paraphrase his observation to state "public relations - when it is well executed - is the art of the achievable". What we found in our survey is that more than half of the press releases issued by the broad sampling of consortia and SDOs surveyed represented wasted effort. The information that was contained in these releases could only be expected to be "news" (at best) in the opinion of the organization's own members, and the issuing organizations should have limited its distribution to that group.

Given the meager human and capital resources of most standard setting organizations, the efforts spent in producing, releasing and promoting these press releases could have been more productively spent in other ways. In many cases, one can only assume that the press releases issued are the result of a "four press releases per year" contract with a PR firm that is fulfilled, whether or not there is anything worthwhile to announce.

The fact of the matter is that consortia and SDOs often lose sight of the fact that the audience they need to reach is narrow, and that the press is not always the optimal, or realistic, way to reach that audience. Standard setters also often fail to marshal the forces of their own members to put the significant marketing shoulders of that group behind the organization's message.

In short, standard setting organizations too-often play the game as if they were commercial vendors, without critically analyzing who, as a consortium, they need to reach, how to reach them, what to say - and whether or not the press is likely to play ball. The result is more activity, and less result.

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