

PR pros let down by smooth Y2K transition

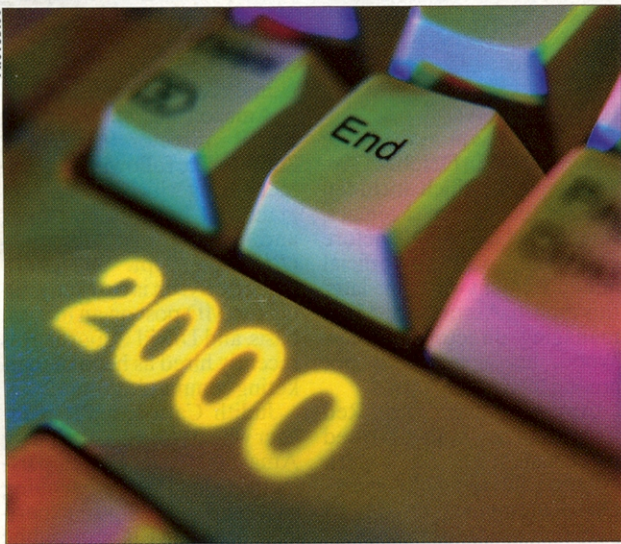
By Craig McGuire

NEW YORK: During the days leading up to Y2K, hundreds of gung-ho PR pros fanned out across the globe, eager to prove just how well-trained they were.

In the end, however, they had to settle for a quiet evening in front of the computer, as few problems – and even fewer that required the know-how of PR professionals – reared their heads.

Attending a black-tie millennium ball, Hill & Knowlton Los Angeles GM Ron Hartwig had pager and cell phone close at hand. “I waited all night for that one beep or bell that would set me off, and I was sort of sad when it never came,” he said. “You never want something

PHOTODISC



Y2K no-show...PR Pros weren't forced into action

bad to happen, but part of you can't wait to get that crisis call.”

For some, ordinary Y2K pressures weren't enough. With 6,000 engineers in the field, EDS wanted everyone in the world to know how well prepared it was. “We invited the media into our war room,” bragged spokesperson Reed Byrum. Among those who took the company up on its offer were *The Wall Street Journal* and CNBC.

Burson-Marsteller, with a global network of 19 Y2K command centers and five backup sites, also spared no expense. As midnight rolled over into each time zone, real-time reports on everything from the results of horse races at the Hong Kong Jockey Club

to mock-frantic calls from BBC personnel who couldn't find any hot water for tea filtered back to the agency's HQ.

“We got a chance to share 26 separate New Year's celebrations,” said Burson's Philip Murphy, who added that many staffers actually volunteered to work that night.

Not everybody, though, was thrilled with the déjà vu quality of the Y2K monitoring.

“The charm of New Year's Eve wears off after you celebrate it for the eighth or ninth time in a row,” said GCI manager of firm development Brandon Borrman, who was dispatched to San Francisco on behalf of client Visa. “One hundred and twenty hours of nothing to report.”