

Perception Is Reality

Probabilities aside, there is a growing level of concern and uncertainty about Y2K. Concern usually leads to the expectation that something will happen. And that tends to become a perception... and as communications experts readily point out, in the mind of the beholder, perception is reality.

Canadian futurist Marshall McLuhan said it best years ago: "If I hadn't of believed it, I wouldn't have seen it!"

For any organization in the private, public or not-for-profit sectors, perception as a form of reality should be of special concern when it comes to Y2K. Customers, suppliers, employees, regulators, partnering organizations, the communities where you work, and the media will all be weary observers of your, and your client's, preventive actions and expressed assurances regarding Y2K. All the stakeholders, especially those who are part of your client's product and/or service supply chain, will question your client's preparedness and be concerned about the possible implications for them. Most acknowledge that supply chain sensitivity extends beyond contractual disputes to non-contractual liability, such as negligence and obligations under product liability legislation for damage caused by defective products.

The trouble is, unlike normal preparation for a major crisis, with Y2K we know exactly when things will happen, but we do not know for certain what will happen. We can anticipate and prepare contingencies, but the truth is, we will not know for certain what will or may happen until it does. That is because even those organizations that claim they are 'Y2K ready' are vulnerable through interconnection with computers that reside in other, external organizations. Evidence of this understanding was seen in the reduction in 'compliant' companies between reports #1 and #2 by TRAC2000.

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Mini-Audit of Y2K Communications Readiness

Here are a few questions to help you assess your readiness to deal with the inevitable Y2K communications issues that will occur in your group, department, or organization.

	YES	NO	Not Sure
Do your stakeholders understand Y2K and what they can expect from your organization?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your organization have a communications strategy in place in the event of significant Y2K-related disruptions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are your Y2K communications strategy and continuity management process integrated?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your Y2K communications strategy include internal communications with employees and external relations with customers and other stakeholders?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has your Y2K communications strategy been tested?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Consequently, learning to live with uncertainty will be the hallmark of successfully coping with Y2K-related issues. So the reality is that no matter how well we prepare, there could be problems.

Expect Problems

Chances are, though, that most systems and services in Canada will be functional throughout the Y2K period of highest vulnerability. But chances are, also, that there will be some problems across all sectors. It is when those problems meet and collide through interacting technologies, or when individual organizations experience a number of Y2K problems, one atop another, that we will be frustrated and feel a sense of threat or harm.

There are those who have dire predictions and are suggesting radical actions

such as moving to a cabin with lots of supplies, or living on a boat, and expecting to stay there for at least six months. Some suggest withdrawing money from the bank, and others urge us to stock up on bottled water and generators. There are those, too, who are vocal in denouncing the Y2K problem, with claims ranging from stating Y2K is a hoax, to insistence that nothing of any consequence will happen. Indeed, Y2K sage Peter de Jager has devoted the last few years to sounding the alarm and is now backing off the rhetoric.

Should we be complacent? No. Based on all our research, we believe it is probable that there will be problems. Those problems will mostly fall into the "nuisance" or "imposition" categories. Some may cause temporary frustration, and some could create short-term grief. But

Developing the Y2K Communications Plan

Regardless of the size of the business or organization, a Y2K Communications Plan is an important element in combating issues of liability and accountability. Stakeholders – customers, employees, vendors and stockholders – need to know and understand what steps the business has taken to deal with Y2K and contingent issues. The bottom line in risk management is be prepared and communicate that preparedness to stakeholders. After all, stakeholders who feel they have been dealt with honestly and fairly are far less likely to litigate.

According to U.S. communications consultant, Bara Oscodar, the four primary factors of a Y2K communications program are to ensure it is:

- **Comprehensive** – incorporate every aspect of the company's business, and every internal/external target audience.
- **Concise** – offer easy to understand messages and layered detail to let audiences select the amount of information they take away.
- **Consistent** – be sure that the tone, style and content of information that flow from all internal sources to all audiences – customers, employees, stockholders, vendors, media etc.. is consistent.
- **Coordinated** – companies should seek to minimize duplication of customer contact by difference internal groups.

overall, planes should not fall from the sky, our major banks will not collapse, and our nuclear stations should remain sound and secure (though possibly not operable). William Ramsay of the Paris-based International Energy Agency also cautioned that "a few minor glitches can compound to create bottlenecks." He said some experts are predicting that Y2K-related problems "could last into the second quarter as problems compound down the supply chain over time." No one knows for sure.

Need for Factual Communication

While computer experts and technicians work to review millions upon millions of lines of computer code and make the necessary corrections, and while software producers work to ensure they have minimized the possibility of Y2K problems in their programs, what is needed is sound, consistent, sustained communications. In short, effective communication. Executives, employees, consumers, and

individuals need to know what to be worried about, and what not to be concerned about. They need that information from governments at all levels, and from organizations in all sectors. Moreover, they need the right kind of information to assess the need for action and to design the required contingency processes. What is not needed is fear mongering, sensationalism, or distortion. Nor will there be tolerance for companies that seek to hide the fact that they are not prepared and have no plans for dealing with Y2K-type problems.

That is why each one of us has an active role to play in this unfolding Y2K drama; to seek out information and be able to separate fact from fiction. That will not always be easy, but by asking the right questions, you will become better informed. And by checking sources, seeking clarification, and through corroboration you will know, in a general manner, what is reliable and what is not. In addition, and

this is for many the difficult part, you must also share the best information you have with others, to avoid their over reacting or under estimating what Y2K is all about and thus causing negative implications for all of us.

The bottom line

In the January issue of *Vanity Fair*, writer Robert Sam Anson's article (12.31.99 - The Y2K Nightmare) notes: "The one sure thing is that the wondrous machines that govern and ease our lives won't know what to do. Some will freeze, electronically paralyzed; others will become imbecilic, giving idiot answers and issuing lunatic commands; still others, overwhelmed, will simply die - as will the blind faith the world has placed in them."

His pessimistic view must be tempered with the fact that enlightened organizations everywhere are working hard to eliminate the Millennium Bug. Most likely, they will not succeed totally. And even if they do, chances are they will be invaded by some bug from somewhere else. Either way, it is foolish to assume we will get through the next 8 to 12 months without some encounter with the Y2K problem.

As long as each of us understands what to expect, what could happen, and what to do about it, you should be able to get through without too much aggravation or pain. And effective communications by everyone involved will help make that happen.

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