

DIRECT MAIL, THE OLD BELLWETHER,
YIELDS SOME MORE HELPFUL DATA

As an indicator of what works, DM has no peer -- largely because behavioral results are available. People either respond or they don't. The following can therefore be applied to all communication forms:

¶Certain demographic categories are less likely than others to trash "junk" mail, according to a Gallup survey. Easterners, women, non-high school grads, low-incomers & seniors are most likely to inspect their promotional mail. Westerners toss the most mail without perusing it.

¶Readership does not guarantee response, & vice versa, warns Target Marketing magazine. Of the groups listed, only women tend to purchase, while the others lead the list of least likely to.

¶Most are annoyed by "official-looking" mail. Trying to break thru by sending promotional mail stamped "urgent," "important," or "confidential" repels recipients. Survey indicates 53% of the public is turned off by mail that looks as tho it's from the government or a bank. Annoyance increases with age -- 18-25 year olds comprise the group most tolerant. All other categories, despite demographic background, express great irritation. Survey results do not, however, indicate success of such pieces in generating response.

ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PRACTITIONERS

¶Street wisdom on current managerial education, from pithy columnist Mike Royko: "The postwar Harvard MBA, with his eye on the bottom line & to hell with quality, the employees & the future, has done more to screw up the American economy than all of history's counterfeiters, embezzlers, bank robbers, congressmen & Japanese carmakers combined."

¶Harvard prof suggests tobacco industry may have hastened its own decline. "What we've seen in the US is just about the most remarkable voluntary change in behavior anywhere," says Thomas Schelling, pub policy prof & dir of Institute for the Study of Smoking Behavior and Policy. Schelling says the Surgeon General's warnings may have incited further anti-smoking sentiment, but smoking-related health concerns are evidenced in all forums, including the tobacco industry itself: "Tobacco ads make so much of 'light' cigarettes and low tar & nicotine," he notes. Schelling told prr the major impetus for the shift in public attitude toward tobacco is a mystery, but fact remains that "fewer young people are trying cigarettes, and fewer of them have tolerance for smokers."

¶Writing annual reports causes nervous breakdowns, divorce, hives, hemorrhoids, PMS, sleeplessness & a slew of other disorders plus it can drive a person to abuse drugs and alcohol. That from Sid Cato, whose newsletter on annual reports asked readers whether AR work is hazardous to health. A 77.24% chunk answered yes, & over 78% said they've experienced health-related trauma because of it. Tips from the Nat'l Inst't on Workers Comp & American Inst't of Stress: get a massage; delegate responsibility; exercise regularly; take refuge in family & friends -- the "real world"; laugh at yourself; go to church or synagogue; stand up to the boss; quit.

pr reporter

The Weekly Newsletter of Public Relations,
Public Affairs & Communication

603 / 778 - 0514

Vol.31 No.42
October 24, 1988

QUALITY: EVERYONE'S SEARCHING FOR IT, BUT WHAT IS IT?
GALLUP SURVEY REVEALS HOW CONSUMERS DEFINE IT TODAY

Until this year, a well known brand name was the single most important characteristic in consumer perceptions of top quality products or services. Now workmanship has surpassed familiarity -- but not by much. Gallup studies in '85 & '88 for American Society of Quality Control (Milwaukee) find 27% now rate workmanship the highest indicator (up only 1%) vs. 24% who rate brand name first (down from 31%).

Price is far less critical, with a 16% rating both years. But the study reveals a steady increase in perception that foreign made products are better. A significant & influential minority (21%) prefer foreign goods. Also, foreign companies have gained in rankings of top 20 companies. They ousted some American companies named in the '85 study while no foreign companies dropped off the list.

In conducting the study, ASQC hoped to shed light on quality -- "the most misunderstood element in the production, selection, & evaluation of goods & services." Among the findings:

1. Those preferring US products tend to be older, poorer & less educated. Younger, better-educated, male, self-employed & professionals favor foreign.
2. Courtesy & promptness are more important than price, personal attention or convenience. Meeting basic needs is integral.

Characteristics Of A High Quality Product (with respondents' comments)		
	All Consumers 1985 %	All Consumers 1988 %
Well known name	31	24
Workmanship	26	27
Price	16	16
Performance	16	12
Past experience	15	9
Word-of-mouth	11	9
Durability	9	11
Design & style	9	7
Advertising	7	3
Manufacturer's reputation	6	11
Label	5	6
American made	3	8
Consumer pub'ns	3	6
Freshness	3	2
Taste	3	2
Packaging/display	2	1
Warranty	1	2
Service	*	1
Miscellaneous	2	2
None of the above	1	1
No answer	3	6
Total	172**	166**
Total number interviews (1,005)		(1,005)

*Less than on half of 1%
**Total exceeds 100% due to multiple responses



- 3. Service at banks, hotels & hospitals wins accolades, while consumers are least satisfied with auto repair and local gov't. Regarding service problems, however, the latter two have improved in ratings since '85, while airlines have declined.
- 4. Willing to pay substantially more for higher quality. For a car, 21% more; a tv set, 40%; 72% more for a sofa. Those who prefer foreign-made products are more likely than the general public to happily pay a premium for quality.
- 5. Consumers are reluctant to complain about poor quality or inquire if they have concerns. They're more apt to sit & stew, throw the product away & complain to friends. This lack of constructive action means problems for companies with inadequate customer service programs since half the consumer calls are simple inquiries, warranty & after-sale service matters.
- 6. Workmanship, brand name & price are more important factors than performance, durability, past experience & word of mouth. This contradicts much basic research & common sense about peer acceptance & confidence in one's own experience as motivators.
- 7. Factors of least influence include advertising, packaging & manufacturer's reputation (as opposed to brand name familiarity).

Study, based on 1,005 interviews of a representative cross section of the US, reflects self-perceptions of respondents -- which may differ widely from actual behavior. (Copy of Gallup study \$19.15 from ASQC, 310 West Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, Wis 53203)

TOLLEY: PROFESSION HAS PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE TOP IF PRACTITIONERS CAN BECOME QUALIFIED FOR THE JOBS; NEED IS FOR STRATEGISTS NOT TECHNICIANS

Jim Tolley, former Chrysler vp-pa & now consultant to senior management, feels there are plenty of top

jobs in pr -- but not enough qualified people to fill them. In a preview of last week's Vern C. Schranz Lectureship at Ball State U (Muncie, Ind), Tolley told prr: "There are many people in pr who are proficient in their tasks, but only a few who are truly qualified for top policy-making jobs."

There are reasons why the captains of industry don't feel pr should sit at the policy-making table. Among them:

Tolley draws the distinction: "The top level practitioner possesses the ability to create pr programs that relate directly to the strategic objectives of the clients...to help them achieve those objectives. To be successful at this, you have to be able to think like the CEO."

1. Nebulous Definition Of The Profession

- a) In the public eye -- people are confused about the function because of the many aspects of practice: "There are people who specialize in investor relations, publishing, lobbying, advertising, etc. who call themselves pr practitioners. Ed Bernays says we go by 62 different titles. No wonder the world is confused!"

- b) Among practitioners -- "A lawyer, a doctor can define his or her occupation. Many pr people have trouble doing this." Tolley laments the mass of practitioners who think of their profession in terms of producing and distributing news releases, says many get hung up on communication. "Communication is important not for its own sake, but for a purpose. Often people have trouble defining that purpose."

- 2. Lack Of An Active Governing Body: "There is no single guiding coalition, e.g. American Medical & Bar Ass'ns, for practitioners." Tolley applauds Public Relations Society of America for making great strides in that direction, but notes: it is not a governing body. "This is because the profession is so young." Of hundreds of thousands of practitioners, only 14,000 belong. "My plea is not for PRSA to be more active, but for practitioners to recognize the need for this type of organization. I hope more people join PRSA & make it stronger."

Tolley told his audience that the call is not for generalists or specialists. Rather, the profession needs people who know public opinion and how to impact it by piquing interest and inciting action on behalf of the client. The demand for top quality practitioners is big. "There are a lot of opportunities up for grabs, and I want pr people to get these jobs, not lawyers, marketers or others." (For copy of Tolley's speech courtesy of Ball State, write prr)

BEYOND BASIC DISCLOSURE, STUDY FINDS PRACTITIONERS AT ODDS OVER TITLE III; IMPLICATIONS FOR ALL PUBLIC INFO PLANS

Is it sound practice to communicate more than legally required for SARA III? While some like Air Products & Chemicals (pr 10/3) embrace the

opportunity to meet the public, others philosophize that a low-profile strategy is best. David Meeker & Assocs (Akron) surveyed 67 industrial companies in an environmental hot spot -- the Great Lakes, where the effect of landfills & waste on groundwater contamination is a concern. All agree on the increasing significance of environmental pr, but debate how to conduct it.

Study (telephone interviews with corporate practitioners) reveals a lack of focus on the environment -- which issue anticipation reviews suggest is again becoming the top concern:

"Some pr people felt strongly that the more you can communicate on a point, the better received your position will be," Meeker's Robert Erzen told prr. "The contrasting approach is 'We're doing what we've been asked to do. We don't have to boast or brag about it.'"

¶The stressing its importance, 77% of the respondents say environmental pr is a small part of their activity.

¶Concerning the July 1 '88 deadline, only 22% released news that they had reported.

¶Only 19% planned community relations activity regarding the October 17 deadline for local emergency response planning.

¶Of the 67 interviewed, 7 had not heard of SARA III or its requirements.