

Then there's this curiosity: Continental, top ranked by J.D. Power, ranked among the "least admired" in the Fortune survey. Fortune's criteria don't include anything about *customer* responsiveness.

The question for practitioners is: If rankings are out there, even if they're basically trash, can you ignore them?

## LEADERSHIP REQUIRES TENACITY, COURAGE & FAITH

Seeking the difficult & elusive systemic solution, while resisting the shallow & often reinforced short-term fix, requires **tenacity**.

- Learning & behaving according to the relevant but new "soft" competencies, while resisting the temptation to retreat into the easier & irrelevant "hard" behaviors of the past, requires **courage**.
- Resisting the pressure for individual action, while allowing collective learning to take place, requires **faith**.

David Noer, sr fellow, Center for Creative Leadership (pr 1/6).

## ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS

**HiTech Billionaire Bill Gates agrees face-to-face vital.** "Nothing can replace a face-to-face meeting," he said on purchasing a new daVinci manuscript for his collection. Full quotation: "Nothing will ever replace a work of art, just as nothing can replace a face-to-face meeting or a trip to an unknown place."

**On a Fundraising Committee or is it part of your job?** New 7-part video series on grassroots fundraising looks at the basic questions: Are you ready to begin fundraising? Do you have a strategic vision of FR? Do you know which strategies are most effective? Is the board clear about its role? How do you get them to give & ask for money? Why is it hard & how do you get over your anxiety? How do you identify major donors? How do you cultivate relationships with donors? Can direct mail help acquire new donors? Is a special event worth all the work? How do you nurture the donor relationship & increase donor loyalty? Videotapes & companion study book are available as a single set (purchased for .1% of your orgn's budget, with a minimum price of \$25 & maximum of \$499) or as a loaner (this package, designed for coalitions, federated funds, foundations & other large groups with member org'ns, contains 5 sets of tapes, 5 study books & authorization to loan them to member org'ns. Cost is \$500.) (More info from Headwaters Fund, 122 W. Franklin Ave, Suite 518, Minneapolis 55404; 612/879-0602, fax 612/879-0613)

**Danger of car phone use suddenly gets a lot of attention.** Toronto study in New England Journal of Medicine, plus one by Rochester Institute of Technology, find frequent users are more likely to have accidents. If you spend 50 minutes or more per month on a car phone, you're *five times* more likely to get into an accident. Toronto study finds hands-free equipment helps little. It's the distraction from concentrating on driving that causes the accidents. PR practitioners must be one of the major groups using car phones.

## SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION: NEW SECRETARY OF STATE SHOWS HOW

Rational, descriptive words have little effect on most people today. In contrast, poetic or soundbite language can gain attention, if not persuade. But *actions* that symbolize meaning, values or intent are powerful. Here's an example of this new reality of pr.

"**Not only can foreign policy be cool,**" Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told a high school audience in Houston, "but it can be awesome" (pretty good soundbite). How well she performs in her assignment will be learned over the months -- but she or her pa staff seem to understand the role of pr in earning public consent.

- Her first official trip was not abroad but to Texas, to **sell foreign policy "straight to the people"** -- a dire need in a society not coping well with the many impacts of globalization. Going there instead of overseas symbolized this need.
- She visited a passport office, one of the few **direct citizen services** her agency supplies ("a symbol of her commitment to the State Department's workers").
- This put her directly in **contact with frontline staff** -- an employee relations move more senior managers should emulate.
- She met with Mexico's Foreign Minister ("a symbol of the importance of its **relations with the US**" & of US relations with its neighbors as opposed to Europe or the Far East).
- Her Republican predecessor Jim Baker introduced her talk at Rice U & she breakfasted with former President Bush ("a symbol of her **desire for a bipartisan foreign policy**").
- She also **met with corporate execs** -- including some having problems doing business in nations with bad human rights records. (Symbolizing her concern about this double-bladed issue.)
- Much of the **time she spent with students** -- a symbol of her stated goal of educating Americans about how foreign policy affects their lives.

On analysis, the reason soundbites work is because they **symbolize** something, someone, an event or position on an issue.

**MEDIA'S CYNICAL RESPONSE**

What did news media think of all this?

Exhibiting why many people have lost confidence in journalists, the starchy NYTimes called it "a trip short on substance." The passport office it termed "one of the more pedestrian offices of the Department of State." But the only one most Times readers ever use.

To give the reporter his due, Albright's pa staff pointed out the value of her symbolic actions -- and it was duly noted in the coverage (statements in quotation marks above).

CEOs & senior managers today need to be masters at symbolic com'n -- since almost no one bothers to even listen to their rhetoric, much less trust it. Politicians understand this better, and make good studies.

**BUT SOME BELIEVE SOLUTIONS IMPOSSIBLE UNLESS READING RETURNS**

A new way of thinking is called for in these times of increasing complexity, believes John Renesch, editor of *The New Leader*. He writes:

"As Albert Einstein observed, we cannot solve our problems with the same mode of thought which created them. Part of this new mode of thinking involves **acceptance of the complexity of modern society**.... We must learn about systems dynamics, quantum science, chaos & complexity. We cannot afford to continue simplistic thinking about our job, football scores & the mortgage. The only way that makes sense out of our present day global society is to engage it -- as it is, in all its complexity. This means getting off our mental 'duffs' & engaging our intellects."

To do this, he says we need to read more. But, he points out:

- Only 4% of our population purchase books.
- "Most people get their information from the media, hardly a caldron for wisdom."
- US legislators spend about 6% of their time reading -- relying on assistants & researchers to debrief them because they're too busy to read. "In fact, many never read the bills they support. Some have admitted they haven't read bills they have authored!"

**J.D. POWER SURVEYS, RANKINGS BECOMING FACTOR TO CONSIDER ?**

Customer delight is perceptual. And this perception moves behavior. So measuring customer satisfaction & delight is valuable research here. J.D. Power & Assocs is a marketing info firm that to date has done studies on:

- telecommunications -- long distance, residential service, & cellular
- credit cards      • automobiles      • hotels      • airlines

Healthcare industry is next. "We're in the initial phases so I don't have information yet on dates or types of studies," Kristina Ferrin told prr.

Firm does both a) syndicated studies "that we fund independently, then sell reports based on the results" & b) proprietary work for clients.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Most are mail surveys; some by phone. Lists for automotive studies, as an example, come from license records, except in states where this is restricted. Hotel study surveys a sample of OAG Pocket Flight Guide subscribers, resulting in questionnaires sent to 30,000 frequent travelers, a return of just over 20%.

**WANT TO CHANGE RANKING? CONTINENTAL SHOWS HOW**

Two years ago, Continental Airlines ranked last in customer satisfaction for flights of 500 miles or more. Now it ranks as the top carrier in this category. It's the first time any company in any industry went from bottom to top in a J.D. Power survey.

It took culture change to make this happen, not publicity, promotion, ads & flag waving. Attention to serving customers made the difference:

1. From a cost-cutting focus where employees received bonuses for slashing dollars from their budgets, employees now get them for on-time flights.
2. A new reservation system is in place with the goal to answer every phone call within 20 seconds.
3. Customer Service stations have been opened in hub airports.
4. Frontline employees have authority to modify rules when necessary. Policy book that guided actions was ceremoniously burned & a new set of user-friendly guidelines put together by a task force of employees.

**NEED TO RANK RANKLES**

Our penchant for ranking just about everything is apparent -- it makes media copy -- but the result is often meaningless. It measures your perception over mine. Unless you're an authority & the methodology makes use of your expertise, or unless the study only seeks perceptions (as in customer satisfaction -- which indicate what's working right now), rankings are useless. Examples:

1. **US News & World Reports' ranking of college & university pr sequences** (pr 4/8/96). Reputational surveys were sent to 340 deans & leading faculty at all graduate programs in journalism & mass com'n. Not surveyed were programs within speech com'ns -- now equal to or larger than the number in J schools. Those responding (40%) can have at best limited knowledge of a few programs, so guessing & perception rules. A random sample of 190 print journalists, 180 broadcast journalists, 150 pr execs & 150 adv'g execs were also surveyed. But response rate (13%) was too low to permit statistically representative rankings. Numerical rankings were based on educators' responses only. Trash research.
2. **Fortune's list of America's most admired companies.** Methodology: 11,000 execs, outside directors & financial analysts are asked to rate the 10 largest companies in their industry by 8 criteria: 1) quality of mgmt, 2) value as a long-term investment, 3) innovativeness, 4) quality of products or services, 5) use of assets, 6) community & environmental responsibility, 7) ability to attract, develop & keep talented people, 8) financial soundness. Again, guessing, rumor & perception at play.