

**MARKETING A "ME-TOO" PRODUCT:
HOW DO YOU DO IT? (TELL US)**

John Beardsley (Minneapolis) led PRSA conference tabletalk on how to market a product that is not

altogether unique, i.e., there are plenty out there already. He describes his experience with a client's cheese popcorn (the brands are many, as grocers will attest). "The issue was how to distinguish the brand. We developed a market strategy based on 'interventionism.'" Example: promo people would burst in on radio stations, throw around bags of "Smartfood" (black packaging, making it seem offbeat & unusual). The tack usually drew a mention from the deejay. "The approach was audacious, confrontational. A guerrilla marketing campaign."

PR firms & dep'ts, inherently creative, would embrace such approaches. It's harder to sell a conservative company on the unusual.

One participant recalled that a plastic surgeon in his area promoted himself by sponsoring a radio contest. "The prize was breast augmentation surgery. Over 10,000 women called."

THE PUTTY-COLORED DESK

What about something as bland as office furniture? How do

you sex it up? That was the challenge for Joyce Helmers (Memphis). She had to promote a basic putty-colored office desk -- what could be less remarkable? She invoked the old special event tactic, and it seemed to work. "We had a 'Greatest Office Furniture' show in Chicago. There was a big party, a jazz band, a tent on the barge." And the putty-colored desk, star of the show, was on prominent display.

HOW ABOUT A ME-TOO SERVICE?

Services are harder to market, because: a) it's more difficult to distinguish differences among them -- at issue is who does the best job; b) many have, traditionally, not promoted themselves. One participant found it a challenge to promote an accounting firm. Another conducts marketing for an osteopathic ass'n. "They (DOs) are more into prevention, wellness, less into medication," she said. "But it's hard to say that. You can't put down the MDs." Some conventional suggestions offered are a checklist:

- 1) regular media placement via an advice column or daily tip; 2) key people as media sources; 3) a new service, e.g., a consumer hotline;
- 4) emphasize a specialization; 5) pro bono work.

Promoting a me-too product or service is a constant challenge for pr practitioners. Send us your experiences & cases or share your challenges and prr will include them in an ongoing series.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Transferred. Gennady Gerasimov, one of the most hi profile practitioners for his work on behalf of glasnost & Pres. Gorbachev,

leaving Soviet Foreign Ministry to become an ambassador. Replacing him "at the top of the Soviet public relations tree" (Tass quote) is Vitaly Churkin.

**CULTURAL DIVERSITY MAKES EVEN HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS TRICKY;
MLK DAY IN ARIZONA IS OBJECT LESSON -- SYMBOLISM REIGNS EVEN
WHEN MUCH EVIDENCE SUGGESTS IT IS INACCURATE**

Public relations by nature is sensitive to fair treatment of others -- and their feelings. But as populations become increasingly multi-cultural, unprecedented watchfulness is called for. Defining fairness is the issue, and giving in to one group's demands may incense others. Is it possible fighting public opinion is good pr?

**HERE WE GO AGAIN:
BOYCOTTS OF WHOLE STATES**

As Arizona is threatened with losing conventions & sports events because voters failed to approve a paid King Day

holiday, another look at this tactic is in order. Florida & other states did lose such business a few years back when unions rebelled against right-to-work laws. But 2 questions need to be asked:

1. Who specifically will be hurt?
2. Will the tactic achieve the goal without creating long-term animosities, which could backfire now or in future?

A poll by Behavior Research Center of Arizona finds the National Football League's threat to pull the '93 Super Bowl, announced before the vote, actually was the reason for the proposal's defeat. 63% of those who shifted from a yes to a no position said this was the cause. Blackmail often backfires.

Pima (Tucson) & Maricopa (Phoenix) counties -- where most resort & convention facilities are located -- favored the idea. Phoenix already has a local King holiday. Resort workers (many of them minorities) will see their establishments punished. So will others who voted yes.

1. **Litmus tests** as a rule are questionable. They are prejudice at its worst -- inferring anyone who disagrees on one point has a multitude of other beliefs or negative characteristics.
2. **Boycotts are blackmail:** do it our way or else. This is contrary to pr's win-win strategy. You surely don't build relationships with boycotts; you destroy them. And the arrogance they imply -- only your viewpoint has validity -- can make long-term enemies. Even if you "win", boycotts are unfair in many ways to many people, so hard feelings can go on & on. E.g. this case may foster racial division.

Arizona has a King Day -- but it's a Sunday so not a day off from work. That the paid holiday for gov't workers was a major factor is attested by a) the fact a second ballot proposal offered a switch of existing Columbus Day to King Day as a day off (it also lost), b) the poll finds 25% of switch voters & 41% of no voters gave this as the major reason for their vote. Arizona is known for its right wing distrust of gov't.

But supporters claim a no vote was racist. One writer to the Arizona Republic turned the tables, reminded NFL of the years it took to get a black head coach. But who wins, really, in such name calling?

Fiesta & Copper Bowls & Phoenix's bid for major league baseball may be affected. Yet Wyoming, the team whose "black 14" in '69 was a major civil rights event, & liberal U California, both eschewed knee-jerk reaction and agreed to play the Copper. But the businessman supposed to get the baseball franchise claimed the vote changed his mind, so he's trying to buy an existing team that suddenly came on the market. Truth...or rationalization? These events offer great excuses.

PHOENIX'S POSITION TOLD BY ITS DPR

"The message that we are trying to get

out is that Phoenix has had a paid MLK holiday for 5 years," Mark Hughes, dpr City of Phoenix, told prr. "We celebrate it with parades, prayer vigils, etc." Hughes finds the public's perception of Arizona as a racist state disheartening. "It's ironic because we've been one of the national leaders. No other state has every voted on an MLK day. Arizona was the first to put it on the ballot. And we have a very good record on Affirmative Action, EEO, etc."

PR associations are among those thinking of pulling out. "There was a preliminary decision that we would go to Arizona," NSPRA pres Bob Grossman told prr. "We decided not to commit yet, since we still have time to review the decision. I feel we need to look again at this." PRSA, with its '91 conference set for Phoenix, is also considering alternatives. "We have received some inquiries (from members) and are looking at various options," pres Joe Epley told prr. "We have a situation where Phoenix has been observing the day for quite some time." Both say their concern has less to do with pressure from publics than with the principle. "We want to do what is right," Epley says.

But the holiday has become an unsolvable emotional subject. What some perceive a tax issue (another day off for government workers & school children) is seen by others as an equality issue. And proponents can wield it like a political sword -- if you're against it, you're racist. Is it fair to turn one state into a whipping boy? Points:

1. Only Christ & Columbus merit paid vacation days now. Even Lincoln's & Washington's birthdays have been abandoned for "Presidents' Day."
2. A day in school may better teach children about King or civil rights.
3. Some communities honor King on a Sunday. They contend that it's befitting, since King was a minister & theologian.

THE ULTIMATE IN STAFF TRAINING? HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT ESTABLISHES OWN COMMUNICATION CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

"Our agency became more & more aware that interacting with the public is one of the most important things we do," Marcy

Goodfleisch, mgr pub info, told prr. "We had to devise a way to effectively convey our role & mission." So Texas Highway Department is trying out a training, assessment & certification program for 60+ employees in its 24 districts.

Goals are to: a) improve understanding of department's funding mechanism; b) educate about construction/maintenance programs; c) market "product" by communicating in an interesting way; d) eliminate communication gaps between the department & the public regarding what's expected and what's actually delivered; e) improve department's reputation thru increased interaction with public, and by identifying & building on positive programs (e.g., "Don't Mess With Texas, prr 9/26/88).

Initiated late last year, program will be evaluated in August '91. "We hope it will eventually have the credibility of PRSA or IABC accreditation."

Training modules are designed to upgrade skills in 4 areas:

1. **Media Relations:** news release writing, PSAs, etc., but also planning & conducting news conference and crisis communication training;
2. **Community Affairs:** planning & conducting meetings, producing audio-visual materials, planning events, communicating with government officials on local, regional, state & federal levels;
3. **Publications:** newswriting, photography, interviewing, etc;
4. **Marketing:** elements of marketing & its role in the state agency; soliciting public opinion/feedback, identifying demographic trends; promotional techniques.

Tho an accredited practitioner helped Goodfleisch plan the program, the dep't chose not to go thru PRSA for accreditation because:

- a) Their tests are for professionals who have been in the field 5 years or more. "Many of our people have engineering or clerical backgrounds." Never exposed to communications, they need soup-to-nuts training;
- b) Standard programs can be too costly for gov't agencies;
- c) Gov't agencies have to conform to a litany of rules & regs not applicable in other sectors.

"Our program may not be the end-all in gov't accreditation, but it's a start. I hope Natl Ass'n of Gov't Communicators looks at what we're doing and decides to take the ball & run with it."