

## MORE OF THE "UNFORGIVING DECADE" TO HELP PLAN STRATEGY

"Someone will blame you for nearly everything you do" warned Ann Barkelew (vp-corp pr, Dayton Hudson, Mpls) in prr 1/6/92 -- dubbing this the "Unforgiving Decade." Partly this is because political correctness puts restraints on public participation, allowing the loudest zealots to run things (prr 1/3). Here's another example:

- Two United Market stores in Marin County (Calif) had to dump 40,000 shopping bags that told the inspiring story of a 4th grader from El Salvador -- but who entered the US illegally. 20 shoppers said story promotes illegal immigration, threatened to picket or organize a boycott if bags weren't removed.
- Fearing loss of customers, stores opted to yank bags.
- Now other customers have come forward in support of the bags.
- Caught in the pincers, United Market decided not to change its decision again. Is this convenient approach the best one? Either way...

"Our community has been targeted by people who are very much right-wing & xenophobic," Lauren Hallinan, exec dir of Legal Aid of Marin told San Francisco Chronicle. "The INS has done 18 street sweeps in San Rafael.... It's all led by a small, vocal, virulent minority." Perhaps true, but like the NRA & others with a small percent of the public on their side, active campaigns in the Court of Public Opinion don't need a majority.

**CLOSER TO HOME...** prr has received some pointed comments from readers about Phil Lesly's conservative, upsetting-to-them views in managing the human climate. They ask why we publish it. prr's answer: it gives readers a look at the environment we live & work in from a different point of view -- one many readers may not ordinarily hear.

Others have accused prr of being too progressive (left-wing), so Lesly provides the view from the right. As facilitators of organizations' relationships, we believe practitioners need to be aware of all views, whether we agree with them or not. Lesly adds this thought:

"I don't think there's any purpose in adhering to conventional wisdom & entrenched platitudes. If you try to modulate what you say so no one is ever upset, you'll rarely say anything that your readers feel is worth paying to read.

"PC advocates believe that the road to Utopia is by preventing anyone from having any critical thoughts about anyone or anything they want. But the truth always has to prevail in the end." [His, like any of ours, is one voice toward ferreting out that truth.]

## WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

**RETIREES.** Robert Carboni after 21 yrs with Northwestern Mutual Life (Milwaukee). Joined NML when it established its comms dep't. Began his career in '53 with Packard Electric Div of General Motors.

## IS IT OK TO USE SLANG IN PR ACTIVITIES?

Is the English language alive, in flux...or static, controlled by rules of what's proper, what's not? New book casts light, & color, on this question: *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Volume I, A-G (already out of stock but more are being printed, \$50). "To understand the slang is to understand the country. From Jerry to Charlie, Dixie to La-La Land, & cowpoke to wonk, slang bespeaks our history," notes editor Jesse Sheidlower.

Compiler/editor J.E. Lighter (U Tenn) believes, "Language is a living thing, a dynamic entity that continually evolves in unpredictable ways. What makes slang particularly compelling is that **it represents linguistic innovation within a particular cultural context**. When America was first coming into its own, for instance, the colonists represented a relatively small band of settlers, the vast majority of whom came from the less refined strata of society. Add to that the tens of thousands of felons transported to America before 1772, & you begin to realize the significance of history to American slang."

"American slang is like a wilderness where words jump from behind a bush whenever they feel like it. It's always burgeoning & it can never be tamed. I'm just trying to make a decent map of the territory," explains Lighter. He's been at it 25 years; his Ph.D. dissertation, greatly expanded, comprises the letter "A". He estimates there will be 300,000 annotated entries when he's finished.

**WHAT IS SLANG?** It isn't standard language, jargon or dialect. It's the contrast with Standard English that makes it slang -- almost always a synonym for a standard word. For example, *grunge* is slang when it refers to dirt; not when it is a descriptive word for the Seattle-based music & fashion movement of the 90s. Just as *heavy metal*, *disco* & *rap* are not slang.

**WHY DO PEOPLE USE SLANG?** Lighter gives these reasons:

- It's fun.
- It puts pep, color & personality into language.
- "It suggests an intimate familiarity that standard language simply cannot convey. You are more likely to be convinced of the user's insider status."
- It's good for popping the balloon of pretense. "It intimates an *in-your-face* attitude. Many think that because so much slang cen-



ters on body functions, sex, insults, intoxication, money, criminal activity & the like, its use indicates deficiency of character or intelligence. More accurately, it's better to assume that those who use slang hold an anti-establishment attitude & display sharp disdain for convention & pretense."

**WHO USES SLANG?** "It's odd how often slang is associated with the illiterate or disreputable segments of society. They are far from alone. Slang pervades American English & is as much a part of communication as dialectal or Standard English. A lot of the lesser regarded societal elements -- drug users, criminals, gamblers -- do use slang of course, but so do pilots, surgeons & professors," says Sheidlower.

**CAN PR USE SLANG?**

- If it's how people talk, shouldn't we?
- Or must practitioners be conservative always, to avoid any possibility of upsetting someone?
- Is this analogous to dress codes -- some of which are changing away from formalism to reflect reality & afford comfort? (But see this week's purview)
- Does linguistic conservatism make org'ns appear solid -- or seem outmoded, unprogressive & perhaps unfriendly or at least uninviting?

What's the balance -- or does that **depend on the audience & the org'n?** The French pass laws regulating vocabulary, particularly to rule out English words. pr's experience suggests practitioners are very conservative about changes in language. That raises the issue of whether it is a detail, observed at a cost to bigger issues like strategy & proactivism [a word some pr pros write to inveigh against].

Best guide may be the "**water seeks its own level**" principle. Since you can't reach or persuade everyone anyway, let language & other expression of values *sort out* your publics. Those turned away on these points would never stay with you long anyway -- if they came along in the first place. But those who share your approach will recognize a true compatriot.

Dictionary spans more than 300 yrs of American history, traces every sense of each entry from earliest to most recent use. 1080-page tome has over 20,000 entries, is first of 3 volumes scheduled for completion by '97.

## PEOPLE DIGEST INFORMATION IN 10-15 MINUTE SEGMENTS

This is a rule of thumb based on com'n research, not an edict, says Fred Williamson of Lanier Worldwide (Atlanta). "After that point, something in the brain clicks off." This is why tv breaks programs into 30-minute segments interspersed with commercials. He offers these tips for presenters:

1. **Change the pace** of your presentation to help hold audience attention.
2. **Shift your audience's focus** every 10-15 minutes, e.g., alternate presenters, mix your media, use media that require dimmed lights, then raise the lights for other segments.

"The best gauge is audience reaction. The second that glazed look begins to mirror in their faces, wind it up or adapt your presentation to recapture their focus."

## WHAT DOES "WORKPLACE DIVERSITY" MEAN? SURVEY PROBES

Random sample of IABC mbrs in the Southwest (for an upcoming district conference) laid out a set of descriptions, asked respondents to select any, or all, that best describe their perceptions. "To invite greater participation, the selection deliberately **used emotionally-charged descriptions to elicit strong negative or positive perceptions**. Surprisingly, most chose positive diversity characterizations":

- Response to the **changing profile of the laborforce** (64 respondents)
- Part of a growing movement toward **establishing higher workplace values & respect** for individuals (55)
- An **equal opportunity**-type program (39)
- Protection against discrimination **law suits** (32)
- **Feel-good buzzword** with no real meaning (19)
- **Lip service** to demands for workplace equality by minorities & women (19)
- Major element of **competitive business strategy** (15)
- **Preferential treatment** for minority groups, gays & lesbians & women (9)

## OTHER FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY:

1. **76% say there is a role for communicators**; 11% aren't certain; 10% say there isn't.
2. **Only 34% have attended any training programs/seminars** designed to create greater awareness of workplace diversity; 65% have not.
3. **Hiring non-traditional employees simply to meet diversity quotas** drew the largest number of responses on what should not be done. 1 in 4 warned against it. Paying lip service to diversity -- "talking the talk without walking the talk" -- also drew negative responses.

## VERBATIMS ON CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD NON-TRADITIONAL EMPLOYEES:

- "It's a good cause, but **upper management needs to set an example** by being diverse itself. An organization whose top management is WASP has no place directing what lower levels do."
- "Workplace diversity will come almost **one person at a time**."
- "The only way to effect change in bigoted people is to affect the way children are raised, the way home communities form & exist in our cities & towns. **Organizations are literally stuck** with the adult products of that milieu."

U Conn's George Chartier had fun on the subject in a recent letter: "While *eyeballing* your June 27 issue, I found myself *eyebrowing* at a word: "*doorbelling*" [used there to describe door-to-door campaigning]. Kindly stop *dumbelling* our language."