

PROBLEMS EXIST IN U.S. AS WELL 1. **Arctic Nat'l Wildlife Refuge.** Debate over whether oil would be drilled was almost won by oil companies, but Valdez incident delayed decision. "If they convince the federal government, and if other industries with their interests convince the government, I wonder if we'll have any refuges at all."

2. **National Parks.** "Acid rain & pollution are ruining visibility. Highways are built along park boundaries so buffalo & deer which wander out of bounds are often killed. Meanwhile, hunters sit at the borders waiting to shoot animals that cross the line."

Manufacturers as well as consumers must review their values. In this society, brand-new, cheap, & disposable mean more than durable & quality. "Even cameras are disposable now. More evidence that, as Ed Muskie once said, we're an 'effluent' society -- that has to change, fast."

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS A) **On a local level,** e.g. in the park situation, conservationists must sit down with surrounding communities and outline needs (economic, transportation, etc.) & park problems (lack of a buffer zone, traffic congestion, pollution).

B) **Business Commitment.** "Some are getting involved, but overall there has been little corporate involvement in sustained utilization." Day says corporations especially must recognize the interconnectedness of everything. "If they commit to recycling paper, oils, & other materials, there would be a giant demand & economic incentive to recycle, pick up waste. There would be no need to invade reserves, build more power plants, drill more oil, mine more coal." Jobs would come from the recycling industries.

NEW MEDIUM WITH CLOUT: Last year, California Now released its pioneering study of children's influence on political issues -- i.e. "can a concern for children influence voting behavior?" This presaged another study by Nat'l Ass'n of Children Hospitals & Related Institutions on attitudes toward children in general. Both found kids have clout...as marketers of products & services have long known.

Aside from Youth News Service (pr 7/16/90) and standard for-youth but by-adult mags, few media have served this age group -- especially the younger segment. Now a host of kiddie-written media aimed at other kids is coming on the scene.

Typical is the originator, Kidwriters Monthly -- called by its publishers "a one-of-a-kind public relations tool." Now a year old, it offers 12 tabloid, newsprint pages of drawings, poems, essays by kids in grades 1-6. Also ads aimed at this market. Plus contests, puzzles & other items fit for this age group -- and the parents & teachers who are its avid supporters & conduits for materials from the kid-authors.

Distributed as a newspaper supplement, Kidwriters Monthly blankets its circulation area. It is the first service truly for gradeschool readers aside from 1 or 2 comic strips & an occasional (usually talking down) feature. (For copies of research or more info on kiddie pub'ns, call pr)

FOCUS GROUPS ARE BECOMING THE MOST USED RESEARCH TOOL; QUESTIONS ARISE ABOUT ADVANTAGES, APPLICATIONS & ABUSES

Can focus groups stand alone as a qualitative public relations tool? With research taking its place as an indispensable part of the pr process, they're moving ahead of other methodologies in popularity. "Focus groups have arrived at the forefront," Larissa Grunig, U of Maryland, told prr. "What we need to do now is apply standards of rigor to reduce their abuse."

FOCUS GROUPS BY DEFINITION Discussions involving a) 6-12 participants, b) a moderator whose role is to c) elicit qualitative data on behavior, opinions, etc. d) via open-ended questions & suggestions. Originating less than 50 years ago from psychology, FGs caught fire with advertisers & marketers who wanted to test-market products & round up ideas ("consumer test panels"). PR has traditionally used them to precede questionnaire drafting, supplement more quantitative research, or as advisory boards & community panels.

For pr's purposes, Grunig counters focus groups are adequate since they garner the very information which practitioners can act upon to solve problems. "The goal of pr research may not be prediction per se but, more often, understanding of some human behavior or belief." Unlike advertising or marketing, pr's purpose is not to simply generate sales. "While we don't talk to the numbers, we get richer information."

Attributing more substantive results to FGs incites criticism that they cannot reflect generalities. Advertising researcher Leo Bogart warns that group members "enticed" into the research don't necessarily represent a cross-section. "It's dangerous to accept the results without corroboration from larger-scale survey research."

A BRIEF CASE STUDY Grunig conducted a focus group with citizens of 4 areas of a large, urban county. Goal was to reduce opposition to & stigma of group housing for the mentally ill, which would be moving into the area. "Tho planned initially as a means of developing a telephone survey, the focus groups became the major source of info for the pr program that resulted."

Grunig found groups: a) believed alcoholism, drug addiction & mental retardation are associated with mental illness; b) defined it in terms of observable behavior; c) believed it was treatable, not curable; d) favored interpersonal methods over mass media as info sources; e) considered the people with mental illness & family members credible info sources; f) thought clergy, civic ass'ns, employers of the mentally ill, & neighbors of such existing housing would be influential.

The research led to implementation of: a) community liaison committee; b) design of a logo for program continuity, plus posters, etc.; c) development of a theatrical troupe to produce a play about stigma; d) patients & families speakers bureau; e) media rels program; f) awards program; g) hotline; h) conferences, which themselves consisted of focus groups with mentally ill people. "The success of the program reveals how effective focus groups can be. They were more valuable than any of the survey research performed later."

ATTRIBUTES 1. **Immediacy** -- quick to plan, conduct & analyze, taking the least time before implementing resulting program;

2. **Response-oriented** rather than question-oriented. Flow of info is partly determined by respondents rather than by a prestructured questionnaire.

3. **A group can be less intimidating** or frustrating to the subjects than other research methods.

4. **Flexibility:** "There is no standard, prescriptive approach to follow in every instance. They don't force people into a box or give them a score or a scale of 1-5 to gauge their answers." A wider range of responses & nuances can be elicited.

5. **Lends a language.** Focus groups give you actual dialogue so that you can construct a jargon well received by the people in your target audience. "If you were targeting teens, for example, you may not want to use 'hip' or 'cool' when 'gnarly' is the current vernacular."

6. **Allows time for exploration,** to find out what motivates a certain group, why they behave the way they do or buy what they buy.

7. **Particularly useful in dealing with community groups, activists.** "It's difficult to tap into them in any other way. With employees, consumers, you have more alternatives."

8. **Can touch upon the most sensitive subjects.** Example: a focus group of child abusers/molesters yielded good results because the participants were relieved to be with others facing the same problems.

FOCUS GROUP ABUSES ABOUND Grunig outlines the many focus group abuses, most of which are the result of poor moderating:

1. **Allowing a few to dominate.** "This can turn into a one-on-one debate. A good moderator draws out people who would be cowed in such situations."

2. **An overbearing facilitator.** "Some moderators impose their own world view on the group."

Ketchum research chief Walt Lindenmann agrees that in some instances, focus group research can stand alone, but often it must be coupled with other research. "To test ideas out, they're fine," he told prr. "But if I want to project anything onto a broader audience -- employees, community members, whatever -- I would have to link them with quantitative research. You have to recognize that focus group research has caveats & limitations."

3. **Striving for heterogeneity.**

"Homogeneity is key. You shouldn't, for example, mix assembly workers with mid-level managers. Put people in a group in which they will feel comfortable and not intimidated."

4. **Failure to hold enough groups.**

Several focus groups must be conducted to gain accurate insights into the whole public. Combining results from homogeneous groups provides a heterogeneous snapshot.

"Perhaps the worst abuse that occurs is trying to generalize from your conclusions. It's a mistake to try to make a single focus group seem like the mainstream view on an issue."

ENVIRO ACTIVISTS WHO TARGET ABUSES ABROAD & HERE ARE NOW REALIZING PEOPLE COME FIRST

Conservationists attempting to reverse damage created by blatant misbehavior are realizing a fundamental: people's needs must be met before change can be effectively instituted. Idea is spawning a new groundswell of innovative strategies which come under the umbrella of "sustained utilization." Challenge now is to convince publics & legislators. Cases:

1. **Poverty, booming population** generate illegal ivory trade which has reduced African elephant population from 1.2 million to 600,000 since '81. Conservationists now say best way to help animals may be to help people via economic activity which offers a stake in preserving nature. Don't put up a fence around wildlife but convince constituents it's worth their while not to poach & exploit.

2. **Tropical rainforests** are disappearing at an alarming rate. Wildlife & weather patterns are threatened, also potential medical innovations from exotic plantlife. Cultural Survival (Cambridge, Mass): a) calls for a united effort to prove to industry & local cultures that preservation will benefit all; b) strives to establish markets for rainforest products (see prr 1/7/91). Market exists for cosmetics, perfumes, flavors.

A CALL FOR INNOVATION Brian Day, World Wildlife Fund (DC), says creative strategies are necessary. "We have to figure out how to have resources and use them, too." An experiment in Peru involves loggers mimicking nature by cutting narrow strips of rainforest, a natural occurrence during storms, to see if these areas restore themselves.

"If you do use focus groups with employees, hire a counselor from the outside to ensure honesty. Hold the meetings off-site. A synergy takes place that overcomes shyness. One comment leads to another."

"People are realizing that whether we're dealing with a US park or a 3rd world forest, the only way conservation will happen is if all stakeholders have a vested interest," Day told prr. "It has got to be in the interest of a very wide set of people to protect a piece of property."