

touted decline in consumer debt may be merely a shift in type of debt. ( ) ( )

- Business inventory data is obsoleted by just-in-time delivery methods.
- GNP data has long been attacked as wrongly structured.
- Unemployment statistics count only those collecting benefits, which in a time of recession omits millions whose benefits have expired.
- CPI (consumer price index) is based on a basket of goods revised every 5 years. Changing buying habits can make it obsolete.

Add to this the **ongoing rewriting of accounting rules** by the Financial Accounting Standards Board. Financial pr folks can keep up -- but every practitioner gets involved in finance issues, and it's not easy.

### FINAL WORD ABOUT TRENDS: THE DOWNSIDE

**Diversity** -- defining it, achieving it, just talking about it -- remains the most explosive issue facing organizations & their pr staffs or counsel. It's a catchall -- as nuclear power was a decade or more ago -- encompassing these topics & others:

- Political correctness
- Traditional minority aspirations, tho minorities have changed, too
- Alternative lifestyles, now usually meaning homosexuality
- Americans with Disabilities Act
- "Senior citizens" or choose your euphemism

**Homophobia** is the screamers' platform. Pat Buchanan & Pat Robertson at the GOP Convention gave a glimpse. Southern Baptist Convention pres. predicts it will be to the 90s what abortion was to the 80s.

**Practices hurting the profession:** 1) False fronts = simply dishonest. 2) Automated answering devices, voice mail & other depersonalizing "technical advances." Because they're possible doesn't mean they're wise. 3) Measuring clips & putting adv'g equivalency values on them; back to the 50s. Misleads on role of media, abets bad strategy. 4) Backroom influence peddling by divisions & national capitol offices of all the big firms, plus others. Anti-democratic, doesn't work longterm, turns pr into "Who you know" vs. helping people participate in decisions that affect them.

### ITEM OF IMPORTANCE TO PRACTITIONERS

**BOYCOTT ACTION NEWS**, published by Co-op America, is literally the flip side of Co-op America Quarterly. Each publication faces in a different direction -- like French & English sections of Canadian publications. Both offer insights for Issue Anticipation Teams -- or practitioners who want to key in on trends while they are latent or beginning to emerge. Co-op America's strategy is "Buy -- Invest -- Boycott -- Demand Change." Unites Greens, socially responsible investors, communitarians, activists. (Subscription with \$20 mbrship; 1850 M st NW, Wash DC 20036; 800/424-2667)

### 3-TIER RESEARCH GUIDES CAMPAIGN TO RETAIN UTILITY FRANCHISE

Public relations is relationship *building*. But in the world of utilities, there's a movement to *destroy* longstanding relationships by decoupling investor-owned companies from the cities they serve -- sometimes to replace them with a municipal system, sometimes with a competitor.

**TREND TO WATCH** Push arose from customer groups upset with what they consider utility arrogance & unwillingness to dialogue with their own ratepayers. In one region, the Southwest, for example, Arizona Public Service has faced local referenda on its franchise. Next door in New Mexico, the major city, Albuquerque, has Public Service of NM in a similar situation. Water utilities in many areas have been targeted for price rises, shortages & requirements of new clean water regs.

**The grassroots is flexing its muscle against monopoly systems** -- to the extreme of replacing public schools & prisons with for-profit contract operators. A case study from the natural gas industry shows how **research-based pr that mixes heavy personal contact with continuous communication** was able to save a franchise for Minnegasco (Mpls).

Competitors may reduce existing *product loyalties* by getting their products added to your acceptable list ("brand set"). But you still have the option of buying your old favorite when you please. The down side of *utility monopolies* is that if the franchise is lost, established customer relationships are over. They cannot do business with that utility any longer.

**BACKGROUND** City Council of Wahoo, Neb., voted to put the takeover of Minnegasco's natural gas system on the ballot. A yes vote would ultimately result in city ownership. "This project was against all odds. It's the first time we'd ever seen a City Council's public relations so well prepared. They were able to get the Chamber of Commerce to support them, to go against one of its own members," Dave Kistle of Padilla Speer Beardsley (Mpls/St.Paul) told pr. Program won a '93 Silver Anvil.

**PROGRAM: PREDICATED ON 3 TIERS OF RESEARCH** The firm had already handled 14 such cases "and won all but 2 (both lost causes on initial research). We used **qualitative research** to frame messages, **quantitative research** to see where we were starting from, and **discriminate analysis** of the data to identify & describe the characteristics of proponents & opponents."

1. **Qualitative:** Done in another setting but the model was similar -- com-



munities facing takeovers of local gas companies by their cities. Used focus groups with general public (primarily utility customers). "We identified key words & phrases that were emotionally charged -- calling this proposed acquisition a 'takeover' or more strongly a 'hostile takeover' moved the decision from a factual to an emotional level."

2. **Quantitative:** Data to identify level of awareness in Wahoo was gathered in 100 phone interviews.

a) First part included benign questions -- have you heard this being discussed, do you think it's a good or bad idea, how do you feel about your gas service right now, are the rates right, is it safe, do you like the people who work there, etc.

b) Next part asked respondents to agree or disagree with 12 statements based on focus groups findings -- "in the gas business, experience is everything," "city owned utilities provide more & better services than private companies," & similar. "Basically we were building a profile of what the community position was at this point in time."

c) Survey ended by asking the ballot question.

3. **Discriminate Analysis:** Taking the yes & no answers to the ballot question, "we looked at what it was in the 12 statements that defined the yes's from the no's. That's done with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Basically, it allows you to run a lot of statistical tests against your raw data. We were able to determine which of those statements absolutely predicted you were in favor of this proposal or absolutely predicted that you weren't. And they were assigned a value in rank order. So it's possible to figure out which ones are more or less influential.

"We were able to apply the information we had that defined the two poles -- & use the ones that would pull people in our direction. Then we could take the 'I Don't Know Yets' and determine the messages that could move them away from one point of view to another."

**CAMPAIGN DELIVERED MESSAGES THRU PERSONAL RELATIONS**

A. Messages, based on the research, "were presented in public forums, on the street face-to-face -- we taught employees these messages -- in our advertising, wherever we had a chance to print a news release to comment on something, and our direct mail. All messages reinforced the things that were going to help strengthen & support the people who were already in our camp & pull others into it."

B. Tactics included: 1) meetings with city leaders to explain issues & listen to concerns; 2) forming a citizens group to advise & deliver company messages; 3) the county fair; 4) holding meetings with employees; 5) a public debate sponsored by the local paper at Minnegasco's request; 6) citizen's group home meetings to deliver messages face-to-face; 7) door-to-door canvassing by local employees, those who are former Wahoo residents, headquarters staff; 8) two direct mail pieces, including one authored by retirees who live in Wahoo.

Voters decided to keep the Minnegasco franchise by a 62% majority.

**PC INFLUENCE ON LANGUAGE: NO DECISION YET ON ALUMNI/AE**

Latin words with their masculine & feminine endings are misfits in our androgenous era. "Increasingly, schools are eliminating the female ending & using 'alumni' to include both men & women," reports Susan Hartt (Baltimore) -- who does seminars on using politically correct language "without committing literary suicide." "But they still tend to gender specificity in the singular (alumnus, alumna)." Other solutions:

- **alumni/ae** "My preference, but it does border on the sickeningly politically correct."
- **alum** "Slang some people use to refer to themselves."
- **alumn** Antioch's alumnus voted overwhelmingly in favor of this compromise. Tied for 2nd were "alumni" & "graduate." In Hartt's opinion, "alumn" is "linguistic pretzel twisting."
- **graduates** "But graduates isn't literally the case. If you're an alumna or an alumnus, it doesn't mean you've graduated. Many members of alumni associations haven't graduated from the school."

**HOW TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM ?**

Few people study Latin so most are clueless about gender. "You'll hear

'I'm an alumni of Harvard.' Well, unless you're Siamese Twins you're not. If you're going to use Latin, use it correctly" -- a problem also in medicine, law & science.

McGill U is a rare case. It has had a Graduate Society (for both men & women) since 1857. But the function is called *alumni* relations. One of the Graduate Society's subdivisions is the *Alumnae* Society. But no alumni society exists; "only the women wanted to be distinct," Ray Satterthwaite, assoc dir of alumni rels, told prr.

Schools particularly are trying to make things as gender-neutral as possible, explains Hartt. "At Swarthmore there is no such word as 'waiter' or 'waitress.' These words have been banned. They've taken it to a total perversion and the new word is 'waitron.'"

"Politically correct language is a problem for pr people at schools because of trying to please faculty & still be intelligible to the rest of the world. Sometimes you can't do both," Hartt finds.

**COMMUNICATING ABOUT \$\$ & COSTS GETTING EVEN MORE DIFFICULT**

Reason: the old financial indicators aren't trustworthy. These reports on the structure of the economy have long been the touchstone for explaining corporate profit/loss, healthcare costs, gov't budgets, school millage.

Examples:

- New research finds consumer debt indicators flawed. They're based on installment debt: auto loans, credit card balances, loans from finance companies. Today households use home equity loans instead -- so widely