

3. "It's a low maintenance kind of public relations, offering an opportunity to share his views with small groups of parents -- & to respond to their concerns. He learns a lot from them -- their perceptions of the school system," Gaskins told pr.

INTERNAL USE

At "Summits," Sosne meets with a small group of interested employees (not restricted by job type). They bring brown-bag lunches, drinks are provided. Most employees at the initial meeting happened to also be parents. "Frequently supts are accused of being aloof or inaccessible. But anybody who wants to can sign up for these meetings" -- or initiate one by contacting the school secretary.

WIDER APPLICATION

"We're looking ahead to doing this with other groups -- people in the business community or church leaders." It could be any kind of group.

ITEMS OF IMPORTANCE TO PRACTITIONERS

¶ **THE UNFORTUNATE O.J. SIMPSON MEDIA CIRCUS** may be the ultimate evidence of the media's voyeuristic tendencies -- but is praised in many quarters for keeping stories not helpful to practitioner's organizations off the front page, or even out of the news. **If you've got a black-eye item to get rid of, do it now!** This beats Friday late p.m. release.

¶ **MESSAGE ON HOLD (pr 7/11) HAS A SIMPLE ORIGIN.** About 9 years ago, J.B. Seligman, one of Digital Message System's founders, "was on hold with his bank when he heard a radio commercial for the bank's competitor. An idea bloomed in his head. Why allow other companies to take advantage of your customers' time?" Message On Hold took shape.

¶ **THE COUNSELOR'S ROLE IS TO BE HEARD & NOT SEEN,** contrasted to children, who should be seen & not heard: Heard by the client -- but not seen by the stakeholders. This is a major reason pr firms get in hot water, wanting to get into the act that belongs to those being advised. PR counseling is a behind-the-scenes job in most cases.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

HONORS. Jean Cormier (Cormier Communicators, Vancouver) receives Fellow Award, IABC's highest honor, for his outstanding contribution to the profession.

Chairman's Awards, for initiative, leadership & contributions to IABC, to Lee Hornick (Business Communications Worldwide, NYC), & Moses Kanhai (comm plng mgr, SaskPower).

Claude Beland (CEO, Mouvement des caisses Desjardins, Montreal) receives Excellence in Communication Leadership (EXCEL) award -- given to a nonmbr for fostering & participating in good communication.

ELECTED. IABC ofcrs for '94-'95: chair, Ruta Skelton (Canadian comm practice mgr, Towers Perrin, Toronto); vice chair, Michael Heron (nat'l vp-pa, American Cancer Society, Atlanta).

GAP RESEARCH: WHY & HOW IT DOES WHAT OTHER METHODS DON'T

The purpose of most public relations research is to help make things happen: facilitate change, motivate behavior, guide decisionmaking. To do this, it must provide actionable information, not status reports.

BUILDING ON OTHER METHODS

In most instances, classic survey research is limited to providing "a look in the mirror" which requires too many assumptions & leaps of faith to be useful. Example: survey methodology is often able to discern opinions & attitudes of a public. But opinion is so time-bound & changeable that it is only minimally useful. And today behaviors are so often de-linked from attitudes that knowing them still requires guesses to determine what action to take to get to behavior.

Survey questionnaires also find great difficulty in getting accurate responses. Even to questions seeking to discover behavior patterns people answer ideally or forget what they really did -- thus the "false positives" or "false negatives" so frustrating to users of research.

OVERCOMING THE DIFFICULTIES

Gap questioning eliminates these problems by letting respondents state, in their own terms, what actually happened to bar a desired course of action, and what needs to be done to facilitate one now.

Typically a gap study asks 4 questions for each topic being probed:

1. On a scale of 1 - 9, how would you rate us in (delivering customer satisfaction, for instance)?
2. Why did you give that rating? Cite specific reasons.
3. Knowing the organization as you do, how good could we get in (delivering customer satisfaction) if we really put our hearts into it -- again, on a scale of 1 - 9?
4. What would we have to do to get there?

WHAT EACH QUESTION ACCOMPLISHES

Qs 1 & 3 establish the gap between current & ideal performance -- as the respondents perceive it. Both elements are critical. If the Q were being asked of customers, the result would be the reality response -- because satisfaction is established entirely by the perceptions of this public.



If respondents were frontliners who must deliver customer satisfaction, results would establish how accurately they see their performance -- easily measured by comparing with customers' responses. By extension their responses could also indicate how sensitive they are to customers.

- Q2 elicits from these critical players **the reasons why** they gave a high, or low, rating: what is happening in fact, based on their intimate knowledge, that is a barrier to success, or is facilitating success. Totally actionable information. If there are misperceptions in the answers, that's also actionable because it identifies necessary clarifications.
- Q3's contribution is **letting those who must deliver or receive** customer satisfaction, in this example, tell how good they believe service can get. Can it reach the heights of competitive advantage: or is it always going to be a barrier? Most importantly, they identify how much improvement they feel is possible or necessary. In the case of employees, they -- not some executive -- are telling how far *they* are willing to go!

[Rarely do respondents not identify a gap to be closed; tho it is possible to get a 7 in Q1 which declines to, say, a 5 in Q3. But that would be really actionable data!]

- Q4 is best of all, for here respondents tell **what steps must be taken** to improve, to close the gap. Nothing could be more actionable, or a better guide to decision.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS

1. **Gap studies are, first of all, simple.** To get the info you're after, no fancy word tricks or semantic handwringing are required to get a workable line of questioning.
2. **Questions are very direct & straightforward.** Busy respondents grasp them rapidly & answer immediately. The flow of thought is obvious.
3. **Responses & ideas are the respondents' own** -- & in their own words.

IN MEASURING RESPONSE TO ISSUES

Gaps can identify whether publics expect things to get better or worse, and why. Q1 may get a 3 rating, while Q3 falls to a 2...or rises to a 5. Verbatims from Qs 2 & 4 then provide the whys & wherefores.

LOEWS HOTELS' "GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY" IS INEXPENSIVE WINNER

Posters greeting guests in the hallways & elevators plus brief folders in rooms are colorful but unobtrusive. Definitely not the too-typical brag-gadocio of such materials.

"Doing what comes naturally" is the theme, environmental & social issue sensitivity in running a hotel chain the topic.

"We know our neighbor is the world" by running an international chain.

This is the first program of its kind in the hospitality industry, say the materials.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Live up to the "naturally" claim. Included:

1. **Collect** office paper & newspapers for recycling; preference for recycled & biodegradable products in **purchases**; use energy- & resource-saving technologies in **construction**.
2. **Donate excess** food to food banks or prepared food programs, replaced items (like furniture) to local assistance organizations.
3. **Encourage employee participation** in volunteer activities.

Folder notes: "If you feel your company might want to introduce a similar policy, we'd be more than happy to share what we've learned. Simply contact our Public Relations Office at 212/545-2833."

SCHOOL'S FACE-TO-FACE SESSIONS ARE BORROWABLE TACTIC

"The most efficient way of changing attitudes is 1-on-1 personal communications," finds Barry Gaskins, pub info dir, Pitt County Schools (Greenville, NC). So he started "**Sanka with Sosne**" -- 1-on-1 meetings between Supt Frank Sosne & interested parents. And "**Superintendent's Summer Sandwich Summits**" for employees.

STRUCTURE

Parents invite Sosne to their homes where 5 - 10 others from the neighborhood also attend. Meetings last about 1 hour. Only cost is superintendent's time because the host/hostess provides the coffee. He generally goes by himself. If the group has a specific concern he'll take that coordinator with him.

Meetings have no agenda. "They're wide open to whatever concerns parents have." Afterwards Sosne jots down issues discussed. Any follow ups are done quickly. "9 out of 10 times concerns are raised because a parent doesn't understand why something happened. We get back to that person immediately."

It's important to keep groups small. "Groups can get too big, & then you're just reacting. It's better to interact."

BENEFIT

1. **Issue Anticipation:** "We've been able to pick up on things that could happen. It's giving us an edge in our planning."
2. **Opportunity to express needs:** School system is growing fast & in negotiations for a bond referendum. "We're building grassroots support one-by-one. If someone isn't sold on it, the face-to-face meeting gives Sosne a chance to address that parent's concerns. **You can't do that with a newsletter or a press release.**"