

3. Listen to audience. People in the community are often more concerned about trust, credibility, control & competence than about mortality statistics & details of risk assessment. If they are not listened to, they won't listen. Communication is a 2-way activity:
- ¶ a) find out what they know via interviews, focus groups & surveys;
b) address concerns; c) look for hidden agendas, broader meanings.
4. Be honest & open. Trust & credibility are the communicator's most precious assets -- they are difficult to obtain and almost impossible to regain once lost:
- ¶ a) state credentials; b) if an answer is unknown or uncertain, say so;
c) get back to people with answers, admit mistakes, disclose risk info ASAP; d) if in doubt, lean toward sharing more info, not less, or people may think something is being hidden.
5. Coordinate & collaborate with other credible sources. Allies can be effective in helping to communicate. Few things make risk communication more difficult than conflicts or public disagreements with other credible sources:
- ¶ a) take time to coordinate all inter & intra-organizational communication; b) consult with others to find out who is best able to answer questions; c) join communication efforts with those of other sources, e.g. physicians, scientists, opinion leaders. [One Clear Voice.]
6. Meet media's needs. Generally more interested in a) political dimensions than details or studies; b) simplicity than complexity; c) danger than safety. They play a critical role in setting agendas and determining outcomes:
- ¶ a) be open & accessible, respect deadlines, provide info tailored to their needs (e.g. graphics, visual aids for tv); b) follow up on stories with praise or criticism, as warranted; c) try to establish long-term relationships with editors. [Tried & true media relations principles.]
7. Speak clearly & with compassion. Technical jargon is only useful as professional shorthand. It's a barrier to successful communication with the public:
- ¶ a) use simple, non-tech language; b) be sensitive to local norms, such as speech & dress; c) use vivid, concrete images, anecdotes & examples which communicate on a personal level; d) avoid distant or abstract language about death, illness or injury; e) acknowledge & respond to anxiety, fear & anger; f) tell people what cannot be done, promise what can and do as promised; g) include a discussion of actions underway or that can be taken.

Covello stresses that more pr research on risk communication needs to be done, so practitioners must rely on their own intuition & experience. "Only they know whether a certain piece of advice is valid & applies to their situation. Altho these principles can be helpful, they are not substitutes for good judgment."

AS WE EMERGE FROM ERA OF INDULGENCE, MESSAGE SENDERS EMPLOY EMPYREAN & APOCALYPTIC THEMES. IS PUBLIC HUNGRY FOR MORAL GUIDANCE -- OR ARE COMMUNICATORS JUST DESPERATE TO BREAK THRU?

Already, decade bashers are picking on the 80s as a time of shameless indulgence. People are scissoring credit cards as the "Dynasty" lifestyle, so celebrated during the Reagan era, becomes unfashionable as well as unrealistic. The Trumps & the Helmsleys, who once epitomized New York glitz, are now clowns for pop media to bash. Meanwhile, studies say we're returning to an "Ozzie & Harriet" mentality (pr 3/20/89). Trendwatchers forecast a revival of 50's favorites such as macaroni, franks & beans, tapioca pudding. The Bible Belt is slated to be the next pacesetter as the population shifts southward. Church attendance is up, free sex is out, alcohol consumption is down & rehab centers are in. What does this mean for public relations?

Many Message Senders Are Deploying Advanced Clutter-Cutting Methods

Communicators are riding the tide of righteousness by tying their messages into Big Picture themes like God & country. Rather than resist neo-Puritanism (pr 3/20/89), they're cashing in. Note current crop of ads:

1. Mitsubishi tv spot features white chapel & overvoice reading from St. Paul, "When I was a child, I spake as a child.... When I became an adult, I put away childish things." Meaning that a new Galant is perfect for the sportscar buff who now has a family & must act responsibly.
2. Another commercial shows a meeting of the Communist party, complete with a Lenin poster backdrop. The scene is eaten away as voice explains that Dorito's tortilla chips are "taking over parties everywhere."

Some go too far. Pepsi did when it featured a scantily clad Madonna jiggling about with crucifixes dangling from her ears. Mitsubishi ad also stirred enough controversy for creator Ed Hannibal, Grey Adv'g (NYC), to rewrite copy to paraphrase rather than quote the Bible. "We were just trying to find a familiar situation with which the average person could identify. We decided the wedding ceremony was one, so we went straight to St. Paul," he told pr. He says trend is a backlash against ad proliferation. "The problem is that viewers are getting a tremendous bombardment of images. It's difficult to do something unexpected & fresh. Too many try to break thru with intrusiveness, by using something harsh. We decided to plug into what's going on in the culture."

- 3. Pepsi ad features Germans chipping away at the Berlin Wall as Handel's Hallelujah chorus reaches a crescendo in the background.
- 4. Merrill Lynch ads celebrate civil rights and Solidarity.
- 5. Entertainment Weekly, a cable guide, says, "Even God Took A Day Off," then, "too bad he didn't have a VCR.... But you probably do."
- 6. A tv ad shows a chef descending from a mountain, holding an Entenmann's pastry as if it were a sacred tablet. "You can eat cake!" he calls out to the waiting crowd.
- 7. Infiniti cars tie their ads in with the beauty & solace of nature -- for the first few weeks of campaign, car was not pictured at all.
- 8. Philip Morris celebrates Bill of Rights with gossamer scenes & choral music. Goal is to defend cigarette companies right to advertise (pr 5/1/89).

Trend Extends Beyond Advertising... It's not just an advertising phenomenon.

Moviemakers too, are tapping into the heart (& soul) of Joe & Jane America. Nat'l Catholic Reporter says theater seats replaced church pews as past summer's megahits tackled idealism, reconciliation, good vs. evil. "Indiana Jones & The Last Crusade," "Ghostbusters II," "Batman," (Gotham City is a regular Sodom), "Dead Poets Society" & "Star Trek V" focus on moral goodness. "As Moral Majority disbands in self-proclaimed victory & the Vatican gets mired in restorationist mentality, risk-taking producers have dared to dip into the pool of spiritual waters."

... Even Into Churches & Synagogues

Many are returning to ornate symbols, ritualism, orthodoxy. US News & World Report cites Protestant groups which are trading in the "comfortable informality of 20th-century style religion for the pomp & mystery of a liturgical faith." They are not alone, but part of a renaissance of ritualism that is penetrating all religions from mainline Presbyterianism to Reform Judaism. Many Catholics grumble about "progressiveness" in their tradition-bound services. "I hate all this incessant chatter and all this de-sexing of the readings and rehearsing of inane hymns and phony McDonald's-commercial-good-feeling on which the dictatorial liturgical committees increasingly insist," writes columnist Michael O. Garvey.

Is trend symptomatic of difficulty in getting overcommunicated public's attention? Or are communicators responding to a public appealing for propriety & moral guidelines? Church changes indicate the latter. And Nat'l Catholic Reporter asserts the results at the box office reveal that if mainline religions don't point the way with sacred & meaningful myths & stories, someone else will by giving audiences what they want. In any case, practitioners should keep heads up. The need for strict guidance may also result in intolerance, bigotry & indiscriminate censorship.

ACTIVISTS DISCREDIT INFO CAMPAIGN BY RETURNING MAILINGS TO SOURCE Citizens Within A 10-Mile Radius (C-10, Newburyport, Mass), a group opposing the controversial Seabrook plant, uses the nuke's pr tactics to its own advantage (see last week's issue for similar example).

Utility's Public Information Effort Seabrook mailed emergency info calendars to residents of 23 communities near the plant. Calendars detailed procedures for safety action during a radiological crisis. But according to C-10 coordinator Sandra Gavutis, they were "a blatant misrepresentation of what citizens can expect in a nuclear disaster." Instead of providing critical facts, she contends, they gave the false impression of protection & concern.

C-10's Response Was to conduct "Calendar Collection Saturday," in which calendar recipients were asked to drop calendars off at town & city halls. From there, C-10 members deposited them at Seabrook station. "We collected several hundred from private citizens and businesses," Gavutis told pr. Members of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission were meeting with utility reps, so they had a chance to sample the level of public concern.

Seabrook, forewarned by a C-10 press release, had put a box outside its door to receive the rejected calendars. "We told them that the box would no way accommodate what we had for them. They scurried off and found 2 huge boxes, but we overfilled them both."

SEVEN KEY PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE RISK COMMUNICATION Tho he focuses on communicating the health risks of pesticides, Vincent Covello, Columbia U School of Public Health, has compiled detailed guidelines for any form of risk communication. "There are no easy prescriptions," he told International Food Media Conference. "However, communication specialists who have studied and participated in debates about ALAR and EDB generally agree on 7 principles." They are applicable in both public & private sectors.

- 1. Accept & involve public as partner. Remember, a) people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives; b) goal should not be to diffuse concern & avoid action, but to produce an informed, solution-oriented & cooperative public:
 - ¶ a) involve people early, before big decisions are made.
- 2. Different goals, audiences & media require different strategies.
 - ¶ a) begin with clear, explicit objectives; b) evaluate available info and know its strengths & weaknesses; c) classify the different sub-groups among the relevant audience & aim communication at them; d) train staff, including technical, in communication skills; e) pretest messages; f) evaluate performance.