

Now Minnesota has taken the step of issuing a fat newspaper supplement evaluating nearly all health plans in the state -- 46 of them including private insurance, medicare & state programs. Funded by public & industry dollars, Minn. Health Data Institute is a nonprofit created by the legislature to improve the quality of healthcare services by reporting on their performance. Deb Anderson is comms mgr for MHDI.

This voluntary public-private evaluation may prove more potent than gov't regulation.

SURVEY DETAILS 17,591 health plan enrollees were interviewed, at a cost of \$1 million. Each plan received at least 400 interviews. Phone interviews were used on a typical random sample. Report was distributed as a paid advertising insert in 60 newspapers. One expert called the report "cutting edge stuff." (Copy of questionnaire from pr. More info from 612/288-2860. Or view the report on <http://www.mhdi.com/>)

QUEBEC SOVEREIGNTY DEBATE STUDY IN MISPRONOUNCEMENTS

Future map of N.America will be drawn next Mon. as Quebecois vote again on secession from Canada. PR counseling proved to be the major need, since campaign high points have been 2 verbal goofs:

1. Last week, the worst possible timing, secessionist leader Lucien Bouchard criticized the province's low birthrate. Factually correct: it is 1.6 while 2.1 is considered the minimum for zero population growth. With the women's vote a key factor, anti-secessionists responded with "The women of Quebec don't have babies for the state...." As if facts mattered.
2. Earlier pro-secessionist Premier Jacques Parizeau, after railing at the antis to go along with a possible yes vote in the spirit of democracy, said that a no vote would only mean years more of fighting by secessionists until they did get a yes vote. The rules of democracy for you but not for me.

Political foolishness recognizes no borders. But this is a vital issue in an era when every group seems to want their own nation -- including some in the U.S. Vermont still has its secessionist party.

ITEM OF IMPORTANCE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Evidence Anti-Smoking Has Become Clearly Socially Acceptable: Nearly 80% of drivers surveyed don't smoke in their cars, & the same number won't allow passengers to light up either. Of this group, half think it's a good idea to eliminate ashtrays in cars, half want them to stay as standard equipment. "Even tho drivers don't smoke in the car, they often find other uses for the ashtray. Many would welcome a thoughtfully designed alternative to ashtrays," explains Tom Moulson, svp of Market Opinion Research. Drivers under age 35 are more likely to "frequently" smoke in their cars, as are those with annual incomes under \$20,000. 1,000 were surveyed nationwide. (More info from MOR, 810/737-5300)

DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS' PRECISE ROLE AS CHANGE AGENT

One of the 9 ways pr impacts the bottom line is as change agent (pr 5/9/92). In a time when change is pandemic, this is a vital contribution. But what exactly are practitioners supposed to -- and able to -- do to implement change within organizations? Three patterns emerge:

CHANGE LEADER Practitioners 1) identify needed changes, on their own or in concert with executive colleagues; 2) then propose programs to bring them about. In short, they *position* themselves as the change agents.

Some among many programs that might be proposed:

- Adopting *Customer Satisfaction Modeling* (pr 5/23/94) to improve sales or customer retention, possibly leading to a regularly surveyed Customer Satisfaction Index (pr 10/2);
- *Team Leader (or Supervisor) as Key Communicator* (pr 5/30/94) to improve internal relations, productivity or communications;
- *What's in the Way?* (pr 1/13/92) to improve morale, confidence in management, or operational efficiency;
- *Constituency Relations* to involve employee volunteers in reaching opinion leaders for purposes of issue anticipation & participative decision-making, in order to improve community, customer, gov't or other stakeholder relationships (pr 1/25/93).

(Copies of pr issues or expanded models of these programs from pr)

CHANGE MODIFIER

1. After years of the program of the month, many organizations are programmed out. Sr mgmt keeps coming up with one new initiative after another & no one tells them employees are drowning already. PR's task here is to provide **reality therapy** -- using research, examples or whatever it takes to slow the pace of change initiatives & let previous ones be digested.
2. Many change initiatives simply fail or do not deliver as hoped. In many cases, Quality in its many guises fits this description. Practitioners can **revitalize such existing programs**, and by bringing success out of disappointment further *position* themselves as the change agents. For instance, Quality consists of 3 elements:

- a) **cycle time reduction** -- here pr can foster major gains by designing systems for better memos & meetings, the principal barriers to reducing managerial & operational cycle time (pr 7/11/94)
- b) **zero or reduced defects** -- here a *What's in the Way?* program may identify the problems, or *Team Leader as Communicator* may smooth work flow & other hazards to quality products, services or operations.
- c) **customer satisfaction** -- again *Customer Satisfaction Modeling* can improve this greatest of all competitive advantages.
3. Organizations with several programs in various states of implementation usually report confusion among employees & managers, and lack of trust that sr mgmt knows what it's doing. Here, pr can **put a unifying umbrella over** all the programs to show that there is a rationale, a central focus or direction. Try:
- Graphically portraying the programs in linking diagrammatic form.
 - Scrapping individual program names & substituting a unifying one.
 - And ineffective elements can be dropped.

These simple steps can revive change initiatives & restore confidence in management.

CHANGE FACILITATOR

In this role practitioners use their traditional skills in communication & understanding human nature to anticipate the expectations & perceptions of employees & work groups -- to help them cope with or embrace change.

Greatly feared changes -- like restructuring, reengineering or downsizing -- usually require a 4-step facilitation:

1. Preconditioning to deal accurately & honestly with expectations
2. The announcement & its immediate aftermath
3. Catharsis or mourning
4. Returning survivors to productivity

Even when pr is acting as change leader or change modifier this task will probably also fall to it.

A 4TH POSSIBILITY

The greatest value of pr often is what doesn't happen. Perhaps pr's greatest role in change is having the positive relationships, effective communication methods, mutual trust & teamwork in place before change initiatives are launched -- so fear, resistance, sabotage & other negative outcomes are largely avoided.

TRAUMATIC WEB SYNDROME EXISTS, READER REPORTS

Frank Stansberry responds to pr 10/9 with this experience:

"I got one of those packages from America On-line which gives you access & 8 hrs of free time. Once I got on line, I learned they had a book to teach you how to get the most out of their services, so, for \$24.95, I bought the book.

"The book didn't arrive, & after 2 months, I canceled the order. Meanwhile, I'm trying to teach myself how to use the services of AOL. My first month's charges were \$160. I called the company numerous times (800 number) & was told each time that, since I was able to log on, all the help I needed could be obtained on-line. At that point, the call disconnected.

"Frustrated, I e-mailed the president of the company. I got no response. I wrote the company. I got no response. Finally, the book arrived. Two copies. Gleeefully, I set in to learn to use the service, book at my side.

"None of the pictures in the book, none of the terms in the book matched what was on my screen. Frustrated, I e-mailed the man who wrote the book. He, at least, responded, telling me to download the upgraded program. I was using an earlier version of AOL; his book was describing the newest version. It took 3 hrs to download the new material. My second month's bill was \$150.

"I wrote AOL explaining what happened & asked if I could have some credit for the hours I spent trying to make their old program work with the new book. I failed to receive any response from them, so I canceled my AOL.

"I'm perfectly content to be 'off-line' now. My AMEX is a lot smaller now that my AOL is gone. To Hell with them & the horse they rode in on. I'm going back to snail mail, the telephone & the fax machine. Anyone wanting to reach me can do so, & I don't have to put up with arrogant cybersnobs who promise much & deliver nothing."

CAN WE LEARN FROM HIS EXPERIENCE?

1. Not all access providers are created equal. In the words of one user colleague, "AOL sucks" for business purposes. It's a lot of hype, featuring entertainment & graphics. There are other, cheaper ways to access the Net that don't waste your time on graphics & frills. Some even download new software without charge.
2. But staying off line isn't the way to go. The Internet provides benefits -- including many saved trips to the library. The Internet isn't going away. At the least, be nodding acquaintances. Or better, find a friendly user to guide you thru this new world.
3. Customer delight is key whatever your industry. Regardless of current demand for your product or service -- which hi tech takes advantage of -- if your customers' experience isn't pleasurable, they won't stay.

MINNESOTA ISSUES PUBLIC REPORT CARD ON HEALTH PLANS

The wave of the future is public evaluation of all types of services. Mandatory testing in schools already allows comparison of results. Community benefit statements make hospitals tote up their value added. Consumer Reports has long scrutinized products.