

4 STEPS TO PUBLIC BEHAVIOR CHANGE THRU PR CAMPAIGNS

The work of Jim Grunig, Harold Mendelsohn, Brenda Darvin, Maxwell McCombs & many others suggests this approach:

1. Coalition Campaign, so target audience gets the feeling everyone who counts is trying to persuade them, that it is obviously the thing to do socially. Appeals in such a campaign must follow three phases:
 - A. Problem (or opportunity) recognition: gaining widespread understanding the issue is an opportunity or problem.
 - B. Problem/opportunity personalization: making target audience realize it involves them, they could be affected.
 - C. Constraint removal: letting them know they can do something about it.
2. Enforcement, establishing rules/laws mandating/outlawing the behavior.
3. Engineering, enact a structural change to work around the situation, e.g. raising drinking age to reduce drunk driving accidents by young drivers.
4. Social Reinforcement, when the behavior becomes the societally accepted norm & social rewards & punishments take over the job of enforcing it.

3 EMERGING TOOLS

Training is in the forefront. PR staff today is most valuable as strategist & coordinator -- with as much responsibility for building trusting relationships pushed down to employees & off to operations managers as possible. They're the ones who interact with key publics -- where behavior occurs on both sides -- so the fate of the relationship is in their hands regardless. But this means continual managerial & employee training. PR alone cannot build relationships that motivate behavior.

Customer satisfaction models can elicit their behavior by conditioning employee behavior. Dep'ts or other relevant units hold brainstorming sessions to build a model of a satisfied customer. They answer such queries as: What would he or she be feeling or thinking after the transaction? What is their likely next action? How can we stimulate that next action?

Then a panel of customers is called in to evaluate the model. Resulting finished model is used to establish norms of customer service -- from not letting the phone ring more than 3 times to positive handling of complaints. The priority question becomes: will this satisfy my customer? Works for internal as well as external customers. Gets ownership by employees for proper behavior toward customers -- because they designed & tested the model.

Constituency relations programs also use employees, at all levels, to personally carry out direct outreach to key opinion leaders in publics most important to the organization. Twice a year the contacts sit down with these assigned influencers to listen to what's on their minds, what they're hearing, their positions on issues or marketing topics. Just one-on-one dialogue. After the visit, the findings are put into a database. Potential for sending forth these opinion leaders to trumpet the organization's cause is unparalleled. And the database may well be the best research available.

Vol.32 No.1
January 2, 1989

IN '89 MORE THAN BEFORE, PUBLIC RELATIONS WILL BE EXPECTED TO AFFECT BEHAVIOR: A REVIEW OF THE TOOLS AVAILABLE

The "value added" by public relations is understanding people & how they are likely to act or react, as individuals & in groups, given the stimuli of varying situations. Call it human nature.

Since it doesn't matter what people think or feel unless they act on their thoughts or feelings, the only reliable test is their behavior. And that's the challenge -- primarily because most practitioners are trained in communications.

But communication theory deals with cognitions, not behaviors -- i.e. what goes on in people's minds as a result of communicating. As Richard Winett put it in Information & Behavior, such studies "leave us with a consumer lost in thought; rarely do we see the flow thru from stimuli, to cognitive processes, to actual purchases."

The simplistic, linear, stimulus-response model of communication theory needs to be contrasted with a non-linear behaviorist model. Several public relations techniques, based on a combination of these models, are now proving themselves.

SEEKING BEHAVIORAL RESULTS MEANS ALTERING WORK HABITS

The first thing most practitioners do when attacking an assignment is to arch their fingers over a keyboard. We are word & writing oriented. But they are the process, not the outcomes. Instead, push away from the keyboard & ask the basic question: What behaviors am I trying to elicit -- from whom?

That is the start of behavioral public relations: a list of very specific behaviors needed...from a tightly targeted group of publics...in order to attain the objective. For example, if the objective is a 5% increase in sales, the necessary specific behaviors might be:

- ¶from new customers, 15% increase in inquiries, responses to mailings, etc.
- ¶from present customers, \$10 higher purchase per order
- ¶from employees, better customer satisfaction, fewer complaints generated
- ¶from management, sufficient budget to support these activities

In an actual plan, both publics & behaviors could be much more finite. The point is that breaking the objective into concrete actions which must occur makes it possible to plan programs that directly elicit these actions. The alternative is the naive belief that some "powerful message" or "smashing placement" will somehow get people to do these things. If pr is seen as soft & fuzzy, this is the reason.



TYPES OF BEHAVIOR Publics can be asked to a) do something, b) not do something, c) let your organization do something. Phrased differently, public relations can 1) motivate new behaviors, 2) reinforce existing behaviors, 3) modify negative behaviors. Obvious as this sounds, it's an essential framework for planning.

BEHAVIORAL TIME FRAMES Desired behaviors may occur a) immediately; b) eventually; c) on a fixed date, such as voting. Because people as a rule do not act without some preparation -- even response to fear follows psychological preparation -- the research requirement is to determine latent readiness to act. (Since conventional polling & surveys rarely probe latent readiness, they are less useful here.)

A recurring fallacy in current practice is automatically assuming publics are ready to act if only we can be persuasive. Discovering whether in fact they are or not quickly tells which time frame applies. A model for eventual behavior -- to motivate publics that aren't ready yet:

Phase 1 = create positive latent readiness

Phase 2 = spring a triggering event that calls forth behavior

Since the fear is that someone else may spring a triggering event, bulletproof programs need to include:

Phase 3 = risk management, full-blown issue anticipation to be sure nothing destroys the positive latent readiness being built

4 BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RULES Major behavioral influences need to be checked in each public as a practical guide. Most useful are these:

¶Rule of Abuse, from sociology: Any significant change in a relationship is the result of an abuse (real or imagined) by one of the parties. Until abuses are removed or at least surfaced, publics won't even hear your appeals for behavior.

¶Rule of Participation, from psychology: People will only get behind those decisions they've had a voice in making -- or feel they had a voice. To get them to act, give them ownership.

¶Rule of Rewards, from psychology: People will do that for which they are rewarded.

¶Rule of the Cheerleader, from anthropology: There has never been a successful society or organization without cheerleaders. Build them into plans because even the most willing audience falters sometime.

OVERWHELMING SOCIAL ROLE Research from several sources makes it clear that very few decisions today are made by individuals acting alone. Despite the myth of the totally independent cowboy & the lone wolf, in reality we take cues from our peers even on small matters. Considering that contemporary life is lived inside organizations, it is no surprise that this would shape our decisionmaking style.

To be successful in organizations, one learns to make accommodations to others' views. In addition, few of us are arrogant enough to think we know it all -- so

we seek the advice of others. Therefore, a key in behavioral public relations is reaching these "others" so they can help stimulate behavior among those they influence. A program that omits active stimulation of the influencer role is bound to falter. 5 types of influencers have been identified:

1. Role Models -- gain admiration & emulation
2. Opinion Leaders -- provide peer pressure, desire to go along
3. Power Leaders -- strength is fear due to ability to reward or punish
4. Cheerleaders -- boost morale & action, even in difficult situations
5. Celebrities -- attract attention & provide awareness

They have clout in this order, as a rule. Occasionally one person will occupy more than one of these positions in a group -- but rarely. Power leaders, for instance, have formal leadership positions. This generally reduces their credibility with the "gang" to the point it is difficult for them to be opinion leaders. Instead, one or more informal leaders -- not in positions of legitimate authority -- become the opinion leaders.

A MODEL FOR MOTIVATING INTERNAL BEHAVIOR THRU PR TECHNIQUES

Assimilating several scholars' work, in several disciplines, a practical how-to emerges for motivating, reinforcing or modifying behavior in organizations:

1. Positive reinforcement starts it -- by building self-confidence. This is necessary to prepare people for behavior change, since those who lack self-confidence are likely to resist, at least wait for others to show the way.
2. Foot-in-door technique gets them practicing the behavior. As a trial, even in a small way, get people doing what is desired. Example: In mergers, employees of new entity receive paychecks, answer phone with new company name. Tho loyalty is not yet built, actual use of new name begins to break down old habits & create new ones.
3. Motivation techniques are now required to retain the behavior. Herzberg's classic studies differentiate true motivators (achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement) from mere hygiene factors (salary, work conditions, supervision, company policy) but the latter are often mistaken for motivators by the uninitiated. (Write prr for copy of his study.)
4. Role models now assume the task of reinforcing & hardening the behavior. These key players become the focal point of meetings, internal media, presentations.
5. Culture takes over when rituals, heroes & recited stories solidify the behavior with the force of social acceptance. Desired behavior becomes the norm -- and now it is failure to perform the behavior that is oddball -- & socially punished.

The practitioner's first task in affecting behavior change inside organizations is to train managers at all levels in a) understanding why positive reinforcement works, carping & griping at employees is counterproductive; 2) how to give reinforcement. In sum: behavior change begins with managerial behavior.