

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES NOW BIGGEST IMPACT ON ISSUES

Regulating HMOs is seen by a clear majority as very important to both the country & themselves personally, according to a survey by Pew Research Ctr. And for all but one issue (tobacco) respondents put importance to the country first, ahead of personal concern:

	Very Important to Country	Me
HMO Regulation	68%	60%
'98 Cong'l Election Outcome	51	41
Campaign Finance Reform	47	33
Corporate mergers	42	27
Tobacco Regulation	40	48
Investigation into Microsoft	21	18
Starr Investigation	18	17

BUT, Americans under age 30 -- who pay less attention to news in general -- rank all of the issues as less important to them personally than do those 50 & older. Generational differences are as large as 15-21 percentage points for partisan control of Congress, tobacco regulation, industry mergers & the debate over HMOs. (More from Pew, www.people-press.org; 202/293-3126)

ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS

¶ **Reader asks essential question.** Referring to David Drobis' 7 key roles of pr (pr 6/22), Janelle Albertson of Kansas State Dep't of Education asks: "If we perform these tasks, **how can we quantify our effectiveness?**" I suppose we could count the number of suggestions we make that are implemented; keep track of the ways we convey the CEO's message, etc. But if our information helped avoid a conflict, sometimes it's hard to attribute it to one's proactive advice. I'm in education public relations & am really bent on getting my colleagues to use more data to show their effectiveness. But first I need to model it. I want this kind of information for my evaluation (goals & objectives with data to support) & I'd like to add it to my resume. Got any ideas?" *If you have ideas or experience that would answer this question, please call, e-mail or fax prr. We'll share responses in these pages.*

¶ **Second Best Communication Channel Is The Phone** (after face-to-face) but using it is getting tougher. One must now dial area codes before all calls in Maryland, even if it's the house next door. And who can keep up with the area code changes everywhere? In places like hotels they don't get changed on the phone instrument or literature, so mis-calls are rampant.

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

ELECTED. IABC ofc's for 1998-99:
chrwm, Brenda Claire Siler (dir com'n, Council on Competitiveness, DC); v chrwm, David Seifert (strategic com'n dev'l mgr, Hallmark Cards, Kansas City). IABC Research

Fdn '98-99 ofc's: chrwm, Charles Pizzo (principal, P.R. PR, New Orleans); v chrwm, David Kistle (svp, Padilla Speer Beardsley, Mpls).

FRAMING, HOT RESEARCH TOPIC, ESSENTIAL SKILL FOR PR PROS

Framing is the use of specific phrases or names, metaphors, images to help the public understand an issue -- or to present a subject in a way that promotes one view of it. Also called "positioning" or "semantic strategy."

While media is one source of framing -- either by repeating phrases presented by news sources or inventing them editorially -- other sources include politicians, organizations, the grapevine, etc. This is perhaps the most active area of pr & communication effects scholarship currently.

Study "Media Framing of the Canadian Tainted Blood Controversy, 1983-1993" by Debbie Steele (Kamloops Society for Comty Living, B.C.) & Kirk Hallahan (Colo State U), analyzed 83 articles from *The Globe & Mail*, found:

A. STORIES FELL INTO 3 DISTINCT TIME PERIODS:

1. **Discovery period** ('83-'85), 15 articles dealt primarily with the discovery of HIV transmission via blood products;
2. **Implication period** ('87-'89), coverage (19 articles) renewed as a growing number of hemophiliacs found they were infected with HIV. Canadian Hemophilia Society embarked upon a campaign to seek gov't compensation;
3. **Grievance period** ('92-'93), attention waned then resurged during debate over whether the federal compensation program that went into effect in early 90s should be allowed to expire at the end of '93 (49 articles).

B. COVERAGE FALLS INTO 2 DISTINCT FRAMES:

1. **Accident frame**, taking place during the Discovery Period, explained the introduction of infectious blood as unintentional & unavoidable. "Polluted blood," "contaminated" blood supply; "tainted blood" evolved primarily as a journalistic label;
2. **Blame frame**, beginning in the Implication Period, shifting into high gear during the Grievance Period, where the events are explained as the result of the culpable actions of key parties, i.e. "negligent," "indifferent," & "potentially guilty of crime."

IMPLICATIONS FOR CRISIS & ISSUES MGMT

1. **Frame contests** -- where an organization tangles with those who disagree with its portrayal of a situation. Puts practitioners in the role of frame strategists -- actively promoting particular language, or developing responses to counter words that frame an org'n unfavorably.
 - "If public relations is defined as the creation & maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships, it could be argued that an effective pr strategy *begins* with the establishment of common frames about topics or issues upon which there might be disagreement."
2. **Frame change** -- framing is not static; it's a dynamic process. The 3 periods mentioned above coincide with the stages frequently identified in the life cycle of issues (birth of the issue; growth; maturity).
 - Crisis/issues managers must be attuned to this & engage in frame transformation as required. Evidence in this study suggests the Red Cross might have been too slow in changing its framing of the problem. It failed to fortify its explanation & then only meekly attributed blame to others when the issue reached a full public debate.
3. **Attributing blame is inevitable** -- notions of villains & victims are embedded in our culture. Thus, in crisis & issues we must anticipate the emergence of accusations *by claims-makers* -- as well as the prospect of accusatory framing *by media* covering a crisis or issue.
 - Red Cross fell victim to "**inadvertence error**" -- where subjects are portrayed as being involved in a blameworthy action when no intent could be demonstrated. Vulnerability lies in the fact that the Red Cross was the only visible actor during the early phases of coverage. Thus it became the most convenient target, the only party whose actions could be questioned. Inadvertence error may be an inescapable problem that crisis & issues managers must address.

In the aftermath of the dispute, Red Cross was forced to withdraw from its role as the exclusive provider of blood in Canada. This may have been beyond its control, the study suggests. "Such a conclusion would lend credence to the argument that crises & issues cannot be managed in their entirety & it's foolish for public relations practitioners to attempt to do so (Pearson, 1990). Chaos theory suggests that some extraordinary events are uncontrollable & that the best pr strategy is simply to ride out the storm & make the best of an admittedly bad situation. Natural forces will return organizations to normal levels (Murphy, 1996)."

FIVE FRAMING DEVICES SHOW THE PROCESS AT WORK

1. **Metaphors:** figures of speech that invite comparisons
2. **Catch phrases:** attempt to capture meaning in a single word or phrase
3. **Exemplars:** allusions that provide historic examples of situations or actions being discussed
4. **Depictions:** characterize the subject using a colorful string of modifiers, or can involve metaphors, similes & examples
5. **Visual images:** pictures or graphics that capture the essence visually

WOULD PR STRATEGY DIFFER FROM WAY GM IS MANAGING STRIKE?

As public relations' role in labor issues is increasingly usurped by "industrial relations" specialists, practitioners ought to consider how well this group has done in the current GM strike. The case:

1. Strike began at one plant where employees were concerned about losing work to other plants or overseas. The symbol to them was GM's refusal to invest 300+ million to upgrade the facility -- then removing machinery in a stealth operation over a vacation weekend.
2. The strike, however, is costing GM that same 300+ million every week that it continues. Since union had refused to accede to \$75 million worth of work rule changes, apparently mgmt feels the loss is justified.
3. Since strike has now gone on 4+ weeks, GM would have saved \$1B (so far!) if it had invested the \$300 million. Where are the supposedly all-powerful bean counters here?
4. Is this just an ego fit by management? Or the union, which is sacrificing \$150 million per week in take-home pay? Surely there must be a win-win solution somewhere in this debate.
5. Another plant joined in the strike, shutting down most GM production. Workers there fear jobs going out of the US. But if GM had invested that original amount, there would have been no strike for them to join in.... These things snowball.

When hit with lawsuits, GM like most organizations today can't afford to be concerned about justice -- because legal costs are so high. As a result, plaintiffs who would probably lose in court get settlements because it's cheaper.

Shouldn't this same thinking apply **where your own employees are involved?**

One other matter: These 10,000 workers on strike are also **10,000 customers**. How would GM respond if 10,000 customers in, say, California or Alabama or wherever, were ticked off at the company? The answer is obvious, GM would go to great pains to satisfy them, to win back the opportunity to keep them as customers. Shouldn't this apply when the customers are also employees?

So much for "industrial relations" thinking. PR strategy would be doubly sensitive to a single group that comprises 2 significant stakeholder entities.

¶ Wonder if GM's vp worldwide com'n, John Onoda, has been involved in the strategy sessions -- or merely asked to "handle the media." How management of the world's largest corporation involves its public relations talent is, for good or ill, a role model.

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