Chapter 13:

OPINION LEADERS

and

CONSTITUENCY RELATIONS

Pat was a firm believer in "supertargeting" stakeholder audiences using constituency relations and opinion leader programs. No organization is large enough or wealthy enough to connect with every member of the stakeholder public. Nor is every stakeholder interested in spending the time it takes to build a relationship with your organization. Key is finding opinion leaders, systematizing contacts and relationships through constituency relations programs.

> "Research shows that opinion leader influence via word-of-mouth, networking and social rewards/punishment is at the core of individual's and society's decision making."
> — Pat Jackson, June 1987.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OPINION LEADERS & HOW TO TREAT THEM; SEPARATE "BANDITS," "GOSSIPS," "ACTIVISTS" & "CHEERLEADERS," USE D.E.N.I.M. SYSTEM TO STIMULATE WORD OF MOUTH

There's nothing opinion leaders dislike more than learning about something second hand -- especially from public sources like the media. That is an affront to their leadership -- and egos. As audience targeting becomes increasingly the essential strategy in a mass, overcommunicated society, new techniques for identifying & working thru opinion leaders are necessary. This includes ways to avoid the problem mentioned above.

Opinion leaders can supply 3 desired behaviors: 1) transmittal (beaconing) of messages, positions, etc; 2) social verification of positions & rationale when discussion of the topic comes up; 3) feedback.

6 Types Of Opinion Leaders		Characteristics Of Real Opinion Leaders
1. Formal	Official or situational power.	¶Have a demonstrable following.
2. Informal	Not in power structure but the trusted, popular catalyst.	¶Have credibility on many topics (expertise plus trustworthiness in the eyes of their following).
3. Activists	May or may not have much following but will act, therefore must be dealt with.	¶Positive approach (except bandits).
4. Bandits	Negative opinion leaders, critics, troublemakers -- cannot be ignored.	¶Activist tendency, doers not just talkers. ¶They get around.
5. Gossips	Pass much info, tho may not be trusted or credible.	¶Potential interest or concern for the issue or subject.
6. Cheerleaders	Where group turns in trouble; positive emotional balancers.	Some persons have such an abundance of any one of these qualities that they deserve to be on your opinion leader list. Usually, however, all or a solid combination are required to make an opinion leader worth including.
When persons combine more than one of these positions, they become super important.		

Requires | Make a specific list of opinion leaders by audience -- like media or
System | mailing lists. Compile dossiers. Get scientific about it. Update
the list because opinion leaders do rise & fall. Everybody has a media list. But how many keep book on this all-important 2nd step of the 2 Step Flow of information & influence.

Media Is | Basically, practitioners must beware of turning opinion leaders off
Final Step | (or against you) by rushing to news media & other mass communications
as the point of first resort. In moving beyond the discredited notion that publicity (or communication, or information) can by itself-motivate behavior, public relations must ask the true role & timing of media. One model, particularly applicable to publics with whom an organization has continuing relations, is known as DENIM -- so called because it works, & when we think of work we often think of the cloth from which work clothes are made:

D = First comes **Direct communication** to opinion leaders by letter, phone, in person or tightly targeted controlled media.

E = Then, **Events**, to bring opinion leaders & members of the target public into face-to-face contact with representatives of the organization; and simultaneously facilitate interaction within the public but in a controlled environment. Often you will use a pre-existing meeting or activity, or even someone else's event. This step gives opinion leaders a chance to do their work.

N = Next is **Networking** which naturally & effectively follows the steps above. It gives you an opportunity to monitor the actual flow.

I = **Internal communication**, & feedback sharing, to be sure everyone **inside** the organization knows what's happening.

M = Media, whether news media or in-house, as reinforcer, reminder & 3rd party verifier.

Media is the final step because to publicize before the internal & target publics get involved may turn off many who pride themselves on being in-the-know or part of the family: "Why didn't I learn about this before the public?" This is especially true of those most-important-people-of-all, opinion leaders. But once they're in the loop, seeing it in the media enhances their sense of leadership.

"CONSTITUENCY RELATIONS" MAY BE FUTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
EITHER AS THE CENTERPIECE THAT LEADS & FOCUSES ALL PROGRAMS
OR, IN A PINCH, IT COULD REPLACE EVERYTHING ELSE

Quality vs. quantity. Research-based. Tightly-targeted. Visible personal impact vs. "messages shot into the air to land we know not where," as Scott Cutlip puts it. Automatically self-evaluating. Links marketing, issues, relationships in one vehicle. These are some of the virtues of constituency relations (CR) programs, which work like this:

BASIC   1. Key opinion leaders (OLs) are identified for each important exter-
FEATURES   nal public, based on a) desired behaviors sought b) in order to achieve
            current objectives. Include opponents as well as neutrals & supporters.

    2. Contacts are assigned to each OL. Preferably they a) cover all ranks & types of personnel, b) get initial training, c) become an elite corps or support group to reinforce each other & continue training. Often they will be friends of the OL.

    3. On a regular schedule, usually once or twice a year, contacts make extended calls on their targets with objectives of a) listening to their views, experiences, what they hear from their networks; b) delivering the organization's currently important messages & appeals; c) getting reaction to potential products, services, plans, policies; d) building a mutually trusting & sharing relationship.

    4. Specific findings of each visit are entered into a computer database.

Research shows that personalized 2-way communication is vital to building relationships that can motivate behavior & create trust -- which media programs & other impersonal communications cannot do. Research also shows that opinion leader influence via word-of-mouth, networking & social rewards/punishment is at the core of individual's & society's decisionmaking. CR is the only program that puts these elements together in one focused activity.

    5. Small facilitating staff supports contact personnel, keeps program running, analyzes data & distributes it widely to operating dep'ts & decisionmakers. CEO's cabinet, for instance, can have to-the-minute data available for any topic they're discussing.

IMPORTANT   6. Formal research once a year or so is used to validate CR database
ADD-ONS   among the entire publics.

    7. Speakers bureau starts seeking audiences it needs to reach, or that will reinforce CR contacts, rather than taking what comes along. Q&A is emphasized in pres-

entations so audience reactions, Q&A response, things overheard can be entered into the database when speaker returns.

8. Sponsored memberships are realigned to assure organization is covering all vital groups, rather than everyone joining Rotary or the Chamber of Commerce. From time to time the member is given topics to toss into the table talk for reaction. Relevant information from any aspect of meetings is put into the database upon return.

9. Community relations, open houses, tour programs, contribution programs & many others can have research value by plugging into the database what is learned from contacts made during these programs. Even sales calls or informal contacts can be entered. Breadth of individuals & groups whose opinions, perceptions & behavior goes into the database safeguards against skewing -- & these are the very folks who influence the rest of your publics.

> CR is ideal for utilities, healthcare, government, schools, human service agencies, plant location programs, even retail or banking, where the whole community is served. But it can work for national marketers, individual industrial manufacturers, insurance or financial services by adjusting the geographic frame. For centralized organizations it keeps touch with the local building blocks of stakeholder constituencies -- often a major problem.

10. Some form of face-to-face program for employees -- or team tasking, work groups, quality circles -- ties CR to internal publics. The difference is that all employees are involved, not just opinion leaders.

ADVANTAGES & INSIGHTS   A. Each year an organization can hold thousands of personal conversations with the OLs in its environment -- listening and communicating via the same vehicle.

B. In today's thrust to create market-based organizations, this is about as close to 1-on-1 relationships with markets as you can get -- yet it covers the environment-creating publics as well. CR makes the needs & values of constituencies visible on an ongoing basis.

C. In periods of downsizing or tight budgets, this low-cost program can replace most other pr or pa activities -- and those are usually difficult to evaluate, whereas CR automatically evaluates itself thru the ongoing database.

D. Lobbying & media contacts can be wrapped into CR -- where they may have more credibility since they are two-way exchanges conducted without a specific immediate objective. Off-season CR contacts with legislators or candidates are especially effective.

E. CR creates a One Clear Voice outreach involving managers, employees, practitioners, senior execs, even retirees if desirable. People who've gotten tunnel vision, are becoming bureaucrats or have lost touch can be revitalized by participating (see prr 4/27).

F. Play back to internal publics from contactors (some programs call them liaisons) sharing their real-world external experiences brings optimism or realism to the rank-&-file -- and either is a springboard for morale & teamwork programs.

¶During a crisis CR system provides an existing network for seeking needed support, seeding the word-of-mouth information system, defusing opposition arguments, even learning who principal opponents are. Special contacts can be made at such times -- by telephone or even mail if necessary.

STRATEGY 1992 AND BEYOND: ONE-ON-ONE BECOMES PERSISTENT AND POWERFUL AS 1) CLUTTER WORSENS, 2) MEDIA AND POLITICOS GRAB AT ANY HEADLINES, 3) NOTHING ELSE WORKS; TWO OPTIONS SEEM TO BE EMERGING

Dow Corning and United Way are this week's sacrifices to the Unforgiving Decade. In both cases dubious policies and activities were not seen by management as probable trouble. But questions about spotless organizations are equally possible -- and once the roulette of spotlight journalism and political pandering hits, it's much too late. No one is willing to listen then. How to strategize in a system out of control?

Two strategic options are forming:

- **Adopt a low profile**, concentrate energies directly on key stakeholders, avoid controversy and even visibility, focus on your mission and growl at those who try to pull you off course.

- **Lead rather than blindly responding**: Accept the realities of perception-is-all, go full tilt with tightly targeted relationship-building and communications -- but understand (and educate the management team to understand) that being served up as the day's or week's entertainment for the masses by media desperately trying to survive and politicians desperately trying to divert attention from their wholesale failure is par for the course. Carefully plan, then stay the course and don't be knocked off it by others.

Competition is one factor for choosing a strategy. But note the consistent points in both: a) realizing presentday media's game, and not playing into it; b) targeting key publics and going directly to them, i.e. *going around* third parties such as media. Both points mean moving toward one-on-one programs.

WHY ONE-ON-ONE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WORKS

1. Mass communication basically reinforces existing positions. Thus it **activates the opposition as well as supporters**. By making your organization visible, it may *stimulate* would-be attackers by showing them a window of opportunity.

2. One-on-one in contrast is **quiet, speaking to your targets** without stimulating others to add their viewpoints. One-on-one is a huddle; mass communication is like the quarterback announcing plays over the loud speaker.

3. One-on-one aims to earn support for positions in advance, through mutual authorship, thus **deflecting effects of criticism** should it come. Effective programs make these positions the socially accepted ones by lining up the opinion leaders and power leaders who determine them.

4. Media only rarely launch crusades of their own. Usually they report the ideas of others. Pols or regulators most often are responding to information brought to them. A well-founded one-on-one campaign gets there first, discovers the issues where there is vulnerability, and finds a mutual

solution before they go public. If the right people are targeted, one-on-one can discourage attacks by going straight to their source – the OLs and PLs who bring issues to media and politicos.

5. But you can't win everyone over to your organization/product/policy. Opportunists, competitors and entrepreneurs exist. Still, a thorough one-on-one program forces them to realize that by attacking, they may be taking on an icon. This usually reduces the rhetoric and ridiculousness of such attacks as do come.

BECOMING A CONSTANT TEACHER TO MANAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL

Constituency Relations, Ambassador, Customer Satisfaction and similar relationship-building programs, targeted to the individuals who drive behavior and opinion in their publics, are working well. But the major barrier is often a management – typically linear-thinking MBA types – that still believes in the one-size-fits-all, silver-bullet message that will "shape them up" or "get the facts out."

This puts practitioners in the role of educator – a huge opportunity. With the amount of solid research and case studies available, plus third party experts from practice and academe, very useful "training" can be done in a way so execs can understand why pr strategies are what they are. Much of the material will make them better execs in other realms, as well.

THE PLACE TO START OLs are critical for a simple, but seldom expressed reason. Publics, groups, don't act en masse. They follow leaders, pacesetters. These persons *jumpstart behavior* within the group. Left to their own devices, publics may choose to be led in any direction. The choice is whether or not to influence this direction...or is there a choice in the Unforgiving Decade?

IDENTIFYING OPINION LEADERS: HOW EXACTLY IS IT DONE?

As practitioners move wholeheartedly into constituency relations programs of various types, the need to identify and build lists of opinion leaders is essential. Basically there are two options:

1. **Conduct sociometric research.** Can be done formally (with a statistical sample) or informally (with a quota sample that covers most of the variables in the public involved). Respondents are asked to name the two or three persons they'd be most apt to ask or listen to for information on the topic. Inevitably certain names will be most mentioned – and they're the opinion leaders.

> OL lists – like any listing – need to be cleaned regularly. Eliminating the "died," "moved" or "inactive" names is easy, but determining who has lost their following requires constant contact. Also, who has gained a following – and should be added to the list?

2. **Working the network backwards.** This begins by mapping the social networks within the public(s) you're interested in. What are the forums of discussion, the personal friendship interactions, the forums of debate where the topics will be aired? Drawing this map enables you to identify key participants in these venues – who become the starting points for tracing the OL network.

Then, these persons are asked who they listen to or check with, until the network becomes known. An apt metaphor is finding electrical wiring in a wall, then tracing it to the junction box or outlet. Find one or a few known (or suspected) OLs, let them lead you to the rest.

SITUATIONAL THEORY OF PUBLICS KEY TO EFFECTIVE TARGETING

What's the difference between audiences, publics, constituencies and stakeholders? (Another case where the language of communication is uncommunicative.) For 25 years, Jim Grunig and others have conducted studies that today enable practitioners to avoid this semantic problem and precisely target groups whose involvement and support, or lack of opposition, is critical to success.

In a paper presented to the International PR Research Symposium in Bled, Slovakia, Grunig summarizes the research for practical use:

START BY REALIZING MOST PEOPLE DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR ISSUE

a) **The two key questions from the beginnings of pr** have been: 1) What is a public? 2) What are the "opinions" of publics, whether expressed as attitudes, behavior, etc?

b) **A major flaw in practitioners' and managerial thinking** is that "most people have opinions on most issues" – which led to the "mass opinion" concept, and thus to "mass communication" as *the* tactic. But as one scholar notes,

"Fifty years of survey research has overwhelmingly confirmed that the bulk of the general population is both uninterested and uninformed on most matters that could be construed as public affairs."

C. **Large majorities on any issue are "ignorant and apathetic"** – and as a sociologist's joke puts it, if you ask them whether they are, they'll say "I don't know and I don't care." This is ever more true as people suffer from over-communication, over-business and over-organization.

THE SKILL IS TO KNOW WHO DOES CARE – AND WHY

D. **The situational theory permits segmenting** a general population into groups pr finds relevant. Publics "begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems" – best labeled stakeholders, since they have a stake in the problem or wouldn't be experiencing it.

E. **When an issue or triggering event arises,** the large stakeholder group reacts by sorting itself into publics, starting with two groupings: 1) **Passive,** which processes information; 2) **Active,** which seeks it.

F. **This differentiation is critical to practitioners** by identifying who will use communication (of whatever type) to form cognitions or shape actions; and who lets it in one ear/eye and out the other. The passive group may read or watch the news about your issue, may even know they have a stake – but are unlikely to do much about it.

G. **One of the challenges is to engage passive publics** in cases where it may be necessary (it isn't in most). Grunig told a PRSA seminar in Columbus, Ohio, he isn't sure it's possible on any large scale.

WHAT MOTIVATES ACTIVE PUBLICS – AND HOW TO PLAN FOR IT

H. The active public can be sorted into three groups:

1) **All issues**, interested in the full ramifications of the topic;
2) **Special interest**, concerned only about certain elements of the topic;
3) **Hot issue**, aroused only by emotionally debated elements.

Add the **passive public** and there are a total of four groups into which stakeholders subdivide on any issue category.

Dramatic Example From Current News:

A waste disposal facility is proposed at a site near an aquifer.

- **Stakeholders** include the 4,000 residents of the host neighborhood.
- A public hearing is held, 400 attend – making 3,600 the **passive** or apathetic public.

Of 7 key points to be covered, the most interest around town is in potential groundwater pollution (the aquifer).

- After that discussion, 200 people leave – the **hot issue** public.
- Another 100 depart after various other topics, such as number of trucks per day that will come to the site; these are **special interest** publics.
- When local officials take a straw vote at the end of the meeting, only 100 residents are on hand – the **all issues** public. [Highlighting point G above.]

I. Communicating with and involving stakeholders and publics faces three tests:

a) *Problem Recognition* – they must accept that a real problem (or opportunity) exists. The natural response to any situation one is trying to duck is, "that's not a problem"

b) *Level of Involvement* (or personification) – they must be convinced it affects them. The avoidance response is, "OK, it's a problem – but it doesn't involve me."

c) *Constraint Recognition* – they must believe they can do something about it and are not constrained from taking action if they choose. The typical response is, "It's a problem and it involves me, but I can't do anything about it."

CONCLUSION

Meeting these tests can only be achieved with targeted communications. The role of mass communication and mass media is very circumscribed.

Focus Issue on this Essential New Technique
COLLEGES ARE A STUDY IN STARTING OPINION LEADER PROGRAMS

There's no denying the role opinion leaders (OLs) play. Yet many practitioners have met resistance in launching systematized programs to build ongoing relationships with them. Few have OL lists.

Higher education is a case study in these difficulties – as well as the payoffs of such initiatives. *CASE Currents*, urging college pr folks to "be more relationship-oriented, with less mass mailing and more sophisticated tracking of what constituents want," reported last month it "had to kill a story about how campus pr people track opinion leaders on their databases because we couldn't find anyone who was doing it."

After a multitude of phone calls, prr did ferret out some higher ed OL programs. **And also learned some things applicable to any organization ready to practice the New Public Relations** – in which OLs are one key.

WHY OL PROGRAMS WORK

"Higher education is fortunate that we have people who are very interested in us and will give us their time and expertise for free – because they are alumni or because they hire our graduates. There are people who feel passionately about us and will help us out if we ask them and give them something meaningful to do," finds Catherine Sams of Clemson Univ (South Carolina).

It's an environment conducive for building opinion leader/ambassador programs. Some in higher education are doing that, though not all systematically. Of 11 schools prr contacted for this article:

- four have full-blown programs with database management
- two have programs & are in the process of building a database
- five do use OLs to support their projects, but they are usually sought project by project and, in some cases, their names are stored only in the heads of the institution's long-time employees

A LOOK AT SOME OPINION LEADER / AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS

Institutional Advisory Taskforces

- **An Image Taskforce at Francis Tuttle** (vo-tech center for high school juniors and seniors, and for adults) looked into changing its name. Members included 18 OLs from industry, government, parents, students and people from schools in the area. With their insights and market research, decided to drop Vo-Tech from its name and do more niche marketing of its various centers. "We continue to call on them to get their pulse on issues. They're a good 3rd party endorsement," Susan Hardy Brooks told prr.

- **Clemson University has a Board of Visitors** (not a policy group like the board of trustees). It's made up of volunteers who come to campus twice a year to hear presentations and give feedback

about the school's plans. "It helps to have people not as close to a situation as we are to find the holes in our plans," Catherine Sams told prr.

- **Commission on the Future of Clemson** is another advisory group of 250-300 highly regarded professionals – some alums, some not. "They hear our plans and give us feedback, trying to set priorities. We want their insights and perspectives, to bring that to our planning process. We've received a lot of good advice this way. Our president speaks about the need to expand our circle of friends. These are ways of doing that. It's not about asking people to go out and parrot our words. They help us set a direction and bring perspective from their communities, that something won't fly in their county. And that's good for us to hear before we go out and do something bone headed."

- **The Illinois Connection** "enlists the aid of 400 ambassadors who give us feedback from their communities," Judy Babb, coordinator of this Univ of Ill ambassador program, told prr. Ambassadors are sent five-times-yearly newsletter ("issues based, not slick") to keep them abreast of school-wide issues "so they can be conversational." Also sent bullet points "which they can use to speak about with those they know well enough, to let them know that the U of Ill is important to them.... We're educating them so they can tell others, or they can let us know when they're hearing something that isn't quite right and we can give them our perspective. Or, if we're wrong, we need to know that."

- **Macomb Community College's database of local decisionmakers** and alumni is used as a sounding board. They are asked, from their perspective "how do they think this would be interpreted, or what do they think is a good direction, or how would this impact them," Rose Bellanca told prr.

Educational Advisory Committees

- **"We encourage all academic departments and colleges to have advisory groups** and to use those groups to help them raise funds, get feedback from programs, etc. Though it's not out of this office, we feel it's a very important part of the overall communications/pr program for the university. And there's a direct relationship between success and those advisory committees. Departments that have strong relationships with their advisory groups are more effective in fundraising, internships, scholarship programs, etc. Departments that don't have those links, don't have the same kinds of bottomline numbers," Paul Kincaid, Southwest Missouri State, told prr.

- **Each instructional area is required to have an industry advisory committee**, made up of the industry's key leaders, at Francis Tuttle. Instructors meet with them at least twice yearly to learn what's going on in the industry and to share what's going on in their instructional area. Advisory committee members "become 3rd party endorsers. They help us do the right thing and they go back and talk about us with their peers." Some advisory committees are more active than others. "It's obvious the programs with the most active advisory committees because they are also the programs with the best enrollment and the best placement, hands down."

Legislative Advocates

- **"This is our most targeted use of OLs.** We're working to become more sophisticated in it. We have new computer software and hardware that we're converting to. When that's up and running we'll make this a more sophisticated process, more precise. Now, we have a list of alumni, donors and community people we know are linked to some legislators. When we need their help we call them and send them a bullet sheet of info and a list of people we'd like them to contact. They make the contacts and then feed back to us what the reaction was. We're only working with 30+ people

now. We hope to expand that to at least one or a group of alumni in every county in the state," Paul Kincaid told prr.

- **Getting out the vote.** For school districts to use Francis Tuttle, they "must vote to increase taxes to annex into our vo-tech district. We use OLs in communities attempting to do this. *We've used OLs very effectively in that effort"* – enlisting people from all walks of life, not just educators or parents.

- **Illinois Connection's ambassadors are asked to contact their state legislators during the budget process.** One reason program began was "we were hearing from legislators that they weren't hearing from our alumni that funding for higher education was a concern to them. We need to educate our alumni and let them know that the amount of support from the state is down to 31%," Judy Babb told prr.

- **Clemson's Legislative Advocates Group** is a group of volunteers in communities around the state. "They work with us to get information out when issues are coming before the general assembly."

- **Univ of Wisconsin-Stout also has a group called the Advocates.** These are "community people – business leaders, educators, retired faculty members – who do lobbying for us. The Chancellor and I bring them in, inform them about university issues, then call on them to do lobbying for us, particularly for the state budget," John Enger told prr. Univ of Wisc is in the process of developing a database that would match alumni to legislative districts. "I want to identify people in various districts who are willing to help us out with lobbying, talk with them and call on them when there are critical votes coming from their districts."

Reputational Programs

- **Reconnecting the Univ of Ill with the people of the state**, is a goal of Illinois Connection. To do this, univ president meets one-on-one with community members during full-day visits to specific communities. Day includes a.m. radio talk show, community leader breakfast, luncheon, concludes with an alumni reception in the evening. "During the day he's there to learn about the community and to put a face on the University of Ill. It has become a trademark of his presidency, to come, listen and learn. He meets with community colleges, legislators, mayors, high school students, media."

Ambassadors co-host the visit, identify invitees. "We would never know throughout all the communities in Illinois with whom he should meet and what the issues are they want to hear about. It's a feather in the ambassadors' caps when they can stand in their community and be the host. He goes as often as he can get dates on his calendar," Babb reports. Program grew out of alumni contacting legislators, expanded beyond the legislative circle. "There are a lot of people who may be touched by the Univ of Ill only because they know we have a sports team. But everybody is a taxpayer. I hope we're doing a better job of educating people about the benefits the university provides to the taxpayers of this state."

Giving Back To OLs

- "We like to know what we can do for them – how we can provide them info and support – as well as what they can do for us," Rose Bellanca of Macomb Community College told prr. **Half-day seminar called Macomb in the New Millennium** is planned. Database of OLs will be invited. "We'll address issues relating to workforce development, education, health and lifestyles in our county and how these things might impact their role in what they do." College also does a yearly economic outlook forecast – the state of the economy – to which OLs are invited.

Internal Advocates

- **"We identify people who are influential among the faculty** as we do campus communications. We communicate directly with them to get them to tell our story," Don Hale of Carnegie Mellon Univ told prr.

- **"We need to consider that our own employees are opinion leaders** – in their churches, professional associations, hobbies. It's in our marketing plan to identify among them who belongs to what organizations, what activities. We do that now but haphazardly. We want to organize and build a database of our own people and who they influence in our community. There's a lot of power in that concept," explains Susan Hardy Brooks.

Problems To Overcome

- **"We have a lot of demands on our time** in terms of what people think pr should do. It's getting people's heads turned around a bit – saying we need to do some of those things, but we also need to put time and resources into these kinds of things [OL/ambassador programs] if we're really going to have a payoff. That's a big obstacle. It's education and expectation and getting people to understand what pr really does, as opposed to 'give us publications,'" notes one practitioner whose hopes for a database are forced to the backburner.

Future Hope

- **"We have a database of all our OL groups.** We call on them regularly – most of the time highly targeted, specific to their area of interest. Most effective is face-to-face, but we maintain dialog throughout the year via phone. Eventually we hope to dialog electronically with them through our Web site. I think there's a lot of potential in terms of communicating with OLs electronically, especially on issues that are urgent, need to reach them quickly and need immediate action," says Susan Hardy Brooks.

EXAMPLE OF DRAMATIC CHANGE IN OPINION LEADERSHIP: KIDS, ONCE TOTALLY IGNORED, ARE NOW MAJOR INFLUENCERS

Just a few years ago, any suggestion or comment by youth of any age was likely to be dismissed with "Just a kid; what does she know." Or "When you grow up, son, you'll think differently." This was true even of college students.

How that has changed. The new social contract allows anyone, of almost any age or station, to be an opinion leader (OL). All that's needed is a greater interest in a topic than one's circle, or the time to pursue a subject others can't or aren't. Facilitating this change are:

1. **Intense overcommunication** so that only those focused on a topic can find the time to become informed

2. **Overbusyness** that is reducing the number of subjects-of-interest any person can continue to follow

3. **The trust gap** which makes level of knowledge or expertise on a subject secondary to whether the opinion maker is trusted by his/her following

IRONIC EXTENSION OF DEMOCRACY

It seems counterintuitive that reliance on the few (OLs) to lead the mass could constitute democracy. It does because there are more and more OLs – and almost anyone can become one, as explained above.

BUT – **opinion leadership is subject-by-subject**. There are no more overall OLs. Few are able to attain OL status on more than one topic. This opens the doors for more persons to be OLs than ever – thus extending the democratic principle of broader, more equitable participation in the marketplace of ideas. Evidence:

- Anyone remember Bernard Baruch, the all-topics OL of the 40s and 50s? A respected financier, he'd take a brown bag lunch to his bench in Central Park (it has a historic marker on it now) and pontificate on everything. This was grapevined and reported in the media throughout the Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower years. Today even the Pope is not followed by a majority of world Catholics. Thus the rise of single-topic OLs.

- Most of us have been dropping subjects of interest because we can't keep up any longer. But we know others who select these subjects to keep up on. So when we need guidance there, we ask them – the new breed of OLs. And when they need help on the topics we've stayed abreast of, they call *us*.

- **This is the new social contract: shared opinion leadership.**

CASES OF KIDS AS MAJOR OLS

1. **Personal computers.** Remember when Apple couldn't sell the first versions, what they did? Donated them to schools, so kids could use them. These kids taught their parents – and, boom, PCs were everywhere.

- To test this, stand in a computer store and see how many kids are leading Dad or Mom in by the hand, then telling them precisely what equipment and software they *must* have. Kids taught us to use PCs.

2. **ATMs.** After their arrival on the scene produced limited response, they were used as teaching tools on the coming hi-tech age in schools. Eight-year-old Jimmy then took Grandma to the bank after hours and showed her how easy it was to use this strange new method of banking. Kids led us to ATMs.

3. **In the supermarket.** Sociological researchers find kids have achieved OL status on many purchase decisions. Mom usually chooses the main course, Dad reigns supreme on snacks or dessert – but stand in the cereal aisle sometime and see who selects what the family eats for breakfast next week.

IMPACT ON PR STRATEGY

Effect on programs aimed at schools or direct to kids is both negative and positive. The old "teach them young" strategy is now often unworkable and a waste of effort since by the time youth reach adulthood to buy your product or support your cause, it and the human environment will have changed dramatically. And it's tougher to get material used in schools.

But how about implanting brands? As these "handles" cover the range of products/services offered by branded providers, reaching kids just for this purpose makes sense. **Institutional programs for kids** are an opportunity – and, if they cover eleemosynary topics, are easier to get used in schools.

- As seen in the examples above, **new technologies or ideas** remain a tremendous opportunity. Kids embrace them, schools want to teach them.

SOME PROGRAMS UNDERWAY

1. As narrowcasting splinters media, WB tv network targets high schoolers. Consider programs like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Dawson's Creek." Advertisers want to sell this market, but expect trendy youth to influence others' purchases. Previously twentysomethings influenced tv fare.

2. Religious organizations turn to kids to bring parents into the pews as well as to serve youth. Jewish Community Center Association initiated a Teen Professional Fellows program and a part-time Teen Professional position on staff.

3. Golin/Harris created a College Campus Panel to advise it on emerging trends on campus. This is a time in people's lives when purchase and other habits are formed. Members come from 50 colleges across the US.

USE KIDS PROGRAMS TO INFLUENCE PARENTS

Sign in library says it well: **"Kids, tell your parents how to use the new automatic card system."**