

STAR KIST EXPLAINS HOW CONSUMER ADVOCACY INSPIRED ITS DECISION FOR POLICY CHANGE

"The primary impetus was the increasing amount of consumer inquiry and concern from all over the country," Erik Bloemendaal, gen mgr quality & communication, Star Kist Tuna (Long Beach, Calif) told prr. "A lot of it came from students (classes often wrote as a group), environmental groups." Finally, management gave consumers what they wanted: the promise to catch only "dolphin-safe" tuna.

CONSUMERS: What had been happening: tuna fisherman look for schools of dolphin to find tuna, because the 2 species hang together. Fishermen encircle the area with nets -- inevitably, some dolphins get caught & drown. But problem had been worse before quotas were established in early 70s. Since then, fishermen have made a valiant effort to save dolphin, sometimes even diving down and maneuvering them out of the net. "They had done an excellent job of reducing mortality. Last year, 12,600 dolphin died as opposed to 300-400,000 in the early 70s. But public's response was no dead dolphins." Sales weren't hurt -- volume had been up. But letters were pouring in.

STAR KIST RESPONDS As of April 12, fishermen must employ other methods, and it's difficult to estimate how much the move will wind up costing the company. "These (fishing) trips take 2 or 3 months. It will take some time for the effect to be known. We feel comfortable we can maintain our supply, tho we may have short-term problems." Edelman PR handled the public information campaign, also helped to develop the new policy & hone details of how it would work.

Despite belated response to long-simmering issue, "We're receiving an overwhelmingly positive response. People get emotional when it comes to dolphins. A lot of human characteristics are attributed to them, a lot of attention paid to their intelligence and grace. We get letters from schoolchildren, cards, people call us, crying & thanking us. Consumers are happy we set a precedent, and a lot promise their support."

Whether enthusiasm translates into dollars remains a question. "We haven't seen a direct increase in sales yet, but it's only been a few weeks. We might be able to enjoy positive business results in the long run, but it's hard to tell if it's from a single factor. We hope to see results, because we are taking a risk."

¶ For those who are wondering, "Sorry Charlie" is still an active mascot, but he was left out of the Dolphin-Safe info campaign due to the seriousness of the subject.

Now tuna packers face supplier relations dilemma: 1) some boats will have to be refit at a cost of thousands -- others will go out of business; 2) tuna & dolphin are so blended in the eastern tropical portion of the Pacific that avoiding dolphin is nearly impossible. Many fishermen will have to move to another part of the ocean; 3) more dolphin may be killed because foreign competitors, who do not fish by the same rules, will move in to the evacuated area.

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WHY ARE HOMEMAKERS SUCH POWERFUL ENVIRO-ACTIVISTS? PRR ASKS TWO MOTHERS WHO FOUGHT & DEFEATED GIANT CORPORATIONS

What do Occidental Petroleum and W.R. Grace have in common? 1) Both suffered damaged reputations as chemical polluters. Occidental owns Hooker Chemical, depicted as the villain of Love Canal. Grace's toxic waste dump in Woburn, Mass. is deemed responsible for several cases of leukemia via polluted drinking water. 2) Both battled and lost against activist groups led by housewives who had no business savvy, no experience with the corporate sector, just determination and conviction.

Love Canal & Woburn are just 2 of several cases in which women steered the fight against toxic waste. Lois Gibbs, known for her rally to clear neighborhoods around Love Canal, says women still lead the charge. "They are more involved than ever in the movement for environmental justice," she told prr. "Of the groups we work with at Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (Arlington, Va), about 70% are led by women. Most are full-time homemakers."

She also notes that efforts have moved to a grassroots level. "There are many more fights by local people than there are in DC." The image of the high-income, college-educated male activist lobbying on the Hill is becoming passe.

Gibbs -- now involved in many related causes, including the push against resettlement of Love Canal, now called "Black Creek Village" -- offers reasons why domestic personalities so often align against the toxic threat:

1. Women are more nurturing. "They fight these battles because they're fighting for their children's survival. That's the biggest motivator." In Woburn, Ann Anderson lost a 12-yr old to cancer as did another woman who became an activist. Gibbs had 2 children sick at Love Canal.
2. They're born organizers, task delegators. "Women are taught early in life how to share responsibilities like setting the table, etc. Men are raised to be heads of the households. They're more dictatorial, and are not as accustomed to building consensus."

Penny Neumann, dir, Concerned Neighbors in Action (Riverside) led the attack against Northrop, Rockwell, other polluters of the Stringfellow site in California. "Women clearly see it is an issue of protecting their families," she told prr. "They react to threats against their children, while men tend to take a more scientific approach & await proof."

3. Are housewives, as outsiders to corporate structure, free of predominantly male bonding that inhibits direct attack on corporate intentions? This bonding may a) provide men with understanding about how decisions are made under various pressures; b) therefore, influence men to put more confidence in big corporations and thus give them the benefit of the doubt.

4. Women often have the single-mindedness that comes from caring about one immediate issue. Because they don't play by corporate rules, they can often thwart corporate plans. Neumann says innocence facilitated success. "If we really knew who we were taking on, we may have had second thoughts. That our adversaries were corporate giants didn't mean a lot. We thought, 'So what? Who is he anyway? He's hurting my kid.' Our naivete eliminated barriers -- barriers which would have been self-inflicted."

IN CONTRAST An organization that cultivates a macho philosophy is Earth First, which resorts to "monkeywrenching" and "ecotage" to achieve its ends. Unlike women's groups, which use new forms of organization and stay within the political process, Earth Firsters tend to be anti-establishment, anarchist & work on the fringe of constitutional processes. But Gibbs feels the difference is societal, not gender-related. "Earth Firsters are wilderness people." Also, what they choose to do for tactics and strategy requires brute strength, e.g. pushing a pole down a tree trunk. "Not many women are physically able to do that."

ON THE OTHER HAND Says a well known practitioner who has had to deal with homemaker-activists: "Yes, they are viable. Anybody who is concerned about the environment is important. But they should research to fully understand the situation based on science, not just emotion. If a housewife or anyone wants to be involved in advocacy, that's great, provided s/he does not just react from emotion."

"The problem for the American public is that it reacts to a 30-second clip on the evening news. The situation may be highly technical and complicated, not black & white but shades of gray. To say that people in a corporation are not environmentally conscious is not true." Clearly, one difficulty is getting the Lois Gibbses to see this.

NEW AD AGENCY COMPENSATION PLAN WOULD GIVE IT CONTROL OF PR; DANGER, BUT ALSO OPPORTUNITY DDB Needham's break with the 15% "commission paid regardless" plan toward an incentive scheme has a serious sidebar for pr. For clients to benefit from the plan, which bases agency pay on achieving pre-set goals, they must agree to "integration of all brand voices" -- meaning ads, direct marketing, sales promotion, pr, et al -- around a "core creative idea" developed by the agency.

Beneficially, this would at last attain One Clear Voice.

Detrimentially, it could also reduce pr's role. Unless it participates in deciding the theme, pr would be relegated to assignments in which even its creative flexibility could be limited.

BACKGROUND FOR INCENTIVE PLANS The straight 15% commission has been under attack for years. Various replacements have been tried or proposed. Studies show only half of advertisers were still paying 15% in '89. Most appealing to advertisers -- but not their agencies -- have been incentives, where compensation is linked to performance. DDB Needham's plan would enable it to earn up to 33% over the 15% for meeting targets; or suffer loss of up to 30% for failure. Two-thirds of any bonus earned would go to the account teams.

Incentive systems could also make bigger budgets available for pr, since there would be some brake on ad agencies spending money where commissions are highest regardless of results. This is the cause, many observers believe, for so much just-plain-dumb advertising.

UNDERLYING QUESTION: WILL PR BE PAID SIMILARLY? If incentives work, they will be widely adopted -- tho several false starts haven't worked out. This is where the inherent posture that pr says qualifies it to be a profession -- and which does not qualify advertising -- comes into play. Advertising is a 1-way, basically propagandistic medium in which both message & placement are totally under control. Its weakness lies in the vehicle itself.

PR, in contrast, can't control either message or medium even in its 1-way communications. Brochures & publications are an exception. Any activity beyond 1-way is totally uncontrollable in process as well as outcome. We can call a meeting or rally, but what attenders do there is beyond our scope. We can create 1-on-1 constituency programs but cannot control the dialogue. In true public relations venues, people & publics are in control; in advertising venues, they can only be passive recipients (or avoiders).

This is the reasoning behind PRSA code article 9: "A member shall not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control." Will this tenet of professionalism now be watered down in the marketplace -- especially since so many practitioners either concentrate on publicity/promotion or work for firms owned by ad agencies?

Evidence compounds that advertising has lost its punch with the decline of mass markets & expendable income. This is a chance for public relations to showcase its value-added power on 2 fronts:
¶in marketing promotion, where 2-way methods, listening & participative devices, and other personalized techniques are delivering solid, long-lasting results;
¶in breaking out of the "marketing pr" or sales support mold into arenas where pr is most valuable, such as public policy, organizational effectiveness, credibility strategy & similar.