

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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Conversation with Joshua Schrader came naturally, both of us honoring our morning cravings. I clutched my espresso, he a smoldering cigarette. As early risers, we would cross paths outside the NEHA office before the business day began in earnest. Josh intrigued me because he was not of my world (i.e., my traditional public health world). At that time, he led NEHA's sales and training support, a business unit that sells our products and services. Josh often regaled me with stories of exploit and adventure from the previous weekend, which evidently were dedicated to his passion: music and deejaying in front of large crowds. What he described was a world that I knew nothing about, something akin to a parallel universe.

I'm struck by the number of universes I know nothing about, including how best to connect with our constituents. I am painfully aware when these connections go wrong, like when we accidentally used the incorrect environmental media in a news alert. We used the term "air" when we should have used "water." Ouch. I was (appropriately) lit up by you folks. I did learn, however, that you were reading (and paying attention) to what we were sending out. I just wish this knowledge would have come to me in a less painful and embarrassing manner. Alternately, I am oblivious to when and how communication works—that parallel universe thing.

For the record, I receive analytics on our social media and its growth. We track open rates for our E-News and the number of unique visitors to our Web site. It's all very interesting, but I have little clue as to what

Distribution > Content > Brand



Joshua Schrader
August 13, 1975–March 8, 2017

these numbers mean. My biggest success has been an op-ed I recently published in *U.S. News & World Report*. Barack Obama's direct reports contacted me to convey thanks for the op-ed. What does that mean? Well, depends on who you talk to.

This train of thought leads me to communication. I'm struck by the notion that distribution vehicles—such as e-mail, text, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram—are more important collectively than are content or brand. Where I struggle, even in conversations with experts, is on what distribution technique(s) do we use for a particular set of circumstances? Perhaps an e-news alert is appropriate for a legislative priority, but how does that ensure our association is seen as a

value proposition to you and potential members? This question keeps me up at night.

While distribution vehicles are interesting, they need to be populated with content. Twitter provides fodder as an illustration. I'm continuously perplexed by the tweets that get "legs," or that are retweeted or liked. Generally speaking, pithy text is rarely retweeted, while a photo with an edgy comment seems to get traction. What am I to make of that? Furthermore, where do we post content that will have the greatest relevance to the professional practice?

Most of the inquiries I receive about subject matter expertise is couched by an adrenalin-driven crisis. "Help! What do you know about...?" Almost none of these inquiries is anticipated and relevant content on our Web site is absent. For example, a request came in today around best practices for regulating mobile food vendors. Last week it was U.S. Environmental Protection Agency support stories from the field from particular states. These inquiries are a little like "whack-a-mole."

Finally, there is the logo conversation, which I acknowledge is a sensitive and complicated issue. Many NEHA employees have emotionally expressed a desire and case to update and modernize our logo. Tinkering with a logo is not trivial. Logos should be original, timeless, adaptable, memorable, and relevant. Having said that, I see value in the effort.

Many employees and members have also suggested that we engage in a branding exercise. So, let me ask you, what emotions or

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thoughts come to mind when NEHA is mentioned in your personal communications? Trust? Value? Customer service? Commitment? Or, something else?

And this train of thought takes me back to membership. Attendee evaluations of our face-to-face training programs, webinars, and virtual conferences are exceptionally good. I receive ample compliments (and some complaints) from you about staff service. Our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition is well liked and attendance is growing. So, when people are exposed to our products and services, they are generally favorable. How do we make this perception contagious? I'm increasingly convinced that we need to focus first on distribution, second on content,

and third on brand. Let's learn to "touch" the profession, then give people what they need to know, and finally, leave them emotionally attached to us.

Winston Churchill said it best. He is quoted as describing post-World War II Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." Likewise, understanding your interests is central to our communication plan.

To that end, we have hired an association membership manager, Jonna Ashley, who has prior work experience with two other associations. Jonna will conduct focus group interviews with members and nonmembers this spring and summer to gain insight into their interests. I trust Jonna will open the door to one of those parallel universes I fail

to understand, learning in the process how best to resonate with you.

Joshua Schrader left NEHA in 2016 to pursue other career interests. Sadly, he passed away in March 2017. He was gifted and intelligent, and I will always be thankful to him for providing me a glimpse into a parallel universe—the one of music. He also reinforced an important life lesson: to remain curious about what works and what doesn't work, and to not fear the unfamiliar. I miss him. I know if he was here he would offer insight into this complex and turbulent world of modern communications. 🐼

Dave

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Did You Know?

The *Journal of Environmental Health* is turning 80 next month! *The Sanitarian* (original title of the *Journal* until 1962) was first published by the National Association of Sanitarians (changed to NEHA in 1970) in June 1938. With an average of two to four articles published in every issue, the *Journal* has contributed close to 2,000 peer-reviewed scientific articles during its publication. So, let us ask you: How has the *Journal* impacted you, your work, the way you think, the policies and laws that govern your jurisdictions, and your understanding of the profession? Please share your thoughts and examples with us at jeh@neha.org!



REHS/RS

Choosing a career that protects the basic necessities like food, water, and air for people in your communities already proves that you have dedication. Now, take the next step and open new doors with the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential from NEHA. It is the gold standard in environmental health and shows your commitment to excellence—to yourself and the communities you serve.

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